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Decoding Symbolism: Sperber's Analysis of the Structure of Symbolic Propositions

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Abstract

Sperber, trained in the Durkheimian sociological tradition, has pursued his intellectual project inspired by Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology. However, he has not confined his studies to Durkheim's semiological and Lévi-Strauss's linguistic views. Instead, he has provided innovative explanations of how symbolic systems and symbolic propositions function. Sperber initially extracted principles from logical positivism to demonstrate how semantic and encyclopedic knowledge shape our understanding of propositions. Nevertheless, he discovered that symbolic propositions do not adhere to these principles. Their verifiability hinges on a distinction between the objective and mythological levels, allowing the primitive mind to simultaneously experience reality and myth without conflating them. This study aims to trace the sources of Sperber's intellectual trajectory and analyze his arguments. It reveals that symbolic propositions cannot be defined as merely mental but not rational, as proposed by Frazer or Lévy-Bruhl. Sperber's theory posits that symbolism is an autonomous field of cognition, independent of any semiological framework, and is more credible than the dominant theories of his time. Ultimately, the author contends that Sperber's propositions, despite his claims, lack the universality required to explain the mechanism of symbolic propositions. This is because implicit knowledge, along with the specific experiences of individuals or societies, plays a unique role in understanding symbolic propositions.

Keywords: Sperber, Semantic and Encyclopedic Knowledge, Symbolic Propositions and Symbolism, Structural Anthropology, Semiology.

1- Introduction

Dan Sperber (b. 1942) is a distinguished French sociologist and anthropologist, whose academic journey traversed the prestigious corridors of the Sorbonne and Oxford University. His scholarly pursuits encompass cultural anthropology, cognitive sciences, and linguistics. Raised within the intellectual tradition of Émile Durkheim (for an in-depth discussion, see Cassirer, 1998, p. 39-41), Sperber critically examined Durkheim's doctrines on symbolism, identifying limitations and ambiguities within Durkheimian semiotics. Consequently, Sperber sought a more foundational approach to cultural analysis through structural anthropology, positioning himself as a prominent proponent of structuralist thought.

Sperber's alignment with structuralism is significantly influenced by the intellectual legacy of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the eminent French structuralist. However, Sperber's engagement with structuralism is not uncritical; he has also articulated critiques of certain Lévi-Strauss's perspectives. By navigating through structuralism and contesting the prevailing semiotic paradigms of his era—evident in the works of scholars such as Victor Turner (Sperber, 1979, p. 13)—Sperber developed alternative methodologies. These methodologies predominantly focus on the cognitive elucidation of cultural phenomena, integrating principles and standards from cognitive psychology. This intellectual trajectory culminated in his seminal work on rethinking symbolism.

Sperber's treatise on symbolism is a comprehensive reflection on the concept in its broadest sense. Notably, his discourse on symbols and symbolism transcends individual symbols, encompassing symbolic propositions and ubiquitous symbolic constructs such as myths, rites, and rituals. Thus, readers must be cognizant of this extensive terminological scope when engaging with his work.

Sperber's critique of semiological and semiotic approaches is thorough and multifaceted. While some critics argue that his explanatory propositions on symbols may not be as compelling as his foundational critiques (Keith, 1976, p. 240-242), Sperber underscores that the acceptance of these approaches necessitates acknowledging hidden or absent meanings that lack intrinsic codes

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within the semantic system, thereby relying on external sign systems. This perspective inherently diminishes the autonomy and significance of symbolism as an independent field of study.

In this study, we will first explore Sperber's intellectual foundations concerning symbols, along with his academic background and influences. Subsequently, we will analyze Sperber's stance vis-à-vis the dominant intellectual currents of his time, highlighting both the convergences and divergences with thinkers such as Lévi-Strauss and Alfred J. Ayer. Finally, we will elucidate Sperber's distinctive approach to symbolic propositions, comparing it with the views of his predecessors, and conclude with a critical assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Sperber's theoretical contributions.

2- Research Background

The perspective adopted by Sperber in rethinking symbolism is fundamentally rooted in the principles of psychology, significantly influenced by his understanding of cognition and conceptual representations. However, the scholarly discourse and critiques surrounding his work have often overlooked Sperber's meta-positivist stance and his critique of semiotic approaches. Instead, the focus has predominantly been on the perceived weaknesses within the psychological framework of his theory.

In a 1976 review, critic Keith likened Sperber's entire research endeavor to a failed military coup, which, despite much commotion, culminated in an inconsequential outcome (Keith, 1976, p. 240). Keith elucidates that, according to Sperber, the mechanism of symbolism resembles a form of bricolage, wherein the residual by-products of the conceptualization process are utilized to construct inexpressible concepts that perpetually elude the grasp of signs.

Similarly, in another 1976 critique, Hillas contends that Sperber's work represents a fusion of linguistic and psychological perspectives that remain unproductive as mere presuppositions. These presuppositions, Hillas argues, do not independently manifest and can only emerge through the critique of prevailing views on symbolism. Herting (1977) also identifies a critical weakness in Sperber's approach, noting that despite his efforts to address the issue psychologically, Sperber remains tethered to certain structuralist doctrines. This adherence, Herting suggests, has impeded Sperber's ability to transcend the limitations inherent in structuralism.

This research aims to elucidate the specific categories of contemporary attitudes that Sperber critiques, rather than centering his investigations solely on cognitive issues. Additionally, it seeks to clarify the foundational principles underlying Sperber's explanations of symbolic propositions.

3- Sperber's Analysis of Symbols

A substantial portion of human consciousness regarding oneself, others, and the surrounding world is constituted by implicit knowledge, seemingly predetermined in nature. This implicit determination, even in the absence of a self-aware subject, renders human existence comprehensible, directs it, and imbues it with value and interpretation. Similarly, it confers meaning upon human social relationships and interactions, delineating the boundaries and gaps of social engagement. Tacit knowledge encompasses those "judgments that members of a cultural group systematically hold, although they may not be able to consciously interpret and analyze its fundamental principles" (Sperber, 1979, p. 11). Consequently, the analysis and elucidation of this tacit knowledge fall within the purview of the ethnographer or anthropologist.

Delegating the analysis of tacit knowledge to anthropology implies that diverse phenomena such as myths, rituals, social relations, and symbols can be examined through a similar methodological lens. In this context, because symbolism, akin to myth and ritual, presupposes the existence of fundamental tacit knowledge, Sperber posits that "symbolism can be studied and investigated as a cognitive development; a process that, together with conceptual-sensory mechanisms, is involved in shaping knowledge and memory performance" (Sperber, 1979, p. 12).

Sperber's emphasis on the cognitive nature of symbolism positions his analytical approach in opposition to semiotic approaches concerning symbol analysis. He contends that while semiotic approaches may ultimately elucidate the function of symbols within social relations, they fall short in explicating the substance of symbols. Thus, in delineating the essential indicators of symbolism, Sperber asserts that the issue of symbolism transcends mere "decoding". By adopting an anti-interpretive stance and advocating for the "self-sufficiency of the symbol" (Sperber, 1979, p. 18), Sperber endeavors to provide a comprehensive explanation of symbol formation and to delineate its cognitive boundaries and gaps.

In this regard, Sperber initially challenges two macro criteria concerning symbols, as will be elaborated below, and subsequently concentrates his efforts on proposing a model to elucidate the essential indicators of symbolism. The extent to which Sperber succeeds in this endeavor, and whether his arguments are fundamentally original in rejecting and accepting certain positions while proposing ostensibly novel theoretical stances, is a subject of this research.

Therefore, following an examination of Sperber's critical judgments, this study will analyze the antecedents and appendices of his theoretical foundations regarding symbolism. Ultimately, by scrutinizing his cognitive stance on symbols, we will assess whether semiotic approaches are capable of analyzing symbols. If the answer is negative, we will evaluate whether Sperber has succeeded in proposing an alternative that more effectively explicates the mechanism of symbols in terms of content.

3-1 Sperber's Position About the Symbol

Sperber offers a robust critique of the prevailing approaches to the analysis of symbolism, asserting that pre-structural patterns within these approaches not only fail to resolve the complexities of symbolic propositions but also reduce them to notions such as "hidden meanings" (cf. Sperber, 1979, p. 17-50) or "unconscious meanings" (Sperber, 1979, p. 51-84). Such reductions, according to Sperber, defer the understanding of symbolic propositions or symbols to semiotics. Consequently, he argues that explaining symbols through the lens of semiotics, while disregarding the "principle of linguistic economy" (Sperber, 1979, p. 11), significantly undermines the cognitive significance of symbols. Sperber's critiques of these models underscore his theoretical precision, although he himself did not ultimately provide a more accurate or comprehensive model.

In the opening pages of *Rethinking Symbolism*, Sperber articulates that two criteria have alternately served to define and delimit

the concept of symbolism: "The first criterion considers the symbolic as a subjective matter that lacks the characteristic of rationality, while the second criterion views the symbolic as a semiotic matter devoid of the element of language" (Sperber, 1979, p. 1). The following analysis will elucidate which of Sperber's principal criticisms are directed at the indicators of these criteria, along with the theoretical justifications for his views.

3-2 Criticism of "Symbolic as Mental Lacking Rationality"

Sperber fundamentally opposes analyses that regard the symbolic as lacking rationality. He contends that such analyses overlook the self-sufficiency of symbolic entities and interpret their intrinsic nature through the lens of modern rationality—a rationality that may impose its rules on a materially distinct world. Consequently, his criticisms are primarily directed at interpretations prevalent in cultural anthropology. As Winfred Nöth observes, in such interpretations, "the symbolic matter is regarded as a subjective matter that is fundamentally devoid of rationality" (Nöth, 1991, p. 120). Thinkers who analyze symbolic matters such as myths from this perspective include Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917), Sir James George Frazer (1854-1941), and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939).

Both Tylor and Frazer approach myths in a relatively similar manner. They posit that myth, as a symbolic matter, serves as an alternative to science in its modern sense. Given that myth precedes science in the historical evolution of human culture, the advent of science leads to the displacement, obliteration, or reduction of myth. Thus, from their viewpoint, the symbolic matter or myth is considered the "primitive counterpart of science" (Segal, 2010, p. 41). They argue that the mechanisms of the primitive mind in creating, understanding, and interpreting myth are ultimately akin to those of the scientific mentality. However, Tylor and Frazer emphasize that the rationality of the primitive mind does not imply systematicity. Instead, "primitive human beliefs are the fruit or result of correct but incomplete reasoning made through unsystematic inferences based on insufficient data" (Sperber, 1979, p. 1). In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer asserts that the primitive mind relies on logical materials to construct arguments that are fallacious and unsystematic. He attributes the lack of rationality in the creation of symbolic entities to the "incorrect association of meanings" (Frazer, 2009: 96) through specific epistemological principles, termed "the magic of proximity and the magic of similarity" (Frazer, 2009, p. 120-36). This phenomenon occurs because the mind operates with logical correctness but fails to apply logical rules systematically. Consequently, this leads to the discovery of entities that lack the desired rationality.

Contrary to Tylor and Frazer's view that primitive man thinks like modern man, Lévy-Bruhl posits that primitive mentality is fundamentally distinct from modern mentality, existing within a "pre-logical" order (Lévy-Bruhl, 2010, p. 174). In this pre-logical order, unlike the modern mentality, which comprehends and interprets complex matters through the reasoning operations of logical thought, we encounter a mechanism that inherently opposes the fundamental rules of logic, such as the disregard for the law of non-contradiction and the law of excluded middle (cf. Lévy-Bruhl, 2010, p. 131-173). From Lévy-Bruhl's perspective, this disregard for accepted logical rules in the primitive mentality leads to the creation of symbolic entities that lack the rationality desired by the modern mentality. However, unlike his predecessors, Lévy-Bruhl attributes this lack of rationality to the essential difference between primitive and modern mentalities (cf. Mehregan, 2006, p. 156-204). This difference allows a false or irrational entity to be systematically integrated within the interpretative or reasoning framework of the primitive mind. Thus, "according to Tylor and Frazer, primitive thought is logical, even if mistaken; but according to Lévy-Bruhl, primitive thought is openly illogical or pre-logical" (Segal, 2010, p. 53).

Opposing these two views, Sperber asserts that the acceptance of the symbolic as a mental matter lacking rationality hinges on "the acceptance of a hidden meaning that only interpretation can discover or reveal" (Nöth, 1991, p. 120). Consequently, by rejecting both perspectives, he adopts a radically different stance: the symbol is not a sign at all...the interpretation of that meaning is not considered its meaning...symbolism is a non-semiotic cognitive system; or a system of conceptual representations (cf. Sperber, 1979, p. 85-87).

3-3 Criticism of "Symbolic as a Semiotic"

Sperber fundamentally disagrees with the analysis of those thinkers who consider symbolic matter as inherently semiotic. He contends that reducing the symbolic to a mere sign, whether through the lens of hidden meanings or unconscious meanings, not only conflicts with the economic principle of language but also neglects the significance of the outward form of the symbolic. Consequently, in such analyses, the "proportion between means and ends" (Sperber, 1979, p. 7) is lost. Common components in symbolic matters, such as myths, symbols, and non-referential propositions, are all employed as tools to elucidate something else—something that cannot be articulated in ordinary language and is thus depicted through metaphor, allegory, myth, and symbol. From this perspective, Sperber challenges the views of Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), and Georges Dumézil (1898-1986).

Malinowski, who refers to his theory as the "theory of the cultural role of myth" (Malinowski, 1948, p. 120) in *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, posits that the primary function of myth is to explain social phenomena such as marriage, taxes, rites, and rituals. This understanding necessitates distinguishing between two levels of myth: the appearance level and the ideological level. Accordingly, the external level is viewed as a form of expression aimed at explaining or validating rituals or social rules (cf. Malinowski, 1948, p. 72-124). Sperber criticizes Malinowski's view for its reliance on the semiotic analysis of symbolic matters, arguing that such an understanding reduces the form of expression or the appearance of myth to a mere tool serving hidden meanings, thereby diminishing the aesthetic value of myth. Furthermore, Sperber questions why the primitive mind would invent elaborate and detailed myths to express something that could be clearly articulated. In other words, is it not possible to explain social phenomena without myth and through common language? Does the use of myth for such explanations not imply the acceptance of hidden meanings, suggesting that the primitive mind is incapable of specifying them?

Sperber further contends that Lévi-Strauss's structuralist analyses, despite their theoretical precision, are not without flaws. Following the theoretical teachings of Ferdinand de Saussure, Lévi-Strauss asserts that "myths, like language, have fundamental categories" (Lévi-Strauss, 1964, p. 16). Understanding these categories, while perhaps not entirely effective in identifying the entirety of myths, at least reveals the building blocks of myths and the logical relationships between these units and categories (cf. Lévi-Strauss,

1994, p. 135-160). Lévi-Strauss's analysis suggests that by "applying the synchronic methodology" (Chandler, 2007, p. 10) and disregarding the diachronic methodology, he aims to establish a structural framework wherein "every myth contains a series of oppositions". In these structural contrasts, the meaning of each unit is determined solely by its dialectical relationship with other units (Segal, 2010, p. 202).

Despite acknowledging the influence of Lévi-Strauss's proposals on the analysis of the symbolic, Sperber emphasizes that Lévi-Strauss's approach, unlike Malinowski's view which internalizes the external face of the myth, possesses a kind of internal content. According to Sperber, this content arises from the alternating and consecutive uses of categories and their generalization to all structural units of the myth (Sperber, 1979, p. 7). Furthermore, Sperber argues that what Lévi-Strauss proposes as logical and internal relations between categories, in practice, leads to the examination of relations directed towards the external world (Sperber, 1979, p. 12). However, in analyzing the analytical aspects of categories, the relationships between categories should be examined in self-referential statements, irrespective of their referability to the external world.

Another figure Sperber critiques in this discussion is Georges Dumézil. Dumézil's proposal for investigating mythology is termed the ideological model of triangulation or the triangular model. According to Dumézil, Indo-European societies are predominantly influenced by this model in terms of intellectual and social structures. Similarly, Indo-European mythology, according to him, is an allegorical account of the ideology and general worldview of the Indo-European people. This worldview "is centered on the three pillars of society, namely, religious authority, military force, and economic production power, and ultimately takes the form of a tripartite ideological system" (Sarkarati, 1978, p. 22-23). Thus, the tripartite ideological system is an abstract reflection of the class or caste system of society. For instance, "in the ancient Aryan religions, the world of gods is a reflection and an image of the social situation and class relations of those people. Aryan gods are divided into three groups according to the three classes of society, and the gods of each group are considered manifestations of the qualities and perfections of their respective class" (Mojtabaii, 1993, p. 57).

Sperber further argues that Dumézil's concept of "representation" suggests that primitive man derives abstract gods from the social organization of his society (cf. Dumézil, 1941, p. 57-8). Theoretically, Dumézil's view on representation echoes, albeit in a more radical form, the perspective of Émile Durkheim. Durkheim emphasized that "religion is an abstract image of the society to which a person belongs. Therefore, religion reflects all aspects of that society—whether harmonious or discordant" (Durkheim, 1985, p. 60). However, as Sperber rightly critiques, explaining myth as a form of representation diminishes its cognitive significance and conflicts with the linguistic economy. He asserts that in Dumézil's analysis, "the superficial and often meaningless shell of mythology is merely a tool for explaining symbolic meaning and nothing more" (Sperber, 1979, p. 5). This implies that, from Dumézil's perspective, the outer shell of myth is often devoid of intrinsic meaning and only gains validity through its capacity to lead to a symbolic or allegorical interpretation of social structures. Otherwise, it lacks originality. Consequently, Sperber's belief in the self-sufficiency of symbolic matters stands in opposition to Dumézil's views.

Sperber introduces several objections to the semiotic analysis of symbolism:

1. In the semiotic analysis of symbolic matter, symbolism lacks its own signs and utilizes signs previously established in another system.
2. Symbolism is a complex sign that requires reinterpretation, rendering the apparent level of symbolic matter often invalid and worthless, serving merely as a tool to convey symbolic meaning.
3. Acceptance of this viewpoint necessitates the belief that symbolic matter can only achieve its intended meaning through "interpretation". This raises the question of why what can be expressed in symbolic language is not articulated through explicit signs, potentially conflicting with the principle of linguistic economy.
4. In the semiotic analysis of symbolism, there exists an allegorical relationship between the narrative and the interpretation, which lacks the generality or universality desirable for logical acceptance (Sperber, 1979, p. 5-6).

Thus, while the issue of irrationality may not be explicitly raised in the semiotic analysis of symbolism, it is effectively transferred from one domain to another. In the analysis of symbolic matter as a mental matter lacking rationality, the primitive mind is perceived as lacking the necessary logic or order to comprehend its world. In the semiotic analysis of the symbolic matter, the emotional intensity experienced by the symbolic matter can be overlooked, and the emotional and experiential burden of the symbolic matter is reduced to allegorical interpretations. Consequently, what appears irrational here is the disproportion between means and ends.

3-4. Getting Over the Fence of Positivism

Positivists categorize propositions into three distinct types:

- **Synthetic Propositions:** These propositions' truth is determined by their correspondence with the external world.
- **Analytic Propositions:** The truth or falsity of these propositions is intrinsic, and independent of external verification.
- **Metaphysical Propositions:** This category encompasses artistic, religious, literary, and mystical propositions, which are deemed neither true nor false but entirely devoid of meaning according to logical positivists.

Synthetic propositions, such as "The book is on the table," require empirical verification to ascertain their truth. In contrast, analytic propositions, exemplified by "Uncle (the same) is father's brother," are self-referential, with their truth conditions realized within the proposition itself, obviating the need for external validation.

Logical positivists, drawing on Wittgenstein's treatise, dismiss metaphysical propositions as insignificant and meaningless, asserting that they are neither true nor false (Khorranshahi, 1982, p. 10). This stance casts doubt on the originality of symbolic propositions within logical positivism. Sperber, influenced by Alfred J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*, adopts this positivist position, asserting that if the myth is to have symbolic meaning, the propositions it expresses must be either analytic or synthetic, belonging either to the world of experience or to categories of thought (Sperber, 1979, p. 6).

Despite being influenced by Ayer's emphasis on verifiability as a measure of meaningfulness (Heelas, 1976, p. 234), Sperber seeks to justify or explain the neglect of symbolic propositions. He notes that symbolic propositions exhibit a kind of "semantic abnormality" (Sperber, 1979, p. 104), deviating from logical rules. The Aristotelian principles of non-contradiction and the law of excluded middle

are considered essential for meaningful and researchable propositions. However, symbolic propositions often violate these principles. For instance, the statement "A light is not brighter than a light off" creates a contradiction, rendering it seemingly insignificant.

To explain the irrelevance of such propositions, Aristotle distinguishes between "primary substance" and "secondary substance" (cf. Aristotle, 1991a, p. 2a13-4b19). This distinction helps elucidate why symbolic propositions, which often defy logical norms, are perceived as semantically abnormal. Building on this foundation, Aristotle discusses in his metaphysics that the primary essence is "any distinct objective thing" (Qaraii, 2004, p. 101), referring to specific individuals or entities, such as a particular person or horse, which cannot be used as predicates. In contrast, the secondary essence pertains to types or categories, such as the type of human or horse, to which primary essences like *Rostam*, *Khosrow*, or *Rakhsh* and *Shaidiz* belong. Unlike primary substances, secondary substances can function both as subjects and predicates (cf. Aristotle, 1991b, Book VII). Thus, according to Aristotle, if a primary essence appears in the predicate position within a proposition, it results in a contradictory or irrelevant proposition. However, contrary to Aristotle's view, "the primary essence in metaphorical propositions is not only the predicate but the consistency and durability of the metaphor depend on the predicate foundation being the occurrence of the primary essence" (Mehregan, 2007, p. 11).

Sperber, having learned proposition analysis from the school of positivism through Ayer, endeavors to provide a scientific explanation of the inner mechanism of symbolic propositions while adhering to the logical teachings of positivism. The following sections will explore the arguments he employs in this endeavor.

3-5 The Mechanism of Symbolic Propositions from Sperber's Point of View

Accepting Ayer's analysis of propositions, Sperber endeavors to propose a novel perspective by reflecting on the fundamentals of cognition, which at first glance appears less aligned with Ayer's positivist model. Sperber distinguishes between two semantic levels: semantic knowledge and epistemological knowledge. He examines the originality of language statements based on the principle of verifiability, demonstrating that in these two approaches, the quality of semantic structures and the referability of statements are the guarantors of the meaningfulness of the statement.

When Sperber discusses semantics, he refers to those "characteristics that distinguish a morpheme from other morphemes" (Vandendorff, 2004, p. 289-290). Methodologically, Sperber's views are akin to what is explored in generative grammar under the topic of "subcategory rules". These rules explain "how to break down a lexical item into its syntactic characteristics" (Meshkatoddini, 1994, p. 44). For instance, the syntactic features of the morpheme "horse" can be organized as follows: [+noun; +essence; +countable; +general; +animate], whereas the morpheme "river" has the following syntactic components: [+noun; +essence; +countable; +general; -animate].

Similarly, "semantic knowledge—since it is not about the external world but about categories—enables the language user to utilize language without reference to the external world. Solely based on intra-category relationships within the proposition, relying on the components in meaning-makers, one can determine whether a proposition is fundamentally meaningful or meaningless" (Sperber, 1979, p. 91). For example, in a contradictory statement like "My wife is single," the contradiction is not based on the experiential knowledge of language users but can only be understood through their semantic knowledge. The meanings embedded in the word "wife" include the components [+human; -male; +married], and thus the element [+married] inherent in this word clearly conflicts with the element [-married], which is one of the semantic characteristics of the word "single". Therefore, to ascertain the meaningfulness or insignificance of propositions, one can rely on semantic knowledge.

However, the question remains whether it is always possible to determine the truth and falsity of a statement and its meaning without considering factors such as referability and without resorting to extralinguistic references. In response to this question, Sperber highlights the necessity of "encyclopedic knowledge" (Sperber, 1979, p. 92). Unlike propositions that rely on homonymy, in encyclopedic knowledge, the principle of referability determines the truth and falsity of a proposition and, consequently, its meaning. Unlike semantics, which is an indicator of semantic knowledge, referability is a theoretical tool of encyclopedic knowledge and fundamentally depends on examining "a situation in the outside world" (Sperber, 1979, p. 92).

Thus, the originality of a proposition is confirmed by the existence of a similar situation in the external world that can determine the truth or falsity of the proposition's referential content. Sperber emphasizes that an individual's life experience and awareness of the state of affairs in the external world are indicators considered the building blocks of encyclopedic knowledge. Therefore, a statement like "the steering wheel is on the right side of the car" may be true or false based on a person's life experience. This explains why encyclopedic indicators do not function uniformly across cultures with fundamental differences. Consequently, a statement deemed true in one cultural context may appear false in another.

During his time among the Dorse primitives, Sperber encountered a perplexing issue that he struggled to explain convincingly. He observed that the Dorse, like many primitive peoples, used seemingly meaningless and careless statements, leading him to conclude that their understanding of the meaning of these statements was fundamentally different from his own. This realization prompted Sperber to analyze such propositions to explain their authenticity on a general and universal level.

The first question that arises in Sperber's mind is why the Dorse do not recognize or address the apparent contradictions in their statements. According to Aristotle, the principle of non-contradiction dictates that the coexistence or negation of opposites is impossible and invalid. However, the Dorse, by making statements like "the leopard is a Christian" (Sperber, 1979, p. 93), implicitly validates propositions that are logically invalid and semantically negligent. Why does the primitive mind disregard this negligence?

In response to this question, various scholars, including Tylor, Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl, Lévi-Strauss, Freud, Dumézil, and others, have offered different arguments. However, Sperber finds each of these arguments invalid for various reasons (cf. Section 1-3) and seeks to resolve the issue of this apparent contradiction. To correctly explain the mechanism of symbolic propositions, Sperber first needs to determine their place within the logical and cognitive system. He posits that symbolic statements belong to a domain fundamentally distinct from semantic and encyclopedic knowledge. Symbolic statements, according to Sperber, reside in the cognitive domain, a space where "conceptual representations" occur (Sperber, 1979, p. 101).

Sperber first notes that the semantic knowledge in analytical propositions is confined to a limited number of internal categories,

whereas the encyclopedic knowledge in synthetic propositions is generally unlimited. Since the originality of synthetic propositions depends on experience, encyclopedic knowledge does not reflect contradictions, and “practical life requires an effort to resolve or correct these contradictions” (Sperber, 1979, p. 94). However, symbolic propositions present different conditions. They act like synthetic propositions and are related to the “state of the world” (Sperber, 1979, p. 93), their nature is such that contradictions do not cause incoherence, unlike synthetic propositions.

Sperber must justify how a level of tacit knowledge can accommodate contradictions without disturbing the originality of its propositions. He suggests that the primitive mind does not confuse the literal and figurative meanings of symbolic propositions. For instance, the primitive mind implicitly believes in the authenticity of propositions like “the leopard is a Christian,” but this does not mean it accepts that in the ordinary world, the leopard is a harmless animal. Instead, in primitive thought, there is a kind of “symbiosis” (Sperber, 1979, p. 94) where the primitive mind can simultaneously accept that the leopard is Christian and dangerous. The leopard’s Christianity is understood at the symbolic level, and its dangerousness at the encyclopedic level, without confusion between these two areas.

Sperber emphasizes that the weakness of semiotic views lies in their neglect of the symbolic level of cognition, reducing the subject of cognition and conceptual representation to aesthetic or encyclopedic levels. From their perspective, the issue is limited to interpretative possibilities or rhetorical arrangements.

Furthermore, Sperber states that symbolic propositions, unlike analytical propositions, are not confined to a priori categories but are “state-of-the-art” (Sperber, 1979, p. 93) and therefore “unlimited” (Sperber, 1979, p. 93). He concludes that, in addition to limited metaphors formed based on encyclopedic indicators (such as the concept of bravery for the lion), there are also unlimited other metaphors or associations that are equally important. “The richer the knowledge of the encyclopedia, the symbol increases its ability by attracting and absorbing these data” (Sperber, 1979, p. 93). This does not mean that when someone says Babak is a lion, they believe Babak has a mane and tail, but part of their conceptual representations can be influenced by such perceptions.

3-6 Fundamental Contradiction and Truth and Falsity of Symbolic Propositions

Sperber seeks to address the question of under what logical conditions a symbolic statement can appear true and authentic without necessarily adhering to the conditions of truth and falsity or compatibility with the external world. To illustrate this, he presents a scenario where someone hands us an unopened envelope, emphasizing that it contains a letter with a sentence that must be true. In this case, we would believe in the authenticity of the sentence without knowing its content, simply by acknowledging the sincerity of the writer. From this example, Sperber concludes that if “P” is a proposition, its truth and falsity may depend on its compatibility with the external world. However, in a proposition like “P is true,” the subjectivity of truth and falsity changes. Here, the truth or falsity of “P” is irrelevant because the entire proposition serves as the carrier of a larger proposition, and what is placed as a predicate in this larger proposition determines its overall value (Sperber, 1979, p. 107).

Based on this, Sperber concludes that “in the primitive thinking of such a space, symbolic propositions provide the possibility of contradiction” (Sperber, 1979, p. 99). These propositions are based on the principle of “symbiosis” (Sperber, 1979, p. 99) and are considered part of people’s tacit knowledge. This is why, even if a leopard—an external reality—kills innocent people repeatedly, there is still no doubt about the authenticity of symbolic propositions. Therefore, in the proposition “the leopard is a Christian,” the leopard—as a mythological concept—is experienced entirely differently. Contrary to Cassirer’s view, which emphasizes the combination of objective components and mythological concepts and asserts that “in mythological consciousness, the distinction between the world of reality and the world of meaning and the difference between the image of an object and the object itself are meaningless” (Cassirer, 1999, p. 91), Sperber recognizes the distinct areas of myth and logos and their specific functions. He believes that the primitive mind simultaneously acknowledges that the leopard is dangerous and that the proposition “the leopard is a Christian” is true. The predicate of the statement is the true statement, which determines the value of the entire statement.

Thus, in such propositions, we are not dealing with an ornamental and rhetorical function but with a cognitive function. The value of a proposition depends on one’s beliefs. Shared beliefs among people make social life possible, implicitly based on the acceptance of a set of symbolic propositions. As Sperber suggests in his discussion of epidemiology, “People share their ideas with each other; these thoughts reside in our minds and then influence our behavior and thinking” (Sperber, 1985, p. 74). An intriguing aspect of Sperber’s analysis is his assertion that many fundamental principles of Marxism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, and similar frameworks also function as symbolic propositions. In these propositions, the concept of truth and falsity, according to their adherents, becomes irrelevant. This is because such propositions have entered the symbolic realm, operating in the form of “P is true,” “P is scientific,” or “P is aesthetic”. Consequently, the proposition “P” is integrated into a larger macro proposition, whose value is determined by predicates such as aesthetic, scientific, or true.

In general, it seems that by adopting such an approach, symbolic knowledge can be distinguished and separated from semantic and encyclopedic knowledge. This distinction allows for a better understanding of the irrationality of primitive beliefs. Additionally, such an analysis ensures that the field of opinions is not confused with verbal permission, preventing the reduction of knowledge to mere rhetorical arrangements.

4- Discussion and Conclusion

Sperber’s suggestions about the structure of symbolic propositions may initially appear attractive, particularly because he does not dismiss metaphysical propositions, including aesthetic ones, as insignificant. However, the question remains whether these propositions are as universal as he claims.

To address this, we recall that research propositions are based on encyclopedic knowledge, and their truth and falsity depend on their referability. In contrast, symbolic propositions, as Sperber explains, are embedded within a macro proposition, making the discussion of their truth and falsity irrelevant. When a symbolic proposition is placed as the subject, the predicate is established through

social belief. For example, when a statement like "the leopard is a Christian" is enclosed in quotation marks, the discussion about its truth and falsity is eliminated, leaving only the issue of what predicate to carry on it. Thus, we encounter propositions such as:

1. "The leopard is a Christian" is evident.
2. "The leopard is a Christian" is scientific.
3. "The leopard is a Christian" is aesthetic.

While it is unclear to what extent Sperber was influenced by Wittgenstein's teachings, it is evident that the acceptance of these propositions reflects the individual's societal influences rather than explaining the cognitive mechanism of the mind. A person's belief in these propositions expresses the usual perception within their specific cultural context. Without engaging in the epistemological understanding of such statements, individuals become subjects and followers of beliefs that shape their lives, as phenomenologists suggest, without being involved in their change or interpretation.

The pragmatic atmosphere governing this interpretation and analysis of symbolic propositions initially presented in the rethinking of symbolism later shapes Sperber's theoretical framework. It can be emphasized that what he later proposes under the title of epidemiology results from the expansion of this view.

Ultimately, the idea that in symbolic propositions, the proposition placed in quotation marks serves as the subject with a predicate dependent on the individual's social position and environment, indicates that such a structure cannot be universally accepted. Therefore, Sperber's analysis ultimately considers the authenticity of symbolic propositions dependent on indicators that are neither fully encompassed by semantic knowledge nor by encyclopedic knowledge.

The aim of this research is to reconsider Sperber's intellectual foundations regarding the structure of symbolic propositions and critically reflect on his views. After examining Sperber's intellectual sources and origins, it becomes evident that he continued his intellectual project by challenging the prevalent semiotic views of his time, highlighting their methodological weaknesses. He utilized Lévi-Strauss's structuralist methodology and the analytical framework of logical positivism, although he did not confine himself to this level of analysis.

In his quest for a scientific answer, Sperber ventured into the field of cognitive psychology. With the knowledge he acquired, he sought to refine positivist teachings and include symbolic propositions in his final analysis. One of his most significant suggestions is that metaphysical statements should be placed in quotation marks, thereby ruling out their truth and falsity. According to Sperber, positioning the symbolic statement as the subject and attaching a predicate to it allows the macro statement within the realm of ideology or social beliefs to remain original, rather than being reduced to a rhetorical or aesthetic statement.

Sperber's anti-interpretative approach to symbolic propositions helps him distance himself from semiotic views that do not recognize the self-sufficiency of the symbol. This research demonstrates that explaining the symbol within this framework leads to a pragmatist attitude, where knowledge depends on the individual's biological experience. This knowledge is accumulated in one's implicit consciousness without self-awareness, illuminated only by social life.

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