

# The semiotics of ritual and verbal interaction: Crossing boundaries and protecting privacy

*José Enrique Finol*

*Departamento de Ciencias Humanas  
Facultad Experimental de Ciencias. Universidad del Zulia  
Maracaibo - Venezuela*

## Abstract

Verbal and ritual sign systems are among the most widely used to communicate information, emotions, values, and knowledge. In this research, six communication situations -couple, Halloween ritual, therapy group, Bahá'í meeting, holding hands in a Catholic mass, and contacts among LatinAmerican people- are analyzed from a semiotic point of view, in order to find how this interactive process allows people to go beyond the limits created by individuals as well as by groups to protect their territoriality and privacy.

**Key words:** ritual, verbal, interaction, semiotic.

## Semiótica de la interacción ritual y verbal: Para cruzar los límites y proteger la privacidad

### Resumen

Los sistemas de signos verbales y rituales se encuentran entre los más utilizados para comunicar información, emociones, valores y cono-

cimientos. En la presente investigación seis situaciones comunicativas -la pareja, el rito de Halloween, la terapia de grupo, una reunión Bahá'í, la unión de manos en la misa católica y contactos entre latinoamericanos- son analizadas desde una perspectiva semiótica, con el propósito de ver cómo estos procesos interactivos posibilitan a los seres humanos atravesar los límites usualmente creados por el individuo o por los grupos para proteger su territorialidad y privacidad.

**Palabras claves:** ritual, verbal, interacción, semiótica.

## INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this paper is to look at the ways in which interaction takes place in two different aspects of culture: language and ritual. I hope that this analysis will allow us to better understand the ways people establish or avoid communication through crossing or creating boundaries that usually limit territories, and are the origins of misunderstandings and conflicts.

Interactional processes are constantly in movement between boundaries because their main role is to cross them. Human beings have always created boundaries for self-protection and for fear of all that is different or unknown. As Fisher said, "each person battles day and night to maintain his borders" (1973:40). But at the same time, human beings feel a strong necessity to communicate with others because communication is the foundation of social and cultural functioning. Cooperation is a condition to be fulfilled in order to satisfy needs and expectations. Nowhere has this situation been better represented than in the myth of the Tower of Babel. For interactions to be accomplished, the crossing of boundaries becomes mandatory. These boundaries are of many different kinds: emotional, physical, linguistic, spatial, temporal, religious, etc. However, for every boundary human beings have created, a new bridge of communication has already been built. I am going to present some of these bridges and boundaries and discuss how they work in some cultural and social contexts, and how they create unexpected communication processes and new interactions. The examples I am going to present are based in my own experience and that of those who are related to me (family, friends, colleagues). I have been observing and/or I have been performing this behavior.

The first experiences I am going to examine are related to the use of language, specifically the Spanish language. I will discuss the use of proper names, some pronouns, and the whole language as elements that create boundaries in some contexts, and cross it in others. Boundaries are established since we discovered the bio-culturally constructed difference between /self/ and /other/. After this difference is established, each term will be fulfilled with many semiotic attributes, according to the semiosphere where differences are built. This dichotomy between /self/ and /other/ pervades the whole cultural and social system. When it becomes an archi-structure, thanks to a combination which eliminates differences, in /we/, for instance, the system will create a new "other", this time expressed in /they/. The encounter between the two minimal elements of a difference is once again re-oriented from individualities to collectivities.

In the field of ritual, I will choose three examples which I have experienced during my stay in the United States, where I had, during a period of two years, the opportunity of observing and participating in some rituals new to me and my family. These rituals are Halloween in October 1992, the holding hands during prayer at a Catholic mass, and a meeting of a group of members of the Bahá'í Faith, in November 1992.

I have chosen verbal and ritual experiences because I think they are two of the most universal ways human beings have developed to interact, and because language and ritual are many times very close in their performances. It is very common to see a ritual pattern in verbal performances and also find verbal elements as an integral part of ritual performances. Since verbal and ritual performances exist in communication processes, they are powerful tools used by men and women to break the boundaries that limit the sharing of ideas, emotions, meanings, and experiences. As a semiotician, I have been working the last two years on rituals in contemporary societies, asking myself what role they play in different contexts and situations (Finol, 1993, 1994), what kind of values they express, and how the whole society deals with it. It seems to me that in many cases rituals are nothing but the expression of the social and cultural struggle by means of which people try to cross the boundaries that restrain them from interacting in a free and mutually enriching relationship.

## THE NAME AND THE PERSON

I remember very well the first time I went to a therapy group in Maracaibo, Venezuela. The purpose of this meeting was to help people to discover themselves by means of showing to others what they thought they were. This psychological technique is based on a ritual performance which begins with the breaking of a spatial boundary: people are asked to sit in a circle, sometimes on the floor, instead of the more common placing of chairs in lines, one behind the other. The main idea is to avoid the meaning of having a rigid group session addressed by some authoritative "teacher". The purpose is to create a flexible, relaxed kind of friendship *milieu*. The circle, as a spatial form, has in our culture a semiotic connotation of equality as opposed to hierarchy, and this meaning is the one invested in by the actors involved in the therapy group. This spatial arrangement constitutes a crossing of a second boundary since the first one was to be together at the same place. But this circle technique is not enough for the group's members to achieve a level of interaction that allows them to begin a session of self-knowledge, which is supposed to allow others to look into our own emotions and feelings. So as soon as they form the circle and sometimes before, every participant receives a label with his name written on it. This label will be placed visibly on their bodies. When each one can identify by a name the one who is beside or in front of him, they begin to cross a third boundary. This third level is the one that will create possibilities of real communication, the one that actually will "break the ice". The leader did not allow the members to use their last name because this would inhibit communication. In fact, the semiosis of the last name is many times linked to social and cultural values, as social class, level of education, national origin, etc. The first name is the one which represents the human being just as a person and not as someone having certain kind of attributes or qualities. Even though the first names still have some connotations, they are more plain and translucent as being the one related to one person. On the contrary, the last name is shared by many members of a same or even a different family. This first names' capacity of breaking boundaries is given also by the fact that last names communicate in Latin American culture, for instance, a sense of respect, particularly when they are preceded by nouns like *señor*, *don*, or by titles like *profesor*, *maestro*, *doctor*, etc. While the sense of respect in the cases of *señor* and *don* is based on the age of the bearer of such nouns, in the case

of *profesor, maestro, doctor*, etc., it is usually based on the power of knowledge or know-how. These nouns or titles create boundaries that limit the nature of the interaction, usually making it less intimate and less open to exchanges.

Naming is an act of identification, of giving to something or to someone a mark that provides to the community or to the members of a group a way of distinguishing one from another. What is at play when we give names and identify is an operation of the **economy of self-placing** in relationship to others in a specific socio-cultural environment. Having a name is for oneself a label to present to another, but it is also for the other an open door to this person. Nothing is more uncomfortable than speaking to someone whose name is unknown to us. It is not just a situation created by what we can call the **bureaucracy of name**, it is a social tension that is alleviated by the open door that a name represents.

If we take a look at the general process which is at work during this ritual of constitution of a therapy group, we will see two kinds of techniques for crossing boundaries. The first one is a **spatial** technique and has two steps. First, people are placed together in the same place where they are going to meet during every session of the therapy group. Second, people are asked to sit in a special configuration which is a circle, in a way that will allow them to look at each other. This semiotic element, **/space/**, becomes an instrument for producing a sense of **/approachability/** which is necessary for creating an environment in which people can cross their own limits and also those of their neighbors in this place.

The second technique is a **verbal** one and follows the spatial technique. It consists of communicating to every one, without formalities, their names. By showing their names people are opening themselves to the possibility of establishing a relationship where every one can know each other and develop a sense of **/intimacy/**, which is related to the first name. In other words, the progression **space → name** is the investment of a semiotic sequence: **+/approachability/ → +/intimacy/**. Generally speaking, the less the physical distance is, the greater are the possibilities of interaction and intimacy .

During the second session of group therapy, every one knew the name of everyone else. So they began opening this door -a door opened by the possibility of calling someone by his or her first name, as if they knew each other since childhood- and going into the boundaries of mind,

feelings, and emotions. In some cultures, the use of first names is much more frequent than in others. I was surprised to see how sometimes in American universities, at the graduate level, students call their teachers by their first names, and also, in some cases, secretaries do the same. In Venezuelan universities it is absolutely improper for students as well as for staff members to call a teacher by his or her first name. This highlights how the use of the first name is linked to a level of communication/intimacy much stronger in Venezuelan culture than in other countries. It highlights also how the use of the first name can be transformed in a semiotic technique for boosting the crossing of personal boundaries.

### A COUPLE'S ARGUMENT

This next linguistic example is taken from the Venezuelan Spanish language, which has, as Latin American Spanish has, its own characteristics in its different levels: phonetic, syntactic, semantic, etc. The principal aspect that I will discuss is the use of personal pronouns. In Latin American Spanish, the second personal pronoun changes in the plural form: instead of *vosotros* as used in Spain, we say *ustedes*, and instead of, for example, *trabajáis* we use the same morpheme of the third person of plural: *trabajan*. In none of the Latin American countries is the form *vosotros trabajáis* employed by any speaker. Also, all Spanish has this form of respect employed in the second person singular: *usted*, which is used as a respectful form, particularly for addressing people older than the speaker or to those hierarchically superior. Sometimes it is also employed to address a person who could be of the same age and position of the speaker, but to whom he has been just introduced. After having a longer relationship people of the same age and position usually shift from the use of *usted* to the use of *tú*, which expresses a much more familiar relationship. But what is amazing is the change in an opposite direction. I have seen this change in Maracaibo in the particular context of a couple's argument. In fact, having been married for more than seven years this couple, as most couples do, employed the pronoun *tú* for addressing each other in normal situations of every day life. But when they had a fight, the husband shifted the pronoun and addressed his wife with the pronoun *usted*. This is a very interesting case because by using this pronoun, the husband created a boundary to keep his wife outside of their relationship. I have never seen a case in which it is the woman who used the form *usted* for addressing her husband. This preceding aspect

is linked to the fact of the dominance of men as head of the family. In this case, we have the use of a linguistic form brought by one of the participants in the tête-à-tête, with the expressed intention of building a barrier in the communication process. In this way, the negative interaction taking place during the argument is boosted by means of narrowing the linguistic bridge of communication. I have seen couples from the Venezuelan mountains of Los Andes who never use the familiar form *tú* for addressing one another. Husbands and wives will use the respectful form *usted* every time they have to address each other<sup>1</sup>. And the children will use the same form for speaking to their parents, but will use the form *vos* when addressing each other. But in the case of using *usted* as a way of creating limits, we can see how the normal interaction of a couple steps back and creates a fence the aim of which is to avoid communication and thus interaction. Putting limits on the level of interaction that he allows to his wife is a way of punishing her; he raises a fence where he is in and she is out. As we have seen, the pronoun *usted* has two main senses. The first one is /respect/ and the second one can be called /distance/, which is communicated especially when it is the expression of a hierarchy. This second meaning is the one which the husband is trying to communicate. In fact, by using this pronoun for addressing his wife, he reminds her that he is the one who has the higher hierarchical position in their family. Moreover, he reminds her that he is the one who has the power.

## CROSSING A LARGE TERRITORY

The third experience I have observed in the crossing boundaries is related to my experience and that of my family in meeting speakers of our own language when living in a foreign country. Living in a foreign

1 Also, in the state of Zulia, in Venezuela, the form *vos* is the normal substitute of *tú* as the second person singular pronoun. The verb will take the morpheme *-eis* or *-ais*, according to the kind of verb, which is proper of the second person plural. So, instead of *Tú trabajas*, people will say *Vos trabajáis*. In some areas of Argentina people also use *vos* as second singular personal pronoun, but they use the verb in a different way, instead of saying *Vos trabajáis*, as in the former example, they will say *Vos trabajás*.

country, with a different language and different culture, is one of the most difficult experiences to cope with, but, at the same time, it is one in which is possible to observe the different ways that people use to build bridges of communication and understanding, to try to interact without being rejected and without rejecting those with whom we are obliged to interact in a particular social and cultural space and time. This work -no other word can describe this difficult task- requires a great consumption of energy and imagination since there are too many aspects to be taken into account in the social and cultural element of every day life. In such a situation I have observed how the meeting of someone who just speaks our language seems to be so well received. When these people, suffering the stress of this new life, meet someone of the same language, it seems as if they have known each other for a long time. The boundaries so difficult to cross in the new country are crossed very easily when we meet with some one who just speaks our own language, even if this person lives very far away, with very different habits and ideas. I have seen how Mexican people, for example, meet Venezuelan people and they immediately become acquainted as if it were an old friendship. The normal personal boundaries that we build for our own people in our own countries disappear immediately. The process of personal interaction is very quickly settled up, and familiarity and intimacy is rapidly increased. In my analysis, this phenomena is the consequence of two main factors: a) the common language which allows communication and interaction without limitations, b) the common situation of having difficulties to cope with within a new culture in a different society. It is, however, astounding how people who live in Argentina, for example, become rapidly communicative with people who were born thousands and thousands of miles away, having in common particularly language and culture. I am persuaded that this relationship is much stronger and quicker between Latin Americans themselves than between the Latins and Spanish people, who, however, speak the same language. I suppose that the elements that mediate to make one case easier than the other, are that Latin American countries share two common elements: a) geographic vicinity, and b) a historic process of independence from Spain which, in many cases, created a sense of unity and identification vis-a-vis the, at that time, common enemy. This sense has been carried through time. I think this is the best example of how the semiosphere plays a fundamental role in creating the possibilities of crossing boundaries



between people who do not know each other. The concept of semiosphere has been developed by Lotman who defines it as "the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of language, not the sum total of different languages; in a sense the semiosphere has a prior existence and is in constant interaction with languages" (1990:123). What I would like to underscore is that Latin American people are sharing very important levels of a same semiosphere, in particular those that we can describe as linguistic and historic. If we could identify levels in the whole semiosphere, we would say that there is a general level that arose over the particularities of each Latin American country and each Latin American community that is based upon common language and common history. In other words, common language and common history have created a semiotic space by which the building of bridges of communication finds unexpected ways. We have experienced the same phenomenon with people from Brazil, who speak Portuguese and have a former colonial relationship with Portugal. Brazilian people do not share the same common history nor the same language. The aspect of a shared semiosphere that allows people from Brazil to develop a quick and deep relationship with other people from Latin American countries is their common geographic space. Geography becomes a semiotic space loaded with meanings, experiences and ideas that originate a powerful open-door relationship between these people.

On a different level, this powerful interaction is also found in contacts between people from Latin America and people from any other country who communicates their experience of having been in the country from which his or her interlocutor comes. This message -having visited your country or your home-town, for instance- will establish a two-way communication. In relationship to this interactive situation I had the following experience in a supermarket where I went to buy fish, and talked to the person who was in charge of preparing ready-to-eat fish. Because my accent was familiar to him, he asked me where I was from. When I said that I was from Venezuela, he smiled widely and told me that he had visited several times the Venezuelan island of Margarita, a place that I too had visited many times. Immediately we introduced ourselves and said our names to each other, **just the first name**, as American people do in informal interactions. Of course we talked about his experiences in the Caribbean Sea, and about my experiences in the United States, especially in Bloomington, Indiana. The second time I met

Steve, his name, he did not called me "José" or "Joseph", which is the English equivalent for my first name. He just called me "Joe", which is a familiar abbreviation for "Joseph". Here we have again an example of how the first name is an open-door for communication. The difference with respect to what I said before is that here we have a familiar use of the first name, and also the common experience of having been in the same place. It didn't matter that this experience occurred in different times, for different purposes, and with nothing in common in our lives. In that way, we began a relationship that went far from an ordinary contact between a customer and a clerk. Here the semiotic components that are at play are more than a geographic space; it is the **experience of having been there**, in Margarita, where I had been too and, also, that this place is part of my country. The semiotic value at play in this experience can be represented through the term */commonness/* of a similar experience, which was the first point of real interaction in both cases described above. The ingredient */familiarity/* is also a key component in the open-door that our communication exchanges yielded. After having found a common experience, actors will have a real possibility of going to deeper steps of knowing each other, of developing friendship and camaraderie, which, if they agree, will continue in a progression of shared experiences with consequently greater familiarity. This progressive interaction follows a pattern that can be represented the following way: *+/commonness/* → *+/familiarity/*.

### TRICK OR TREAT: THE HALLOWEEN RITUAL

My children Diego and David, six and nine years old respectively, never had the experience of a Halloween celebration<sup>2</sup>. I think that they had never heard about it before coming to the United States. After being there for almost one year, they experienced Halloween as it was something they had known before. In fact, children usually have fewer and weaker boundaries to keep and more mastery in building bridges over

2 A more detailed analysis of Halloween ritual, from a foreigner's point of view, is provided by Finol, 1995, where I argue that this annual festivity "is an expression of a progressive process of initiation of children and youths".

the deep abyss of new cultures and languages. I remember how David, then eight years old, the day following our arrival in Bloomington, without knowing one word of English, was playing basketball with children from different origins, children he had never seen before, and to whom he couldn't speak or even call by their names.

During the Halloween ritual, as other children did, they went around our neighborhood asking for candies, chocolates and all sort of sweet treats. I went with them and I saw how the slogan *Trick or treat* operated as a boundary-crossing instrument. It wasn't just a password; it was the way it had to be in a ritual: a way of making contact, of showing that they and the neighbors were placed in the same mood, in the same semiosphere, performing within the same ritual language. At that time, during the few minutes they made contact, the children and the neighbors conformed to the same culture, they shared a common agreement, they built an interaction based in mutual assumptions and actions. This interactional process was acting upon roles that every one was supposed to assume and the assumption of this role was verbally expressed by a simple statement: *Trick or treat*. Even if the menace of tricking was a fictional one, loaded with old memories, as many rituals are, what is at play is how the boundaries were crossed in harmony. Everybody knows how difficult sometimes the relationship between neighbors is. Everyone fears the loss of privacy, and sometimes it is just the terrible pressure of not having time to say to others something more than a superficial "Hi" or "Hello"; some slight talk about the weather and that's all. Often people prefer to build relationships with people who live far from their homes in order to keep a spatial distance that will avoid too close a friendship. When the neighbor is a foreigner, as was our case, the possibilities of making contact are weaker than in other circumstances. Moreover, being hispanic makes it more difficult since some people have some prejudice against hispanic people. None of these boundaries apply when people from dissimilar origins participate in the same ritual using the elements -words, movements, clothes, colors- that are considered appropriate. In my children's case they were wearing costumes, they said the proper words, and therefore they established during this ritual an interaction that would be settled with much more difficult under different circumstances. Yet this interaction is limited to the ritual; it shows another way of breaking boundaries that are ordinarily so firmly built. The boundaries crossed during the Halloween ritual are of two orders: spatial and

personal. The process of establishing the interaction begins with a spatial approach and continues with a verbal action. These two actions imply the creation of a communication process: approaching and saying. This approaching is not necessarily physical and the saying is not necessarily verbal, as they are in this particular case I am describing here.

## **HOLDING HANDS DURING MASS**

Holding hands as well as wishing peace to each other is one of the many changes that the Catholic church introduced in the mass' ritual during the seventies, when the Charismatic movement within the Catholic church began to show a new powerful trend of practicing religious life. The introduction of the holding hands during mass aims to create a deep sense of community between members of this church. The church, Catholics say, is not a building, it is a body. The idea of being church, of being the body of Christ implies the idea of a totality of church members. Therefore the church created a ritual way of expressing unity through the physical contact of hands during some prayers. The main purpose was to institute an interaction between God and church members. For this to be accomplished, they had to cross the boundaries between church members. Taking and holding the hand of your neighbor during the mass' ritual was an excellent way of reaching out, one to another. It wasn't enough to be together, at the same time and place and practicing the same ritual. It was necessary that the idea of community church, the idea of becoming a collective interlocutor toward God, was really reached. So many Catholic people really began to understand what being a religious community meant only when they crossed the limit of their own bodies toward the body of their neighbors. I can only speculate that this crossing of borders was probably more significant in cultures where the touching and using of small distances between interlocutors is less common. For Latin American people, so fond of touching and placing themselves close during verbal communication and dance performance, for example, this change was seen to be very natural and very easy to incorporate into the ritual.

As in many other religious groups, Catholics have many differences of social class, national origin, level of education, etc. As in other community churches, the leaders try to invent ways of communication between members. At the Saint Charles Church, in Bloomington, Indiana, where this experience took place, the leaders created some activities

like a sort of brunch, with donuts and coffee, after the 10 o'clock mass. This meeting gives an opportunity for parishioners to talk and know each other. Also they developed a dinner for newcomers, as a way of meeting people who had moved to the parish recently. But none of these activities have the ritual and religious intensity, the deep sense of church as the touching of hands has. This capacity of creating a sense of community is maximized because the physical contact is the very symbol of their unity during prayer.

The semiosis at play during the mass ritual is built upon two main senses: /unity/ and /totality/. As we can see the second one is the consequence of the first one. In other words, the parishioners hold hands to build up the sense of /unity/ as a necessary step to achieve their sense of /totality/, therefore to be a body-church as a whole. Moreover, the sense of /unity/ implies also the encounter of body and soul, the erasing of borders in the human being itself. If we pay attention to the **semiotic orientation** of this process of creating /unity/ and thereafter /totality/, we can see how the physical contact acts as the starting operation of founding the communion of body and soul and, by this means, the founding of a real body in a physical and spiritual sense.

In this experience, instead of having a verbal device to cross borders between church members, we have a kinesic sign, a body touching technique which has, in our culture, a great power of communication and interaction. There are different body-contact signs<sup>3</sup>. These signs can be classified according to the positive or negative connotation they have in order to establish or to break a relationship. According to the first criteria we have shaking hands, kissing, hugging, tapping, caressing, picking up, holding (hands, arms, etc.), cleaning, suckling, and sexual contact. (The sexual contact body-signs can also be classified according to different criteria as body parts, positions, etc.) According to the second criteria we have knocking, kicking, biting, scratching, gripping, elbowing, and knocking heads together. Both types of sign are aimed to establish a communication, be it in a positive or negative way. But while the first ones are aimed to continue a relationship, the second ones are aimed to

3 See the pioneering works of Erving Goffman (1967) and those of Raymond Firth (1972) and Esther Goody (1972).

finish it or, in an other sense, to continue in a discordant way. Every body part employed during the body contacts has particular connotations and can be analyzed separately. Many of them can be performed on different places of the body recipient. Many of them can also be combined sequentially or simultaneously. The best example is the sexual contact when lovers perform many different kinds of touching in order to give-receive pleasure, love, etc.

Hands have a special significance in the semiotics of body. They hold many symbolic meaning in Western culture: creation, work, love, prayer, etc. In a temporal sequence, during the encounter and meeting process of people in every day life, hands are usually the first point of body contact, they are the doors through which people provide access to each other. Beginning with shaking hands, a friendly relationship would continue maybe with slapping, hugging, kissing and so on. So we can say that hands have a similar significance as does a door: they are the way to go through<sup>4</sup>. Nonetheless, the meaning of the hands during the Catholic mass ritual is much more than being the threshold of the human body. During mass, hands are the contact that break the borders, that cross the personal boundaries, to make possible the /continuity/ necessarily required for establishing /unity/ and /totality/.

## WITH THE BAHÁ'Í

In November 1992, still living in Bloomington, I went with my wife to a meeting of members of the Bahá'í Faith, wonderful people with a great sense of brotherhood and internationality in their faith. There we had the same experience I talked about before: we met an American girl who had been living in Argentina since she was thirteen years old. Now she was twenty-five and she spoke Spanish as Argentinean people do, with no English accent at all. For us it was like speaking with an Argentinean and immediately this stream of empathy and understanding started as if we had been friends for many years. We exchanged tele-

4 Here we must remember the wonderful lecture of M. Mauss (1934) about "Techniques of the body": "the ways in which from society to society men know to use their bodies", "The body is man's first and most natural instrument". (1973:70, 75).

phone numbers and made an appointment to meet again as soon as possible.

But the experience I want to talk about now comes from our relationship with American people during this Bahá'í dinner meeting and why we felt a little more uncomfortable than usual. When we arrived at the house, the meeting had already begun. We were greeted in a very friendly way and we tried to find a place to sit. After doing so, we saw that no one was wearing shoes. They had taken them off immediately after entering the house, but we didn't because before sitting down we didn't know they had done that. We were a little embarrassed, and knowing nothing about the Bahá'í Faith, we didn't even know if being shoeless during this meeting was part of their religious ritual or just a way of keeping the carpet clean! We still don't know. So we kept our shoes... and our embarrassment! The embarrassment converted into an obstacle in two directions. On the one hand, we avoided asking whether being barefoot was part of some ritual or not. On the other hand, it created a boundary because in our own perception it separated us from them, it made us different from them.

I consider the meeting a ritual since it was a pot luck dinner with a pre-established although loose order. After meeting people and when the hosts knew that most guests were there, they asked everyone to make a line in order to serve themselves. They said that, as on former occasions, those who were at the meeting for the first time would be the first on the line. After the dinner, one member of the church talked about her experiences on a trip to a former Soviet republic. It wasn't just a dinner, it was a ritualized meeting where activities were accomplished in a certain regular way. As Firth said "it follows patterned routines" (1972:29).

I think that what is interesting in the experience I already described is how this mechanism of boundary creation works in an unexpected, involuntary way, and how it follows a progression in which new boundaries, new limitations are created in a schismogenetic fashion that makes it more and more difficult to develop an environment where interaction is favored. The situation has many elements to be taken into account since we have here elements we have seen before but also new ones. In fact, if my wife and I had seen the shoes placed in a corner of the hall or had seen that people weren't wearing shoes, probably we would have taken ours off. When we saw that people had no shoes, we were already

seated far from the place where the shoes had been placed. The alternative of going back and taking our shoes off was also embarrassing for people who are a little shy as we are but also who were newcomers as we were. What I am trying to show is the intervention of */space/* as a limitation for doing what we didn't do when we entered the hall. But also the */differences/* that we were bearing: "foreigners", "newcomers" and "non-members" of the faith. What did the first differences do in this situations? They created new ones. We have here an example of a negative progression toward interaction. In other words, we have here an example of building boundaries most of which originated in our ignorance of the ritual rules. This ignorance prompted other elements like shyness or embarrassment which, immediately, created more difficulties for communication.

The new element we have in this experience is *clothing*, if I can so call the non-wearing of shoes. In fact, clothing is a cultural element with a broad semiotic code which, regarding interaction, works as a way of creating or breaking boundaries. The way people dress themselves is a message addressed to other people about their accessibility, place on a hierarchy, level of education, social class, social occasion, etc. Specifically, taking off the shoes has very important significance in different cultures. Muslims take off their shoes before entering church, and in Japanese culture, it is a very common habit to take off the shoes before entering the house. During our Bahá'í meeting, being without shoes seemed to be a way of communicating */informality/* or openness to communication. But in our case it worked in the opposite direction because it was, at least at the beginning, interpreted as a ritual */formality/*.

## CONCLUSIONS

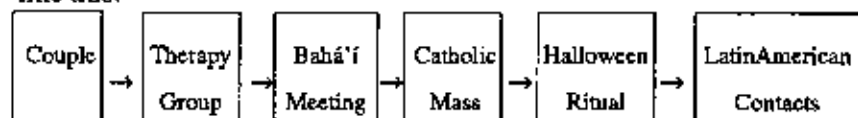
It is possible to visualize the different semiotic elements at play in verbal and ritual interaction cases described above, in Fig.1, where we can see some of the most common elements of a semiotic of interaction expressed both in processes of intra and intercultural contacts.



1. Therapy Group	egalitarian space <hr/> first name	/approachability/ ↓ /intimacy/
2. Couple's argument	personal pronouns <hr/> tú → usted	/distance/ ↓ /respect/
3. People from Latin American countries	geographic vicinity <hr/> common language	/commonness/  /familiarity/
4. Halloween Ritual	common space <hr/> ritual slogan	  /neighborliness/
5. Catholic Mass	holding hands	/continuity/ /unity/ /totality/
6. Bahá'í Meeting	unclothing (bare feet)	+/informality/ -/formality/

Figure 1.

If we try to establish an order that goes from a small and intimate cultural sphere to a wider and more public one, we will see something like this:



Every one of these experiences is related to a particular semiosphere, every one is integrated into a cultural micro-cosmos which gives sense to the experiences of people involved. But in our case, the performances that are expected are related also to our own national and familiar semiospheres, which gives new sense, at least for us, to the proposed interaction processes. The building and breaking of borders is both a way of keeping ourselves between the limits of what is known to us, between our own culture, and, at the very same time, of exploring the unknown, of knowing, of crossing borders and expanding our own limits. There is always a fear of going toward the unknown and thus a powerful

appeal exists to stay within the sheltered limits of our semiotic world. A basic distrust nourishes our relationship to what is different but at the same time what is different appeals to our curiosity and interest. The sense of body border that Fisher mentioned<sup>5</sup> is also and foremost a cultural border embedded in our behavior and thoughts, and consequently, there is always an implicit potential risk in going away from it.

## References

- FINOL, J.E. 1995. "The Semiotics of Ritual: The Halloween in an American Community". Paper presented at the **Central States Anthropological Society, 72nd. Annual Meeting, 9-12 March, Indianapolis (USA).**
- FINOL, J.E. 1993. "La Despedida de Soltera en los Estados Unidos". *Revista Relaciones* 111:9-11, Montevideo (Uruguay).
- FINOL, J.E. 1994a). *Socio-Semiótica del Rito en la Sociedad Contemporánea; La Despedida de Soltera en Venezuela. Revista Espacio Abierto* 5:95-113, Maracaibo (Venezuela).
- FIRTH, R. 1972. "Verbal and Bodily Rituals of Greeting and Parting". **Interpretation of Ritual.** Tavistock, London (England).
- FISHER, S. 1973. **Body Consciousness: you are what you feel.** Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall,INC, N.J. (USA).
- GOFFMAN, E. 1967. **Interaction Ritual.** Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y. (USA).
- GOODY, E. 1972. " "Greeting", "begging", and the presentation of respect". **Interpretation of Ritual.** Tavistock, London (England).
- LOTMAN, Y.M. 1990. **Universe of the Mind.** Indiana University Press, Bloomington (USA).
- MAUSS, M. 1973 (1936). "Techniques of the Body". **Right and Left: Essays on Dual Symbolic Classification.** R. Needham (Ed.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago (USA).

5 "What we have found is that some people clearly visualize their bodies as possessing a boundary, or border, that separates them from what is out there and is capable of withstanding alien things that might try to intrude upon them" (1973: 20-21).