

Semiotics: The Representation, Construction and Evaluation of Reality

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Abstract

Semiotics works with signs and has developed based on the sign system as propounded by Saussure. Centering on the sign systems of Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher and Ferdinand De Saussure, a Swiss Linguist, Semiotics takes into account diverse areas and parallels those to the linguistic signification system. In the process, the scope and nature of the fields have been broadened deviating at times from the central notions of its origin. The current paper focuses on the purpose of its use, its functional procedures and on how it cuts across other disciplines.

Introduction

As semiotics functions based on sign system that is, linguistic system, at first we need to focus, on sign and its associated areas that underpin the system of language. According to Charles Sander Peirce (Peirce, 1931-35), who is considered as one of the proponents of his own brand of semiotics, the other being Ferdinand de Saussure, anything that signifies something or somebody is a sign. He considered sign as a part of the social life.

The foundational basis of the structural semiotics is the sign. It deals with anything that can be regarded as a sign (Eco, 1976). According to Saussure, (Saussure, 1983) sign is a structure that has intrinsic meaning and is a psychological entity, not the material thing. From Saussurean perspective, sign has two parts—signifier—the sound image and signified—the concept. In this sign system, the referent that is the object, that the signifier stands for, is left out or left aside.

The signifier and signified are not connected naturally. According to Saussure, there is no essential and inherent connection between the signified and signifier. However, even as, there is no connection at the ontological level; there is connection at the social or historical level. In other words, epistemologically there is a connection. When we communicate in a language community by using signs, the language users have the shared knowledge about and familiarity with certain conventions and codes in which these signs operate. This mutual negotiation among the language users is an aspect that falls under the purview of epistemology and it is done based on prior historical and social agreement.

Langue

Signs are the parts of the signification system that, to Saussure, mainly refers to langue, the underlying system or sets of rules that account for the individual parole or the utterance that an individual in a language community uses. Saussure in this regard emphasized on the study of langue as he said that there is a potential for science of language if parole is excluded. (Saussure, 1983)

The “langue”, the underlying system of language has very crucial role in shaping the ideas of reality. In other words, our sense of reality, our perception and ideas are not transparent and direct but only are filtered or represented or mediated by the signification system that, for Saussure, refers to the language. More precisely, he said that langue does not reflect reality but constructs it. In this connection, Saussure greatly influenced many other theorists who based their method on language system in analyzing other disciplines.

As mentioned, other Structuralists followed and at times adapted the sign system to account for wide range of social phenomena. For examples, Levi Strauss (Strauss, 1969) explained myth, kinship rules and totemism. Lacan (Lacan, 1977) explained the unconscious based on this system, Barthes (Barthes, 1975) and Greimas (Greimas, 1990) for the “grammar” of narrative and Julia Kristeva (Kristeva, 1968) in explaining any social practice.

Criticism of Saussure

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Saussure's prioritization of structures over usage brought criticism against and disagreement with his views from those theorists who supported the views that social and historical forces also are at work in constructing, shaping and influencing meaning, that is to say our concepts of reality.

Valentine Voloshinov (Voloshinov, 1973) criticized Saussure's synchronic approach and his emphasis on internal relations within the system of language. The stance of Voloshinov as regards the place of *langue* and *parole* is quite the opposite of Saussure. According to him, the sign cannot remain outside the "organized social intercourse" of which it is a part. He attributed the origin of meaning not to the oppositional relationship between signs but to its use in the social context. Saussure's shunning of historicity was criticized. Roman Jakobson and Yury Tynyanov (Jakobson, Tynyanov, Eagle, 1980) declared the synchronism as an illusion stressing on the point that the synchronic system "has its past and future as the inseparable structural elements." According to Umberto Eco (Eco, 1976), "Semiosis is a process by which culture produces signs or meaning to signs." Eco admitted the role of both social activity and subjective factors in each individual act of semiosis.

Discourse

According to Michel Foucault, the scholars did not see the words and the signifiers as representations before the early modern period. Foucault is labeled both as a Structuralist and a Post-structuralist. About the representation of reality and its construction with a particular bias, Foucault took a broader view of the signification system relating it with discourse. In his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he defines discourse as "By discourse, then I meant that which was produced by the groups of signs...a group of acts of formulation, a series of sentences or propositions (Hawthorn, 2003).

According to Foucault, "discourse of certain type consists of a set of rules and conventions and systems of mediation and transposition which govern the way a certain aspect of reality is talked about. A series of sentences or propositions, as Foucault said, are ruled by or formulated based on laws that are called "discursive formation" (Hawthorn, 2003).

Foucault emphasized that discourses force the beliefs, values and categories on to others, implying that the rules of particular discourses do not just allow certain things to be said, but impose certain ways of looking upon the world while excluding alternatives (Hawthorn 2003).

Foucault clearly parallels function of discourse to the function of signs as their role in constructing reality. Now do the signs or discourses have their own inherent or internal capacity to make the meaning and thus shaping the reality or are they also influenced by the external forces of reality—that is social and historical forces?

“Discourses impose certain ways of looking upon the world while excluding alternatives” what the statement means is that the signifying system leaks and is permeable to social forces as discourses do the “meaning making jobs” in a social context and vary our perception, and tilt it in favor or against a social or political ideology. Discursive formation is more broadly described as episteme, a term associated with Foucault.

Ideology

Another broader picture of how the signifying system works in reality that has its root in the sign system or language system is its association with ideology. A Marxist theorist Louis Althusser (Althusser, 1971) used the term *Interpellation*. He related it with ideology that can be defined as “a system of ideas”, in other words, a “system of signifieds” and said that all ideology “hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects.” So there is an underlying relation among the language system, the discourse and the ideology all of which play parts in subjecting individual to a certain views of reality thereby constructing reality to the individual users of the system making different types of meaning. Though Saussure’s views are strongly about the internal “meaning making capacity” of language impermeable to the influence of the social forces, other theorists some of whom are already mentioned differed from Saussure in the way that they gave priority to the influence of the social context.

For all that, they have one thing in common, that is, all they have agreed on the essential fact that our conception or perception of reality is the result of representation or construction through sign system. From this perspective, Saussure and other Structuralists are labeled as

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idealists. Also, Derrida who has both agreed and disagreed with Saussure in a number of ways is labeled as an idealist.

Idealist and Realist Views

Contrary to idealists, what the realists think about the reality and role of language is very simple. They think reality comes first and then comes language. Reality, to them, is already categorized and language only names or designates the reality. Hence, their views about the role of language are to the effect that language is just the nomenclatures that are used to refer to pre-existing categories of reality. However, the idealists' views of the role of mediation through language are called linguistic determinism.

Signifier and Signified: The Priority

About priority attached to the signifiers and signified, the Structuralists give priority to signified over the signifier. It is interesting to note that this priority to the signified was even more in the classic writing as in classic literary writing, the writer is “always supposed to go from signified to signifier, from content to form, from idea to text, from passion to expression” (Chandlers, 2002).

“Saussure very reluctantly admitted the material quality of a sign” (Chandler, 2002). For the most part, he said that signs are psychological entity. Besides, in the sign system, Saussure mainly gave priority to the concept—I mean the signified - not the referent - that is object. Here comes in Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 1967) with his objection against sidelining of the object that is “referent “from the signified, that is, the concept of the object. In this way, “signifier gets blended with signified.” Derrida has different views about the relation between signifier and signified. He did not oppose the arbitrary relation between them neither does he deny the oppositional relation working for meaning. But his main point of disagreement is the “fixed relation between signifier and signified.” He denies the fixed relation between them and hence, there is no fixed meaning. He refers to the “free play of signifiers”. He says that “the seeming meaning is the result only of a self-effacing trace.” He further says, “The differential play of language may produce the effects of decidable meanings in an utterance or text, but asserts that

these are merely effects and lack a ground that would justify certainty in interpretation” (Abrams, 2000).

Whereas for Saussure, “the meaning of signs derives from how they differ from each other” and whereas meaning in Saussurean concept, “is guaranteed by an extra-systemic presence or origin”, Derrida used the term “differance” to mean that “difference” sees meaning as permanently deferred, always subject to and produced by its difference from other meanings and thus volatile and unstable” (Hawthorn, 2002).

According to Chandlers (Chandlers, 2002), these notions were anticipated by Peirce in his version of unlimited semiosis. In other words, Post-structuralists challenge the structuralists’ assumption that meaning is inherent in the signifying system. He also criticized the privileging of the unmarked signifier of the binary opposition. As already mentioned, he valorized the signifier over the signified which he called “the metaphysics of presence.”

Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1972) mentioned about the “empty signifier” and defined it as one with no definite signified. Baudillard’s (Baudrillard, 1981) concepts of simulacra are in conformity with the empty signifiers which do not refer to “signified” but refer to only other signifiers. One finds the play of signifiers where there is no original meaning except for one determined by the “free play of signifiers.”

The discussion of sign that has been so far made is the essential basis for understanding operational procedures of semiotics as we know that Semiotics assumes that language is not the only sign system that mediates between subjects and the reality, knower and known; there are other signification systems too. Semiotics, be it structural, social or post-structural, recognize the fact that our knowledge or perception of the reality is only representation. For example, Derrida famously said that “there is nothing outside the text. Though this statement is an extreme example of idealism, it has obviously some basis of truth as far as the perception of the reality is concerned, if not true as far as ontological basis of the reality is concerned.

Semiotics and Its Scope

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Semiotics encompasses a wide range of signification system such as film, advertisement, TV programs, photography, gesture, posture, musical sounds and other objects “ and the complex association of all these which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment (Chandler, 2002).

We find that semioticians regard some other systems as the signification system and explain how that system produces shapes, distorts, subjects, circulate, motivate, modify the sign systems and naturalize certain social norms or practices and how this naturalization is not neutral and biased or a particular interest groups.

Now to put things a little more in detail, signs operate in a particular ways in any sphere of signification. In order to understand the functional procedures of semiotics, we need to understand some other organizing principles based on which signs are ordered in a system. According to Silverman (1983), meaning derives from the two kinds of differences between signifiers. Those are the differences of dimensions called Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic.” The terms have been borrowed from Roman Jakobson.

In order to understand the nature of representation, we need to understand the significance of the way in which the elements of a signifying system are combined in certain way in a sentence or in a movie or advertisement. According to Culler (Culler, 1981), “the semiotic narratology deals with any mode of narrative by isolating the minimal units and grammar of the plot.”

The traditional narrative sequences of a film are the beginning, middle and end with continuity and closure. What one commonly finds is that most films end in such way that all the crises that the characters got into are resolved—that is, one finds resolution. Do these happen in that order in reality? Actually, narratives convert the unique or the unusual to the “familiar and regular patterns of expectation” (Chandler, 2002).

According to Chandler, coherence is one of the main characteristics we find in the academic writing that has a structure, a format following of which gives a sense of finished

product, a sense of completeness. However, do this coherence and sense of completeness mean that an academic essay says all that it wants to mean?

Likewise, narrative has its own structure that conditions our perception, acts as representation just like the sign system that subjects the readers to the views as depicted in the narratives. The readers of the narratives or the viewers of the visual narratives are easily deceived with the misconception that the narratives portray the natural reality. In other words, the very structure of the narrative with all its continuity, order, repetition, coherence, regularity, symmetry, resolutions give the impression that reality is as neat as how it is shown in the narratives, “The narrative form itself has a content of its own; the media is message. Narrative is such an automatic choice for representing events that it seems unproblematic and natural” (Chandler, 2002).

When, syntagmatic dimension is analysed in film, the elements of the film are paralleled to different units of language composition. So film is compared to a linguistic composition. Like the fact that sign starts from the word level or morpheme level in language, similarly in film, the first unit that is regarded as the sign of the basic level is the frame—then larger unit than frame is shot and then scene and sequence. In semiotic analysis of films frame parallels a morpheme or word, a shot a sentence, a scene a paragraph and sequence a chapter.

We know paradigmatic dimension mainly refers to the rules of substitution. In linguistic signification, in any utterance that is, parole, choice of one element over the other makes a “selective choice prioritizing one element over the other”. We find the binary of presence and absence in this dimension. We can search for the absences, the gaps, fissures, ruptures. By applying semiotics, one can find out the underlying politics and ill-motive behind those omissions and gaps.

In analyzing types of meaning, we use the terms denotation and connotation. We normally give importance to denotation assuming that it gives the literal meaning. However, to semiotics, no text says what it means. Hence, there is no division between denotation and

connotation. Valentine Voroshilov maintained that there is no division between denotation and connotation as meaning is “always permeated by value-judgment (Voloshinove, 1973).

In films and televisions, paradigms are seen in changing shot such as “cut, fade, dissolve and wipe”. The medium and genre are also paradigm, and particular media texts derive meaning from the ways in which the medium and genre used differs from the alternative. (Chandler, 2002)

According to Chandler, there has been a discursive turn or the rhetorical turn in the academic discourse we can see in many disciplines. The turn centres around a concept that facts do not speak for themselves and the academic papers are not unproblematic presentations of knowledge but are subtle rhetorical constructions with epistemological implications.

Rhetorical Devices

In semiotics the rhetorical devices are studied with strong interests as these devices play crucial roles in projecting or shaping reality and in sustaining certain sense of reality in a language community. Post-structuralist semioticians do not conform to the views that rhetorical devices or tropes play the role of only the decoration of language. They rather emphasize on the needs of investigating the way in which these apparently innocent tropes help in maintaining certain representation of reality serving the interests of certain groups in the society.

Post-structuralists famously say that there can be no text which ‘means what it says, Post structuralists study the figurative tropes in texts and practices that constitute the thematic structure. Besides, the Post-structuralists also search for the dominant tropes in different discourses According to Derrida, traditionally philosophers have referred to the mind and the intellect in terms of tropes based on the presence or absence of light.

According to Chandler (Chandler, 2002), figurative language constitutes a rhetorical code and understanding this code is part of what it means to be a member of the culture in which it is employed. Like other codes, figurative language is part of the reality maintenance system of a culture or sub-culture. Our repeated exposure to and use of such figures of speech subtly sustains

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our tacit agreement with the shared assumptions of our society. In fact, tropes “orchestrate the interactions of signifier and signified in discourse.”

According to semioticians, structure plays crucial roles in the process of how an aspect of reality is represented to those who make sense of reality. Besides the general evaluation or perception of reality that is mediated through structures of varying level of complexity, in analyzing and decoding texts of any kinds verbal, visual and other kinds, one finds the function of structures ranging from a primary level to a broader level. Sign as structure works in context and becomes the constituent of larger structure that again works under a system. This larger system or framework can be called codes.

To semioticians, codes are of high importance as the semioticians “do not grant the status of a sign if it does not function within a code.” Some theorists maintain that our perceptions also depend on codes. Codes are sometimes explained as universal principles through which one perceives and understand the reality. Sometimes codes can be also discovered in a discursive context. Some of the examples of the gestalt psychologists’ concepts of universal principles that act as perceptual codes include proximity, similarity, simplicity, continuity, closure etc.

Roland Barthes in his *Textual Analysis of Poe’s Valdemar* (1981) made reference to a variety of codes. For examples, there are the socio-ethnic code, the social code, the narrative code, the cultural code, the scientific code, etc. About the role of codes in the interpretation or decoding (though there are debates about these two points) of a message social or textual discourse, Barthes said, “different discourses in a culture or interpretive community are coded in such a way as to direct the reader’s attention towards the right interpretative technique at the appropriate point in the reading of a literary work” (Hawthorn, 2003). Hence, codes have very important roles in influencing our perceptual approach to a certain “discursive formation” and in “forcing” or directing us to decode certain aspect of reality with certain specific bias. Thus, codes are instrumental in representation of reality in tandem with sign system with which it is inseparably related.

Conclusion

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Since evolving from Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure, semiotics has branched off widely over time involving theories of various schools. Despite criticisms against the structural rigor and idealism that semiotics maintains in emphasizing on the dominant role of signs in mediating between the reality and subject or individual, semiotics has still remained as an evolving discipline with its scope being gradually widened and consolidated. It is an interpretative framework that can be engaged for a deeper understanding of reality either textual or temporal. It has attracted and intrigued theorists and intellectuals from multiple areas whose works play seminal roles in the cultural, political, literary, media and other studies under Arts and Social Sciences.

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