



**TOWARDS MEANING: A SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE**

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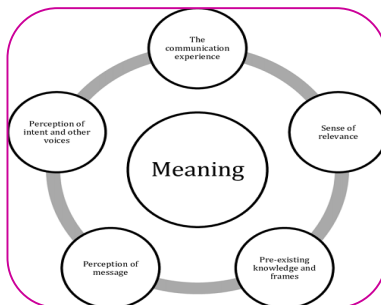
**ABSTRACT**

Man is always in search of meaning of the surroundings, happenings, events, utterances, cultural events through linguistic and non-linguistic signs in order to acquire knowledge and try to use and apply them by finding reasons behind the happenings. Noam Chomsky focuses on ‘innateness hypothesis’ and argues that a child has an internal or biological capacity to learn a language. A child learns the language but through signs, that is the tacit knowledge of the language i.e. ‘competence’. It may be mother’s touch or hunger (crying) which associates the signs with its consciousness. For instance, a ten-rupee note is not a mere piece of paper but with the exchange of it one can buy either a pencil or a pen or a chocolate. The value is determined by the social institution of economics/market. The ability to use language, including kinesics and proxemics or body language and the efforts at meaning making are continuous. Semantics, one of the levels of linguistic and semiotic analysis deals with the aspects of meanings and syntax deals with the vertical and horizontal relationship. The syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationship of the signs form a message. The arbitrariness of ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ seems restricted and display only denotative meaning. The post-structuralists view challenges the notion of restrictedness of meaning with the signifier. Roland Barthes breaks the system of one to one relationship of ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’. He calls it firstness of meaning i.e. ‘denotation’. The signified has associative or connotative meanings which are numberless and dependent on contexts. Any piece of literature, like this the thesis, does not deal with denotative or literal meanings and is not restricted either to the author, or text or reader but depends on the way one looks at the artifact. Meaning is extracted from the text, which is embedded with signs. This paper attempts to highlight on how meaning is extracted and created from ‘signs’ from semiotic perspective.

**KEYWORDS:** Semiotics, pragmatics, sign, signifier, signified, competence, construct

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The terms ‘semiotics’ and ‘semiology’ generally denote the study of ‘signs’. These terms are used synonymously which encompass various fields of study from human communication to space communication. In this so-called ‘cyber village’, the nature of communication became complex. Semiotics is a more comprehensive approach to study human sciences. The term *semiotics* is accepted as the general



term by the International Association of Semiotic Studies in 1974, which comprises the whole field of research in the traditions of both *semiology* and general *semiotics*. (Noth: 14) Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist argues the wholeness of semiotics in the *Course in General Linguistics* as:

A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it *semiology* (from the Greek *semeion* ‘sign’). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern

them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts. (1915:16)

Saussure and Peirce are called the fathers of 'Semiotics' and 'Semiology' who have proposed the basic notion of 'sign' and the possibility of 'semiotics' and 'semiology' as the formal field of study in the twentieth century. Saussure regards 'semiotics' or 'semiology' as the broad one, while 'linguistics' is a part of it. Daniel Chandler in his book *Semiotics: The Basics* defines semiotics:

Semiotics is 'the study of signs'. Semiotics has not become widely institutionalized as a formal academic discipline and it is not really a science. It is not purely a method of textual analysis, but involves both the theory and analysis of signs, codes and signifying practices. Beyond the most basic definition, there is considerable variation among leading semioticians as to what semiotics involves, although a distinctive concern is with how things signify. (2002:240-241)

'Semiotics' or 'Semiology' was later developed by Barthes, Eco, Lotman, Morris, Hjelmslev, Noam Chomsky, Judith Williamson, Angela Goddard and others have formulated an approach to be applied to language, literature, communication and other fields of study. The linguistic signs, spoken or written, are not enough for analyzing human communication. The gestures, body language, pictures, images and photographs are contributory to effective human communication. The canvas of semiotics is inexhaustible in human life.

Though, we read books, the written or printed message, the non-alphabetical signs are supportive like punctuation marks which are also valuable and thus contributory. In mathematics, we use 'signs' which facilitates the subject, through mathematical notations for saving space and time. There are several branches of semiotics – from Aesthetics to Zoo semiotics, including semiotics of law, semiotics of passion, semiotics of power, semiotics of literature, media semiotics, and computer semiotics and so on. Thus, Semiotics is a common thread interwoven in every field of life.

A linguistic sign is needed to be treated as a 'semiological sign' and its meaning as a 'semiological construct' or 'deconstruct' (Barthes). The application of semiotics is of great value when it is applied to a certain field of study. It is an attempt to apply semiotic approach to the study of consumer newspaper ads, which are needed to be studied from a semiotic perspective because modern life without ads is incomplete. Ads are a new form of literary genre, 'a modern art', (McLuhan) and the advertising texts are an assemblage of linguistic and non-linguistic signs, conveying a complete and organic message to persuade its readers or audience. Consumer ads are remarkable for their controlled messages and signs used in them because both of them are intended to persuade the readers and to turn them consumers. The signs organized in the ads are not merely literal or denotative but have associative and connotative values. They are the linguistic, socio-cultural background of society, which reveal certain contemporary realities and ideological notions.

Thus, 'Semiotics' or 'Semiology' studies the nature of signs, their structures, their meanings and functions objectively and analyses them. The object of study of semiotics is a *sign*, for instance, literary approach which considers literature as a sign system is called 'literary semiotics. The essence of literature is language and semiotics does not criticize literature but studies the sign system organized in the piece of literature, objectively. Therefore, it is regarded as a 'pseudo-science'.

The process of meaning making and the role of semiotics depend on the Jakobsonian six factors in communication. Meanings of signs are dependent on the addresser and the addressee. They are active in the meaning making process, bringing with them cultural experience and ideologies for the process making sense. Semiotics is the technique, spontaneous and untutored, self-reflexive and critical. John Sturrock argues that semantics focuses on what words mean while semiotics on how they are in sensory form. Saussure calls 'Semiology – a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life'. Charles Morris defines Semiotics as 'the science of signs' and considers semiotics and semantics as integrated. Peirce fuses pragmatics and semiotics. As structural approach, semiotics studies the text. Kristeva classifies the text as 'genotext' and 'phonotext' while Morris calls it 'an assemblage of signs, including words, images sounds and

gestures, constructed (or interpreted) with reference to the conventions associated with a text type and in a particular medium of communication'. The medium of 'text' can be speech and writing; print and broadcasting, specific technical forms within the mass media such as Radio, newspapers, TV, magazines, books, photographs, films, records, letter, telephone, fax, and e-mail.

Saussure argues that *sign* is made up of *signifier* and *signified*. The one to one relationship between the sound image (*signifier*) and meaning (*signified*) which is later challenged by Roland Barthes by asserting the plurality of meaning / *signified* i.e. along with the literal/dictionary/lexical (denotative) meaning, a sign has connotative or associated meanings. In his polemical essay, *Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of human sciences* (1957) Jacques Derrida marks the possibility of several contextual meanings of the same *sign* in course of time and shatter the concept of 'centre'. For example, among the media texts, an advertisement is a 'media text' which includes several kinds of *signs* - linguistic and non-linguistic, verbal signs, graphic symbols, images, photographs, caricatures, cartoons, sizes of the images, font sizes, extra-graphical signs (emoticons, alphanumerical signs), their colors, foregrounding, defamiliarization, slogans, catchy phrases, jingles and organization of all these in a certain way in order to communicate effectively. Jonathan Bignell comments on visual signs:

Although language is the most striking form of human sign production, the whole of our social world is pervaded by a message which contains visual as well as linguistic signs, or which are exclusively visual. Gestures, dress codes, traffic signs, advertising images, newspapers, and television programs and so on are all kinds of media which use visual signs. (Bignell:1997: iv)

Thus, every linguistic and non-linguistic item in an ad is contributory to the message.

Among the linguistic signs, the linguistic deviance at phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic levels, parallelism, repetitions, nonce formation, neologism, tropes and schemes, abbreviations, short forms, initialism, alphabetism, emoticons, figures of speech such as metaphor and metonymy, pun etc. are employed to save time, space, and for effective communication. In the non-linguistic signs, images, photographs, colors, logo, etc are intentionally employed to achieve the target or goal in the consumer advertisements. Morris relates semiotics to semantics and pragmatics which are closely integrated. Lacan's concept of the 'chain of signifiers' gave way to the meanings in context. Barthes gives prominence to 'connotative' and 'mythical' level of meaning and Hjelmslev proposes 'Connotative Semiotics'.

Semantics is one of the levels of linguistic analysis which is concerned with meaning. A 'sign' gets life when it is given a meaning or meanings. The process of association between a 'sign' and its meaning takes place in society and not in isolation. Thus, semiotics and semantics are 'integral' and 'implied'. A single 'sign' may have 'denotative' and 'connotative' meanings. Thus, semiotics and semantics are interdependent.

### SEMIOTICS AND SEMANTICS

The roots of 'Semiotics' as a field of study lie in the ancient/primitive human society and culture. The development is found in Greek, Latin and French languages as well as in the fields of logic, philosophy, anthropology, medical sciences, and communication. 'Semiotics' as a field of study was not hinted and established formally until Saussure and Peirce's theory. *Semiotics* and *semiology* are alternative terms. *Semiotics* and *Semiology* interpret, evaluate and analyze the signs: linguistic and non-linguistic signs. Therefore, it became necessary to use either term. In 1974, the Association of Semiotics in Milan recommends that 'semiotics' the term for both *semiology* and *semiotics*. In this argument, the term semiotics is inclusive of both semiotics and semiology. The field of Linguistics, which studies language as an object, challenged the traditional notions of language learning, such as John Locke's comparison of human mind to a 'tabula rasa', i.e. a blank slate on which the experiences are engraved and later used for communication. Thus, he proposes that human mind is like a store house of experiences it accumulates in life. This kind of imperialistic view has been challenged by structuralism. Structuralism considers language as a system and phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics are the major levels of linguistic analysis. The structural view presents binary opposition, arbitrariness of language, syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations of the linguistic signs. The post-structural notion of language study has challenged the structural

notion of language in the 1960s. It opposes the arbitrariness of language, and binary oppositions like absence/presence, man/woman, natural /cultural etc. In fact, it is an extension of structuralism, which paved the way for the multiplicity of meaning and destabilized the restricted notions of meanings. The association of *signifier* (sound image) and *signified* (object) is restricted to denotations. The relationship of *signifier* and *signified* was almost restricted to sentence and therefore connotation and associative value of the *signified*, violations and deviations in literary artifacts were ignored. Saussure's concept of 'sign' is inclusive of 'signifier' and 'signified'. C.S. Peirce proposes the triadic model of *sign* which has three constituents: *representamen* (sign vehicle), *interpretant* (sense), and *referant* (object). In the 1960s, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Hjelmslev, Jacques Lacan, and Levi-Strauss's contribution and the emergence of various approaches, feminism, psychoanalysis, formalism, New Criticism, anthropology, sociology, reader-response theory, dialogism, subaltern perspective of Gayatri Spivak and Ilah Kancha, and the extension of syntactic theories-phrase structure theory, Transformational Generative Grammar, X-bar theory, Government and Binding theory and minimalism have changed the perception of appreciation, analysis and recreation of literature through language. The gap between the linguistic and critical theories has been built in the post-1960 theories and discourses.

### SEMIOTICS AND PRAGMATICS

Semiotics is the study of signs, the doctrine of signs; the signs include all types which stand for something. Pragmatics is the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker/writer and interpreted by a listener/reader. It is the study of utterance meaning; the study of speaker meaning, the study of contextual meaning, and the study of what is communicated rather than what is said. Semantics and pragmatics try to determine meanings. Pragmatics is a part of semantics. In other words, semantics is a broader concept which also includes pragmatics.

Linguistics is the sub discipline of semiotics. Semiotics incorporates linguistics, i.e. the study of linguistic signs or simply language while semiotics studies 'signs', linguistic and non-linguistic signs as both of them are complementary in conveying message. Linguistic signs, either verbal or non-verbal, occupy the major part of human communication but still the kinesics or body posture, body language, gestures, facial expressions, eye gaze, dress etc. contribute to the message. Semiotics is not only a textual approach studying signs as an object but also considers their meanings which are determined in society and their contexts in which they are used or employed. Thus, Semiotics incorporates both the approaches of semantics and pragmatics. Pragmatics is the study of utterances against a background and in context. Therefore, pragmatics is the study of context which determines the meanings. The speech – act theory, locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, cooperative and politeness principles are the major domains of pragmatics rather than the structure of signs. Thus pragmatics is not a structural approach but a functional one. Meaning is not independent of but dependent on context.

### SEMIOTICS AND LITERATURE

Semiotics studies all types of the signs: verbal, non-verbal signs and their organizations in a text. The relationship of the signifiers and the signifieds are studied from communicative point of view. The meanings are studied at denotative and connotative levels. Literature, though in any form either verse, or prose, or drama or fiction the essence of it is language. Any language is formed of the linguistic signs. They are further divided into signifiers and signifieds. They convey messages and entertain, and offer pleasure to the audience or readers. Semiotics studies literature as a sign system objectively. Language is the medium of the literary message. Semiotics also focuses on the observation and violation of the sign system i.e. linguistic sign system. In poetry, the poetic deviations at various levels are found. Phonological, Syntactic, Semantic, Morphological, dialectical, and parallelism are found and the violation of the linguistic or structural conventions, which Leech calls 'deviations'. The deviations are intended or intentionally violated for the purpose of effective communication of the literary message. The liberty to 'deautomatise' or violate the linguistic norms is called 'poetic license'. It means that not only the structural arrangement of signs

employed in a poem but their violations are accepted because of the intentions. The purpose of 'foregrounding' is to highlight the message against the background. The controversy between linguistic analysis and literary criticism remains invalid here. But both of them go hand in hand to appreciate, analyze and interpret literature. Robert Scholes emphasizes the need of interpretation of literature through semiotic perspectives in his book *Semiotics and Interpretation* (1982)

As the study of codes and media, semiotics must take an interest in ideology, in socioeconomic structures, in psychoanalysis, in poetics, and in the theory of discourse. Historically, its development has been powerfully influenced by French structuralism and poststructuralism: that is, by the structural anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss, by the neo-Marxism of Louis Althusser, by the "archeology" of Michel Foucault, by the neo-Freudianism of Jacques Lacan, and by the grammatology of Jacques Derrida. (Preface: x-xi)

Thus, literature is needed to be studied in various contexts so that the shades of meanings can be revealed properly.

### SEMIOTICS AND LINGUISTICS

Saussure asserted in his book *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) that linguistics is a part of *semiology*. *Semiotics* or *semiology* is the study of signs, scientific or objective study of signs. A sign is anything that makes or conveys meaning(s) or may be natural, artificial or any sign. He also asserts that language is an arbitrary system. There is no one to one or inheritance between the object and the sound image used for it. He argues that language is a sign system. He uses the terms *langue* for language as a system and *parole* for the actual utterance. Further, he also classifies the study of language in to two major categories, the synchronic and the diachronic. The major assertion of Saussure is that linguistics is a part of semiotics. The two major approaches, linguistic and communicative, are integrated in the ELLT class which depends on the need of the students. There are four major critical approaches to literature which can be classified as: author oriented, text oriented, context oriented and reader oriented. It is the linguistic notion that studying literature is nothing but studying language in a special context. Russian formalists showed their interest in the 'literariness of language'. Linguistic approach is mainly structural and descriptive hence *textual*, while in actual society we need to have prescriptive or communicative approach which needs to consider addresser, addressee, contact, code, message, and context. R.A. Hudson, in his *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (2003) points out the interdependence of language and society. Roland Barthes has modified the concept of sign at two levels and thus, contributed to the Saussurian concept of 'sign'. The American linguist, C. S. Peirce who is called the father of semiotics, classified signs into iconic, indexical and symbolic. Hodge and Kress in their book *Social Semiotics* (1988) claimed that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not arbitrary, but motivated. He insists that there is a relationship of motivation between the world of the sign-user and the signifier. Signs are formed in a certain socio-cultural environment. The process of meaning making is creative and continuous. Thus, the making of signs is not an act of imitation but of creativity and innovation. In linguistics, language is studied at the phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels while semiotics encompasses all these levels, paralinguistic, and non-linguistic signs. A 'sign' conveys meaning(s) and so semiotics is related to semantics.

### SEMIOTICS: A MORE COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

Semiotics is a more comprehensive approach in studying human communication, human and artificial languages -computer language, computer linguistics, animal communication and behavior, medical science, anthropology, conventional systems of social institutions, human culture and so on and so forth. Semiotics/Semiology, in relation to linguistics, human communication and culture, is a more comprehensive approach because as Saussure stated, linguistics is a part of semiotics and not the other way. In human communication, though verbal language is dominant verbal/linguistic signs, non-verbal signs- i.e. body language /kinesis and proxemics and the background signs against which communication takes place, also

play a vital role. A newspaper reader though he concentrates on a particular news item reads the news, surrounded by other news items.

As the basic object of linguistics is language, one is expected to possess 'linguistic competence' as well as 'communicative competence'. Linguistic competence means the ability to form numberless grammatical sentences which conveying meaning. But as a social behavior, language is used in society and needs to observe social taboos, ethics, rules, religion, social institutional norms etc. in the context, of the relationship between the addresser and addressee. Therefore, it is necessary to have 'communicative competence'. In society, one needs linguistic as well as communicative approach. Along with 'communicative, linguistic, and literary competence' one needs to develop 'semiotic competence' too. It is useful in realizing life and linguistic and non-linguistic signs medical signs, social sciences etc. Semiotic approach is needed to be the part of pedagogy.

## CONCLUSION

The extension of structuralism is known as post-structuralism which rejects the rigidity of 'arbitrariness', 'philology', 'diachronic nature of language' and 'binary opposition' found in language and proposes that 'signs 'in a text need to be studied not merely for 'sign's' sake. Language is a social phenomenon, which carries and spreads culture and ideology. Semiotics is the major post-structural approach which relates to the verbal and non-verbal signs in any form of communication. It relates to semantics, pragmatics, anthropology, psychology, culture, and ideology. Semiotics does not exist as a mere approach or theory but it is a program to be applied to the texts and subtexts. Hence, it becomes necessary to acquire / possess 'semiotic competence' which includes of 'linguistic', 'literary', 'communicative' and 'grammatical competences'.

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