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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Semiotic Analysis of the Simpson's Sitcom

Prof. Salih Mahdi Al-Mamoory[1] ✉ and Iman Farhan Mohammed[2]

[1]*PhD, Department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Babylon, Iraq*
[2]*Department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Babylon, Iraq*
Corresponding Author: Prof. Salih Mahdi Al-Mamoory, **E-mail**: salih_mehdi71@yahoo.com

| ABSTRACT

The current study is conducted to focus on the semiotic analysis of the American Simpson's sitcom created by Matt Groening for the Fox Broadcasting Company. It investigates the signs that Sampson's characters convey. It aims to show the messages that the concerned data have. The data is limited to 4 characters that are selected from the concerned series. Barth (1977)'s model is adopted in analyzing the concerned data. It is hypothesized that the concerned characters are full of messages that are used as tools to deal with certain cases in American society. To achieve its aim and verify its hypothesis, the study adopts the following steps: 1. Re-visiting concepts of semiotics and sitcom. 2. Presenting the basic elements of the sign system. 3. Following Barth (1977)'s model in analyzing the concerned data. 4. The main points are concluded.

1. Introduction

For several decades, people coming home from work or school have been tempted by their televisions to watch sitcoms or situation comedies. Sitcoms have been a source of relaxation and entertainment since the 1950s when they moved from BBC Radio transmission to BBC TV channel in the United Kingdom. Sitcoms are often perceived to be less valuable than more serious and factual programs, such as news or documentaries. It is said that their main function lies in relaxation and entertainment.

The study of semiotics focuses on how meaning is produced and transmitted. Its roots are in the academic study of how language and visual signals and symbols convey meaning. It is a perspective that helps us recognize how the environment and culture in which we live have a profound influence on each of us unintentionally. Our ability to rapidly and instinctively interpret cultural signals and traditions determines how frequently our actions and thoughts are influenced by them. Our ability to instantly and instinctively interpret complex cultural messages and conventions often governs our actions and thoughts, which are what we do automatically.

2. Semiotics

Dineen (1967: 195) points out that a linguistic sign is a connection between a notion and a sound pattern rather than between an object and its name. Since a sound is a physical phenomenon, the sound pattern is not a sound. A sound pattern is the listener's psychological interpretation of a sound based on the information his senses provide. Only because this sound pattern represents our sensory impressions can it be referred to as a "material" element. The sound pattern and the other component of a linguistic sign can be distinguished from one another.

Besides, Bussmann (1999:1054) defines semiotics as the theory of linguistic and non-linguistic signs and signing processes, with the study of natural languages serving as its central component because they are the complete system. In addition to theories of language

and communication, many humanistic disciplines also study nonlinguistic signs. Semiotics, according to Crystal (2011: 431), is the study of the characteristics of signaling systems, both natural and artificial. The term semiotic, also known as semeiotics, semiology, semasiology, and significs, refers to the study of sign and symbol systems in general within philosophy. This method examines communicative systems' linguistic, psychological, philosophical, and sociological traits all at once.

Dineen (1967: 195) continues (ibid) by stating that Saussure separates writing from language and places emphasis on linguistic signs (such as words) that specifically refer to images. A signifier, such as the written letter "t," denoted a sound in the primary sign system of language within the ('separate') system of written signs. Writing and speech are equivalent in Saussure's view as signifier and signified. The majority of theorists who have built upon Saussure's paradigm in the past are happy to categorize linguistic indicators as either spoken or written. A sign, then, is made up of a signifier, which refers to the representation of something, and a signified, which refers to the mental construct of what is being represented. The relationship will be shown in the following figure:

Source: https://www.google.com

According to Saussure, signs express meaning in semiotic systems. Thus, the term "table" would have two distinct meanings in English. It would be heard as [tebl] in mid-western American English when spoken; when written, it would be spelt as a succession of graphemes or letters: t-a-b-l-e (Meyer, 2009: 4). The signified is connected to signifiers in turn. A speaker of English will immediately associate the word table with its meaning upon hearing or reading it. Different sign systems are used by other semiotic systems. For example, many cultures value lifting the head, and this time, language users concur on the link between signifiers and signified, according to Baker and Ellece (2011: 20). These connections can be denotative (literal), where the term blue denotes the idea of the color in mind. However, there is also the possibility of a connotative relationship, in which the signified is given additional (often figurative) signifiers. For instance, blue has a variety of connotative connotations that might vary between cultures. It may also imply sex (blue movie), sadness (feeling blue), rarity (once in a blue moon), or coldness (turning blue with cold), among other things.

Dineen (1967: 195) notes that all signs share two fundamental characteristics: they are arbitrary and linear. This is important to note. According to De Saussure, there is no relation between a word's meaning and its use in a sign. Saussure prefers the term "sign" over "symbol" to define linguistic statements. Onomatopoeia may seem to constrain signs' arbitrary nature, but he doesn't think such signs are prevalent or significant enough in the language to undermine the fundamental idea.

The significance, which can be divided into parts succeeding each other in time, is where the linearity of the linguistic sign is most clearly visible. The chain of speech, as described by de Saussure, is formed by this succession. He views that the consequences of this obvious fact are incalculable in linguistics since linearity is the entire basis of linguistic mechanisms and the criterion by which language can be distinguished from other sign systems (ibid).

Romanini and Fernindez (2014: 13) argue that Peirce states that the form a sign takes, it is a signifier, can be classified as one of three types that are:

Icon signals are those whose physical attributes closely match those of the circumstances to which they relate. This is the typical situation in animal communication, for instance, where a call expressing dread is only employed in an environment that produces fear. Only a few things in language could be said to have such directly symbolic (iconic) properties, for example, onomatopoeic expressions like a cuckoo, growl,

An index is a category of signs where the association between the sign and the thing it indicates is based not on convention (symbol) or likeness (icon) but rather on a direct genuine (causal) connection to the specific thing that is truly there. An index could be considered a "symptom" of the thing it refers to. Experience may be necessary to understand a sign as an index. For example, a fever is an index for an underlying illness, while smoke is an index for fire,

The term "Symbol" generally refers to various iconic associations between word forms and their referents. Onomatopoeia has the strongest connection. Phonaesthesia, in which a portion of a word form is connected to a particular meaning, is a less powerful

example. For instance, in English, the suffix -ump is connected to low-pitched sounds like crump, thump, and grump, while the prefix gl- is connected to light like gleam, glisten, glow, and glitter. The conventions that apply in a particular language govern these associations, which are not universal. Phonaesthemes include sequences like -ump in bump and thump and -gl in glow and glimmer. Such a relationship will be shown in the following figure:

Source: https://www.google.com
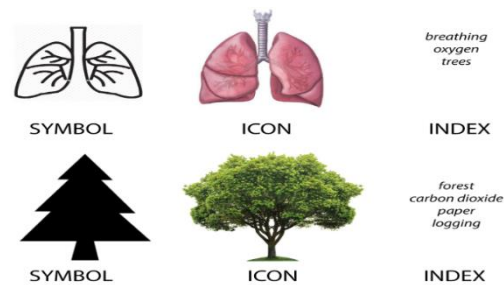
Based on Gérard Barthes' theory (1977), levels of meaning often describe connotation and denotation. He adopted the concept of Louis Hjelmslev that there are different orders of signification. That is, the sign is the denotative sign which is made from a signifier and signified. It can be called the first order of signification is that of denotation. Then, the signifier is the connotative signifier which uses the denotative sign. It is connotation as a second order of signification. Afterwards, the connotative signifier must create a connotative signified to produce the sign or connotative sign.

2.1 Sitcoms

Sitcoms are usually half-hour series segmented into episodes, where the same characters appear in the same settings. The episodes are finite; what happens in the episode is explained and solved. "The most important feature of sitcom structure is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premise undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored". In comparison with other series of stories, sitcoms are funny. In each episode, the same central characters in the same setting are exposed to a new, unexpected comic situation. The comic aspect is, therefore, the most important distinguishing feature of the sitcom as a genre (Taflinger, 2013: 67).

Sherman (2003: 89) claims that "what makes people laugh often has to do with 'in-knowledge', with making quick connections and coming close to sensitive issues. They laugh because they are in the know when a brief cultural reference taps a pool of knowledge. They laugh when they suddenly see the hidden implications and can close the gap that the actors have set up for us. They laugh, perhaps out of a sense of protected shock, when they come dangerously close to taboos, like death and cruelty, or when they see incongruities created by juxtaposition." Laughter is an indicator of participation since the sitcom is a social event - "the audience perceptions are quick, shared and simultaneous".

A typical feature of some of the sitcoms is the recorded laughter, which emphasizes the funny places and draws the audience's attention. Taflinger (2013: 67) claims that the sitcom provides four criteria for humour:

1) Appeal to the intellect rather than emotion,
2) Established societal norms,
3) Disagreement with those norms, and
4) The perception by the audience that the events are essentially harmless to both the characters and to the sensibilities and beliefs of the audience.

Besides the source of humour, the sitcom is a mirror of society. Therefore, most sitcoms are set in the present, not in the past. Creators of sitcoms suppose that the sitcom relates to its audience, in other words, that the characters represent and resemble the audience (Berman, 1987: 90). Besides, Taflinger (2013: 68) distinguishes three types of sitcoms: action comedy, domestic comedy and dramatic comedy. The most widely spread kind of sitcom is the action comedy, which can be based on a variety of themes such as family (I love Lucy), gimmicks (Alf), places ('Allo 'Allo!) or occupations (The Big Bang Theory).

In the case of action comedy, the emphasis is put on verbal and physical action. The second type of sitcom is the domestic comedy, which is more expansive, and has a wider variety of events and a greater sense of seriousness than an action comedy. In comparison with action comedy, domestic comedy involves more characters. "The greatest emphasis in a domcom is on the characters and their growth and development as human beings. This type of sitcom is called a domestic comedy because it is almost invariably set in and

around a family unit: a mother and/or father, and most definitely, children. A major factor in motion picture and theatrical drama is that the events portray the most important thing to happen in the protagonist's life (ibid).

3. The Analysis

This current section is focused on analysing selected characters of Simpson in terms of semiotics. The Simpsons is an American animated sitcom created by Matt Groening for the Fox Broadcasting Company. The series is a satirical depiction of American life, epitomized by the Simpson family, which consists of Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie. The show is set in the fictional town of Springfield and parodies American culture and society, television, and the human condition. The family was conceived by Groening shortly before a solicitation for a series of animated shorts with producer James L. Brooks. He created a dysfunctional family and named the characters after his own family members, substituting Bart for his own name; he thought Simpson was a funny name in that it sounded similar to "simpleton".

The data is limited to (4) characters that are selected from the concerned series since they are regarded as the most sitcom ones. The researcher will adopt Barth (1977)'s model in analyzing the concerned data. However, the study adopts a qualitative approach. In this respect, Shank (2002: 5) states that the qualitative method is "a sort of systematic empirical analysis into meaning." "Systematic" is defined by Shank as "planned, ordered, and public."

3.1   Data

Character No. (1)

From a denotative viewpoint, Bart is a young boy that is just looking at him. Although his hair gives the impression that there is more to him than meets the eye, he has a normal appearance. Most people assume that he is just a regular, everyday boy like those you might see in your area. Furthermore, things connotatively become much more convoluted when you look more closely at the indicators that Bart represents. Bart's hair, for one, embodies the common "rebel" hairstyle. It might be interpreted by some as a "punk" hairdo. Others might interpret it as a nod to the "box cut" trend that was prevalent when the show first debuted in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He has yellow skin, which appears to be standard in the program. However, because of how universal his skin is, no one can claim that he is neither black nor white, nor any other ethnicity for that matter. It is beneficial to shift the attention away from such things and toward Bart Simpson as a person.

You may make preconceived judgments about Bart's character based on the impression you have of him. Nowadays, the portrayal of Bart that is most frequently used is one in which he appears innocent in a family portrait-style photograph. However, in earlier pictures of Bart, he was depicted as being greater than the entire family. He frequently had his back turned and a slingshot in his back pocket, giving him the appearance of being a "bad lad."

Character No. (2)

Marge denotatively does not appear to be a very complex person just by looking at her. Her enormous blue hair stands out at the same time. She wears red pearls, a modest long green dress, and red heels. She lacks depth in her persona just by looking at her. From a connotative perspective, Marge is also a very straightforward person, as evidenced by the numerous photographs and appearances she makes in pop culture. Her hair, however, is the one feature that will always catch your notice. You will frequently wonder, "What the heck is with that hair?" She seems to have the typical housewife's 1950s appearance. They portray her as one of those housewives who only cares for her spouse. She does, however, occasionally deviate from that pattern. Her persistent nagging is one of her defining traits for this program. She consistently anticipates negative outcomes, yet she insists on commenting on everything.

Character No. (3)

One cannot but feel bad for Homer when they first see him. He is denotatively an overweight middle-aged man. On his entire head, he also has three pieces of hair. Two parts display his shoddy comb-over effort and the extensive zigzag strip that wraps around the back of his head. He wears a plain white polo shirt with short sleeves and a pair of blue pants. Connotatively, Homer is also the most complex character on the show, despite the fact that he appears to be the most straightforward. One of Homer's roles is that of the father figure, which is meant to represent his leadership qualities.

Anyone who has watched this show will be able to easily identify Homer as a follower rather than a leader. Homer is as stupid as he appears, which is unfortunate for him but lucky for the spectator. His son calls him "Homer" and generally shows no intellectual admiration for him. His wife will hardly ever agree with any of his ideas and for a good reason. Homer is unquestionably the center of the program, despite the fact that he is not the smartest character in it.

Character No. (4)

Denotatively, at first glance, Lisa comes across as your sweet innocent girl. And for the most part, you would be right. Lisa's attire consists of a red dress and some red slippers, along with some pearls. Her hair, to put it into very simple terms, resembles a star on her head. Connotatively, one thing that you can note right away is that she is often shown with her saxophone. This gives her some humorous depth because although she can play one of the most difficult instruments around, it is the same size as her, if not bigger, in a lot of the pictures. Although one cannot tell from what they see of her appearance, Lisa is the brain of the Simpson family. At 8 years old, she contains the intelligence of most Nobel Prize winners. For the most part, though, Lisa Simpson is not one of the most complex characters on the show, although she has her moments every now and then.

As a result, semiotic methods are used to interpret various meanings based on indicators presented in the characters in question. The signals examined here are quite ubiquitous throughout "the concerned characters," as shown from the samples that were evaluated, despite the presence of constant features of normality. Architectural works contain signs that can only be understood in the context of specific codes. These signs are organized using these codes in terms of semiotic tools.

4. Conclusion

It can be concluded that semiotic tools are used to decipher the architectural message being conveyed by the characters in question. Architectural text is created based on a complex interplay of codes or conventions that people in the modern world are unaware of. Semiotics aids in understanding meaning as a whole. Thus, the hypothesis of the study is confirmed, i.e., the concerned characters are full of messages that are used as tools to deal with certain cases in American society since the characters in question are full of symbols that signify various things.

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