| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Semiotics: A Transdisciplinary Quest for Meaning

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| **ABSTRACT**

Human communication, often defined as the transfer of information between human beings, is better understood as the exchange of meaning between them. It has been discovered that meaning hardly makes sense outside the context of communication. Efforts to make sense of meanings date back to the classical times from the metaphysical postulates of Plato and Aristotle, which establish basic paradigms for the interpretation of the relation between 'ideas' and 'individual forms' as correlates of linguistic signs through Locke's postulates of a fully-fledged system of ideas pre-existent to language, Condillac's acknowledgement of the constitutive role of signs, which allow a level of cognitive organization beyond that of animals to the modern realization of the dependence of the mind on language and its social character which lead directly to Humboldt's linguistic relativism. One of the most dynamic breakthroughs in the understanding of human communication and the meanings exchanged therein is semiotics which is often defined as the science, doctrine, or study of signs and has become one of the traditions used in the study of communication. Combining historical inquiry and content analysis as methodological tools, this study explores the trajectory of semiotics, its nature, and dynamics and posits that because signs are socially and culturally polysemous, the use of semiotics requires exposure to diverse disciplines or at least more than one discipline in order to be able to properly underscore its multimodal tenor.

1. Introduction

Communication is perhaps the most important feature of human beings, without which their survival is impossible. It is the basis of individual and social essence, identity, and aspirations and lies at the core of anthropological and social inquiries (de Sola Pool et al., 1973). It has a cosmopolitan, many-sidedness that makes it difficult to evolve a consensual definition. Frank Dance, who is said to have written the most comprehensive work on communication theory, reportedly listed more than 120 definitions of communication many decades ago, after which several other scholars have tried their hands on producing more definitions, but none to date has been accepted as the standard and absolute consensual definition. Jennifer Slack agrees with him and, as if speaking with clairvoyant precision, rules out the possibility of such a definition ever emerging. (Griffins, 2012).

Despite the seeming impossibility of having a final word on communication in an all-inclusive way, there appears to be an understanding of the fact that communication is a relational process, or simply put, a process that involves a kind of interaction that creates a message that generates meaning, interprets it, and transmits with the hope for a response. (Abraham Solomonick, 2015; Thayer, 1961; Alan Cruise, 2000).

Communication, in light of the above, is related to every aspect of human endeavour and can be located within every discipline. It is perhaps because of this inherent complexity that several traditions have emerged with unique approaches to the study of this phenomenon. One of such traditions sees communication as the process through which meanings are shared through signs. This

tradition, which has become an independent field of study, is called semiotics, and it is the subject of this study. This paper thus attempts a survey of the subject of semiotics, its origin development, goals, and foci. It projects semiotics as an all-inclusive, transdisciplinary approach to evaluating and analyzing all signifying systems through which meanings are inferred, negotiated, and transmitted within personal, social, and cultural references.

2. Literature Review

The field of semiotics has not lacked eager explorers in the vast sea of its ideational trajectory in the past few decades. Scholars from various backgrounds have contributed to the discourse because of the complexity of signs and symbols. Chandler (2002), in his introductory work, "Semiotics: The Basics'' acknowledges the vastness of semiotics' terrain and argues that no treatment of it can claim to be comprehensive. Though he attempts to offer a coherent account of some key concepts in semiotics, he admits that there are divergent schools of thought in the field, and there is little or no consensus among scholars regarding the scope of the subject, core concepts, or methodological tools.

Danesi (2007), an anthropologist, in his "The Quest for Meaning: A Guide to Semiotic Theory and Practice," examines the various themes, concepts, and techniques that constitute current semiotic theory in lucid, easy-to-follow language. He attempts to show the relevance of semiotics to everyday experiences and things such as food, clothing, mathematics, and popular culture with insights into how the discipline can be applied in everyday life. Fidou (2014), in his doctoral thesis titled 'Communicative Semiotics in Everyday Life (Cultural Criticism – The Image in the 21st century)', explores the use of semiotics in the understanding of visual images and in the advertisement in particular.

Barthes (1977), in his 'Elements of Semiology', attempts a deconstruction of Saussure's postulates on semiology and reconstructs some of his basic assumptions. He maintains that contrary to Saussure's position that linguistics is under semiotics, it is semiotics that should be under linguistics. Thomas Hestbaek et al. (2015) in "Social Semiotics" presents the views of a generation of scholars who, though inspired by Michael Halliday's approach to language and semiotics, have added their own ideas in accordance with their particular academic interests and have developed their own original works. By presenting the thoughts and ideas of these people, the authors succeeded in formulating a coherent concept of social semiotics.

Roberta Kevelson (1983), in "Semiotics and Methods of Legal Inquiry: Interpretation and Discovery in Law from the Perspective of Peirce's Speculative Rhetoric," argues that from the perspective of pragmatics, as defined by Peirce's perspective of pragmatics, a legal judgment is a value-sign which acts to bring about an end or goal. Since, according to Peirce's scheme, human actions in the public sphere are governed by value-signs and value-systems, which themselves are networks of interrelating signs, the universality of the semiotic process is not contestable. In addition to these, several other scholars have navigated the almost boundless sea of semiotics from their peculiar areas of specialization, and the exploration subsists in a continuum.

3. Conceptual Analysis

Semiotics is the study of signs. In a way, it can be said to be a form of applied linguistics concerned with the study of all signs and symbols that facilitate communication among people. These may involve spoken or written language, sounds of nature, or tools and artifacts we use or see on a daily basis. Any image, object, sound, action, concept, or word capable of representing something else is understood to be a sign. Semiotics is seen as a sister discipline to cultural studies because while it studies signs, cultural studies are concerned with what the signs connote. That is, it focuses on the cultural semantic contents of signs or what the signs represent and mean to people within a particular cultural setting. It is, therefore, a major tool of cultural criticism (Dalel Fidou, 2014).

Despite the basic definition of semiotics as the 'study of signs,' leading semioticians differ in their understanding of the details of the semiotic enterprise. It has been understood in various ways ranging from a science to a body of principles. In all of these shades of understanding, it is implied that meanings dwell in the human mind, and it is a man that gives meaning to all phenomena. Virtually all the creative activities with which human life is engaged are signs; be they intellectual and artistic forms, words, gestures, symbols, paintings, stories, comedies, and symphonies to scientific theories and mathematical theorems, they fall within the subject of semiotics. Because of the vastness of the sea of semiotic concern, contemporary semioticians do not study signs in isolation but as part of structured semiotic 'sign-systems' through which they explore how meanings are made and how reality is represented. (Chandler, 2002; Danesi, 2007)

Attempts were made throughout the history of philosophy, from ancient times to the present times to understand signs, but the first explicit reference to the study of signs as a branch of philosophy appeared in John Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding. It was, however, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who first proposed the establishment of a science, a field of study, that would examine the roles of signs as part of social life. This field of study, which, according to him, was to form a part of social psychology and, by extension, an aspect of general psychology, was christened by him in semiology. (Sebeok, 2001)

The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (pronounced 'purse'), on the other hand, preferred what he called 'semeiotic' and interpreted it as the 'formal doctrine of signs,' which was closely related to logic. Peirce borrowed his term from John Locke and argued that logic, in its general sense, is just another name for semiotics, the doctrine of signs. Peirce pursued a pan-semiotic view of the universe. The main thrust of his theory is that cognition, thought, and even man are semiotic in their essence. He even went as far as asserting that every thought is a sign, and when this is taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, it can be concluded that man is a sign (Winfried Noth, 1995).

In his view, signs are not a class of phenomena but the whole of phenomena. He argued that the entire universe is perfused with signs if it is not composed exclusively of signs. Semiotics, according to his thoughts, should be seen as a universal science that covers everything in existence. In a letter that Peirce wrote to Lady Welby on December 23, 1908, he reiterated this view and affirmed that it was not his style to study or examine anything —mathematics, ethics, metaphysics, gravitation, thermodynamics, optics, chemistry, comparative anatomy, astronomy, psychology, phonetics, economics, the history of science, history, men and women, wine, metrology except with the lens of semeiotic. (Peirce, C. Sanders, 1965)

Saussure and Peirce are the widely acclaimed founders of what is now popularly known as semiotics. Though there are scholars who, like Daylight, propose that there is a difference between Saussure's semiology and Peirce's semiotics, the majority view is that they refer to virtually the same intellectual orientation. In his effort to establish that semiotics and semiology form wholly separate but contiguous domains of discourse. Daylight insists that semiotics is an act of "representation" while semiology is an act of "articulation. (Daylight, 2002). I, however, believe that both Saussure and Peirce represent two major theoretical traditions, though, in contemporary times, the term 'semiotics' is widely used to embrace the entire field.

4. Semiotics- A Brief History

The term semeiotics (now spelled as semiotics) – from Greek sêmeiotikos "observant of signs" – was first used by Hippocrates, the founder of Western medicine, to describe the study of human body symptoms. He explained that showed that a semeion's form constitutes a vital clue for identifying a disease, diagnosing it, and understanding the illness it represents. With this simple concept, Hippocrates presented medicine as a diagnostic "semeiotic" science – that is, as a science whose whole essence is based on the detection, identification, description, and interpretation of bodily signs. This concept of semeion was later expanded to include all signs that originate from man (such as words) that depict psychological or emotional states. By this, it was implied that signs are divided into natural (those with physiological origins) and conventional (those that are products of human overt and covert actions) Danesi (2007)

Consequently, people became puzzled by the nature of the connection between the two main categories of signs. Leading the discourse was Saint Augustine, a medieval philosopher and one of the early fathers of the church. In his De doctrinachristiana (397-426 CE), he described natural signs (signa naturalia) as those without intentionality- spontaneously appearing, neither pre-meditated nor conjured, and these, according to him, included not only bodily symptoms but also the rustling of leaves, the colours of plants, the signals that animals emit, and so on. Conventional signs, on the other hand, are products of human intentionality. These include not only words but all symbols invented by humans as expressions of their psychological, social, and communicative needs. Cobley and Jantz (1997)

Finally, he argued that miracles are messages from God and, thus, sacred signs, which can only draw their authenticity from faith, though the understanding of such is also based on inferences and is susceptible to interpretations. After Saint Augustine, formal interest in signs seemed to have wavered, and it was not until the twelfth century that it was rekindled by the Scholastics, who asserted that signs were very important for human understanding as they contained truths about the world that could be examined and transmitted to subsequent generations. It is pertinent to mention that there later arose among the scholastics a group that called itself the nominalists that held a contrary view. Their own position was that "truth" was subjective in nature and that signs can only capture illusory and highly variable human versions of it.

John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, for instance, argued that signs only referred to other signs rather than to actual things. This is, in fact, very similar to some modern theories of the sign. Saint Thomas Aquinas averred, however, that signs truly refer to real things. They and the things they refer to are therefore invented and thus variable, though they still captured truth, partially or completely. (Danesi, 2007)

It is, however, worthy of note that there was no distinct discipline of semiotics at the time these views were expressed. It took a number of centuries later for John Locke to revive the discussions on the term semeiotics, which formed a part of his "Essay Concerning Humane Understanding (1690)". Locke saw it as a tool for philosophical inquiry and not as an autonomous discipline for the study of signs. It was the Swiss philologist Ferdinand de Saussure who first put forward a proposal in his Cours de Linguistique générale (1916) that there was the need to create a new discipline which would be called semiology with the goal of understanding the social function of signs. Yakin and Totu (2014)

The term 'semiotics', however, became popular through the efforts of the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce in the early twentieth century. Although his writing style is highly philosophical and not easily understood, his theory of sign has become the nucleus of enquiries into a sign and a powerful model of cognition. He first put forth the theory of iconicity as a fundamental sign-making impetus, after which he added indexicality which refers to the kind of sign that puts things in existential relation to each other, such as smoke as an index of fire; and symbolic, which represents the sign that is created by convention, such as the meanings of flags as standing for nations. (Cilliers, 2014). In all, Peirce was able to identify sixty-six species of signs that constitute the theoretical apparatus for semiotics to this day. (Danesi, 2021)

As the twentieth century progressed, several scholars emerged to extend the frontiers of semiotics considerably. One of the most celebrated among them, Charles Morris, subdivided semiotics into three broad areas:

(1) The study of sign assemblages, called syntactics.

(2) The study of the relations between signs and their meanings called semantics.

(3) The study of the relations between signs and their users called pragmatics. (Zhang, 2016; Adham, 2012)

The Russian-born American semiotician, Roman Jakobson, devoted his attention to the study of various facets of sign construction though he is best known for his semiotic model of communication. He identified six elements that enable communication to occur:

1- Context
2- Addresser (sender)
3- Addressee (receiver)
4- Contact
5- Common code
6- Message

Each of these elements is the focal point of a relation or function which operates between the message and the factor. His theory suggests that the exchanges of signs are not usually neutral. They rather involve some kinds of subjectivity and goal-attainment motives. This implies that there is almost always a background to issues, and this reflects in communication. (Louis Hebert, 2011; Keane, 2003). The French semiotician Roland Barthes, in his own postulates, displayed how semiotics could be used to decode the hidden meanings in pop culture spectacles such as wrestling matches and Hollywood blockbuster movies (Danesi, 2021; Sharma & Gupta, 2015).

Another French semiotician, Algirdas J. Greimas, developed narratology as a branch of semiotics. He showed how human beings in different cultures weave their peculiar cultural signs into different kinds of narratives (myths, tales, fables, etc.), sharing strikingly similar stock of characters, motifs, themes, and plots. The late Hungarian-born American semiotician, Thomas A. Sebeok, had the credit of expanding the semiotic paradigm to the comparative study of animal signalling systems, which he called zoo-semiotics. He also proposed the application of semiosis to all living things, now called biosemiotics. (Marcello, 2008)

Similarly, the late Italian semiotician Umberto Eco also made a significant contribution to the interpretation of signs. He posited that interpretation is central to human semiosis, contrary to the semiosis of other species of being. According to him, human signs enable them to interpret the world in their own peculiar ways and empower them to construct, modify, deconstruct and reconstruct their realities, and this is fundamental to Peircean semiotics. Several other scholars have made an immense contribution to the growth and spread of semiotics in the 20th and 21st centuries. (Eco, 1976; Danesi, 2021; Surapongse, 2020)

4.1 Semiotics: One Craft, Many Hands

In spite of the aforesaid, semiotics is not often seen as an independent discipline. Rather, it is understood largely as a terrain defined and circumscribed by the paradigm to which it is applied-we, thus has cultural semiotics, organisational semiotics, media semiotics, visual semiotics, etc.; or an ideologue to which its theoretical framework is traced, hence Saussurean, Peircean, Greimasian, or Barthesian semiotics; or a philosophy, orientation or epoch as in "cold war" semiotics, existential semiotics, etc. It obviously has some kind of potentiality in virtually every human endeavour, and it may be very difficult to find a discipline in which certain aspects of its constituent structure have not been semiotized. A typical example is found in issue 207 of *Semiotica,* one of the most celebrated semiotics journals, which contains articles on issues as diverse as automobile design (Wilson & Haładewicz-Grzelak, 2015; Morley, 2014), American gardens (Hirschman, 2015), Navajo poetry (Webster, 2015), Peircean mathematics (Sabre Ru, 2015), and Heidegger and the sign of history(Hope, 2015). It thus appears that if an area of study has no existing semiotics, it is susceptible to having semiotics created for it. (Shackell, 2019; Stamper, 1993)

In a practical operational sense, the semiotic enquiry looks like this: What does this sign mean? The sign may be a word, colour, painting, symbol, image, attitude, gesture, action, event, novel, play, or film. The heuristic size of the sign may vary, but the nature

of the inquiry remains constant. An example is the meaning of the colour 'red.' Red here is a sign. This sign may have a culturally assigned meaning to it, such as a reference to a primary colour known to all; it also means different things in different situations to different people. It can, for instance, appear as a traffic signal meaning "stop" to anyone facing the signal at an intersection. It can also indicate a particular political affiliation if it is worn as an armband at a political rally. As the colour of the flag used at some construction sites, it can mean the signal of "danger. It can also figuratively show an emotional state in an expression such as "turning red,." Similarly, the colours "blue' and "green" also serve as symbols portraying different meanings. They are manifested in expressions such as 'the blues' (a type of music'), once in a blue moon (rarely), turned green with envy (great envy), and greenhorn (inexperienced person). (Culler, 2001; Curtin, 2009)

Each of these colours is thus an example of a sign that stands for something else, e.g., a traffic signal, a political ideology, music type, behavioural state, an emotional state, etc. Semiotics therefore investigates and describes the nature of the relationship between a sign and the meaning inferred there. Since human beings have a remarkable ability to portray the world through the interpretation of signs, the peculiarity of the human environment, social encounters, and cultural heritage have been reflected in these interpretations. This interpretative ability has been regulated by the accumulated meanings that have been created, preserved, and handed down by early generations of human beings in the form of signs in different lands and climes. (Danesi, 2007)

4.2 The Semiotic Process
From the aforesaid, it can be seen that semiotics operates within a triadic structure of the person-social-culture framework. It can therefore be applied to anything that signifies something as well as everything that bears meaning to a person or society within a culture. Since we live in a world of signs and codes, we are surrounded by diverse subjects that can and must be subjected to semiotic analysis if we truly want to understand them. The media messages we receive, the books we read, the languages we speak, the films we watch as well as the commercial advertisements and political messages and campaigns, are all replete with signs and codes that bestow special meanings within particular cultural settings (Adedimeji, 2002).

In the case of an advertisement, for instance, it is good to begin with a reconstruction of the first impression one has after a glance at it. Attention must be paid to what is first noticed, how it draws attention, what thought it invokes, how it appears after looking at it for a longer time, the connection between the pictures and the written words, and how the words impact the previous perception of the pictures. This done, it is necessary to reflect on how the advert works and what it denotes as well as the connotations its codes inspire. Through imaginative substitution, cultural codes in an advert are easily identified. This is done by using questions such as would it be different if the model in the advert belongs to another gender, background, race, or age? A question of this nature will unearth the key signifying elements of the advert and lead to an understanding of their relationships.

The goal of a semiotic analysis is to explore the narrow confines of particular texts and practices and look beyond them to establish the functional distinctions within them (Chandler, 2002). It thus seeks to make explicit what is implicit. In an advert, it does not explain the effectiveness or otherwise of the advert; rather, it focuses on what it says about society and culture and the meanings derivable therefrom.

In advert and non-advert semiotic analysis, the following steps adapted from Daniel Chandlier are very effective:

4.3 Identifying the text
Wherever possible, include a copy of the text with your analysis of it, noting any significant shortcomings of the copy. Where including a copy is not practicable, offer a clear description that would allow someone to recognize the text easily if they encountered it themselves.

Briefly describe the medium used, the genre to which the text belongs, and the context in which it was found. Consider your purposes in analysing the text. This will affect which questions seem important to you amongst those offered below.

4.4 Why did you choose this text?
Your purposes may reflect your values: how does the text relate to your own values? How does the sign vehicle you are examining relate to the type-token distinction? Is it one among many copies (e.g., a poster) or virtually unique (e.g., an actual painting)? How does this influence your interpretation? What are the important signifiers, and what do they signify? What is the system within which these signs make sense?

4.5 Modality
What are reality claims made by the text? Does it allude to fact or fiction? What references are made to an everyday experiential world? What modality markers are present? How do you make use of such markers to make judgements about the relationship between the text and the world? Does the text operate within a realist representational code? To whom might it appear realistic? What does transparency keep obscure?

4.6 Paradigmatic analysis

To which class of paradigms (medium; genre; theme) does the whole text belong? How might a change of medium affect the meanings generated? What might the text have been like if it had formed part of a different genre? What paradigm sets does each of the signifiers use to belong? For example, in photographic, televisual, and filmic media, one paradigm might be shot size. Why do you think each signifier was chosen from the possible alternatives within the same paradigm set? What values does the choice of each particular signifier connote? What are signifiers from the same paradigm set noticeably absent? What contrasted pairs seem to be involved (e.g., nature/culture)? Which of those in each pairing seems to be the 'marked' category? Is there a central opposition in the text?

Apply the commutation test in order to identify distinctive signifiers and define their significance. This involves an imagined substitution of one signifier for another of your own and assessing the effect.

4.7 What is the syntagmatic structure of the text?

Identify and describe syntagmatic structures in the text, which take forms such as narrative, argument, or montage. How does one signifier relate to the others used (do some carry more weight than others)? How does the sequential or spatial arrangement of the elements influence meaning? Are there formulaic features that have shaped the text? If you are comparing several texts within a genre, look for a shared syntagm. How far does identifying the paradigms and syntagms help you to understand the text?

4.8 Rhetorical tropes

What tropes (e.g., metaphors and metonyms) are involved? How are they used to influence the preferred reading?

4.9 Intertextuality

Does it allude to other genres? Does it allude to or compare with other texts within the genre? How does it compare with treatments of similar themes within other genres? Does one code within the text (such as a linguistic caption to an advertisement or news photograph) serve to 'anchor' another (such as an image)? If so, how?

4.10 What semiotic codes are used?

Do the codes have double, single, or no articulation? Are the codes analogue or digital? Which conventions of its genre are most obvious in the text? Which codes are specific to the medium? Which codes are shared with other media?

4.11 How do the codes involved relate to each other (e.g., words and images)?

Are the codes broadcast or narrowcast? Which codes are notable by their absence? What relationships does the text seek to establish with its readers? How direct is the mode of address, and what is the significance of this? How else would you describe the mode of address? What cultural assumptions are called upon? To whom would these codes be most familiar? What seems to be the preferred reading? How far does this reflect or depart from dominant cultural values? How 'open' to interpretation does the sign seem to be?

4.12 Social semiotics

What does a purely structural analysis of the text downplay or ignore? Who created the sign? Try to consider all of those involved in the process. Whose realities does it represent, and whose does it exclude? For whom was it intended? Look carefully at the clues and try to be as detailed as you can. How do people differ in their interpretation of the sign? Clearly, this needs direct investigation. On what do their interpretations seem to depend? Illustrate, where possible, dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. How might a change of context influence interpretation?

4.13 Benefits of semiotic analysis

What other contributions have semioticians made that can be applied productively to the text? What insights has a semiotic analysis of this text offered? What other strategies might you need to employ to balance any shortcomings of your analysis? (Adedimeji, 2002).

5. Conclusion

Semiotics, as shown briefly above, is concerned with signs. Its definition of signs is, however, complex, and this is evidenced in the various stages it has passed through and the extent to which its horizon has been expanded to almost embracing the entire cosmos. It has been a tradition within the study of communication, and it is arguably the broadest tool for the deconstruction of textual and non-textual signs and symbols. Because of the multiplicity of social phenomena, the understanding of signs has multimodal dimensions, and it can only be properly negotiated and explored in transdisciplinary nuances. This probably explains why modern semioticians tend to come from diverse backgrounds and disciplines. Since men have always shown an innate need to give meaning to their existence which in itself is an amalgam of signs, the multimodal tenor of their experiences, culture, and

vocation tend to feature prominently. Since the middle of the twentieth century, semiotics has grown into an enormous discipline that embraces almost all phenomena and the meanings human beings give to them.

6. Limitation of the Study

The perceived limitation of this study lies in its inability to explore the various dimensions of the semiotic enterprise. It focuses primarily on the nature of semiotics and its multidisciplinary tenor. It does not attempt to explore the broad application of semiotics in persuasion, hypermedia, nor its broad application in advertising and the new media.

7. Suggestions for Future Research

This researcher strongly recommends that semiotics be incorporated into the curricula of all the humanities because of its multimodal thrust in generating meanings. Its ideational locale should go beyond linguistic and media studies to embrace all of the humanities, including religious studies. There is no doubt that the application of semiotics to the study of religious texts will unearth new meanings that may reduce the friction and tensions often experienced in interfaith encounters because of rigid and monolithic reading of the scriptures.

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