

Semiotic Study of English Text

Jinshun Long

The English Department, School of Foreign Languages of Jimei University, Xiamen, Fujian, China.

jslong123@sina.com

Abstract. Researches show that semiotics is both a kind of theory and a kind of methodology. Contemporary semioticians study signs not in isolation but as part of semiotic sign systems. They study how meanings are made, concerned not only with communication but also with the construction and maintenance of reality. Semiotics supplies people with a new thinking mode, which can be used to analyze some phenomena or problems in many fields. A semiotic study of text scrutinizes the various signs in the text in an attempt to characterize their structure and identify potential meanings, especially socio-cultural meanings. Semiotivity is one of the important characteristics in text. Semiotics seeks to analyze texts as structured wholes, involving identifying the components within the semiotic system, and the structural relations between these components. Semiotics stresses the semiotic structures and relations both within and outside the sign system, and their interactions.

Keywords: semiotics; sign; code; text.

1. Introduction

Semiotics, also called semiotic studies or semiology, is the doctrine and science to study sign system, sign processes, and sign functions. It is thus a more comprehensive system than language itself and can therefore be used to understand language in relation to other forms of communication and interpretation, such as nonverbal forms. Semiotics focuses on the production, transmission, exchange, and interpretation of meanings consisting of one or more signs. It stresses what constitutes signs, what regulates their interaction and what governs the way they come into being. Just as Tobin suggests, semiotics is “a general philosophical theory dealing with the production of signs and symbols as part of code systems which are used to communicate information”. [1] In its broadest sense, semiotics comprises all forms of formation and exchange of meanings on the basis of phenomena which have been coded as signs.[2] Therefore, it is a theory that the world itself is open to interpretation, that we can make meanings out of just about anything. [3]

Contemporary semiotics has extended beyond structuralist concern with the internal relations of the parts within a self-contained system, and has attempted to explore the use of signs in specific social situations. Semiotics provides the basis to relate the text to the non-linguistic universe of its situational and cultural environment. Semiotic analysis is increasingly being viewed as providing a useful descriptive and interpretive framework for analyzing language. Semiotics supplies people with a new thinking mode, which can be used to analyze some phenomena or problems in the fields of linguistics, literature, culture, politics, art, news communication, etc. Whether or not you are familiar with this world, you are already practicing sophisticated semiotic analyses every day of your life. [4] Through the efforts of many theorists, wide-ranging contents have been constructed in semiotics, and there have been distinctive theories from different semiotic schools. However, the rich semiotic theories constitute a great theoretical treasure-house, from which how to obtain an effective methodology to settle some problems in English text is a new question for study.

2. Semiotics and Text

2.1 Semiotic Interpretation of Text

Semiotics is probably known as an approach to textual analysis. A text is an assemblage of signs (such as words, images, sounds and/or gestures) constructed (and interpreted) with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication. [5]

Semiotic studies focus on the system of rules governing the text, stressing the role of semiotic context in shaping meaning. Semiotics focuses on the structure of meaning-producing events, with the sign (verbal or nonverbal) the fundamental unit. Signs (e.g. words, clothing) combine to form messages and texts (e.g. words and sentences, ensembles and fashions). Both the production of a message or text, and the subsequent decoding by readers, are governed by rules that are generally known to individuals who are from the interpretive community or culturally-constituted code environment in which the message or text is exchanged. These rules establish the manner in which signs combine into acceptable and understandable messages or texts, and the correlation that signs (as expression) can have with their potential meanings (as content) in specific contexts. [6]

2.2 Code and Sign

Codes are interpretive frameworks which are used by both producers and interpreters of texts. In creating texts we select and combine signs in relation to the codes with which we are familiar 'in order to limit... the range of possible meanings they are likely to generate when read by others'. [7] Codes help to simplify phenomena in order to make it easier to communicate experiences.[8]

The conventions of codes represent a social dimension in semiotics: a code is a set of practices familiar to users of the medium operating within a broad cultural framework. Indeed, as Stuart Hall puts it, there is no intelligible text without the operation of a code.[9] Society itself depends on the existence of such signifying systems. Codes are dynamic systems which change over time, and are thus historically as well as socio-culturally situated. Codification is a process whereby conventions are established.

Codes are not simply 'conventions' of communication but rather procedural systems of related conventions which operate in certain domains. Codes organize signs into meaningful systems which correlate signifiers and signifieds. Codes transcend single texts, linking them together in an interpretative framework. Stephen Heath notes that 'while every code is a system, not every system is a code'. [10]

2.3 Sign and Text

Semiotics seeks to analyze texts as structured wholes and investigates the latent, connotative meanings. A semiotic analysis of text scrutinizes the various signs in a text in an attempt to characterize their structure and identify potential meanings.[11] In short, a text is a part or result of an act, whereas signs are potential conveyors of meaning which can be actualized in a text or as a text. Texts also have material existence---even if only sound frequencies---and they can therefore be perceived in their distinctiveness and variety in relation to other phenomena and to other texts, or as individual copies of the same text. And they can be perceived by a single or practically unlimited number of receivers. If we assume that any phenomenon, a sign, can furnish items of information about another phenomenon, its object, as long as their interconnection is established or discovered, then the number of a text's interpretants is in principle unlimited.

2.4 Code and Text

A code is content-directed set of rules which govern the relation between a general body of social norms and concrete facts involving human behaviors. A code is both a regulating mechanism and an organizing principle that guide us to write effectively. Codes organize signs into meaningful systems which correlate signifiers and signifieds. Codes transcend single texts, linking them together in an interpretative framework.

Jakobson emphasized that the production and interpretation of texts depends upon the existence of codes or conventions for communication.[12] Since the meaning of a sign depends on the code within which it is situated, codes provide a framework within which signs make sense. Indeed, we cannot grant something the status of a sign if it does not function within a code.

In a word, every text is a system of signs organized according to codes and subcodes which reflect certain values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and practices. The sign and the code in a text are presumed to be capable of interrelating in an unforeseeable number of ways, so that semiosis is always open, potentially infinite.

2.5 Semiotic Construction of Text

The term *construct* or *construction* suggests that when we write we build or put together something that formerly did not exist in the same form. To construct is to be productive as well as creative. The construction of a written, physical text involves not just a single movement from mental to physical text but, depending on the complexity and length of the text, a series of recursive movements. It is, in fact, this recursive motion between the mental and physical texts that characterizes the process of constructing a text. The writer constructs a mental image of the text and the attempts to construct a physical text that reflects it. Although there are only two steps to this model of text construction, a writer repeats these two steps, shuttling back and forth from the mental to the physical text and back again, until a deadline or lack of energy or interest terminates the process.

However, the text construction process does not end here because readers as well as writers construct texts. Although readers do not construct a physical text as do writers, they do construct a mental text, which is their version of the physical text. Thus, a mental text exists not only in the mind of a writer but also, in a different but analogous way, in the mind of the reader. Because the reader's experiences and information always differ somewhat from that of the writer, the reader's mental text always differs from that of the writer.

2.6 The Intersemiotic Interaction of Text

The interaction exists between semiotic systems of different natures, for example, between our perception of the world around us and its linguistic articulation. Different semiotic systems do not produce identical differentiations and articulation of given phonemes. Intersemiotic writing is not only a way of refining our perception and understanding of the surrounding world. It is a precondition for meaning to occur. It is only in the combination of different semiotic systems that meaning is produced: if somebody writes to us in a language absolutely unknown to us without any figures, pictures, charts, diagrams or any other illustrations, even an endless flow of words would not help us. Only when writing is connected with known non-verbal iconic and indexical signs and thus given an intersemiotic dimension will we begin to grasp the language written to us.

2.6.1 Interaction of Signs within Text

Semiotic interaction defines the text as a sign among other signs, acquiring significance within a cultural context. The exchange of meanings is an interactive process, and the text is the means of exchange: in order for the meanings which constitute the social system to be exchanged between members, they must first be represented in some exchangeable symbolic form, and the most accessible of the available forms is language. So the meanings are encoded in (and through) the semantic system, and given the form of text. Interaction is a process which takes place not only between participants (writer, reader), but also between the signs which constitute texts and between the participants and those signs. Writing, as an interactive process, is both retrospective and prospective. Thus, perception of this interaction of signs within the text constitutes the basis of micro-text processing, namely, discovering the hierarchic organization or structure of the text.

2.6.2 Interaction of Signs with Other Texts

Attention is transferred to the relationship between texts. The notion of the text itself is universalizing: it is claimed more or less categorically that the whole world is a text. The elements constituting a particular text are thought of as borrowed from and referring to other texts. It is not

immanent structure but reference and quotation that become the main subject of interest and the generators of a text's meaning. Analysis is directed not to the relations between elements within the text but to the relations between elements and their constellations within a semiotic world containing in itself all real and potential texts.

(i) Intertextuality

Intertextuality is the shaping of texts' meanings by other texts. It means that the texts refer to each other, quote each other, that there are allusions in the text to other texts. Intertextuality is involved in the identification of a text as a sign. The idea of intertextuality weakens the boundaries of the text, by subverting unity and assimilation and replacing it with a limitless texture of connections, associations, paraphrases, fragments, texts, and contexts. Therefore, any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another". [13]

(ii) Hypertext

Hypertext refers to a computerized system that shares the common goal of encouraging more reflexible exploration, presentation, search, and manipulation of information and ideas. It is the structuring of information as a linked network of nodes that allows the reader to navigate in following a direction that is nonlinear. Moreover, hypertext makes it possible for there to be more than one writer, a blurring of the writer and reader functions, extended works with diffuse boundaries, and multiple reading paths. Hypertexts may break the conventions of traditional print texts, and thus may require different composing and reading practices. A hypertext, however, contains hyperlinks that enable writers and readers to jump from one section of a document to another or to other documents entirely.

2.6.3 Text as a Network of Semiotic Relationships

The meaning of a sign is not contained within it, but arises in its interpretation. Whether a dyadic or triadic model is adopted, the role of the interpreter must be accounted for - either within the formal model of the sign, or as an essential part of the process of semiosis. Systems of signs are constituted by the complex meaning-relations that can exist between one sign and another, primarily relations of contrast and superordination/subordination (e.g. class/member, whole/part). Signs are deployed in space and time to produce texts, whose meanings are construed by the mutually contextualizing relations among their signs.

(i) Semiotic Relationship between the Writer and the Text

The two basic levels of semiotic interaction---that of the text producer with a text receiver, and that of text with text---necessarily involve another level of interaction, namely that of writers with texts produced or received. For its success, this latter kind of interaction primarily relies on intentionality---the ability to 'do things with words', the capacity to deploy one's text for a 'purpose'. Here, semiotics or signification through signs acquires a pragmatic dimension. As all forms of use of human language, text is a kind of creative activity with structural and intentional encoding and decoding. That is, as long as text appears as a communicative form, it means a process of activity has started. Then text producers and text receivers, namely participants of such an activity. The differences between the two lie in the fact that the former is the original subjects of activity; the latter is summative subjects.

(ii) Semiotic Relationship between the Writer and the Reader

The meaning of texts can be seen as something which is negotiated between producer (writer) and receiver (reader) and not as a static entity, independent of human processing activity once it has been encoded. The negotiation between writer and reader forms the basis of one level of semiotic interaction. This involves the exchange of meanings as signs between a writer and a reader. When the reader reads what you have written, he or she constructs---usually quite unconsciously---a mental image of the writer, including your tone, your apparent values, your fair-mindedness (or lack of same), your knowledgeability about your subject, and your writing style.

Thus, the writer-reader relationship is dynamic and indeterminate without being chaotic. Texts stabilize meaning but do not control meaning. Writers conjure their vision--- a vision which they hope readers will actively come to share as they read the text---by using all the resources of language available to them to establish a broad, and ideally coherent, range of cues for the reader. [14]

(iii) Semiotic Relationship between the Reader and the Text

If we view the relation between text and reader as a kind of self-regulating system, we can define the text itself as an array of sign impulses (signifiers) which are received by the reader. As he reads, there is a constant “feedback” of “information” already received, so that he himself is bound to insert his own ideas into the process of communication.[15]

Since a text can never be completely fixed, it is open to interpretation. Readers can offer several possible readings of your text without doing the work a disservice, although certainly some readings appear more “sophisticated” or may turn out to be closer to your original intention than others. Readers depend on the conventions they have learned to understand your work, yet they also need to be willing to suspend their judgments in order to understand each new work they encounter. A reader has to identify the genre you are attempting as well as decide to what degree you intend to deviate from the standards of that genre. Reading and writing are both interpretive acts, then, requiring intricate intellectual negotiations from all parties concerned.

2.7 The Three Relations of Textual Analysis

According to Morris, semiotics is composed of three branches---grammar, semantics, and pragmatics, on the basis of which he distinguished three dimensions of a sign--- syntactic, semantics and pragmatic. In Morris’s classical definition, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics are the three dimensions of semiotics today.[16] Thus arise the three relations of the text from syntax, semantics and pragmatics. The relations among signs in formal structures, between signs, between signs and referents, and between signs and sign users are not static, but interactive. Text transmits meanings and functions of language. These meanings and functions are actually created by different sign relations and their use.

The three branches of semiotics----syntactic, semantics and pragmatics----are closely related. In constructing text, to be an effective writer, he should pay attention to the structure of signs and sign systems or the relation of signs to each other in formal structures, and have a good command of the rules that govern how words are combined to form phrases, sentences paragraphs and texts. He should also attach great importance to the relation between signs and the things they refer to or the meanings of signs and sign systems. However, he should be fully aware both of the relation of signs to their impacts on those who use them, and of all the psychological, biological, and sociological phenomena which occur in the interaction of signs.

3. Conclusion

The above analyses show that semiotics is both a kind of theory and a kind of methodology. Contemporary semioticians study signs not in isolation but as part of semiotic sign systems. They study how meanings are made: as such, being concerned not only with communication but also with the construction and maintenance of reality. Semiotics supplies people with a new thinking mode, which can be used to analyze some phenomena or problems in many fields. It not only helps us to analyze various sign-systems separately and then study their integration, but also helps us to attempt to directly analyze the interconnections between signs belonging to different systems.

This study is intended to employ semiotics as a tool or a methodology to interpret and construct the production of the text. It provides a comprehensive overview of the two fields of semiotics and English text, examines how the two fields have worked and interacted, and attempts to build a bridge across the two fields of semiotics and text.

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