

Chapter 1
Introduction

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERATURE

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Chapter Ten

SEMIOTICS: THE SCIENCE OF SIGNS

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Introduction

Communication is a central activity that human life revolves around, a *sine qua non* to human existence, (Oyewo, 2000: 148). And in every social and cultural context, communication takes place through the activation and interpretation of signs embedded with messages. Signs are pervasive; they are prevalent in almost all gamuts of human endeavour – from medicine to theology, from geography to agriculture, from philosophy to communication theory itself. The science, according to the Saussurean tradition, that “studies the life of signs within a society” is semiotics or semiology (Hawkes, 1977:123). The subject of semiotics was originally spelled “*semeiotics*” to honour the English philosopher, John Locke (1632 – 1704) who in “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding” (1690) first coined the term “*semeiotike*” from the Greek word “*semeion*” meaning “mark”, “token” or “sign”.

In his *Course in General Linguistics* first published posthumously in 1916, the Swiss linguist and acclaimed father of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913) considers linguistics as a branch of semiology. According to him,

Linguistics in only one branch of this general science (of semiology). The laws which semiology will discover will be applicable in linguistics. As far as we are concerned . . . the linguistic problem is first and foremost semiological . . . If one wishes to discover the true nature of language systems, one must first consider what they have in common with all other systems of the same kind . . . In this way, light will be thrown not only upon the linguistic problem. By considering rites, customs, etc. as signs, it will be possible, we believe, to see them in a new perspective (Saussure, 1983:16 – 17).

That linguistics derives from semiotics is further evidenced by Charles Morris' conceptualisation of at least three levels of linguistic analysis as “component fields of semiotics, the study of signs and sign systems” (cited in Taylor 1998: 514). According to Taylor, Morris regarded syntax as the study of the relationships between signs, semantics as the study of the relationships between signs and the things for which they stand and pragmatics as the study of the relationship between signs and their users (also Littlejohn and Foss, 2005). And as phonology (with syntax and semantics) is construed an aspect

of grammar or syntax by modern linguists, (Aitchison, 1976; Leech, 1989), and morphology also considered as such (Forster, 1990; cf. Tomori, 1977), it goes without saying that linguistics is just one of the purviews of semiotics, as represented by the following schema, to which reference will be made in the subsequent sections:

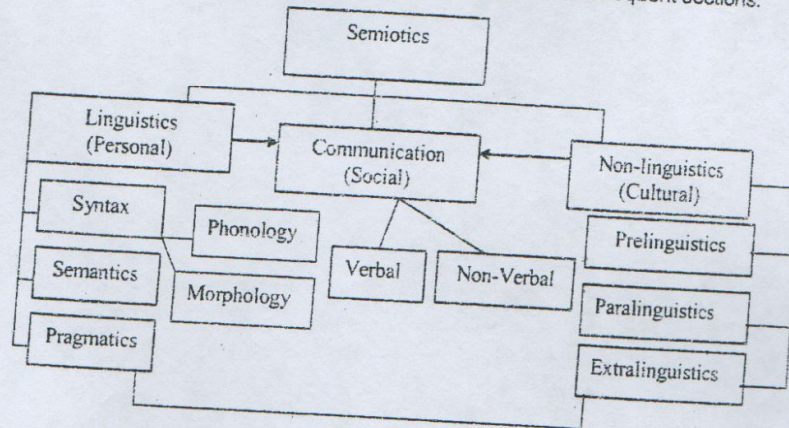


Fig. 1: The Components of Semiotics

This chapter attempts a broad survey of the subject of semiotics, its concept, origin and development, goals and foci, process and metalanguage as well its strengths and weaknesses. It further projects semiotics as an all inclusive, trans-disciplinary approach of evaluating and analysing all signifying systems by means of which meanings are ascribed, negotiated and transmitted within personal, social and cultural rubrics. With emphasis on language, which Levi-Strauss considers as "the semiotic system *par excellence*", the chapter provides analytic tools that underpin the submission of Griffin that "only those with semiotic savvy can spot the hollowness of connotative signs" (www.ic.arizona.edu).

The Concept, Origin and Development of Semiotics

Various authors and semioticians have defined semiotics from different approaches. The classical or canonical definition of the subject is that it is a means of considering anything as signs and sign systems. By defining semiotics as "a science of signs and/or sign systems", semiotics has everything as its object, meaning that it has nothing specifically as its object: it is everything that can be taken as a sign (Eco, 1976:7). The methodical and practical definition of semiotics sees it as "the application of linguistic

methods to objects other than natural language" which means that semiotics is an approach of considering anything as constructed similar to language. This approach is also adopted by *The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* (1987) which defines semiotics as a:

study of patterned human communication behaviour including auditory/vocal and facial expression, body talk (kinesics) touch (proxemics), signs, symbolics (semiology).

The "best" definition of semiotics as claimed by Elam (1980:1) is that it is "a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society". He adds that it is equally concerned with the processes of *signification* and with those of *communication* i. e. the means whereby meanings are both generated and exchanged. It is concerned with the theory or science and analysis of signs and sign systems and their meanings specifically those concerned with communication between human beings in different societies and cultures (Wales, 1989: 416; Adedimeji, 2002:29).

The essence of signs and signification had for long occupied a vintage position in the history and scholarship of philosophy. Plato and Aristotle both studied the relationship between signs and the world. St. Augustine of Hippo (334-430) preoccupied himself with the nature of sign within a conventional system identifying two kinds of signs, i.e. *signa naturalia* (natural signs bearing direct reference or indication to something else, e.g. smoke and cloud signify fire and rain respectively) and *signa data* (conventional signs, those whose connection to what they refer to is arbitrary, like words in natural languages). Their theories have had a lasting effect on Western Philosophy (www.wikipedia.org).

Semiotic theories have also found implicit expression in the religious history of African, Indian, Chinese and Latin American experiences. Rituals and other religious ceremonies since the ancient times have been carried out through sacrifices, worship, divination and deification of things – images, idols, animals – all with semiotic connotations. For instance, the crescent and the star, the cross and the crucifix, the cow and the serpent, the iron and the water – all have religious semiosis from ancient to contemporary times.

Semiotics as an academic discipline owes a great deal to the pioneering works of Ferdinand de Saussure, as earlier mentioned, and the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914). While Saussure conceptualised semiotics from a "dyadic" perspective, differentiating between such binary oppositions as *langue* (the system of rule and convention which is independent of, or pre-exists, individual users) and *parole* (speech, the use of *langue* in particular instances), signifier and signified, paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships, denotation and connotation, etc., Peirce viewed semiotics from "triadic" angles, such as his trichotomies of *qualisign*, *symbol* and *legisign* (triadic relation of comparison), icon, index and symbol (triadic relation of performance) and *rheme*, *dicent* and *argument* (the triadic relation of thought) (Hawkes, 1977).

Another major theorist of semiotics is the French linguist, philosopher and educator, Roland Barthes (1915 – 1980) whose major concern was to create a way, through non-verbal signs specifically, for people to enrich their understanding of language, literature and society. He started by considering semiotics as an attitude, rather than a process, that would provide an opportunity for denouncing "the self-proclaimed petit-bourgeois myths" of his day regarding the superiority and universality of French mores and culture. To Barthes, semiotics is a part of linguistics and its major elements are language and speech, signified and signifier, syntagm and system as well as denotation and connotation (Barthes, 1967).

Since the pioneering studies of Peirce in the early twentieth century till the early 1960's, semiotics has undergone significant development. Three strands in the development of semiotics are distinguished by Thomas A. Sebeok. These are the biological, the philosophical and the linguistic traditions (Baer, 1987). The first tradition is rooted in medical practice and diagnostic methodology. Jakob von Uexküll, the Baltic biologist, is credited to have depicted this approach in explicit semiotic forms in his study of animal behaviour and perception between the two world wars.

The second tradition (i.e. the philosophical) begins from Plato and Aristotle through St. Augustine and the medieval scholastics via thinkers like Leibniz, Locke and others to Peirce, "the real founder and first systematic investigator of modern semiotics". The linguistic or third tradition in its explicitly semiotic pattern leads from Ferdinand de Saussure to writers such as Louis Hjelmslev (1899 – 1965; who developed a structural approach to Saussure's theories), Roman Jakobson (1896 – 1982) and Roland Barthes.

Contemporary development in semiotics is engendered mainly by the expansion of semiotics by Umberto Eco to designate the process by which a culture produces signs and/or attributes meanings to signs (Eco, 1976:7). As such, the objects of semiotics are the different sign systems and codes at work in society and the actual messages and texts produced thereby (Elam, 1980:1) with contemporary semioticians studying signs not in isolation but as part of the semiotic sign system - such as medium or genre. From the embers of the three traditions, those involved in semiotics have now included psychologists, sociolinguists, anthropologists, literary, aesthetic and media theorists, psychoanalysts and educationists (Chandler, 2002).

Goals and Foci

The main goal of semiotics is the investigation of signification patterns and structures in texts, identifying and analysing them (Adedimeji, 2002:30). Its preoccupation lies with "meaning conveyed through any medium" and the study and description of signification (cf. Adedimeji, 2003:117). According to Barthes (1967:9),

Semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public

entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification.

In general, the goals of semiotics are the decoding of signification, which is the methodical analysis and description of how a particular phenomenon communicates, the interpretation of signs vis-à-vis their semantic implications and the examination of structures with which communication takes place (Adedimeji, 2002:30). In other words, as Jakobson (1971:698) submits, every message is made up of signs, correspondingly, "the science of signs termed semiotics" deals with and is aimed at discovering those general principles which underlie the structure of all signs, whatever and the character of their utilization within a message as well as "the specifics of the various sign systems and of the diverse messages using those different kinds of signs". A semiotic approach is thus an approach to a text (and everything, semiotically speaking, is a text) that is concentrated on its sign nature and tries to explain and interpret it as a phenomenon of language.

With semiotics focusing on how meaning is made and understood, it overlaps with communication. Communication is the process of transferring data from a source to a receiver as efficiently and effectively as possible. In order to achieve understanding, the receiver must be able to decode the data (or code or message – the centre of the communication process) and thus make meaning out of it. Danesi (1994) opines that semioticians' priorities are to study signification first and communication second.

As such, as Fig. 1 shows, the centre or heart of semiotics is communication, whose crux is message/meaning. Semiotics links linguistic and non-linguistic facts or signs from the personal and cultural domains to reinforce and highlight meaning or communication in the society. The translinguistics of semiotics thus informs its overlap with psychology (Saussure in Hawkes, 1977:123), communication theory, sociolinguistics and semantics (Wales, 1989:416). The breadth of the semiotic enterprise is such that it transcends a single discipline and it is too multifaceted and heterogeneous to be reduced to a "method" but its unity lies in its focus on giving broader empirical coverage of, and offering more plausible conclusions to signs and sign systems. The principles and precepts of semiotics have thus been applied by scholars to folktales, myth and mythology, drama, narrative, advertisement, satire, comic-discourse, fiction and driving among others (Adedimeji, 2002:30-31; Alabi, 1995).

Semiotics: The Metalanguage

A metalanguage is conceived to be that language which gives or presents or assigns terms for the analysis of an object language. It is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* Vol. LX (1989), a formal language system describing language or a linguistic source. Put differently, it is a sign-system developed to talk about another sign system as *content*, or a higher level language to talk about another language (object-language) (Wales, 1989:294). The semiotic metalanguage is the set of jargon, terminology and

elements that facilitates the description of semiotic phenomena. As a result of the interface between semiotics and other disciplines, linguistics (and communication theory) especially, it draws heavily on linguistic concepts mainly, partly because of the influence of Saussure and partly because linguistics as a sub-system within it is a more established discipline.

Following the triadic 'semiotic' tradition of Peirce now, rather than the dyadic 'semiology' of Saussure, the elements of semiotics are here trichotomized along the following lines: system, subsystem, message; sign, object, interpretant; signification, signifier, signified; substance, denotation, connotation; icon, index, symbol; genre, medium, theme; structure, paradigm, syntagm; encoding, code, decoding; qualisign, sinsign, legisign; rheme, dicent, argument; text, pre-text, co-text; context, sub-text, inter-text and language, langue, parole. Each of these triads, some of which have been adumbrated more or less, is discussed thus:

System, Subsystem, Message: A system is a set of interacting components that together forms something more than the sum of the parts (Littlejohn and Foss, 2005:40). It is the object of semiotic investigation, constrained by its dependence on other parts (subsystems), the interdependence of which organises the system itself. A family is a system, made up father, mother, children; communication is a system, made up of sender, message, receiver (the linear model) and language itself is a system of interacting interdependent levels and sub-systems. A *subsystem*, thus, is a small group of elements within a larger group. A newspaper is a system within which the subsystems of headlines, editorial, features, news, sports reports, etc. operate. It is possible to even take a broad view of observing a number of systems that interact with one another in a large suprasystem and we can take a narrower view by observing a smaller subsystem. A message, on the other hand, constitutes the total meaning content of a discourse, the essence of what communication is about. A message can only be meaningfully examined or obtained in the context of other elements all of which are interlinked and interactive (Watson and Hill, 1993:116).

Sign, Object, Interpretant: These constitute the elements of the Peircean semiosis. Sign is the focus of study in semiotics, as the title of this chapter shows. It refers to "something" which stands for, or refers to, something in a meaningful way. According to Peirce, it is "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (cited in Alabi, 1995:19). Peirce further considers signs in general as a class which includes pictures, symptoms, words, sentences, books, libraries, signals, orders of command, microscopes, legislative representatives, musical concertos, performances of these (cited in Gorlee, 1994:50). There is a triangular relationship involving these elements as schematised by Peirce:

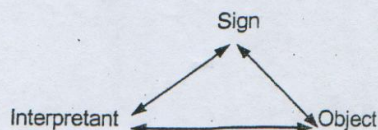


Fig. 2: Peirce's elements of 'semeiosis'

The sign is the form which the sign takes. The object is that described by the sign, that which the sign refers to and interpretant is the sense made of the sign – not an interpreter. The sign only signifies – has meaning – in the process of becoming a mental concept or interpretant, which Saussure named "the signified".

Signification, Signifier, Signified: Every sign, the root of signification, consists of a signifier (the form the sign takes, the stimulus that signals the presence of something else) and the signified (the concept it represents), in Saussurian semiology. The signifier is the term for the sign itself (the image) and the signified is the mental concept. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is signification – the process through which signs refer. If clouds signify rain and laughter is a sign of happiness and dozing is a sign of tiredness, these simple relationships are called signification. (Littlejohn and Foss, 2005:101). Our own understanding of this relationship is presented thus:



Fig. 3: The signification process

In the above figure, studied with Fig. 2, one can see similarities between Peirce's *sign* and Saussure's *signifier* as well as Peirce's *interpretant* and Saussure's *signified*. Signification is the mid-point between signifier and the signified, the link or connection. Saussure, it appears, was not concerned with the relationship of Peirce's object or external meaning, and as such, *referent* or *object* is not featured in the Saussurean semiology.

Substance, Denotation, Connotation: Substance refers to anything that constitutes an independent entity, something tangible and observable. A substance is a thing, and semiotics deals with things considered as signs. A dog is a substance just like a jug or a consonant. Language, in systemic linguistics for instance, is composed of *substance* – the phonic and the graphic *substance*, as well as *form* and *situation*. A substance is a constituent of signification or meaning and it can generate denotative or

connotative meaning. Denotation, also referred to as first order signification in semiotics particularly, is the plain meaning of a word; the literal and central meaning of a word (or substance) (Ogunsiji, 2000:51). Denotation is the cognitive, conceptual, basic or logical meaning; the meaning of which is descriptive and often objective in nature (Odebunmi, 2001:48). The denotative meaning of the substance/word "dog" is that it is a domestic animal with four legs and a tail, that eats meat and is used for security or companionship. Connotation, whereas, referred to also as second order signification, is used to refer to all kinds of association a word or substance may evoke, whether emotional, situational, etc. particularly in certain contexts over and above denotation (Crystal, 1992:89). Connotation derives from denotation, while the former is secondary, the latter is primary. To still use the example of dog, its connotative meaning is a whore or prostitute. The substances of goat, lion, horse, lamb, among others connote stubbornness, courage, hard-work and meekness respectively.

Icon, Index, Symbol: These are the three types of signs, in relation to performance. An icon, to invoke the authority of Peirce, is a sign which refers to the object it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own, and which it possesses. Anything whatever, be it quality, existent individual or law, is an icon of anything, in so far as it is like that thing and used as a sign of it (cited in Alabi, 1995:23). In simple terms, it is a sign that resembles its object in some way, it looks or sounds like it. Visual signs are good examples of icons, such as photograph, map, diagram, and in the case of language, onomatopoeic words. An index is a sign that is directly connected in some way (existentially or casually) to its object. It has some connection or association with its referent. For example, a sneeze signifies a cold, a smoke is an index of fire, symptoms are indices of diseases (Lawal, 1997:15; Adedimeji, 2003:118). A symbol, on the other hand, is the sign in which the relationship between it and its object is arbitrary. A symbol's connection with its object is a matter of convention, rule and agreement among the users. A symbol "means something beyond itself" (Watson and Hill, 1993:291) and symbols are almost always culture-bound. Words in language, traffic lights, etc. are symbolic.

Genre, Medium, Theme: Genre is the category that signs belong to. There are different types of works, signs, arts, etc. but some of them share formal or structural properties that make them belong to the same class or category. Genres are identifiable by frequently recurring patterns of subject-matter, style and form (*Encarta Encyclopaedia*, 2006). As it is possible to identify literary genres as prose, drama and fiction and the genres of film as musical, adventure, horror, etc., all phenomena have their genres. Medium is the substance or means through which something is carried or transmitted. Messages are passed through media and a communication theory holds that "the medium is the message" (Ajibade, 1994:30). Oral, written and electronic media are suitable for different genres of signification. Theme, on the other hand, is the distinct or unifying idea, the subject matter of signs and sign systems. The central message that signification process would bring about is the theme. Different genres and media may be used to highlight a theme.

Structure, Paradigm, Syntagm: Structure is the pattern through which the component parts of a system are organised, which allows them to function as an orderly whole. Semiotics analyses the relationship between parts and the whole with a focus on how such relationship comes into being. The system of a sentence is made up of the structure: subject, verb, object, adjunct (SVOA). The computer system (hardware) is composed of the monitor, the CPU (central processing unit) and the keyboard – each of which has its own structures as well. The elements of structure are wholeness, transformation and self-regulation. Wholeness relates to the completeness of parts of structure, transformation concerns variation in organization (the structure SVOA can also be AVSO, VSAO, OSVA, ASVO, etc. in different contexts) and self-regulation refers to the internal mechanism which allows for order, sequence and correctness.

Paradigm and syntagm are two structural relationships; one relates to choice or selection, the other relates to chain or combination. A paradigm is a classification of signs that all belong to a category (i.e. genre) but in which each sign is different. The alphabet for instance forms a paradigm of a written language, and the words or lexicon of a language are a category, all similar because they belong to a particular language and all different because each is used differently. The two characteristics of paradigms have been exemplified with reference to the English alphabet: "All the units/elements in a paradigm must have something in common: they must share characteristics. Each element must be clearly distinguished from all the others in the paradigm" (Fiske, 1982:61). A paradigmatic analysis of a text in semiotics examines patterns other than the surface structure of the text. Such analysis will address the use of a paradigm or its choice rather than another in its category and the significance of that selection.

A syntagm is a combination of signs that are interacting on the horizontal line through which a meaningful whole is formed. When a unit/element from a set of paradigms is selected and then combined with other units, a syntagm is formed. For instance, "the science of signs" is a combination of an article, a noun, a preposition and another noun which all combine to form a (nominal) phrase/group. According to Fiske (1982:62), the important aspect of syntagm is the rules of convention by which the combination of units is made – which is called grammar in language. While a syntagmatic analysis of a text would involve the study of its narrative sequence, discursal progression or the sequence of the interacting signs, a paradigmatic analysis studies structures that are not considered sequential.

Encoding, Code, Decoding: The triad represents the basic communication process of sender, message and receiver in that order. Encoding is a term in semiotics from the communication theory used to refer to the process by which an addresser or transmitter converts a message to a text by a set of rules or codes, to be received or decoded by an addressee (Wales, 1989:144). It is the process or act representing our world and feelings through the use of signs or any language system. Code is a signifying system by which signs are organised and governed by consent (Watson and Hill,

1993:133). And, for the fact that all aspects of human behaviour function as signs, there are codes of all kinds in the society with differing degrees of complexity of structure and information (Wales, 1989:71). Decoding is the art by which meaning is made of an utterance or act by the listener (Medubi, 2003:129). It refers to the interpretation of signs, (symbols, icons, indices) messages (spoken, written, visual) by the receiver or addressee which have been formed or encoded as text by the transmitter or encoder according to the set rules of the code.

Qualisign, Sinsign, Legisign: These are the Peircean triadic relation of comparison. To Peirce, a qualisign is a quality which is at the same time a sign. It is the qualitative character of a sign (Alabi, 2000:135). A colour chip, for example is a qualisign, used to identify paint colour. "The chip is perhaps made of cardboard... But it is only the colour of the chip that is essential to it as a sign of the quality of the paint" (Savan, 1987-88:20). A sinsign (i.e. single or singular sign) is an actual existent thing or event which is a sign and acts singly as a sign (Alabi, 2000:135). Savan (1987-88:21) describes a sinsign further that its "singularity as an encountered (individual), thing or occurrence must be essential to it as a sign - must be that which makes it a sign". Moonrock, signals (e.g. odour, posture and specific sounds produced by human beings and animals) and ritual use of language (in marriage, court, etc. contexts) are given as examples of sinsigns (cf. Alabi, 1999:1-2). A legisign, on its part, is a law that is a sign, especially if the law is what gives the sign its character. Language, individual social regularities of behaviour, conventions and customs are legisigns (Alabi, 2000:135-136). Replication or recurrence is a property of legisign - words for instance are replicated in texts.

Rheme, Dient, Argument : These are the Peircean triadic relation of thought, as earlier mentioned. Rheme is a substance that indicates the potentiality of an object, the subject of possible interpretations. A car for instance is a rheme - it is a means of transportation and it is a status symbol. That one has a Jeep or Limousine in Nigeria signals that one is wealthy. That you own a "Beetle" (a Volkswagen) is a signal that you are still "struggling". In language, contradictions and ambiguities are two of the contending possibilities of rhemes exhibited: "my mother is a virgin" (shows that the thought process is faulty) - being a mother has negated or contradicted being a virgin in our physical world. "Visiting strangers can be dangerous" is ambiguous and can only be disambiguated by either saying that "Visiting strangers is a dangerous habit" or "visits by strangers are dangerous". Dient, also referred to as dicisign or pHEME, is a substance or sign that gives information about its object. A black cloth is conventionally a dient that informs people that one is bereaved. Originally, the white gown adorned by ladies/brides on their wedding day indicates and points directly to their chastity, purity and innocence. Blaring of sirens on Nigerian roads is a dient - a governor or political personality is approaching: give way. An ambulance also conveys information beyond its physical self. An argument, on the other hand, is a sign intended to regulate or guide. The icons of males and females on toilet doors are arguments that guide users on where to use, based on their sexes. The skull and crossed bones sign are arguments when fixed on an

electrical installation – they regulate one to “keep off to avoid danger”. An image/icon of crossed cigarette is also regulatory – it means smoking is prohibited in the area. In linguistic communication, arguments are signs, expressions or codes that present a perspective, a view-point or a position. An argumentative essay, for instance, persuades one to reason along the presented position of its writer.

Text, Pre-text, Co-text: Text, which originates from the Latin verb, “textere” meaning “weave” suggests a sequence of words, utterances “interwoven” structurally and semantically. It is, according to O’ Sullivan et. al. (cited in Watson and Hill, 1993:193), a “signifying structure composed of signs and codes which is essential to communication”. As also a focal point of semiotics, the central concern is to discover ways in which a given text can generate a range of meanings (cf. Watson and Hill, 1993:193). Text is an all-encompassing entity that includes every conceivable entity, thing or phenomenon, an assemblage of signs (words, images, sounds, gestures) constructed/ interpreted according to the conventions of a genre in a specific medium. Pre-text is the entity preceding another text to give it meaning. Dozing, for instance, is a text, yet, it is a pre-text to sleeping. Drumming may be a pre-text to singing, which may also be a pre-text to dancing. Co-text is an identifiable text that completes another text to give it a recognizable signification. Wales (1989:100) submits that it is the co-text of an item that helps to determine its form and meaning. It is the co-text that will show if one is shedding tears of joy or sorrow. In language, it describes the verbal or linguistic context as distinct from situational context.

Context, Sub-text, Inter-text: Context is simply a place where a communicative/ semiotic event occurs or a term used to provide links between linguistic items and the social and situational factors of communication (Adegbite, 2000:64). A red light at a road junction means ‘stop’ and in some houses or places, may mean that such houses are brothels. A material in the school context may be a book but at a construction site is a tool and in politics may mean a credible, popular and qualified person for an electoral position. Sub-text refers to the hidden meaning of a text. The sub-text does not operate at the denotative or surface level of meaning, it is only obtained through inferences obtainable from the context and co-text. The sub-text of a gift may be an intention of a love relationship. The sub-text of the expression “what time is it now?” in a context may be “I want to leave now; you’ve wasted my time enough”. Inter-text refers to the framing of texts by other texts in various ways. The multidimensional property of texts in the way they interact, interconnect and interlink informs the notion of inter-textuality. Inter-textuality, in literary discourse, refers to those characteristics known to the reader because s/he has come across them in other previous texts s/he had encountered. The power of inter-textuality is to blur the boundaries between individual texts (Watson and Hill, 1993). In essence, inter-text is basically utterances, signs or texts in relations to other utterances, signs or texts (cf. Wales, 1989:259).

Language, Langue and Parole: Language is a system of conventional signs all

aspects of whose structure serves the sovereign function of meaning (Cruse, 1990:140). Another semiotic perspective of language – itself being a semiotic system *par excellence* is given by Watson and Hill (1993:17): “a system of signs and representations, arranged by codes and articulated through various discourses”. Language is shared, meaningful, symbolic, rule-governed, conventional, arbitrary, systematic and creative, among other features. Semiotics attempts to explain and analyze texts, signs, indeed anything as a linguistic phenomenon. The study of language has been heavily influenced by semiotics and vice versa (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993:13). *Langue* and *parole* are two distinctions that Saussure made about language. *Langue* is the internalised linguistic culture, the formal system that can be analysed apart from its use in everyday life. *Parole* simply means the actual use of language to accomplish a purpose. The difference between *langue* and *parole* is this, according to Littlejohn and Foss (2005:103-104): you don't sit around with your friends and invent new grammatical forms to designate past, present and future; but you do, through interaction, make use of these forms in creative and constantly changing ways. To Saussure, stability is the difference between the two concepts. *Langue* is characterized by synchrony, meaning that it changes little over time. *Parole*, however, is characterised by diachrony, meaning that it changes from situation to situation.

Semiotic Analysis: The Process

The task of the semiotic analyst, at least within the Saussurean tradition, is to look beyond the narrow confines of specific texts and practices to the systems of functional distinctions operating within them (Chandler, 2002). The primary objective is to establish the underlying conventions and identify significant differences and oppositions with a view to highlighting distinctions and rules of combination in force. The object is to render explicit what is given implicitly. And as previously indicated, semiotics is applicable to anything that signifies something or everything that has meaning to a person or social class within a culture (i.e. the personal-social-cultural triad in Fig. 1). In the context of mass media alone, semiotic analyses of radio and television programmes, advertisements and public announcements, films, editorials, news reports, cover design, cartoons, sports, etc. can be done.

As semiotic analysis is broad, yet any analysis must answer some significant questions. The following points and questions that a semiotic analyst addresses are adapted from Daniel Chandler:

- **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 which would allow someone to recognise 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.

- **The purpose for selecting the text**
 - Why did you choose the text?
 - As the text may reflect your values, how does the text relate to your personal values?
- **How does the sign vehicle being examined relate to the type-token distinction?**
 - Is it among many copies (e.g. a poster) or virtually unique (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?
 - What signs and sign-types are evoked and what do they communicate?
- **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?
 - 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 signifiers from the same paradigm set are noticeably absent?
 - What contracted pairs seem to be involved (e.g. male/female, darkness/light, nature/technology)?
- **Syntagmatic Analysis**
 - Identify and describe syntagmatic structures in the text which take forms such as narrative, argument or montage.
 - How does the sequential or spatial arrangement of the elements influence meaning? What is the syntagmatic structure of 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?
- **Rhetorical tropes**
 - What tropes (metaphors, metonyms, synecdoche, irony) are involved?
 - How are they used to influence interpretation?
- **What semiotic codes are used?**

- Which codes are *specific* to the medium and which codes are *shared* with other media?
- What relationships does the text seek to establish with its readers/audience?
- What cultural assumptions are called upon?
- How 'often' to interpretation do the various signs used seem to be?
- How might a change of context influence interpretation?
- **Benefits of semiotic analysis**
 - What other contributions have semioticians made that can be applied productively to the text?
 - What insights have a semiotic analysis of the text offered?
 - What other strategies might you need to employ to balance any shortcomings of your analysis?

The above questions and issues, among many others are the foci or what semiotic analysis involves. The questions may not all apply to a single text but the most important thing is to deploy as many as possible that would show the *what* and *how* of signification. The basic concern of semiotics is to provide the theoretical tools for the analysis of signs and communication process. This it does by expanding the analytic horizon from the verbal message in the narrower sense of it to the multiplicity of codes used in communication (Nöth, 1990: 476).

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has provided a panoramic exposition of "the science of signs termed semiotics" which "deals with those general principles which underlie the structure of all signs whatever and ... with the specifics of the various sign systems" (Jacobson, 1971:698). It traces the origin of semiotics to the beginning of human existence and the quest to relate with man and gods to the scholastic interests of the Greek philosophers up to its emergence and development as a distinct field of study in the twentieth century. It further highlights the development, terminology as well as the process or method of semiotics.

As a whole, semiotics is enduring and attractive because of its many strengths. Some of them are that semiotics makes life so predictable, hence, more comfortable as a psychological defence against the harsh nature of reality. The reality of life is easier to manage when its contours and contradictions are reduced to mere 'signs'. The concepts and insights of semiotics have also deepened our knowledge of many fields of academic interest - from linguistics to philosophy, from communication to anthropology, from biology (biosemiotics) to computing (computational semiotics) from theatre to literary/cultural studies (literary semiotics).

Besides, semiotics offers a wide range of a systematic, comprehensive and enriching study of the communication phenomena as a whole. It provides us a rallying point in terms of framework and terminology to study all signifying practices (Lotman, 1990; Danesi, 2002). It as well creates awareness in us about what we take for granted in the representation of the world. A working knowledge of semiotic concepts and the application of such concepts is crucial to survival in the complex and dynamic world of words we live in (Greimas, 1987). Semiotics further complements the human curiosity to seek, to find and to discover what is 'hidden'. The quest for the deep from the surface which informs the exploration of connotative meanings and signification is an impetus to development. It makes us realise we can always find meanings that suit us from various signs in life as social semiotics calls our attention to the possibility of a text generating different messages to different decoders.

The major weakness attributed to semiotics is that rather than an independent academic discipline, it is a complex amalgam of a wide range of studies, which makes it somehow amoebic or formless, symptomatic of the proverbial "Jack of all trades".

The conclusion one can reach based on the foregoing is that semiotics is profound and insightful because it assimilates concepts, ideas and terms from related disciplines, the eclectic pattern of which defines and shapes our life. Semiotics imagines two worlds – a world of things and a world of signs - and brings to light the relationship between these two worlds (Littlejohn and Foss, 2005:37). Central to the tenet of semiotics is the idea of representation, which comes through our personal feelings and perceptions to reflect social reality as a result of our cultural upbringing. Based on the theoretical tripod of syntactics, semantics and pragmatics, semiotics relates linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of total cultural process as processes of communication, permitted by an underlying system of signification (Eco, 1976:8). Semiotics postulates that the benefit of culture lies in differences (mores, biases and attitudes) of groups and without such differences, choices would be limited. The implication of all these is that semiotics is about communication, communication is about meaning and meaning is about life. The knowledge of semiotics thus gives meaning to our lives by adding more value to how we generate, interpret and transmit meaning in our world of signs.

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