





**Semiotics and Literature: An
Ever-Budding Process of
Signification**

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Having understood that language is a process of signification in words (signifiers) arbitrarily refer to things (signifieds) – the two forming the sign – Ferdinand de Saussure coined the term semiology to designate the science of signs (1). Language, in this case, is looked at as a sign system. The study of the nature of the linguistic sign, which the main concern of semiotics, helps to understand, ultimately, the structure of all (even non-linguistic) signs (2) – symbolic rites, military signals, for example. This language of communication cannot be complete, sometimes, without the accompanying communicative devices known to a given community, like taste, smell, touch, sight, and of course hearing and voice.

Semiotics does not define art as mimesis, as the representation of reality, but it concentrates instead upon semiosis, the process of recovering from a text a secondary and deeper level of signification. It poses a pivotal question that concerns itself with the way language and literature convey meaning(3). There may exist a consensus about meaning especially in communities that share a textual history because they share codes and conventions of expressions. This consensus is limited to the extent that individual experiences of codes (meanings) vary. The world (experiences) has not always been encoded in the same way by all people in all places at all times(4).

This chimes with Halliday's view of the text that it is sociosemiotic event. In its most significance, a text is a sociological event, a semiotic encounter through which the meanings that constitute the social system are exchanged. He goes on to say that the meanings are the social system that is interpretable as a semiotic system(5). Although this contains at its core a claim of equivalence between the meaning (semiotic system) and the social system, but it does not mean that we have a finality of meaning, but a plurality because of the plurality of the ways of encoding and decoding.

A text's meaning is connected directly with its place within a system of texts. Meaning, in this respect, is intertextual. Any text refers the reader always to other

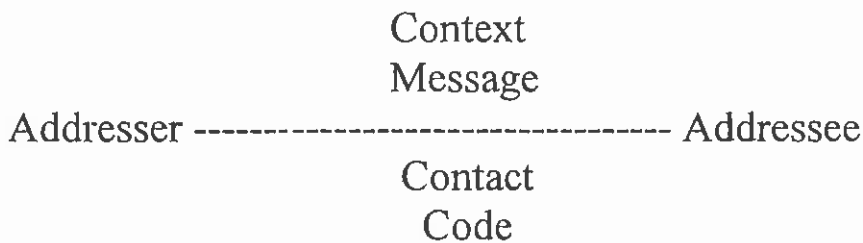
texts. This explains why readers are able to infer meaning from sparse information or arrive at different meanings for a specific text because of the recollection of different texts. The reader, in this case, makes the meaning from the sign and reading, then, is a process of creation and creativity (6).

Riffarterre, a well-known semiotic critic, goes so far as to allege that the system of reference or interrelatedness is close. Language, in this respect, refers only to itself. But other semioticians (like Lotman and Scholes, for example) argue that the reader's understanding of meaning derives from both his linguistic and extralinguistic experience. In either case, the more familiar the reader is with relevant codes or meanings (linguistic, generic, historical, or social) the richer and more full-fledged his reading (experience) of a particular text will be.

It is clear, so far, that semiotics differentiates between two types of the meaning of the linguistic sign (word): First, we have denotation or denotative meaning (a word's dictionary definition, lexis) and second connotation or connotative meaning (the associations the words carry). So, beside the fact that semiotics finds meaning only relationally and restores literature to its many contexts, meaning, within a single text, is also expressed relationally. Semioticians look to the internal structures asking about the nature of categories or elements within which meaning is

expressed and the way these are organized in a systematic make-up (text)(7).

Semiotics concerns itself with signs (in the case of literature, words as linguistic signs) as means to achieve a certain end (meaning – world) through the process of signification. This process of signification is paramount in the process of communication of meaning, for language after all is the most full-fledged means of communication. Roman Jakobson provides, in this respect, his influential model of communication:

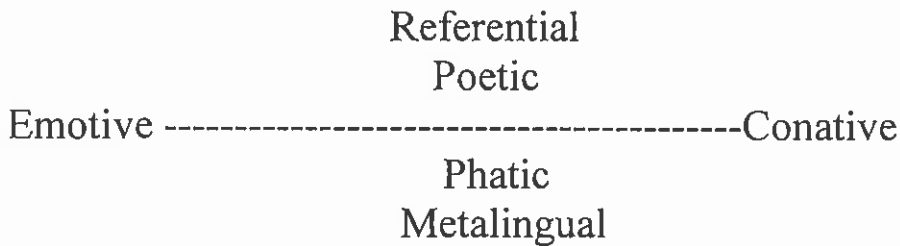


Every act of communication requires an addresser to send the message that received, consequently, by the addressee. There are other important pre-requisites for this act of communication which are:

- 1.The context in which the message is conveyed and which colours the meaning or is the main reason behind variance of meaning, that is why the same words mean different things in different contexts.
- 2.The code (English, German, or Arabic- or the type of language: literary, scientific, or otherwise).

3.The method of contact (a written text, telephone line, etc.)(8).

Jackobson delineates the functions that correspond to his model of communication:



Such a scheme provides an interesting way of describing and distinguishing among texts and parts of texts.

One of the founders of modern semiotics was the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce who developed a science of signs that he named semiotics. Peirce named three kinds of signs or three different kinds of relationship between a form and a content:

Form	Relationship	Content
1. an icon e.g. portrait	is similar to (e.g. similar shape)	what it mean person portrayed
2. an index e.g. smoke	is caused by (is connected to its object)	what it means fire
3. a symbol e.g. headshake (In India) headshake	is conventionally linked with	what it means agreement disagreement

The word, in this case, is the best example because it stands in arbitrary relation to its object (content)(9).

Meaning is taken by Peirce to cover a range of different relationships. One can take naming as a standard case of meaning, as when the name 'John' (a form) means a person (its content – object). Peirce classifies this kind of meaning under 'symbol'. Meaning, in this case, is a kind of replacement: the form stands for, or replaces, the content. Peirce's 'icon' is also an example of replacement. But, there arises a difference between symbol and icon. In symbol, the form is related to the content only by convention; in an

icon, the form is related to its content by some inherent property of the form (some similarity with the content). The shapes and colours in a picture (an icon) are similar to the shapes and colours of the thing portrayed. Onomatopoeia in language is then iconic and it lies beyond the arbitrary tie that exists between the signifier and the signified(10).

Peirce, also, describes another triad of relations: the sign, the interpretant, and the object. The sign stands for something, its object, to someone or a specific thing. The way the object is understood by a particular person is the interpretant. Peirce focuses on the relay of thoughts that signs generate. It is clear, for this, that we have an infinite process of signification: An interpretant becomes a sign for another object, which in its turn generates another interpretant. According to Peirce, the world can be known only indirectly, through this signification process which depends upon community(11).

Because meaning is pivotal in the process of signification in general and in literature as a highly-wrought world of signification product in particular, much of what literary readers and critics do is to find contents for forms. Some of these contents can be found by applying codes to forms, and decoding meanings from them; other contents have to be reached by applying the reader's individual knowledge in the context in which he is reading the text, and so different

people in different contexts will find different meanings. Thus, there exists a gray area in between the coded and the non-coded meanings(12). Symbols which are 'public property' for many people use them or understand them in the same way, like the way the apple symbolizes sin and temptation, are not fully coded but not fully uncoded either; the relationship has something conventional about it (=coded) but still allows individual interpretation (= non-coded).

Works of literature in their raw form are text-tokens(13) , a number of pages with printed marks on them. What makes Ulysses different from Pride and Prejudice is not the physical differences between the two (such as weight and size which are sometimes similar), but the fact that we, as readers, create different meanings from each book when we read it. We might say that we deduct meanings from the marks on the pages. But this activity is not adequate and it does not fulfill the overall steps of the process of reading. Meaning, in this case, is not contained in the marks or signs, like cigarettes in a packet. Rather, we create meanings by applying to the printed signs (in the case of the written text) an additional element that is connected with our knowledge.

Our knowledge can be delineated as the following:

- a. A number of specific codes, and
- b. Our memories, beliefs, and knowledge of the world in general.

We begin with the marks (signs) on the pages. This is the first step in visually capable persons. As a second step, in this ever-budding process, we interpret the signs as corresponding to sounds. This may not carry the same clarity in the case of all written texts (poetry is a clear-cut example). This depends on our ability to use a particular code, in the case of English language, 'the English pronunciation code' . What we do, so far, is that we match the signs (= the forms) with the sounds (= the contents, so far). This is the first code in this long process of meaning-making effort. It results logically into new codes, and new binary oppositions:

<u>Form</u>	<u>Content</u>
Code 1.marks on the page	English letters or sounds
Code 2.sequence of English letters	individual words, phrases, sentences,... .
Code 3.word	its meaning
Code 4.sentence	the event described

But each one end of binary oppositions is not mechanically linked with the other end. This relationship is dynamic. In addition, we have to abide by specific conventions, in this case, the conventions of English. This knowledge of English is made of a

number of codes, for instance, the left-right ordering of words.

The decoding process, which is pivotal and meaning-making, takes place in our heads: we make sense of the form, or to state this in other words, we turn a form into a content. But, there arises an important question: What is the nature of this content? Is it linguistic or non-linguistic presentation of a thing? Or, is it a detailed description in language of a specific event? Let us take the last possibility because it is the most dynamic of the three. The decoding takes place when we take one piece of language and decode it into another piece. We can call this step as 'annotation' (underlining, writing below,...etc.; adding more information)(14).

This step of annotation carries within itself our efforts or participation in this meaning-making process. This participation is clear in our added assumptions as mediatory step to reach tentatively the conclusion(15). The relationship between form and meaning via our interpretations or assumptions is not coded, because there seems to exist a never-ending cycle of inferences (assumptions).

This process takes place intricately and interestingly in literary texts. Because the activity of inferencing involves bringing into consciousness other meanings, and involves the creation of new meanings;

it may be that non-literal can be more meaningful than literal ones. These other meanings pup in because they are invoked and brought to the edge of consciousness(16). These meanings which are arrived at through providing inferences or assumptions are hard to attain and need larger cycles of interpretations in case of highly-wrought writing: metaphorical, symbolic, or ironic (literary texts). The differences appear mainly because there arise different assumptions (non-coded). That is why literature, as a great discursive make-up, is “traditionally believed to be rich in connotations and elusive in its nuances,” and it is “surely susceptible of a plurality of interpretations.”(17)

We have to look at the meaning of a given text in two ways:

- 1.The meaning intended by its author, and
- 2.The meaning derived from it by a skilled reader.

In the first case, the meaning-making process is guided by the belief that there exists an original intention (of the author). The reader derives, in this case, relevances. But unconsciously there appear effects that arise through scrutinizing the way the text is put. The more inferences we make, the more we shall be away from the original intention, and the interpretation, in this case, encroaches on the second case.

Meaning is always meaning for someone. With the introduction of someone (reader), the meaning-making process becomes more lively and creative. Thus, the cycles of this meaning-making process are pleasing. Pleasure results from one or more than one of the following: a particular thought which figures out during the inference (assumption) – making (creating) step, structure of thoughts, the relationship of the text at hand with other texts (intertextuality), the psychological state of the reader, and etc..

II

Stacy Amonier's "Miss Bracegirdle Does Her Duty":

From a poststructuralist point of view, Stacy Amonier's short story "Miss Bracegirdle Does Her Duty" is a compelling example. This story appears to be about the devious processes of the signifier. The heroine, Miss Bracegirdle, the English lady belonging to the puritanical community of Easingstoke, decided to go to Paris for the first time to meet her sister-in-law arriving from South America. But this lady faced the dilemma of being locked in a French hotel with a dead man. Her ultimate and sole duty was to get out of this critical situation.

The title is so important because it introduces the theme in a laconic way that triggers the line of thought in the reader's mind. It is highly expressive because it is in the form of a sentence. It begins with a name of a person (modified as Miss), Miss Bracegirdle, in the subjective position. From our knowledge of literature, we guess that this person is the main character of the story and we have to expect, in this case, that the writer is to delineate it. This person is an actor carrying out, 'does' an action (or an object of action, 'her duty'). 'Her' is a proform referring anaphorically(18) to Miss Bracegirdle. So far, we can arrive at a certain meaning by going backward and forward.

The word 'duty' figures out here. It has a dictionary meaning (denotative meaning, lexis) which tells us that duty is " what one is obliged to do by morality, law, a trade, a calling, conscience, or etc.."(19) The plurality of meaning appears here. In this case, we leave the title with questions concerning the kind of duty we are to find in this story. This is one of the elements that make good stories, an element that pushes the reader onward.

We encounter the word 'duty' for the first time in the body of the story on the first page:

Indeed it was the pursuit of duty which had brought her [Miss Bracegirdle] to the Hotel de l'Quest at Bordeaux on this summer's night. (Ibid.) (Underlining and interpolation are mine)

This duty is modified as the kind of duty which obliges Miss Bracegirdle "to meet her young sister-in-law" instead of her brother, the dean, "because of the claims on his time were so extensive, "the parishioners would miss him so ... it was clearly Millicent's [Miss Bracegirdle's first name] duty to go.(161) This kind of duty is done because of the social obligation of Miss Bracegirdle. The first reference to 'duty', then, curtails the lexical plurality of meaning to this meaning. Unconsciously, we go back in our minds to the 'duty' of the title and we modify it by the piece of information we are provided with so far. Going backward creates the cohesion of the text, because, here, we have the semantic anaphora.

The process of signification of the word 'duty' does not end here. The second major reference to 'duty' occurs after the happening of the important event. In the French hotel, Miss Bracegirdle entered the wrong room and suddenly found herself locked in with a sleeping Frenchman. Being warned by her brother and aware of one sole fact that in France "there are loose, bad people about, always on the look-out,"(164) she

faced the dilemma of getting out without waking the man up. She stayed for some time. Then she discovered the horrible fact that the man was dead. She was horrified by the fact that she was to be considered a suspect if she did not clear out. Her mind became swarming with thoughts of the gendarmes and the guillotine because of the French situation she was in.

In the above-mentioned situation, there comes the second reference to 'duty': "It was her duty not to have her head chopped off if it could possibly be avoided." This presents new kinds of duty, viz., the moral one and the duty which pushes somebody to be clear (law). Because Miss Bracegirdle belonged to a puritanical society, her duty, at this point, amounted to be religious: "Her ... mission was to escape." Because of the moral obligation of the protagonist, 'duty' is coloured with this kind of meaning. We have to go back, then, to colour the word 'duty' of the title with the new colour. This moral duty prevented Miss Bracegirdle at the end even to tell what had happened to her sole brother, the dean, when she wrote a letter to him: "It was her duty not to tell." This 'duty' is the most important kind of duty, because duty, because 'duty' embraces its meaning as the events rise to a certain climax. The same reference is repeated verbally because of its hold on the mentality of the character. This verbal repetition, which plays a cohesive role, concentrates the plausible kind of meaning of 'duty' of

the title and Miss Bracegirdle did her 'duty' by keeping silent.

Notes

1. Lori Hope Lefkowitz, "Creating the World: Structuralism and Semiotics", in Douglas Atkins and Laura Morrow (eds.), Contemporary Literary Theory (Massachusetts: Macmillan, 1989), p.63. The word 'sign' is derived from the Greek word *semion* meaning sign.
2. Raman Selden, Practicing Theory and Reading Literature (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p.75.
3. Lori Hope Lefkowitz, op.cit., p.61.
4. Ibid..
5. David Birch and Michael O'Toole, Functions of Style (London: Printer Publishers, 1988), pp.147-48.
6. Refer to reader-response (oriented) approach to literature.
7. Lori Hope Lefkowitz, op.cit., p.61.
8. Ibid., p.65. Jakobson's model directs our attention to the ways in which messages vary according to their emphasis on a particular aspect of communication. For example, a diary focuses on the sender of the message, an advertisement on the receiver, the question "can you hear me?" on the contact, and so on.
9. Alan Durant and Nigel Fabb, Literary Studies in Action (London: Routledge, 1990), p.141.

10.Ibid, p.142.

11.Lori Hope Lefkowitz, op.cit., p.66.

12.Alan Durant and Nigel Fabb, op.cit., p.142. The coded meaning is conventionally agreed upon and the non-coded meaning is the meaning about which there is no general agreement; it depends on the personal effort to arrive at meaning (personal knowledge). Sometimes, in certain words, meaning, to be fully realized, is both coded and non-coded. This kind of word is described as deictic.

13.Ibid.A text-token is any version of the work of literature.

14.Ibid, p.146.

15.Ibid, p.150.

16.Ibid. Every utterance carries a tacit guarantee of relevance. This relevance of utterance comes from its having adequate efforts for the hearer (in the case of the spoken language) and the reader (in the case of the written). What the hearer or the reader has to do is to find relevance. In this way, relevance directs the hearer or reader to the intended meaning or brings him close to it.

17.Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice (London: Routledge, 1988), p.54.

18.Textual or structural anaphora.

19.Stacy Aumonier, "Miss Bracegirdle Does Her Duty", in Jack Ford (ed.), Modern Short Stories (London: Methuen, 1979), p.159. All subsequent references are taken from this anthology.

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