**COURSE TITLE :**

**SEMIOTICS : LEARNING TO THINK AND ANALYSE SEMIOTICALLY**

**Pr Louis OBOU**

* **COURSE OBJECTIVES**
* To familiarize readers with the semiotic approach.
* To provide models used in semiotic metalanguage, and an example of semiotic analysis applied to a text.
* **COURSE CONTENT PER SESSION**

**INTRODUCTION**

* There is a certain amount of technical language involved with semiotic analysis that cannot be avoided.
* Semiotics is a form of applied linguistics: it is has been applied to everything from fashion to advertising.
* The most fundamental concept in semiotics is the sign; semiotic theorists posit human beings as sign-making and sign-interpreting animals. It is with signs that this discussion of semiotics and cultural criticism begins.

**Chapter 1 : What is semiotics?**

* The term “semiotics” derived from the Greek word *sèmeion* denoting 'sign'.
* In the seventeenth century, the philosopher John Locke referred to *semiotika*, which he defined as 'the Doctrine of Signs, [...]; the business whereof, is to consider the Nature of Signs, the Mind makes use of for the understanding of Things, or conveying its Knowledge to others'.
* Semiotics designates, on the one hand, a *cognitive faculty* and on the other, a discipline of knowledge.
* In modern usage the concept semiotics refers to a theory of signification. There are different branches of semiotics under this heading:
* Semiotics *examines the ways linguistic and nonlinguistic objects and behaviours operate symbolically to « tell » us something*.

The American branch influenced by C. S. Peirce. Much of Peirce's work is devoted to the development of sign categories such as making a distinction between **icon, index and symbol.** The American founder of semiotics, Peirce distinguished between three basic kinds of sign. There was the **iconic**, where the sign somehow resembled what it stood for (a photograph of a person, for example); **the indexical** (smoke) ; **the symbolic**, where as with Saussure the sign is only arbitrarily or conventionally linked with its referent.

Semiotics takes up this and many other classifications: it distinguishes between « denotation » (what the sign stands for) and « connotation » (other signs associated with it); between codes (the sign-governed structures which produce meanings) and the messages transmitted by them; between the “paradigmatic“ ( a whole class of signs which may stand in for one another) in a a chain“). It speaks of “metalanguages”, where one sign-system denotes another sign-system (the relation between literary criticism and literature, for instance), “polysemic” signs which have more than one meaning, and a great many other technical concepts.(Eagleton, p.88).

1. The European branch represented by the Paris School (Ecole *de* Paris) founded by A. J. Greimas. The Paris School is concerned primarily with the relationship between signs, and with the manner in which they produce meaning within a given text or discourse.

**Chapter 2: Signs in Semiotics**

**-** We live in a world of signs, and of signs about signs. In terms of literary analysis, semiotics is interested in literary conventions and sign system.

A sign system is a linguistic or nonlinguistic object or behaviour that can be analysed as if it were a specialized language. For semioticians, anything can be a sign. The whole world of human culture is a « text » waiting to be « read ».

Each sign in the system has meaning only by virtue of its difference from others.

To Barthes, everything ends up being explained in words, thus, ultimately, it would be the theoretical system of linguistics, which explains the production of the meaning accomplished by the action of various signs, whatever their nature: images, symbols, objects, and behaviors.

**Chapter 3:Semioticians and constructedness of meaning**

There are basic principles on which the semiotic analysis of texts is based:

* Meaning is not inherent in objects, objects do not signify by themselves. Meaning, rather, is constructed by what is known as a competent observer, i.e. by a subject capable of 'giving form' to objects.
* Semiotics views the text, any text, as an autonomous unit, that is, one that is internally coherent. Rather than starting with ideas/ meanings external to the text and showing how they are reflected within it, an approach that is still widely adopted in the academic world.
* Semiotic analysis begins with a study of the actual language and structures of the text, showing how meanings are constructed and, of course, at the same time what these meanings are. Semiotic analysis becomes, then, a discovery method and is clearly an invaluable tool for all those engaged in original research.

Semiotics posits that story structure or narrativity underlies all discourse, not just what is commonly known as a story. For instance, it underlies political, sociological and legal discourse. One can even go as far as to say that narrativity underlies our very concept of truth: recent studies in the field of legal discourse, for example, have shown that those witnesses in a law court whose account conforms most closely to archetypal story patterns are those whose version is most likely to be believed.

A text must, therefore, be studied at these different levels of depth and not just at the surface level as is the case with traditional linguistics. Keeping in mind these principles, semiotic analysis is aided further by *schemas* or *models* whose application contributes to decoding the meaning of texts.

* **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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