

LICENCE 3 TRONC COMMUN

Semiotics Culture and Interpretation

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INTRODUCTION

Reference books:

- Umberto ECO, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, [1976] 1979.
- Terry EAGLETON, , *Literary Theory-An Introduction*, London, Blackwell Publishers Lid, (1983)1996

1. Definition of semiotics

In contrast to semiotics, which is concerned with the theory and analysis of the production of meaning, semiology refers to the study of sign systems in operation such as codes, including those of linguistic signs

The term semiology was coined by Saussure to cover the theory of sign systems, and for a long time was used alongside semiotics with very little difference in meaning.

Today the Greimassian School distinguishes clearly between the study of **sign systems** (semiology) and **the study of the process of the generation of meaning** (semiotics)

Semiotics is the theory of signification, that is, of the generation or production of meaning. In contrast to **semiology**, which studies sign systems and their organization (e.g. traffic codes, sign language), semiotics concerns itself with how meaning is produced.

Semiotic theory is based on the belief that meaning is not inherent in objects, that they do not signify by themselves, but that meaning is *constructed* by a competent observer - a subject - capable of giving 'form' to objects.

Semiotics is particularly effective in the uncovering of the multiplicity of meanings within - and beyond - the text.

Semiotic analysis is flexible and can be adopted to meet specific requirements

Semiotics postulates the existence of different levels of meaning

2. Semiotics and culture

- One of the semioticians who, together with Lotman, made the most significant contribution to the systematic study of the culture is undoubtedly **Umberto Eco**.
- His theory follows several different interests, ranging from **semantics and history of semiotics** through to **the theory of text interpretation and cognitive theories**.
- his interest in cultural dynamics is a *fil rouge* running through his work, from the earliest studies with their more aesthetic approach (*The Open Work* , 1962;*Apocalypse Postponed* , 1964) to those published most recently.

Umberto Eco

- Semiotics is strictly cultural in nature: its semiotic functioning and its usefulness as a discipline are cultural.

- It is not possible to explain semiosis outside the cultural logic in which it exists, and if there is one field for which semiotics is useful, it is social and cultural analysis.
- Semiotics is a form of social analysis and intervention. This is clearly explained in what is probably the most programmatic of all his works.
- Even in the book's introduction, the author clarifies that **“the aim of this book is to explore the theoretical possibility and the social function of a unified approach to every phenomenon of signification and/or communication”** (Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* , 1975, Eng. trans., p. 3) and, closer to the end of the book, he claims: **“semiotics is also a form of social criticism and therefore one among the many forms of social practice”** (p. 298).
- **Semiotics**, in other words, **is an understanding of culture**, and thanks to its analytical power, **it becomes a critical, unmasking discipline** and, therefore, an effective one.
- semiotics may, through cultural typologies, flow into cultural anthropology, going to study its objects and emancipating itself from the study of pure and simple sign systems.

Semiotic research finally shifts its attention to phenomena which it would be difficult to term sign systems in a strict sense, nor even communicative systems, but which are rather behaviour and value systems. I refer to systems of etiquette, hierarchies and the so-called “modelling secondary systems”—under which heading the Soviets bring in myths, legends, primitive theologies which present in an organized way the worlds vision of a certain society. (p. 12)

- For **Eco culture *could* be perceived not only as a semiotic object**, but rather the whole of culture *should* be studied as a communicative phenomenon based on signification systems.
- Eco states that “**once society exists every function is automatically transformed into a *sign* of that function.**(Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* ,p. 24)
- **Sign, Culture, Representation**

Culture also works *via signs* (which, according to Saussure’s lesson and to structuralism as a whole, have, by their very nature, a differential value), it works acting on differences, building specific dimensions of heterogeneity, opposition, and contrast.

Example: Car – boat - plane

For this reason:

To look at the whole of culture *sub specie semiotica* is not to say that culture is only communication and signification but that it can be understood more thoroughly if it is seen from the semiotic point of view. And that objects, behaviour and relationships of production and value function as such socially, precisely because they obey semiotic laws. (Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* , p. 27)

In other words, Eco’s semiotics *is* a cultural perspective on semiotics; that is, a semiotics whose deep roots and meaning lie in interrogation and analysis of cultural systems.

There are four main reasons for this “cultural vocation”:

First, Eco's theory is a semiotic theory based on the idea that **meaning** shall be conceived as **a cultural unit**;

Second, this theory believes that meaning is, and has always been, a matter for public and intersubjective negotiation;

Third, since 1975 Eco has posed himself the problem of *sign production* of *semiotic work*, of the *praxis* with which we manage, exchange, and produce sense; he delves into the matter of the *social production of sense*

And last, from the outset, Eco has conceived semiotics as an *antiideological* force that works on culture and for culture, in order to unmask its presumptions and paralogia.

- **SIGN**

Definition according to which a sign is the correspondence between a signifier and a signified. This assumption entails some consequences:

a) **a sign is nor a physical entity**, the physical entity being at most the concrete occurrence of the expressive pertinent element;

b) **a sign is not a fixed semiotic entity** but rather the meeting ground for **independent elements** (coming from two different systems of two different planes and meeting on the basis of a coding correlation).

Properly speaking there are no signs, but only **sign-functions**. Hjelmslev remarked that "**it appears more appropriate to use the word sign as the name for the unit consisting of content-form and the expression-form and established by the solidarity that we have called the sign-function**" (1943:58). A **sign-function** is realized when **two functives** (expression and content) enter into a mutual correlation

Take for instance the expression item /plane/: the English language provides many content items for it, i.e. «carpentry tool» or «level» or «aircraft»). In this sense we are faced with **three sign-functions**: (plane=X), (plane=Y) and (plane=K)

ECO formulated an initial classification wherein he distinguishes artificial signs and natural signs.

Artificial signs are divided into two classes: (1) signs intentionally produced in order to signify; (2) signs intentionally produced as functions.

Natural signs are divided into two classes: (1) signs identified with natural things or events; (2) signs unintentionally produced by a human agent.

Conventionality is Eco's basic criterion of codes. As a first approach, Eco (1968: 19) accepts Miller's (1951: 7) definition of **codes** as "**any system of symbols that, by prior agreement between the source and destination, is used to represent and convey information.**" More specifically, **Eco defines the code as a system of significant units with rules of combination and transformation.** In sum, a code is "**a system of rules given by a culture**" (1968: 130, 134).

Charles Sanders Peirce

The triangle *apparently* translates Peirce's:

(2)

INTERPRETANT (reference)

REPRESENTAMEN (symbol) -----

OBJECT (referent)

The interpretant is not the interpreter (even if a confusion of this type occasionally arises in Peirce). The interpretant is that which guarantees the validity of the sign, even in the absence of the interpreter.

the *interpretant* as another representation which is referred to the same 'object'.

Therefore **a sign** is anything which determines something else(its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*"

The interpretant can assume different forms:

- a) It can be **the equivalent** (or apparently equivalent) **sign-vehicle** in another semiotic system. For example I can make the drawing of a dog correspond to the word /dog/.
- b) It can be **the index** which is directed to a single object, perhaps implying an element of universal quantification (all objects like this).
- c) It can be **a scientific** (or naive) definition in terms of the same semiotic system, e.g./salt/ signifies «sodium chloride).
- d) It can **be an emotive association** which acquires the value of an established connotation: /dog/ signifies «fidelity» (and vice versa) .
- e) It can simply be **the translation of the term** into another language, or its substitution by a synonym

The first point to be made absolutely clear is that such triangles can indeed be useful in discussing a theory of sign production andn particularly a theory of 'mentioning"

One difference between semiotics and semiology is that semiotics draws its basic ideas from a trichotomy elaborated by C. S Peirce (1958). According to Peirce, there are **three kinds of signs-icons**, indexes, and symbols.

A sign or **representamen** is 'something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity'. It is 'anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*)'. A sign thus *stands for* something (its *object*); it stands for something *to* somebody (its *interpretant*); and finally it stands for something to somebody *in some respect* (this respect is called its *ground*). These terms, *representamen*, *object*, *interpretant* and *ground* can thus be seen to refer to the means by which the sign signifies; the relationship between them determines the precise nature of the process of *semiosis*.

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**, whereas with Saussure the sign is only arbitrarily or conventionally linked with its referent.

The semiotic object of a semantics is the *content*, not the referent, and the content has to be defined as a *cultural unit* (or as a cluster or a system of interconnected cultural units)

When we call something a “*sign*”, we bear in mind its effectiveness to *produce* what we call “*semiotic objects*”; That is why a *semiotic object can perform a function of sign* when it produces the identification of other semiotic objects; and *a sign can be considered as semiotic object* when we bear in mind the sign that has produced it.

“Semiotic object” is what is known about the object or phenomenon. Semiotization of object consists in grounding the explanation on the textuality of one or more given semiosis i.e., on the materiality of the discourses in force, not only verbal, but also visual, auditory (musical), gestural, behavioral, etc. in a given text

- **Meaning**

What, then, is the meaning of a term?

From a semiotic point of view it can only **be a cultural unit**. In every culture "a unit ... is simply anything that is culturally defined and distinguished as an entity. It may be a person, place, thing, feeling, state of affairs, sense of foreboding, fantasy, hallucination, hope or idea.

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