

SOCIETY AND SIGNS

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‘The science of the life of signs in society’

Saussure 1974

The above definition of semiotics sets the stage for all things in a culture to be seen as a method of communication. Everything with a communicative function is related to the verbal and consequently, possesses a common set of basic rules or principles. Until the advent of semiotics, these phenomena were placed into various academic disciplines: film study, literature, history, philosophy, art and etc. Now, these various areas of study can be seen as a ‘whole’ not simply ‘parts’ of it.

It must be noted, however, that there has been a sense of ambivalence towards semiotics as a ‘single’ area of study. The main objections towards this are related to a cry that these semiotic systems cannot be studied in an isolated form.

Despite numerous objections to semiotic theory, it is the contention of this author that there is a ‘truth’ in viewing society in semiotic terms. This unites various academic disciplines in their quest for looking at society (and all that makes it up) in a single, unified view, exemplified as semiotics.

The idea of society and its relationship to semiotics ‘must’ rely upon various universal assumptions about society and meaning that remain valid. This ‘social consciousness’ is dependent upon the ‘truth’ about independent people acting upon each other in a structured, ‘rule governed’ society within a material world and all that implies.

The whole concept rests upon the idea of the ‘rulers and the ruled’. By the former term is meant the ones WITH power as opposed to those WITHOUT it. There are inequalities in the distribution of power and other goods between these groups and each individual MUST belong in either the control or a controlled group.

From an ideological point of view, the resulting complex of groups (dominant or

dominated) results in one of a set of contradictory world views with each group moving on behalf of its own values and views of itself.

There is an ideological concept which exists and governs 'how' power is distributed, used and either accepted or not. These concepts influence group behavior and are determined in versions upon which social action is governed and in which ways.

It must be stated that message receivers are thought to react in certain, 'expected' ways and the producers of these messages depend upon (expect) this reaction. This, of necessity, requires that anyone who receives 'any' message is expected to manifest certain responses. Jokes and irony are examples. Of course, these are subject to many factors. (The reader is encouraged to examine the bibliography for discussions about these areas).

This is related to logonomic systems-which are sets of rules which specify who 'can produce or know' meanings under different modalities (how, when, why). Logonomic systems wherein domination structures (groups dominating or being dominated) are either challenged or unchallenged. These systems are taught and enforced by specific concrete social agents-e.g. teachers (students), parents (children) employers (employees) etc.

These logonomic systems 'must be' clearly seen, and known in terms of politeness, etiquette, and all relations, legislation and etc.

Such logonomic systems therefore imply an 'ordered' society wherein things 'happen' under a system of 'rules' that are understood by all participants.

Both text and discourse are guided by (controlled by) intended message, which, in turn, is determined by the participants in any and all cases.

Logonomic systems possess certain 'laws' that decide the usual forms of text and discourse. These dictate and control the producers of texts and their consumers in terms of group, message, type, production and reception.

Many factors influence message form, production and reception. Therefore, the meanings and interests of both dominant and non-dominant groups are important because of their involvement.

Billboard messages are good examples of this ideological complex that constitutes text. (The interested reader is encouraged to examine a very good example of this in 'SOCIAL SEMANTICS' ppgs 8-12).

THE FATHERS OF SEMIOTICS REVISITED

One's version of semiotics (its construction and use included) is dependent upon the original founding father's views and contributions. The work of many scholars from a wide

variety of disciplines determined the shape of 'future' semiotic research. It is to a brief discussion of some of their work that we shall now turn. Similar to virtually all theories concerned with academic fields of study, semiotics has a past, a present and a future. Much has transpired in the field of semiotics and numerous scholars (famous in other disciplines) have contributed knowingly or perhaps even unknowingly to the understanding we presently have with respect to society and its relationship with signs.

Names that are well-known in other academic areas are: Saussure; Peirce; Husserl; Wittgenstein, Freud, and Voloshinov (to name just a few).

A very important truth about semiotics which asserts the maternal and social dimensions inherent in it comes from Voloshinov (1973:21)

- '1. Ideology may not be divorced from the maternal reality of the sign.
2. Signs may not be divorced from the concrete forms of social intercourse (seeing that the sign is part of organized social intercourse, and cannot exist, as such, outside of it).
3. Communication and the forms of communication may not be divorced from the material basis.'

He further postulates (1973:9)

'Without signs there is no ideology. . . . Everything ideological possesses semiotic value.' C. S. Peirce stated (6:338: 'Every thought is a sign.' He also writes: that there exists a relationship between the interpretant and the sign. (See Peirce 1940-65)

Peirce classified signs in a more clear-cut manner than did Saussure. He discussed 3 main types: ICON-which was based upon likeness or identity, e.g. road signs; INDEX which was based on causality or contiguity, e.g. smoke-a sign of fire; and SYMBOL which was simply a conventional link which Saussure referred to as arbitrary. ' . . . the same sign could be transparent to a producer and not to a receiver, or vice-versa.' (Hodge & Kress, 1988:22).

Saussure is difficult to understand but his contributions to semiotic theory are undoubtedly important (In order to better understand semiotics the interested reader is encouraged to read his works.

Also of extreme importance to a better understanding of practical semiotics is the relationship between it and 'reality'. By 'reality' is meant the 'real, material world' that provides the 'things' semiotic theory deals with and semiotic activity. If semiotics does NOT DEAL WITH the 'real world' it simply continues to be faced with the same problems that have existed for thousands of years. Consequently, it cannot account for the role of semiotic

systems in this world. In short, the relationship between language and thought, thought and reality and even 'truth' and 'reality'.

Of course, persons the world over call each other liars with quite severe assumptions of what is 'truth'. These assumptions have their own 'accepted' definitions although, as we all know, there is no universally accepted definition of these terms! However, people use them often.

Untruths (lies) are also important here-the detection of which is cardinal. Also, ever more devious manners of lying or concealing ignorance of the truth have evolved. Saussure did not deal with this; while Peirce did. (The interested reader is encouraged to peruse the bibliography for more on this topic.)

MEANING

Voloshinov believed that the utterance formed 'one' semiotic act and this formed the basis of his ideas about the make-up of social semiotics. He wrote that 'The form of signs is conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants and also by the immediate conditions of their interactions'. (Hodge & Kress 1988: 37). This was a dramatic break, a new orientation from the 'until now' structuralist views. The example of traffic signals (often utilized by structuralists) is of vital importance here. The colors of the traffic signal, red, yellow & green have meanings that people 'the world over' can relate to and obey. Obviously, red & green mean 'stop' and 'go' respectively. This understanding of 'what' is meant by the traffic signal applies to many other cases of semiotic communication as well the understanding of signs (in this case the traffic signal) allows a society (indeed, a world) to function. Indeed, without semiotic signs like the traffic signal, reality and the world itself would be greatly compromised.

POWER & SOLIDARITY

Both power and solidarity are based upon transparent signifiers These basic signifiers provide a sound basis for the generalizations societies base themselves upon. They provide the 'understood' without a need for spoken language. However, these two things (power & solidarity) make-up the functioning system of the societies of the world.

Hodge & Kress (1988): pg. 40 sum up the function of content:

1. The context of semiosis is itself organized as a series of texts with meanings assigned to categories of participants and relationships.

2. The behavior of participants is constrained by logonomic systems which operate through messages about their identity and relationships, signifying status, power and solidarity.
3. Participants in semiosis typically transmit a great profusion of messages in a number of codes about the status of the exchange and their own and others' roles.
4. Where a semiotic exchange does not involve direct contact by all participants, producers are likely to include instructions specifying producers, receivers and contexts into the form of their text.
5. The set of messages which organizes a particular semiotic exchange will imply a generalized version of social relations. That is, every semiotic act has an ideological context.

There are also messages of power that are exchanged between people on a regular basis. Again, Hodge & Kress (1988:46) list a number of situations wherein this occurs:

1. Inter-related systems of signs of power and solidarity are used to organize and make sense of the relationships of participants in all semiotic acts.
2. Systems of signifiers of solidarity are based on the assumption of both opposition and identity between these dimensions, leading to systematic ambiguity and multiple redundancy.
3. Transparent signifiers of solidarity are based on a number of principles including analogies with equality, reciprocity, self-reference and simplicity.
4. Transparent signifiers of power are based on a number of principles, including analogies with asymmetry, self-suppression, magnitude and elaboration. These can also signify absence of solidarity; and signifiers of the absence of power can signify solidarity.'

It is apparent that power and solidarity are important in terms of their presence or absence among groups. It goes without saying that groups are either controlling or being controlled. The manners in which they react to these situations manifest themselves solely in this relationship.

In semiotic situations the most basic thing is that of the physical relationships of the bodies of participants in terms of spatial relationships. Of course, spatial concerns differ amongst nations, but it can be said that there are many expressions in human language that refer to spatial terms and the meanings such expressions have.

Edward Hall (1966) termed the phrase 'proxemic' to discuss space relationships amongst participants in any and all situations wherein they interacted with each other. Non-closeness

usually signifies weakness, indifference, or some sort of problem in any relationship. This can either be a plus or a minus. Physical closeness always implies powerful relations-love or intimacy in positive situations or in negative ones, hostility and/or aggression.

Distances which, for example, indicate solidarity in one situation/language. may show non-solidarity. in another. Spatial relations between participants commonly signal power/solidarity relationships.

GENDER

The most powerful form of ideology is expressed in terms of gender. Styles of dress, behavior and/or appearance, are obvious enough with verbal expressions taking a subservient role.

There are many situations wherein men and women interact with each other. There are social rules that apply when genders meet. each other. Everyone 'knows' what is expected in each situation.

However, culture plays a very important role in gender relations. What is true in one culture does not necessarily hold in another. This is very apparent in cross-cultural exchange-when two people of different genders, age and cultures interact with each other.

DOMAIN

The issue between participants is not simply one of differences. In the realm of linguistics, Halliday (1978) developed a theory called 'anti-language'. Herein, languages are used by opposites: prisoners and criminals spring readily to mind as examples of this. Anti-language creates situations wherein another world-an anti-world- is created depending upon whom is interacting with whom. This creates a situation where values and meanings of the dominant group are inverted.

An anti-society is created although anti-language is not used at all times. As a matter of fact, it is protected. and used only when and where users feel secure.

A good example of this is space allocations in architecture to create separate domains. This is especially manifested in western architecture.

Space in homes and times when different genders are in control are examples of this. Women typically are 'in charge' during the daytime hours; while men are performing this role during the evenings. A division of labor exists in situations such as these. The differences in gender, class or status indicate degrees of power and separate groups.

IDEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Any and all groups of any size require markers of group membership in order to give them identity and sense of cohesion which differentiates them from other groups. Usually, groups are not marked with only one label but with many of them.

CONCLUSION

There are many other topics that could easily be discussed and elaborated upon in the complex realm of semiotics. Space considerations do not allow for the luxury of doing so here.

Style; grammar; accent; and metasign-which defines group membership; gender; physical appearances; distance; clothing; social factors; the visual media; control; community; transformation and time; love; narratives; and etc are involved herein.

An understanding of semiotic theory is absolutely essential for the 'understanding' of what makes the world go 'round. It exists and holds the societies of the world together. An awareness of semiotics and its relationship to society is something that people should be aware of. Persons deal with signs virtually all of the time. Many inhabitants of this world are not really 'conscious' of the role that signs and symbols have but they follow and/or 'obey' them.

It can be seen from this brief paper how vital, complex and **IMPORTANT** semiotics really is. The reader is heartily invited and encouraged to learn much more about this fascinating field of study.

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