



Communicative Semiotics

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of communication from the semiotics point of view. Semiotics is a form of applied linguistics concerned with the study of all signs and symbols that permit communication among people, whether that involves spoken or written language. Semiotics has an important role in understanding the hidden implications of everything, as the universe might be nothing more than a system of signs and icons in reality¹, according to Peirce. Communicative semiotics proposes – in principle – the study of all aspects relating to our lives in which language and codes are important. It allows the researcher to deal with visual discourse parallel to lingual discourse.

Keywords: Onomastics, variation, surnames, attitudes, standardization and codification.

Peirce, C.S., *Semiotics and Significs*. Ed Charles Hardwick. Bloomington I.N.: Indiana University Press, 1977.

سيمياء التواصل

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الملخص

تتناول هذه الورقة تطور التواصل من وجهة نظر السيميائية. بوصفها شكلا من أشكال اللغويات التطبيقية المعنية بدراسة كل الإشارات والرموز التي تسمح بالتواصل بين الناس، سواء كان ذلك من لغة منطوقة أو لغة مكتوبة، أو إشارية. كما أن للسيميائية لها دورا هاما في فهم المضامين المخفية، فالكون قد يكون مجرد نظام إشارات ورموز، وفقا لبيرس. وسيميائية التواصل تعنى - من حيث المبدأ - بدراسة حياة الدلائل داخل الحياة الاجتماعية؛ أي من جميع الجوانب المتعلقة بحياتنا حيث اللغة والرموز مهمة. كما تسمح للباحث التعامل مع الخطاب البصري بالتوازي إلى الخطاب اللغوي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السيميائية، الاتصال، اللغة، اللسانيات، علامة.



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“One could say that ours is an era which is now obsessed with the idea (or perhaps even the ideology) of communication”¹

Semiotics of language and communication:

Language occupies a prominent space in semiotic studies because it is the perfect system that maintains its three elements (contextual, signification and pragmatic) that characterize every system of signs. There are many theories and concepts that deal with the phenomenon of language and communication, and cover all intellectual, cultural, philosophical, and social aspects. This paper will cover only the concept of “language and communication” in its semantic context, which deals with the signifier, the signified and the intention, away from the developments in other cognitive concepts. Roman Jakobson is one of the pioneers of this model, as he considered that the primary function of language is to communicate and defined six functions of language:

1- David Morley, ‘Communication’ in T. Bennett, L. Grossberg & M. Morris (eds) *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, pp. 47-51.

The addresser sends a message to the addressee. To be operative the message requires a context referred to (‘referent’ in another, somewhat ambiguous, nomenclature), seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized, a code fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and decoder of the message); and finally, a contact, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to stay in communication.²

-Jakobson suggested that each of these functions “determines a different function of language.”³ The iconic function can be added to these functions of language discourse, after reading the works of Jacques Derrida concerning semiotics.

Language consists of communication derived from all the modalities of life associated with spiritual, physical and emotional attributes that characterize any society, or a particular social group,

2- Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics”. In T. Sebeok (Ed.), *Style in language*, pp. 350-77, Cambridge, MA 1960.

3- Ibid.



but it is not complete unless it is within the format of cultural mediation. This happens based on the correlation of individuals or communities, within the study and analysis of ethnological phenomena identified by the parameters of ethnography, in order to enable the convergence of cultures, according to the diverse formulas. This process is now called “acculturation” or “cultural exchange”, dealing with cultural development of all peoples by natural mutual communication, called “transculturation”. The term “acculturation” shortens the reality of the coexistence of different cultures, either through: automatic acculturation, as is the case in peaceful telecommunications by commerce in a way that we can find, for example, acculturation among traders in Canada and the north of the USA, or imposed acculturation, as was the case with Mexico and Peru during the invasion and the storming of their culture. There is also voluntary acculturation that concerns the confluence of civilizations among peoples and nations, which was the object of study of the American School of Diffusion, pioneered by Franz Boas.

What concerns me in this context is precisely how the culture of the other, with its own values, can find an equal place among the cultures of the world? While the dominant culture may spread enlightenment to the target culture [i.e. local culture], it also acts to erase differences. This conflict can be analysed through the semantic link between the overlap of these cultures. The people in the third millennium have become a group in a global village,

communicating through different means of technology; therefore, societies as a whole represent “communicative signs” from the argument of Charles S. Peirce that everything is sign,⁴ as a kind of coordination, or union with the interaction of cultures and ideas. This is what Gabriel Marcel calls “shared experience”, which should be seen as a cultural phenomenon, as it encourages communication among global communities, on the condition that there be consistent rules for this communication.

Perhaps, this is an indication that language with its semantic concepts, whether through the language of creativity or the language of community participation, falls within the framework of the philosophy of communication that is not isolated from the context of time and space. This opens broad prospects for the exchange of experiences and cultures, which is determined by the nature of language on one hand, and forms of communication on the other hand. Therefore, Jürgen Habermas believed that the perception of the world remains closely linked to the world system.⁵

If we try to understand the relationship between language and communication, from where the limits of common communication emerge, we might wonder about how they contribute to the transformational process of linguistic communication, and how to move them from one place to another.

4- Peirce, C.S., “A Letter to Lady Welby” (1908), *Semiotic and Significs*, pp. 80-81

5- Jürgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, translated by Frederick G. Lawrence, MIT Press, 1990.



Does the process happen automatically and naturally or by agreement? How does the agreement come on the unification of most of the symbols in spite of the different cultures involved? As Ernst Cassirer stated in *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, humans are an animal symbolicum.⁶ The relationship of language and communication explains the ability of humans to build symbolic worlds that embody their consciousness, on the grounds that language symbols are an integral part of organizational life of the human beings, wherever they are, and in any era.

According to this perception, language can only be a link for a social use, and an indicator of consciousness, or an expression of it. This accords to a large extent with John Locke's theory of empiricism, which sees experience alone as the primary source of human knowledge, through signs used to understand things, and to transfer knowledge to others. Locke said that "words in their primary or immediate signification stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them,"⁷ meaning that communicative action becomes part of the action of expression of human ideas.

People do not create languages in order to express things, but things appear in front of them and languages come to expose these objects. Umberto Eco has mentioned this matter, describing it as a sign of an ontological problematic character, meaning the

philosophical section seen in the existence from what exists, according to Aristotle.⁸ Eco discusses this by questioning the nature of the mutual reflective relationship between the sign and the thing. From this perspective, the philosophy of communicative language is concerned with the contextual, as the significance of language is subject to the relations context and how it is used within a culture, and not according to the theoretical concept, because looking at things starts from the language use for these things, whether expressive, indicative or symbolic language. Therefore, there is no limit to using language, which according to Ludwig Wittgenstein is only infinitely diversification of uses.⁹

It seems that such a perception is contrary to what some of the concepts called for, which sort to place communicative semiotics in a template form, as adopted by Soviet semiotics, in the second half of the twentieth century, in its quest to create cultural systems modelled for the world, according to fixed forms that lead the world to a systemic culture. The Soviet vision of semiotics was a product of, the communist aim of uniting the world with a unified ideology. Perhaps this is not dissimilar in practice to the consequences of the culture of globalization at the beginning of the third millennium, which seeks to strip away all cultural privacy.

Such reflections raise a number of questions; is it the task of cultural

6- Ernst Cassirer. *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, Yale University Press, 1972, p.27

7- John Locke. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book III Words, Chapter II, Section 2.

8- *Metaphysics* By Aristotle

9- Ludwig Wittgenstein. *The Blue and Brown Books*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965



communicative semiotics to care about cultural privacy or to dissolve it in the global culture? Is it possible to call this kind of communication a model for unifying world culture and subjecting its inhabitants to universal laws? Or can it function differently? Can communicative semiotics probe the depths of the privacy of cultures to rebuild them as valid forms of cultural communication in a plural world? Can this become a general rule for what Cultural Studies should do?

Such questions, and many others about communicative semiotics, continually return to the ongoing controversy concerning what is universal and what is particular. In terms of Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, the self is a cultural accumulation of symbolically inherited "archetypes". The self is only a holder of these concepts, habits, traditions, values, and aspirations, which are the product of social relations at a given time. Therefore, the self is itself a theatrically-produced image of the stage of reality reached by those relationships at the current historical moment, according to Jacques Lacan.¹⁰

According to Jürgen Habermas, the universal and the particular are linked in social interaction through communicative action. Communicative action is therefore a social component of a cultural system. From this perspective, the human perception of the value of language may be considered to lie in its continuity between the self and the other. This perception is a product of

the awareness that communicative action determines the course of cultural patterns. Add to it that every form of these patterns represents a semantic unit, and each semantic unit reflects a cultural pattern. In this context, any culture of this perspective is supposed to be looked at from the angle of the necessary competence of communicative semiotics. Eric Buyssens defined semiotics as the study of all systems of communication, i.e. the study of the procedures of communication that are recognised as being used in influencing others. Therefore, the element of communication is the main theme in semiology, especially human communication.¹¹

Evolution of communication:

Communication is a central aspect of human activity across all times, and that it has played a key role in human evolution. Anthropology researchers consider communication to be central to cultural exchange between individuals and within communities and the tool that expresses the culture of the community and determines its identity. When the evidence of anthropological studies is combined with the analytical understanding that the rules of communication ensure the existence of cultures, then it is possible to investigate the evolutionary phases by which individual and collective communication rolled out through the ages. Despite this, the means of communication do not exceed the scope set by Roman Jakobson: context – addresser – addressee – contact – code – message.

10- Jacques Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VI: Desire and Its Interpretation, 1958-1959*. Translated by Cormac Gallagher.

11- Eric Buyssens, *La communication et l'articulation linguistique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1967, p.11.



If communication is a meaningful process for transferring information, ideas, skills, and attitudes, from one person to another, and leads to an impact on the recipients of the message, therefore it must undergo different stages. Hence, I will address the most important stages that have contributed in the communication development process. The first stage is establishing communication, which was practiced through sounds and body language. Anthropological studies refer to this as the Cro-Magnon stage.

The second stage is the scientific community stage. It perceives science and technological developments in the 16th and 17th centuries, until scientism turned to the positivism. Science then replaced religion, especially in the 18th century, and promoted rationalism through the works of Spinoza, John Locke, Richard Simon, Pierre Bayle and others who characterized the enlightenment movement with the idea of progress, lack of trust in tradition, faith in science, and a call for independent self-reflection.

The third stage is the era of mass communication, a prelude to the social and political concept of mass society, resulting from the mechanisation of the printing press in the nineteenth century. The speed of communication started to increase, which was considered a great leap forward that facilitated the spread of science and ideas quickly. One of the other components in the evolution of communication at this stage was the industrial revolution in the developed world; which created a mutual communication between

peoples and nations in its various commercial, cultural, and political types. In this stage other modern communicative inventions appeared, such as the telegraph in 1837, although this method was relatively distant from the means of mass communication, but it was an essential element of the means of communication, followed by the discovery of Alexander Graham Bell of the advanced means of communication, the telephone, in 1876, and, one year later, Thomas Edison's invention, the phonograph. In 1896 Guglielmo Marconi discovered the wireless, and enabled the development of radio communications, the first broadcast media. Others followed these developments such as television, cinema, computers, electronic and fiber-optic cable.

The fourth stage is the era of interactive communication. Following the Soviet Union's launch of the first satellite in 1957, global communication has been revolutionised. At this stage, Marshall McLuhan describes, in his famous book *The Medium is the Message*, the modern media that made the planet earth a global village, "time" has ceased, 'space' has vanished. We now live in a global village... a simultaneous happening."¹² In a broader idea of the global village, McLuhan also wrote "we live mythically and integrally... In the electric age, when our central nervous system is technologically extended to involve the whole of mankind and to incorporate the whole of mankind in us, we necessarily participate... in the

12- McLuhan, M. and Q. Fiore. *The Medium is the Message*. New York: Bantam, 1967, p.63



consequences of our every action.”¹³ Since then, human societies did not live in isolation anymore, and people started to interact and participate in a new global system.

In spite of the tremendous developments that this stage has seen, the initial promise of the global village quickly began to fade, due to the misuse of communication technology. This led Richard A. Blake to argue, contradicting McLuhan, that the global village no longer exists,¹⁴ and that communication technology was practiced to break up the crowd, and to disperse the recipient, imposing more individualism and isolation in a system in which communication technology addresses individuals instead of groups. Nevertheless, even in this alienated form, this stage of communication has enabled the dispersed masses of the world to come closer together, especially after its spread since the end of the sixties.

The fifth stage is the communicative society stage at the beginning of the third millennium. This kind of cosmic mass communication has no choice but to interact with the stream of information of communicative society, after communicative information moved towards decentralization in two appearances. The first one is controlled by the sender, and the second one is controlled by the receiver. They both find themselves in the revolution of information technology

in order to provide the highest quality research methods, and provide different services to communicate and exchange information. The transfer of information occurs over vast distances and at high speed, and in this context, as Alvin Toffler predicted, the electronic infrastructure in the developed countries is characterized by six features that represent the keys of future, which are: interactivity, mobility, convertibility, connectivity, ubiquity and globalization.¹⁵ According to this perspective, we live in the era of communicative society, after technological determinism imposed itself on us, in a manner approved by McLuhan that the important technological inventions affect communities essentially.

While printed works – since the era of Johannes Gutenberg – divided society into classes (literate / illiterate, educated / uneducated), electronic media try to unite the communicative society in the acquisition of information in various ways to the senses, especially mental and visual. The listening sense took control, as people get their information mainly by listening, as the vision sense is impressive in terms of the photo industry, which relies on physical technique, such as colours, colour temperature, colour gradients, colour reflection, and colour refraction. These techniques are used in order for the image to cross-borders through the display quality in advertising, media, to the latest technological innovation to provide a three-dimensional image.

13- McLuhan, M. *Understanding Media*. New York: Mentor, 1964, p.4

14- Richard A. Blake. “Condominiums in the Global Village”, in George Rodman (ed.), *Mass Media Issues*, 3rd ed. (Dubuque, IAL Kendall/Hunt, 1989), 133.

15- Alvin Toffler. *Powershift: Knowledge, Wealth and Violence at the Edge of the 21st Century*, Bantam Books, 1990



Therefore, many researchers promote the idea that the culture of the image is an alternative to the culture of the word, and perhaps it was recognition of this that led Toffler to argue that we live in the age of Future Shock.

The adequacy of the communicative language:

Christian Metz believed that the semiotics of communication mainly proposes the study of languages that are “specialized”, meaning the study of a semantic fields in which language and code are temporarily mixed, before the social functioning of language diminishes to a single code.¹⁶ Hence the importance given to the subject of semiology, in recent studies by many scholars, which is what Prieto referred to when considering semiology signs are based on communicative intentionality. This is called the communicative semiology. It is an important link in the chain of the evolution of modern semiotics, given the importance of the topic and scope.

Therefore, pragmatic language is not interested in accurately phrasing in terms of linguistic aspect, as much as it is interested in how language can be translated into everyday reality. Noam Chomsky considers language an independent entity that functions through arrangements of basic symbols moving to universal grammar as a system of language laws, without any consideration for communication. In other words it separates between efficiency and linguistic performance. In contrast to Chomsky, Habermas

does not care about universal grammar but universal pragmatics and the interconnection of the social system. Perhaps this matches with what Hegel thought concerning the phenomenon of mind when he said that the path of formation of the mind is through dialogue. Perhaps this means that the communicative mind follows the structure of language in its pragmatics, as the language of social interaction.

The relationship between the communicative self and the communicative other is called acculturation, fused and overlapping with each other, as both of them are conditional on the existence of the other. Every culture recognizes itself through the other’s culture; in addition to that every culture does not feel perfection, only if it sees itself through the other’s culture. Herein lies the importance of mutual dialogue through communicative rationality, as advocated by Habermas, and originally observed by Hegel.

To analyse the adequacy of the language of cultural communication is to examine the range of knowledge systems and values that allow humans to assess what is happening in their surroundings. Thus, cross-cultural communication through symbolic speech gives semantic meaning to the value of the thing symbolized and builds up a picture of ‘reality’ according to the mind. As a result this communication creates a relationship and interdependence between individuals and communities in the form of functional symbols.

Hence the functional form of

16- Christian Metz. *Essais sémiotiques*, Isd, 1977, p.48



linguistic communication heads towards freedom from stereotypes imposed by the abstract language of the signs, system or icons, in contrast to what Ernst Cassirer considered that language drifts away from the meaning assigned to it towards the functional meaning. However, Cassirer emphasizes the use of communicative tools when figurative symbols start in the communicative language. These symbols are seen as constituting a relationship between man and his outside world in all aspects of human behaviour, ranging from agitation to social rituals, and ending with major ideological modalities. The sign in the communicative semiotics perspective tries to understand the secrets of the semantic meaning produced by man in his interaction with the environment, and in this context Umberto Eco defines the sign as a “gesture produced with the intention of communicating, that is, in order to transmit one’s representation or inner state to another being.”¹⁷

The works of Prieto, George Mounin, Eric Buysens, Martinet and many others all utilize the communicative semiotics pattern; they all agree that the Saussurean sign is composed of three units: the signifier, the signified and intention. This constitutes the communicative function of anything the individual encounters in life, regardless of the linguistic message, but also in other non-linguistic systems such as, logos, maps, banners, magazines, and all the data produced for the purpose of communication. In his correspondence with Victoria, Lady Welby, Charles Peirce referred to the merits of the semiotic approach and its validity in comparison to different symbols, writing: “it has never

17- Umberto Eco. *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Indiana University Press, 1986, p.16

been in my power to study anything, — mathematics, ethics, metaphysics, gravitation, thermodynamics, optics, chemistry, comparative anatomy, astronomy, psychology, phonetics, economics, the history of science, whist, men and women, wine, metrology — except as a study of semiotic.”¹⁸

If the subject of semiotics is the meaning and forms of existence, then this meaning is part of the components of communicative language, which is referred to by Habermas when considered that the language within the communicative context according to him is a dialogue between the minds of the speakers, designed to build a bridge of understanding; a language governed by rules to establish a coherent connection among interlocutors in particular, and between cultures in general, or what can be called forms of culture. Language is a privileged communication medium, because it is among the deliberative tools. From here the focus within communicative semiotics is on all aspects of expressive and non-expressive language.

If Habermas has considered communication as the only sound able to unite the world, then according to Prieto dialogue is a communicative act or a semiotic act in every moment in which the sender tries – in the process of producing a sign – to supply the addressee with a certain indication. Moreover, the adequacy of the ideal language plays its role to ensure perfect communication, and perhaps this raises the following question: how does the phenomenon of ideal communicative discourse happen?

18- Peirce, C.S, *Semiotics and Significs*. Ed Charles Hardwick. Bloomington I.N.: Indiana University Press, 1977, p.85-6



And how do we distinguish it from the misleading-deceiving communicative discourse?

Perhaps the search in criteria to ensure that the ideal situation for communicative discourse enhances the image of society, which communicates within the terms of recent studies, especially the contents of the studies of Habermas: reality, justice, sincerity, and intelligibility that respects the rules of the language used in the communicative discourse. Habermas believes that intelligibility is a permanent precondition for communication.¹⁹ If these conditions are available, the ideal communication discourse system is available oriented by mutual culture, because the culture lies in the activation of these conditions through a deliberative discourse and organization of communication.

Karl-Otto Apel has considered these conditions as hypotheses ideally placed to continue non-specific communication; the discussion depends on transcendent intellectual perspective.²⁰ This level of contemplative intellectual perspective is beyond the boundaries of the installation of the linguistic context in grammatical significance to the standard, which includes deliberative discourse in illocutionary context. Hence language is a tool used by human beings to complete the process of communication between each other,

19- Habermas. "Signification de la pragmatique universelle", *Logique des sciences sociales et autres essais*, trad. Par R. Tochiltz, Paris, PUF, 1987, 329-41
20- Karl-Otto Apel. "The problem of Philosophical Fundamental Grounding in Light of Transcendental Pragmatic of Language", in *Man and World*, Vol. VIII, 1975, p. 239 – 275.

transferring connotations and meanings by acoustic signals.

This hypothesis – concerning the deliberative aspect of language – explains the communicative competence that stems from the cultural pattern of people, and which enables them to describe the power of perception of facts and events. The language in this case serves as a mediator supporting the cultural role of ideal mutual dialogue perspectives, or what is considered a pragmatic competence in interacting with the outside world. This is what Ludwig Feuerbach had in mind when he wrote: "the true dialectic is not a monologue of a solitary thinker with himself; it is a dialogue between "I" and "thou""²¹ and what Hegel realised when he noted that "language is self-consciousness existing for others."²²

Leonard Bloomfield and Ferdinand de Saussure also focused on the social nature of the communication process. Saussure's concept of communication is based on a psychological concept arising from the acoustic image. Bloomfield established his concept on the behavioural propensity involved in stimulus and response, without underestimating the social nature of communication. According to this perspective, the semiology of signification deals with structures in a non-communicative context, which depends on intentionality, as with Roland Barthes, for example.

21- Ludwig Feuerbach. *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, Hackett Publishing, 1966, p.72

22- Georg W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit (The Phenomenology of Mind)*, Digireads.com Publishing, 2004, p.296



The theory of communication seeks to bring the world together as an integrated unit, through the context of cultural awareness, and a desire to overcome the concentration on self, because self-isolation from the other cannot create a cultural awareness. Hence the task of the theory of communication to compensate for the individuality of the self by participating with the other, and to aid the coming together of the cultures of nations with each other, via the communicative community enabled by information technology. However, there is no absolute communicative act, or ideal such as the concepts advocated by the culture of globalization. The aim is not to replace the local culture with the totalitarian culture, but to facilitate genuine communication between different cultures on an equal basis.

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