

The Sociological Value of Semiotics

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Abstract:

This article attempts to identify basic features of semiotics and its relevance of understanding human behavior. The overall design is including with the fundamental foreword of semiology and semiotics as well as its relationship linking with sociology. The discussion concerning sociological value of semiotics will be conversed in the final stage.

Semiotics has been one of the prominent issues of scholarly circles in social sciences and humanities scholarly circles in the 20th century. This is the science of learning of signs. On the other hand, signs are the guide of every behavior and every behavior can be considered a sign. Sign can be seen through visual and non-visual aspects. These two types of semiotics are being used in day-to-day life. This is the way of making inter- relationship among the entire society. These signs can be seen as drawings, paintings and photographs. They represent road, pub, map, and star signs as well as words, sounds and body language. These are extremely significant to gain knowledge. Semiology is one of proper disciplines of read these signs.

Semiology's starting point was in linguistics. Obviously most linguists are the pioneers of semiology. Semiology derived from the word "*seme*" from Greek. It means "sign" and it looked into the nature of signs and the laws governing them. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) is the founder of not only linguistics but also semiotics. According to Saussure, linguistics is only one branch of the general science. The laws, which are in semiology, will be laws applicable to linguistics. There were couples of linguists who developed semiotics as a science in semiology. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and Charles William Morris (1901-1979) led in early development of semiotics. Charles William Morris discussed the way of the behaviorist semiotics. Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Algirdas Greimas (1917-1922), Christians Metz

(1931-1993), Umberto Eco (1932), and Julia Kristeva (1941) lead to the develop modern semiotic theories.

According to Saussure; Semiotics, semiotic studies or semiology is the study of signs and symbols, both individually and grouped into sign systems (Hayward, 2001). It includes the study of how meaning is constructed and understood. According to Charles Peirce, Semiotics was the "formal doctrine of signs" (Hayward, 2001, p.6). American Heritage Dictionary (2011) showed the theory and study of signs and symbols, especially as elements of language or other systems of communication, and comprising semantics, syntactic and pragmatic. Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary (2010) explains semiology as "a general philosophical theory of signs and symbols that deals especially with their function in both artificially constructed and natural language and comprises a natural language, syntactic and pragmatics". British philosopher John Locke (1634-1704) gives a descriptive interpretation on the semiotics on his book on "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" that there are three parts in science and human understanding as follows,

- i. The nature of things, as they are in themselves, their relations, and their manner of operation.
- ii The man him-self ought to do, as a rational and voluntary agent, for the attainment of any end, especially happiness.
- iii. The ways and means whereby the knowledge is attained and communicated (en.wikipedia.org).

According to Locke (1690), the third part includes semiotics that is the doctrine of signs. Peirce and Morris (1938) illustrated semiotics as learning signs and how it affect human communication to animal learning and the use of signals. They think that society make notion or idea on certain things as a sign or symbol. For instance, the word "dog" makes an image on animal that has four legs, snout and tail. This word is used for only to describe features of dog and it is already established in the society. Therefore, anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as "signifying" for something. Peirce further says this as 'nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign'. It

gives us signs have signals which are already have significant meanings. Saussure's introduction on semiotics belongs to social sciences. He said that signs can be considered a part of social life. Especially it is a main part of social psychology as well as general psychology. According to Saussure's model of sign (1974) discuss on the role of signs as part of social life. Sign has two parts termed signifier and signified. It means sign has both physical and psychological meaning. The signifier is physical part of the sign and the signified is the meaning represented by the physical phenomena. The "signification" is the total meaning of the sign. Saussure's model of sign can be summarized as follows,

- The signifier: the word *temple*
- The signified concept: A place for religious activities.
- The signification: The whole meaning of the sign (the message)

Signs have different meanings in different contexts. For instance, the word *temple* (sign) gives us an idea that it is a worship place for Buddhist followers with Buddha shrine, stupa, a bo tree and a reverent with yellow robe in the Sri Lankan context. But *temple* takes some other meaning for Hindu followers. Therefore, this sign has different definitions or meanings and values in relation to different religious, sociological, archeological, historical, and political notions. Thus, sign is not only things such as those can be seen heard, touched, smelt or tasted but there is a psychological combination too. According to Saussure (1974), as noted by Aristotle, signs are not natural and 'every thing depends on relations' (Chandler, 2002). In view of that, signs have different meanings and they depend on certain social and cultural conventions.

Umberto Eco (1976) says that semiotics involves with studies not only of what referred as "signs" in everyday life but also with these "stand for" something else. "Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign" (Chandler, 2002). It has a message or, signs can be read through words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. Signs are giving meanings to the society. Signs make interactions. Peirce declared, "Every thought is a sign". The term

"thought" is a collection of different types of mental activities. Thoughts are born according to the knowledge. It can be cultural knowledge, shared non-cultural knowledge and non-shared non-cultural knowledge (Clark & Clark, 1977).

Roland Barthes (1915-1980) developed this concept in his studies in the way signs work in culture. Barthes (1957) identified two orders of signification.

1. Denotation: A simple first order of meaning
2. Connotation: All the associative and evaluative meanings attributed to the sign by the culture (Hayward, 2000).

John Sturrock (1915-1974) made argument on semantics and semiotics whereas semantics focuses on "what" words mean and semiotics is concerned with "how" signs mean. Herbert Blumer (1900-1987), Leslie White (1900-1975), and Ray Birdwhistell (1918-1994) contributed to develop the discourse of symbolic communication.

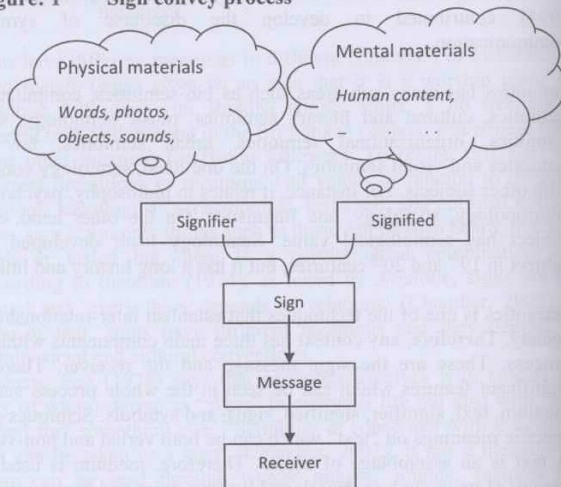
Semiotics has many sub areas such as bio-semiotics, computational semiotics, cultural and literary semiotics, music semiology, social semiotics, organizational semiotics, urban semiotics, law and semiotics and visual semiotics. On the one hand, semiology connects with other subjects. For instance, it relates to philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics. On the other hand, every subject has semiological value. Semiology itself developed as a subject in 19th and 20th centuries, but it has a long history and links.

Semiotics is one of the techniques that establish inter-relationships in society. Therefore, any context has three main components within the process. These are the sign, message and the receiver. There are significant features which can be seen in the whole process such as medium, text, signifier, signified, signs, and symbols. Semiotics gives specific meanings on "text" which can be both verbal and non-verbal. A text is an assemblage of signs. Therefore, medium is used in a variety of ways such as speech and writing, print and broadcasting or in specific technical forms. It can be seen through signs and symbols. Signs and symbols can be seen as words, actions, images, sounds,

gestures, postures, objects and fragrance. The signifier is the physical existence of the medium regarding the message. The signified is a mental concept, which is the meaning of the relevant message. The sign is an aggregate meaning of the signifier and signified. The message, which is received by the receiver, is the result of this communication process. The receiver reads the sign with his knowledge and experience.

Signs have values or meanings of what before noted. The receiver also plays a main role in this process. Signs cannot convey any stimulation, if the receiver could not read it. Hence, every receiver has basic ideas and experiences on signs. It can be concluded as follows.

Figure: 1 Sign convey process



It is noted that semiologists have concerned the anthropological and sociological perspectives in their studies on semiotics. The pioneer

sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1893) explained in his book on "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life"; a study on primitive societies and their religious beliefs on *totemism* among Australian aboriginal tribes and how extent it contributes in meeting social prerequisites. He further mentioned that totem is a sign of things, which are sacred or worshipped. A totem is an object such as animal or plant that serves as an emblem or symbol of a kingship group or person. For example, there were totems such as bones, cabbage and shells. These signs give us a message of God or spirituality as well as collective consciences. In the sense of that the people in that society performed a rain dance as a symbol; the important point is that they used group's values and norms to show their collective activity. Saussure's idea on language is that on "system of values" and Durkheim's conception on collective consciousness has a relationship with this. Durkheim's book on "The division of labour" (1893) mentions that the collective consciousness refers to the shared beliefs and moral attitudes which operate as a unifying force within society. He further highlights which features can be seen in mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. A French anthropologist, Claude L. Strauss (1908-1990) developed structuralism as a method of understanding human society and culture. He considers culture a system of symbolic communication. He used his knowledge on phonology, which is the sound system in a specific language. In this description, phonetics is a physical production and perception is that sounds of speech. He applied this theory for understanding sign language of primitive cultures.

There are three basic stages of action as individual, group and corporation interactions. Social relations are made-up with actions and reactions. Culture and socialization are the main concepts regarding social behavior. Social behavior is a learning process. A newly born child has to learn things, which are needs to survive as a human being. This is a long-term process, which is called as socialization in sociology. The term "socialization" gives us an idea on the process of teaching and learning of the life style or culture in a certain society. For example, when the baby feels hungry, he/she starts to cry. The second step regarding this action is that mother

feeds him. All the mothers have learnt this basic sign of children. If the baby cries after feeding also, then the mother knows the baby has some other difficulties. Hence, the mother checks if the baby wants to do his excretion or any other matter. This is the first interaction between the baby and the mother. In this sense smiling, weeping, suckling as well as anger, fear, shames are the common signals. For instance, weeping means sorrow, laughter means joy. There are thousands of social activities in our social life. Every behavior has cultural background or value system. These are not just actions. These are also learned behaviors.

Signs can be seen within animal behavior also. Animals are using different kinds of behavior patterns such as sounds, actions and odours for making interactions. When they want to fight each other, they use different kinds of sounds, gestures and stances. If they want to engage in sex, they use their hereditary olfactory activities. Some of them use significant sounds for exchanging messages.

Structure and system are vital issue regarding every context. Structure is the whole context with systems such as biological, economical, legal, political, psychological, socio-cultural systems. System is a set of entities that interact with one another to form the whole. Each system has its own unique features and elements and systems are interdependent. Herbert Spenser, George Simmel, Karl Marks were the pioneer of structuralism in 19th century. Levi- Strauss and Talcott Parsons are the conspicuous scholars in this regards during the 20th century. Levi-Strauss (1908-2009) who contributed to develop meta-linguistic models of communication refers to the structural similarity between myth and music. On the other hand, the important issue in semiotics is that texts can be considered as systems. For instance, language is a sign system with rules and elements such as words, sounds and sentences. This discourse has meanings, values, and social identities to individuals.

Social behaviourism is a vital theme in this context. Symbolic interaction perspective can be used to identify how individuals interpret and give meanings to the daily interactions, which make up their social worlds. G.H.Mead (1863-1931) presented his theory on

self-development using this perspective. He believed that this is a dialogue between the "me" and the "I". The "me" is the social life; learned society's expectations and the "I" is the spontaneous or creative self. His argument is that self depends on each person's psychological capacity for reflexive thinking. Self-awareness and awareness of others and their evaluations of one's behavior and appearance helps to preserve good interaction. Symbols and gestures are the mechanisms that allow an individual to interact with others. According to Mead "A significant symbol used to convey a meaning and that has the same meaning for the person transmitting it as well as for the person receiving it" (Ferrante, 2000). When people interact with one another, they use symbols especially in the form of language. Interpretation of others' behavior is important during social interaction and individuals learn which behavior is appropriate to the particular situation. Mead (1934) explained this based on three basic principles; meaning, language and thought. C.H.Cooley (1864-1929) further pointed out that, "self" is a product of interaction experiences and it is acting as a mirror when we behave with each other. This is called the concept of "looking glass-self". Erving Goffman (1922-1982) explained his dramaturgical perspective in the book titled "The presentation of self in everyday life" (1959) that life is a theatre, we all are actors and it is the relationship between the performance and audience. These are expressions and impressions in human relations. It can be done through sign vehicles including both language and body language as Goffman says. Symbolic interactionism is one of the major areas as well as a perspective of sociology. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the founder of psychoanalysis represented valuable concepts on signs in his advanced theories. He carried out his studies on psychoanalysis, personality, theory of sexuality, interpretation of dreams, religion and morality. His famous study gives us a good sign of the human mind. His idea can be summarized as "the mind is like an ice berg; it floats with one seventh of its bulk above water". Hence, dreams have more signals regarding self-interpretations. Dreams give us some hints on life. There are different kinds of dreams making ideas on good, bad, dangerous, and success. Those are indicated by dreams. Common dreams can be summarized as seeing

friends, relatives or family members, flying, falling, dying and having sex in the dream, animals, money among others.

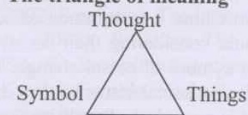
Human beings create a world of messages and meanings and continue to create new things to look for the meaning of life. Human beings have the power of using images, signs and symbols since the beginning of the history. Symbols and signs can be verbal, musical, dramatic or physical as well as natural or conventional. Some of them are universal and some of them are regional or tribal. In order to communicate with each other they have used things what they had at the movement. Then it became a habit or sign regarding such behaviour or feeling. In the history of hunting and nomadic age, there were large amounts of signs and symbols. For instance, hand signs, different kinds of sounds, fire and lightning, and tracking were more popular among them. It helped to understand the situation of safety, to identify paths, to take actions carefully as well as to get knowledge on water, animals, enemies, friends, and distance.

When considering the sociological value of semiotics it is easy to understand by observing culture. Culture can be defined as a set of knowledge, experiences, values, beliefs, attitudes, meanings, art, customs which are learned behaviours which pass from generation to generation. Culture is a symbol of a certain society. The study of culture means understanding or reading these signs and symbols. Semiotics began to become a major approach to cultural studies in the late 1960. Barthes explained his model, which is used in study cultural phenomena in his books on "Elements of Semiology" (1964) and "The fashion system" (1967), discussed important relations with language, signs, myth, and culture of the societies. Sociolinguistics which is another one of important sub field of linguistics is the study of language in relation to society. It is concerned with the nature of the language, or characteristics of a particular language. There is a long tradition in the study of dialects and in the general study of the relations between word-meaning and culture.

The triangle of meaning was developed by C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards. According to this triangle of meaning, the "word" is not the thing. However, when we see the "word", thoughts help to create

things. Socially acquired knowledge or culture directly influences to build thoughts.

Figure: 2 The triangle of meaning



Language is a unified system of symbols that permits a sharing of meaning. "words" are symbols and thus words represent objects. The important thing is words stand to represent things but there are not things. Therefore, signs help to create meanings and expectations regarding the message or objects and ideas. When creating meanings, it depends on the place, time, gender and experience.

Signs and symbols are the most important communication methods regarding the study of culture. For instance, every culture has signs and symbols while certain signs and symbols have cultural values. There are more symbolic values with marriage customs, food habits, fashion costumes, colours, flowers and consumer goods. Culture is not a dilemma. It has environmental, geographical, social, and political values and experiences. For instance, the sign of "paddy" shows us an idea on geography. "Paddy" is considered as symbol of prosperity in these countries. There are many customs relevant on this such as New Year customs, religious customs, and rituals. Paddy is a good symbol in understanding life. When a person becomes more mature he/she must be more flexible and respect others as same as the stalk full of paddy grain bows down.

For centuries individuals, groups, or societies have used clothes and other body adornment as a form of non-verbal communication to indicate their gender, role, occupation, rank, sexual availability, locality, class, wealth and group affiliation. Fashion is a form of a free speech. It includes accessories, jewellery, hairstyles, and beauty and body art. For instance, different ethnic groups have different dress patterns in Sri Lanka. Different forms of costumes represent different social classes. Some dress patterns give us an idea on weather or living place. However, this connotation is different from

place to place. When considering a person wearing a coat and a long trouser, he may represent a good rank in his occupation, upper class or wealth in the society in Sri Lanka. But in countries which have four seasons, for example in China it is common to see that people wearing this in winter without considering their social strata. Hence fashion can be considered a symbol of social change. The dress and other accessories give an idea on social status as they are represented in frescoes in Sigiriya. That is a symbol of traditional art techniques, traditional dress pattern, prosperity, social stratification during that era.

Signs can provide a complete message in relevant contexts and every single thing has a meaning. For instance, colors give universal as well as local messages. The red colour implies different things. Red means "stop" when it is on traffic lights. It stands for blood in medicine. In most countries, red gives the meanings of danger, hot, sex, embarrassment, left-wing or radical. Pink and blue makes a gender view. Black represents objections, inauspiciousness, and dolefulness, while white represents an idea of a bride, peace, friendliness, artless or sadness. Light and darkness gives another signal. Malinowski (1922), the pioneer anthropologist, described the bride wore a grass skirt decorated with bright colors and the widow wore a grass skirt blackened with soot in the Melanesian Trobriand islands. Some objects are symbols in that they mean something other than themselves. Flowers give different kinds of signals or expressions as love, happy, prosperity, sadness, sexual impressions. In marriage customs, white fresh flowers give us an idea of bride or purity and red flowers indicates honeymoon.

Different signals are used by different groups in different settings with deferent views. Types of signs and symbols can be seen as colours, flowers, flags, animals, actions, objects, stances, odours, customs among others. These very signs are used in every stage in everyday life for making social interactions.

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