

Linguistic and Literary Semiotics

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*“... a science (be it a hard science or a soft one)
should be able to change the state of things
of which it speaks...”*

– Umberto Eco

Semiotics is the theory of sign systems. For decades it has been assumed that every sign system in nature, society and cognition belongs to the domain of semiotics. The literature on the subject is voluminous. Semiotic studies are increasingly attractive to whoever is interested in signs at large. At present, however, the attempts to address every instance of semiotics to the general theory of sign systems have unreasonably widened the scope and confines of semiotics. Internationally recognized authorities in the field point to “the agony of semiotics” implying “the crisis of theory” (Blonsky 1991).

The above pessimistic view of the status of semiotic theory makes one think of the reasons why general semioticians more often than not find themselves “at the crossroads” (Blonsky 1991), doubting the relevance of the elaborated concepts and the validity of research and methodology. This extreme situation is reflective of indeterminacy which resulted from a discrepancy between theory and practice; continual theorizing has liberated semioticians from the burden of practice, practical goals or procedures. It is impossible to suggest a remedy for the whole of general semiotics. With respect to the language and its study I would suggest going back to the empirical basis of linguistics (Waugh 1984).

In the 1990s linguists are more concerned about the unity of theory and practice. A sophisticated linguist will no longer state that language is a sign system *par excellence*. He will no longer indiscriminately relegate language to the domain of general semiotics. On the contrary, a linguist in the proper sense of the word will think of applied semiotics, considering the relationship between the science of natural human languages and the science of sign systems, and addressing the following questions: How much of a natural human language lends itself to semiotic interpretation? What are the signs and sign systems within a natural human language? In what way can the concepts and categories of semiotics be applied to the actual teaching of natural human languages? Expanding the list of questions one could include the following ones: Are we justified in applying the semiotic methodology to literature? What is literary semiotics (the semiotics of literature)?

Before I pass on to the material at hand and demonstrate the linguo-semiotic methodology I am aiming at, I would like first to present the categorial characteristics of signs.

For a unity to aspire to the status of a sign it must be disembodied, arbitrary and singular. Before some or other linguistic (lexical, syntactic or morphological) unity is allowed in, it must be proven to comply with the “fundamentals.” Otherwise stated, the content plane of the sign, the *signifié*, must not be encumbered with individual reference to a particular extralinguistic object. It must be arbitrary in the sense that its physical expression is not required to be symbolic: It is meant to be used arbitrarily, by agreement. It is required to possess the very important property of “singularity:” It must be something that is easily distinguishable from all other facts of the same kind.

I shall begin with the diacritical level of the language. The ultimate units of the diacritical level are phonemes – two or more sounds the difference between which is not conditioned by position alone. What do phonemes generally signal? Irrespective of their individual and particular phonetic-articulatory properties phonemes signal “otherness,” thus distinguishing between different sound envelopes. Without the latter, languages cannot function as coherent means of human communication. At every stage of its growth and development a natural human language will offer its native speakers as well as foreign learners a balanced system of phonemic oppositions which have to be rigorously adhered to, followed, and intelligibly reproduced. Every time an imaginary Eliza Doolittle utters “I didn’t sigh that” there will be a sophisticated Professor Higgins to

comment critically “You didn’t sigh that. You didn’t even say that,” not only insisting on precision but selflessly safeguarding “the majesty and grandeur” of the English language!

The fact that nowadays more and more English language teaching professionals insist on accuracy, literacy and norms shows convincingly that in learning the language we have to acquire more than just the sounds. We have to make conscious choice with respect to the particular variant of pronunciation we are after. In the 1980s the ELT classroom has been unreasonably tolerant of imprecision, illiteracy and, more generally, bad English. In the 1990s it is being rediscovered that proficiency in the use of standard English creates favourable sign situations. Speakers of Modern Standard Literary English have more chances to be promoted in business, trade, commerce and education. Those whose English has been proverbially “branded on the tongue” have to learn to convey “cross-cultural identity” by disguising negative signs (inferior background, poor education, unrefined manners) and demonstrating, with growing confidence, the positive signs and sign systems, the ultimate aim being that of maximum intelligibility and social acceptability.¹

Along with the “choice” of the variant of pronunciation one should make another distinction – between diatopic variants of the language. To illustrate the point I will adduce examples from the vocabulary. The use of “solicitor, flat, rubbish, lift, autumn, petrol” etc. “signals” that you are a British English speaker, whereas “lawyer, apartment, garbage, elevator, fall, gas” etc. convey that you are an American English speaker.²

Differences between the two variants of English are observable in grammar, morphology, syntax and style. On a more sophisticated level of cultural awareness we shall have to take into account the perception of the world by an American and an Englishman. Americans are generally recognized to be more outspoken and categorical, whereas the British are

¹ This approach is well in line with the fundamentals of “the British aesthetic” with its emphasis on “manners, appearance and voice.” Every time an English speaking person listens to a foreigner, the latter will likely be “analyzed” in terms of oppositions like: educated – uneducated, polished – unrefined, classy – crass, etc. The above “cross-cultural identity” possesses a certain amount of “appropriate classlessness” (Anita Brookner) that could be regarded as a model for a foreign learner to imitate and make his own. In terms of practical semiotics it means learning to convey (= signal) the sum total of relevant parameters and purports.

² To add to this: abbreviated forms of words *cossie*, *footie*, *pressie*, *rellie*, etc. will not only “signify” the great productivity of the informal suffix *-ie*, but will likely place the determined user of these words as a speaker of Australian English.

more tentative and roundabout. In terms of intercultural communication the following piece of instruction “Please Keep Hands Off Door” will be recognized as American, the respective understated British counterpart being “Obstructing the door causes delay and can be dangerous.”

At the beginning of the present article I focussed on phonemes as the unilateral units of the diacritical level signaling “otherness.” A seemingly simple instance of semiosis gradually led to wider linguodidactic and cultural contexts – pronunciation and intercultural communication. A transition of this kind, at times negated by structural semioticians, seems to be well-justified to a linguist who regards language not as an “emic” idealized abstraction, but a fully cognizable synthesis of underlying mental processes and the complexities of linguistic semasiology (Akhmanova, Nazarova 1992). Every time we apply the semiotic methodology in question to the objectively existing facts of the language we have to be aware of the continuous interaction of language and speech, language and thinking, language and literature, language and culture.

We can make another step and consider a universally-recognized, commonly-shared and conventionally-used sign system – punctuation marks. These are “disembodied” in the sense that there is no historically or extra-linguistically determined connection between what they signal and what they actually are. Punctuation marks can be used arbitrarily by whomever in writing. This is a system of very convenient, compact signs which find conventional expression both in writing and oral speech. Punctuation marks are singular in the sense that they are semiotically kept apart: the things they signal have to be clearly distinguished and differentiated. A full stop denotes the end of a sentence; a colon introduces an explanation; a semi-colon links separate ideas within a sentence. In terms of a wider cultural perspective there will be a dramatic difference between the use of punctuation marks in English and Russian. English punctuation is semantic-stylistic, whereas Russian punctuation is syntactic-grammatical (Alexandrova 1984).

The property of belonging to the field of semiotics can be discovered in words. In this respect it is important to distinguish between syncategorematic and categorematic words. Syncategorematic words, in contrast with the categorematic ones, are of a much more abstract character. This is best illustrated by an examination of English articles. To arrive at the semiotic function of articles one has to begin by completely “disembodying” and “abstracting” them. The three English articles – “a/an” (classifying), “the” (identifying) and “[zero]” (generalizing) – are used to indi-

cate, single out or classify an object with respect to the participants of the speech event. The English articles are a set of special signs by means of which we can continuously shift, organize and re-organize the deictic orientation of speech in different ways.

From words we may turn to polylexemic word-equivalents – word combinations. The latter also have meanings as words do. In Modern English there are different classes of word-combinations. They display varying degrees of semiosis. On the one hand, there are neutral, recurrent word-combinations of the following type: “blue sky,” “warm day,” “long night,” “nice face”. They are the so-called “common property” collocations (Ter-Minasova 1980). We may list more formal word-combinations like: “extensive literature on the subject,” “the development of our science,” “leading linguists, drastic reconsideration of our methodology,” etc. They can also be included into the “common property” thesaurus in the sense that there is nothing uniquely individual or occasion-specific about them. They can be used by different speakers for a wide range of communicative purposes.

Collocations of this type should be distinguished from what was called “private property” (Ter-Minasova 1980) – word-combinations created by a speaker or writer for a particular occasion and aimed at achieving a certain expressive-emotional-evaluative impact on the addressee: “spiritual adultery,” “ripples of dissent,” “dinginess of soul,” “a little hangover of guilt,” “a woman without mystery,” “a coma of misery,” “a massive sea of protest,” “a vague flower of the upper classes,” etc.³

In terms of linguistic semiotics the underlying opposition lies between the following poles: “common property” collocations *vs* “private property” collocations, the former signaling the intention of the speakers to convey information or message for the purposes of communication, the latter likely signaling that speakers are intent on esthetic impact, artistic effect, rhetoric or wordplay.

Of equal interest for linguosemiotics are phraseological units like “in general,” “by definition,” “to take into account,” “to take care of,” “to be ill,” “to be late” etc. They are to be used as is, with no change afflicting the registered dictionary form. Their careful reproduction in speech signals correct acceptable literary usage; violation of word order, or a change

³ I have borrowed these collocations from modern British and American writers (Iris Murdoch, Anita Brookner, Jeanette Winterson and John Grisham).

of articles or prepositions, would signal bad style, erroneous use and even illiteracy. The learner has to be aware of this system-based sign situation.

The ontology of idioms in speech is drastically different from phraseological units. Let me adduce several examples from the Longman Dictionary of English Idioms (1992): “a new broom sweeps clean” (sometimes shortened to a new broom), “dot the i’s” and “cross the t’s,” “have a finger in every pie” (also “with a finger in every pie”). In studying their semiotic properties we should take into account the present-day socio-cultural tendencies in the use of idioms and attitudes to their adequate use. Adequacy in the use of idioms presupposes that speakers match the “meaning” of the idiom and the particular speech situation adapting the conventionally-shaped and registered form to a new linguistic environment. Creative and sophisticated use of idioms will signal that the speaker is well-educated, linguistically cultured, has a rare gift of the feel for the language. Banal and trite uses of idioms in their dictionary form with practically no attention to the requirements of context and situation will unfailingly signal lack of linguistic culture reflective of either inadequate education or inferior social background.

Let me adduce three quotations from fiction in which idioms are used coherently and adequately, the subtle and elegant variations of form conveying a host of esthetic implications that characterize a work of literature in the strict sense of the word:⁴

- 1) “He wanted to see how far below the table the new broom was liable to sweep.” (Graham Greene)
- 2) “He was putting the dot on an i, but he wasn’t going to cross the t’s as well.” (Graham Greene)
- 3) “I believe John Akenside had a finger in nearly every European political pie...” (Barbara Pym)

Linguosemiotic methods are not confined to the separate elements of the language (phonemes, words, word-combinations). They can be applied to texts as well. Here the semiotics of interlinguistically based texts comes into the picture. Otherwise stated, this is the question of the choice of the kind of English for this or that sign situation. The moment

⁴“A work of literature distills creative imagination into excellence of linguistic expression” (Quirk, Stein 1993).

someone deliberately chooses a variety of English for a special kind of human communication, he (or she) ceases to be functioning on the natural linguistic (historical-philological) level, but enters a new branch of activity which becomes the object of a different science – semiotics. The process is connected with the use of “rational communicative systems,” the rationality of scientific communication, its optimal character. Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) has much to do with a semiotically repetitive, “disembodied,” arbitrarily chosen text, “singular” (or “unique”) in the sense that it is there to be “transcribed, imitated, emulated” as closely as possible.

Teaching literature to foreign-language students appears to be one of the most involved linguodidactic problems. On the one hand, there are teaching programs in which there is no room for literature; here the latter is proclaimed to be incognoscible, and, therefore, teachers have the right to disengage themselves from the cumbersome object. On the other hand, there are numerous textbooks whose conspicuous titles give a clear idea of how the solution to the problem is viewed and practiced by the respective authors. Texts are abridged, simplified, and, to use a very popular term, “neutralized.” More often than not learners are presented with sentences and paragraphs torn out from the context for further exercise and perusal. Numerous literature-based textbooks are confined to comments on the plot and the characters. No wonder that authors of manuals rarely concern themselves with the esthetic value of verbal art and the globality of a literary work – a fictitiously construed “imaginary world” that serves the purposes of esthetic impact, enjoyment and appreciation.

Literary semiotics is in a way distinctly different from the approaches outlined above. Discourse-oriented semiotics aims at typological investigation of narrative and has more to do with narratology, logic, cohesion and syntax, being of little practical value to students professionally concerned with literature and language studies. Structure-oriented semiotics deals with schematic synopses of literary texts and owes its present-day worldwide recognition to a Russian scholar, Vladimir Propp, who was the first to elaborate the structural approach to folklore (1928) and whose findings were later (in the 1950s) placed at the base of the structural-semiotic presentation of literary works. One should also mention learner-oriented methodologies inviting students esthetically to decompose significant utterances following the patterns worked out by Barthes, Greimas, Genette and Todorov.

When we speak of understanding fiction we mean much more than the retelling of the plot, the rendering of the story or the enumeration of facts given in a work of verbal art. The factual aspect of fiction is the “tip of the iceberg.” A student of philology is expected to read “between the lines,” continuously questioning the esthetic relevance of this or that stretch of the text with respect to the author’s purport. Philological reading is a permanent “quest for meaning.” Much depends on the reader’s intuition, education, background knowledge and linguistic sophistication.

Linguopoetics (Akhmanova, Zadornova 1977) provides us with the method of linguopoetic stratification (“slicing and splicing”) of a work of fiction; the latter is the necessary prerequisite of literary semiotics. Literary semiotics comes in when we have analyzed a work of verbal art linguopoetically. On a higher level of semiotic abstraction we can arrive at one or more general purports (or themes) signaled to us by different texts of the same author or literary trend, irrespective of the dissimilarities between the respective linguopoetic entities. For instance, if we would like to speak of the semiotics of Anita Brookner’s novels then we must be able to grasp a recurrent Brooknerian theme, such as the “bravely borne loneliness of a woman,” in a number of different novels (*Hotel du Lac*, *A Friend from England*, *The Misalliance*). Another theme is the life-literature relationship (*The Debut* and *Providence*). In L. Percy, however, the author expands the inventory of favored themes and addresses the loneliness and suffering of a man, thus presenting semioticians with another generalization apt to be discovered in different texts with respect to different linguistic expressions. Literary semiotics of this kind verges on literary criticism, the difference being that literary critics find it difficult to “keep their eyes” on the text all the time, whereas literary semiotics is linguopoetics-based, the extended global work of verbal art in the unity of written and oral forms being its primary object and study.

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