

SEMIOSIS IN SOME LITERARY THEORY CATEGORIES

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Received:

15 – 09 – 2017

Accepted:

20 – 12 – 2017

<http://jshe.ued.udn.vn/>

Abstract: Semiosis is the central concept of semiotics. Focusing on this notion does not only allow us to deal with semiotics in depth, to avoid misunderstandings about underlying concepts, but also to thoroughly interpret many types of literary works. This article analyzes the correlation between semiosis and some typical literary theory categories such as dialogism in Bakhtin's thought [1], intertextuality in the thought of Barthes [2] and Kristeva [13], the poeticity and metaphor of Jakobson [11] and Eco [6], deconstruction of the meaning of Eco [7], Johansen [12] and Derrida [5].

Key words: semiosis; dialogism; intertextuality; poeticity; metaphor; deconstruction of meaning.

1. Introduction

Although it is impossible to completely deny the mimesis tradition in the history of Occident's philology, it is clear that the birth of semiosis has created a turning point in comprehension of language and literature. In particular, it is the re-election and deepening of the problem between the reference of the thing of language and the relative autonomy of language to reality (in Saussure's conception) or the fault between signs with its object and infinite interpretation (in Peirce's conception). Accordingly, we must answer the question whether the work expresses reality or speaks of itself. Although this is a fundamental issue of philosophy of language and of epistemology of literature, up to now, in Vietnam, there has been no work on this subject as a fundamental concept. Based on the semiotics theory and the history of the development of literary research, this article analyzes some correlations between this category and some typical categories in literary theories. The purpose of this study is not to comprehensively analyze

the other hand, to find common points in the notion of the semiosis of the two schools of semiotics: the Anglo-Saxon tradition and the the Saussurean linguistic tradition.

2. Semiosis in Peirce's semiotic theory

The term *semiosis*¹ of semiotics refers to “the motion and progress of the sign leading to the emergence of a new sign”, which is an endless phenomenon, deriving from the expression: *semiosis ad infinitum*. This term also refers to the “creation phenomena of the sign itself”, “derived from the Greek word *sēmeiōsis*, which refers to the “act of signification” (derived from *sēmeion*, meaning “indice”). This term was coined by Peirce in his paper “Pragmatism” in 1907 [18]. The text is written in the context of the debate about what is pragmatism. Peirce

¹French: *sémiosis*.

sent this paper to two journals: *The Nation* and *Atlantic Monthly*. However, this text was denied and was not published when Peirce was alive. Important passages of this text are printed in the fifth volume of the *Collected Papers* [19]. The concept *semiosis* is considered as a central concept of theory of signs in 5,484 passages. There, Peirce explained the Greek origin of this term *sēmeiōsis* to indicate the act of signification. Peirce used the Greek term *semeiosis* or the new spelling: *semiosis*.

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semiosis as a fundamental conception of signification with its mechanisms, but from these correlations, to draw some fundamental theoretical issues to explain in which sphere the sign creates a significant structure; on

Firstly, the terminology of Peirce is understood in the field of logic and philosophy: the phenomenon of the creation and development of the sign and the result produces a new sign, resulting in an infinite process.

More than 20 years later, Peirce returned to the concept of *semiosis* by pointing out Philodème's conception: the evolution of the spirit starts from the sign:

“But, by semiosis I mean, on the contrary, an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant”. [19, part 3, p.484], [18, p.411].

Semiosis is the interpretation of signs. The term *semiosis* drafts the unpredictability of the sign, its dynamics and its production. In the text in the preceding this quotation, Peirce was interested in the natural signs (such as the smoke of a fire) as well as simple reactions to a stimulus (such as a surprising cry). These are two-sided or in pairs, which are just sketches of sign or degenerate signs. Only triangular signs, or triads, are constituted by three elements (sign, object, interpretant) that reach the “true sign” status, and only this sign can lead us to discoveries and thus contribute to the progress of knowledge. Thus, the sign called “authentic” explains the conception of “semiosis” that Philodème constructed [19, part 6, p. 20].

Another fundamental aspect of the function of semiosis that needs to be emphasized here is: this phenomenon is created in the space of cultural diversity; at the same time, it is time characteristics with the dimension associated with the past of history and toward future possibilities. These phenomena of the past and the future are not limited, as we know, the concept “semiosis” attached to Peirce's expression in the text: *ad infinitum*. From a fundamental standpoint that Peirce against Descartes' doctrine, because, in opposition to the cogito² ability of cognition, the origin of the sign, and, more generally speaking, of thought, cannot be reached. That is, the potential development of perception is opened towards the infinitude.

Is the essence of cognition also the sign? We can not restore its origin and, theoretically, its future is unlimited. It is important to note a different definition of Peirce:

“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”. [19, part 2, p. 303].

Thus, it can be said that Peirce's notion of semiosis and the definition of the three-side characteristic of the sign are almost synonyms, defined with the same object, but the interpretation and grasp are derived from different views.

Based on Peirce's ideas, Charles W. Morris created a science of signs. The subject of this discipline was extended by him, including the communication of animals, and attached to the scope of the behavioral philosophy. This term holds an important place in Morris's theory. When he stresses “a significant process, i.e., a process in which something as a sign reaches an organization”, [17] actually Morris is talking about the process of semiosis.

3. Correlation between semiosis and some literary theory categories

This fundamental concept in the text of Peirce and Morris has become the central aspect of semiotics. It has become the subject of many semiotics project, especially works on literary theory. [15], [21], [22].

3.1. Semiosis and dialogism in Bakhtin's thought

The work of Augusto Ponzio [20] analyzes many useful aspects of these two theoretical categories; especially, the author illuminates the similarity of unpredictable and dynamic features of their significant

²“*I think therefore I am*”, or in Latin, the *cogito*—“*Cogito ergo sum*” is a philosophical statement used by René Descartes has become the basis for Occidental philosophy.

phenomena. In this regard, it is important to pay special attention to the aspect of epistemology: Peirce's works are in scope of cognitive semiotics, while Bakhtin's works belong to the domain of philosophy of language, are the foundation for literary criticism. From the first work of Bakhtin entitled *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (V.Volochinov) [24], the central theory topic is dialogism. This concept of Bakhtin is equivalent to the notion of a sign in Peirce, presenting itself as a

“hyphen” between two spheres, a range of relations maintained by itself and another bound by two objects. In brief, these two terms contain a dialectical space, the space of encounter and the space of dialogue. The word's meaning in these two concepts is linked to ongoing language activities, speech act, intermittent utterance, dominant social conditions, phonetic characteristics. That makes us think immediately about the concept of “discourse”. If “meaning” of a word is defined by its current use in a context rather than codification, its meaning is never “standardized” - or fixed in a strict way and it always opens up unpredictable possibilities. This corresponds with the operation of the sign and semiosis phenomena in Peirce. The equivalence between expressions and discourses in Bakhtin's and the sign and the semiosis in Peirce belong to an unpredictable process, infinity, and their transformations.

Actually, the polyphonic concept, central to the dialogism of Bakhtin's thought, is evidenced by Dostoevsky's works to clarify the interaction and contradiction of social voices is a semiosis process who has both dimensions: social and discursive ones.

3.2. Semiosis and intertextuality in the thought of Barthes and Kristeva

From the 1970s, the concept of intertextuality was developed by Barthes [2] and Kristeva [13] from Bakhtin's thought rather than from Peirce's semiosis. Kristeva's interpretation can be summed as follows: a text (primarily in terms of literary texts) does not have absolute isolation, because the preceding texts are always present in some form. In this sense, writing is always some kind of rewriting, a text always associated with a cultural and social context.

Barthes said: “All texts are inter-text; other texts are present in a text at various levels, in more or less recognizable forms: earlier cultural texts and contemporary cultural texts” [2, p. 112]. Thus, there are not any texts which exist independently, and all texts are influenced by cultural texts that contain ideological and historical structures. A “dialogue space of text” is the interaction of endless code. The text with understanding is “expression” and “discourse” proposed by Bakhtin is similar: it is refreshing, renovated, redefining the significant process. The aspects of the *ad infinitum*

process are, in fact, the basis of the intertextual concept, especially in applications to analyse literary works.

3.3. Semiosis and poeticity, metaphor of Jakobson and Eco

The third problem relating to the correlation between semiosis and poeticity, metaphors of Jakobson [11] and Eco [7]. Jakobson's concept of the poetic function was proclaimed and published at the conference “*Linguistics and Poetics*” in 1958. The nature of poetic discourse is determined by a displacement in the paradigmatic logic of language (in terms of the phonetic equivalence of the signifier rather than the content of the signified) in the axis of formation about speech, it means syntagmatic relation. The paradigmatic logic becomes the fundamental principle for poetic category of linguistic utterance. Ten years later (1968), Jakobson discusses this problem in order to bring out the meaning of expressions beyond the linguistic domain, in particular to construct a theoretical aspect from the linguistics of Saussure to Peirce's semiotics. In addition, the concept of semiosis becomes the central issue in his interpretations. First of all, the change about the name: from “poetic function” to “aesthetic function”. The researcher refers to two categories of coherence: contiguity and similarity. He uses these categories to indicate the anteriority and posteriority of the process with two other terms, effectuation and assignment. These two categories allow the creation of four variants of perception: an effective contiguity, an allocable contiguity, an effective similarity, and variety.

Utterance, as well as all other signs, is opened towards its object, generally about the world. This characteristic is the propensity of the meaning that Jakobson calls semiosis. The purest aesthetics utterance - Jakobson refers to music associated with musical instruments, abstract painting, and poetic texts (considered as idiolect) - which are characterized by an inversion of the semiosis process. This process returns to itself in order to achieve the presentation of inner language activities and because of that it refreshes our forms and our meaning of structure of the signification, instead of heading towards the world. This inverse phenomenon is called the introversive semiosis, or, in other words, interior semiosis in the distinction between

a phenomenon called the outward-oriented process, or in other words, extroversive semiosis.

Thus, the identification of analogy becomes the fundamental problem of the interior phenomenal semiosis. The numerous poetic analyses (Shapiro [16], Haley [10], Francoeur [9]) have emphasized this aesthetic function in order to estimate the boundaries of the interior semiosis and the extroversive semiosis process. Typically, Umberto Eco [6] derives its basis from this analysis about poeticity in *Metaphor and Semiosis*.

3.4. Peirce's ad infinitum semiosis and the deconstruction of meaning of Eco, Johansen and Derrida

Finally, one can not fail to mention the correlations of Peirce's ad infinitum with *literary semiotics* and the deconstruction of the meaning of Eco [7], Johansen [12] and Derrida [5]. We know that, in Peirce's thought, the limitlessness of the semiosis phenomenon manifests an important philosophical aspect. This attribute is associated with the dynamics of the sign, and hence, is associated with its instability. The point of view of Anti-Cartesianism that we have mentioned above is also relevant to this philosophical aspect. The critique of semiotics develops on the basis of philosophy about signs belonging to another order, in the ideological dimension of the sign in front of the text, that is, the object is associated to the role of describing, explaining, and interpretation. There is an important methodological shift that marked the history of semiotics in the twentieth century. In general, the research works of applied semiotics are always associated with philosophical notions on signs. The important research works of literary semiotics are published to elucidate the sign, the semiosis process, and the various aspects of the phenomenal sign. On the contrary, the theory of semiotics allows us to grasp the diversity in the transferal process of meaning of different objects, especially the spheres of imagination. We can refer to Johansen's work in *Semiotica*, 2007 [12].

In particular, it will be necessary to mention the turning point that Derrida created in relation to drifting without the end of the interpretation process and the deconstruction of meaning, which is also an infinite feature of phenomenal semiosis. Contrary to logocentrism, the tradition that regards words and language as a fundamental expression of an external

reality, a word refers only to another word and in this uninterrupted process, is the transition from Sd to Sd (from signified to signified), Peirce's semiotics defined that the sign is no longer a simple presentation from itself to itself (or to another object, but as itself), but as a desire, as the first step of a phenomenon sent to the world, that is, always in another place. The place is no longer homogeneity but only a displacement. For Derrida, the sign is a *representamen* whose identity is characterized by a change when an *interpretant* is altered to something and so it is infinite. He asserted, "The property of the *representamen* is not to be proper [propre], that is to say absolutely proximate to itself (prope, *proprius*)"³ [5]. In Derrida's logic, the journey of meaning always deconstructs meaning (se déconstruire) to lead to another place, in a space and in non-distinct homogeneity. It is also sphere where the instability belongs to the nature of every interpretation, that is the semiosis process, and here, it becomes all signification that is beyond the composition of sign.

Umberto Eco interprets Peirce's infinite semiosis in a special way. His work *The Limits of Interpretation* (Les limites de l'interprétation), especially the final chapter, questioned Derrida. He said that "La dérive déconstruiviste et la sémiosis illimitée ne peuvent être réduites à des concepts équivalents" [7, p.377]. According to him, "L'interprétation, avance-t-il, n'est pas issue de la structure de l'esprit humain, mais de la réalité construite par la sémiosis. [...] dès que la communauté s'est arrêtée sur une interprétation donnée,

³In Latin, "proprius" is often considered equivalent to the English term "proper" and "proper" in French. However, it also means "itself" ('own', même).

on a la création d'un signifié qui, s'il n'est pas objectif, est du moins intersubjectif et est, de toute façon, privilégié par rapport à n'importe quelle autre interprétation obtenue sans le consensus de la communauté" [7, p. 382]. We see that this argument displaces the problem of the dimension of meaning within the community as a term for the unstableness of interpretation. And the phenomenon of sign takes place at the heart of society, which is a specific domain of signification. We also find that the rhythm of the

semiosis can be cut out in the social dimension of the sign but cannot be decomposed in its agnostic. In the same way, creativity in each individual always involves some regression in correlation with the rhythm that is accepted by the spirit of community. Peirce often takes the example of Galileo Galilei to prove that creativeness follows trends that opposes social agreement. There is a dialectical logic, which cannot be reduced and is inevitable between the capacity of creativeness and the necessity of a social space, namely, the signification. Thus, defining the sign as a dynamic and unstable entity in Peirce's sense as well as the "expression", "discourse" in Bakhtin's thought coincides with this dialectic. The character of "infinity" is closely related to the concept of semiosis as well as to the interpretation about signification, which Peirce considered as the diversity of the spirit to form the community. Eco's analysis is needed to better understand Peirce's conceptualization as well as in analyzing the aspects of the interpretative community and literary texts.

4. Semiosis in language and literary research in Vietnam

From the explanations presented briefly above, we see that the potentiality of semiosis is very large. Hence, although it is not possible to use this concept as an opposition to the mimesis tradition, as we know, critics about mimesis in the history of Occidental literature are not really convincing⁴. Consequently, there is a need for recognition of the existence of a semiosis category across all sign systems.

⁴See: Compagnon, A. (1998), *La démon de la théorie*, Seuil.

Clearly, this concept have become the center of semiotics research and many semioticians are interested in it, especially in literary theory. However, the general situation of Vietnam is that we have not had a separate work on this issue. In Vietnam, according to our survey, this concept was first mentioned in the work of Cao [23, p. 55]. Recently, some researchers have begun to pay attention to semiosis. La [14, p. 145] paid special attention to this term in footnote 1 in the Vietnamese translation of the work *Cultural Semiotics* (Yuri M.

Lotman). Trần [8, p. 169] posed the problem of studying literary texts from the semiosis process with discursive theory. But, in general, the research seems to have just presented the origin of the term (derived from Pierce) and a brief explanation of the terminology that has not yet been applied to analysis in specific texts. In particular, there is almost no author who mentioned that Saussure also discussed this issue, though he did not use the term "semiosis".

As we know, Saussure pointed out the error in linguistic circles before him when they thought that the universe was divided into things, phenomena and humans just named them. In fact, the universe is a continuum, with the birth of language, humans have divided the universe into corresponding concepts, which is also the process of conceptualisation. Emphasizing the importance of the value concept⁵ in language has provided a basis for his explanation about the mechanism that forms the relationship between the signifier and the signified through an automatic estimate process, which Peirce named semiosis. In this regard, in our opinion, it refers to the content that Saussure called arbitrariness between the signifier and the signified. Therefore, there is rarely a correspondence of an significant object in two different languages. In fact, the psychological tendency of language users in a community, or in the case of a reader receiving a literary

⁵In order to explicate the double phenomenon of signification and value, Saussure used the image of a sheet of paper: if we cut out shapes in it, on the one hand we have various pieces.

work, is very important to explain the meaning of words, texts and values of the work.

A category related to language may not be the object of linguistics but it is subject to literary text research, so there are two tendencies in literary studies when the researcher is aware of the importance of language: either imposing rigidly on linguistic principles for literary research (namely "technical") or speculation, emphasizing the psychological factors of the reader in an unsubstantiated manner. These two

trends do not find the mechanism of signs in literary texts. Saussure does not consider that the psychological factor of language users is the object of linguistics, but Jakobson, in his valuable work, has asserted that the psychological factor is related to the poetic function⁶. The simulation of language is always motivated for users. Peirce calls this phenomenon iconicity. The impression, the sensuality of the expression is valuable in the language and creates special artistic effects in the reception of literary works. In our opinion, the study of the text-image problem in a literary work, such as the case of visual poetry, will bring many interesting interpretations.

5. Conclusion

Semiosis, in short, is the process of signification. It should be noted, however, that in the ancient Greek language of the Roman period, the word “semiosis” means the operation of any sign. Semiosis is a process of progress in spirit and through interpretation. It begins with the realization about the sign and ends with the presence in the spirit of the sign's object. The process of semiosis is a triadic relationship between a sign or *representamen* (a first), an *object* (a second) and an interpretant (a third). The *representamen* represents an object. All that communicates by information about the object - that of a reality that is available - is the *representamen*. Peirce uses the term *object* to identify all thing that the *representamen* is brought by the intermediate element, namely, the interpretation. It can be something, an movement, a situation, or the sphere of spirit.

⁶See: Jakobson [11].

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KÍ HIỆU HÓA TRONG MỘT SỐ PHẠM TRÙ LÝ THUYẾT VĂN HỌC

Tóm tắt: Kí hiệu hóa là khái niệm trung tâm của nghiên cứu ký hiệu học. Việc tập trung nghiên cứu khái niệm này không chỉ cho phép ta đi sâu hơn các vấn đề của ký hiệu học, tránh được những ngộ nhận về các khái niệm cơ sở mà còn giúp ta kiến giải thấu đáo nhiều loại hình tác phẩm văn chương. Bài viết phân tích tương quan giữa khái niệm kí hiệu hóa với một số phạm trù lý thuyết văn học tiêu biểu trong lịch sử như: tính tương thoại trong tư tưởng của Bakhtin; khái niệm liên văn bản trong tư tưởng của Barthes và Kristeva; tính thi ca và tính ẩn dụ của Jakobson và Eco; quá trình giải ý nghĩa của Eco, Johansen và Derrida.

Từ khóa: kí hiệu hóa; tương thoại; liên văn bản; tính thi ca; ẩn dụ; giải ý nghĩa.