

## THE SEMIOTICS OF WRITTEN DISCOURSE IN A NEW LANGUAGE

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### 1. SEMIOTICS AND SEMIOSIS

Semiotics, the study of signs, signaling systems, and symbolic behavior, is variously regarded as a field of knowledge, a perspective, a methodology, a program of study, an academic discipline, or an area within established disciplines such as literature, linguistics, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and theater arts. It studies all manifestations of a 'stand-for relation' (Sless 1986). It attempts to apply a single explanatory framework to various cultural phenomena, such as the arts, sciences, and philosophy. At the heart of semiotics is semiosis, the process of making and using signs. Both Saussure (1959) and Peirce (1982) have laid the foundation for this study of signs and sign users, although the term goes back to a free morpheme *onm-*, according to Heraclitus in 6th or 5th century B.C. Greek philosophy.

### 2. WRITTEN DISCOURSE IN A RELATIVELY UNCULTIVATED LANGUAGE

The development of written discourse in a relatively uncultivated language such as Filipino may take off from the semiotic emphasis on the reader as sign maker or producer of a text not necessarily identical with the author's text. If the author wishes his text to be interpreted correctly--that is, according to *his* own, authorial, intended meaning, he has to keep in mind a projected or imagined reader and assume that point of view. Similarly, a reader who wishes to interpret correctly--that is, according to *the* author's intended meaning, has to keep in mind a projected or imagined author whose point of view has to be assumed.

There are at least six possible signifying systems in written discourse: the writer's perception of oneself, of the reader, and of discourse, as well as the reader's perception of oneself, of the author, and of discourse. Once this 'logic of positions' (as author or as

reader) is accepted, the 'landscape of communication' is properly drawn, and the semi-otician author or reader is ready to (re)construct a text (Sless 1986).

A writer writing then assigns a deputy writer, in the same way that a reader reading imagines a deputy writer. Each deputy is not necessarily identical with the real writer or reader, as the former is only an image produced by the other.

The result is a distanced or detached position, such as an adult's watching of children's television, because he assumes that the text is addressed to children. More accurately, this projection is that of a projected reader of a projected author.

Thus, to be a successful writer, one must share a common point of view with the reader. This can be done by a proper projection of the reader as imagined by the author. While written language is used primarily for transactional or informative purposes, some written genres are used also for interactional purposes or the maintenance of social relationships. Examples of the former are descriptions and directions; examples of the latter are thank you letters and love notes (Brown and Yule 1983). This interactional view of discourse emphasizes the use of a reader-oriented language, rather than an author-oriented or message-oriented kind.

### 3. SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS IN WRITING DISCOURSE IN AN UNCULTIVATED LANGUAGE

In writing discourse in a new language, the semiotician author must consider the *sociocultural factors* influencing his projected readers. In terms of structure, sociocultural patterning exhibits vertical and horizontal differentiation. Vertical differentiation is exemplified by the stratification into social classes: high-middle-low or elite-bourgeois-proletarian (to which correspond sophisticated-lower forms of discourse, avant-garde-dominant trend-traditional/archaic classifications). Horizontal differentiation is exemplified by divisions according to age, sex, generation, region, period, etc.

In terms of function, sociocultural patterning includes the theoretical, practical, symbolic, and esthetic functions, manifested in the respective domains of science or philosophy; politics, economic, cuisine, kinship, or communication; magic or ritual; and literature, music, film, or architecture.

### 4. FOREGROUNDING

Using the Czech esthetician Mukarovsky's notion of foregrounding (defined as the manifestation of the esthetic function in the process of attracting attention to itself--vs. the sign's attracting attention to other-than-itself) (Garvin 1964), one may view the four sociocultural functions as coming into opposition, renewal, combination, and recombination, whereby certain functions are foregrounded or dominant, while others are backgrounded or subordinate through time, space, and social class.

Mukarovsky (1970) plots the exact relationship between foregrounding and sociocultural patterning by using the art object as an example. Whenever a society foregrounds the esthetic function, as in the case of a literary discourse, sociocultural norms display a relation involving the creation/production and reception/consumption of what may be valued as literary discourse and by whom such is valued.

Depending on time, place, and position in the social hierarchy, a writer creates an esthetic discourse by foregrounding it against the background of literary norms regulating his particular milieu. If he simply follows the usually tacit norms, his discourse may recede into the background and not attract enough attention to itself.

Thus, a writer brings about attention to his written discourse--that is, tries to foreground the esthetic function, for instance--by producing a work in dialectical an-

tinomy to all the conventions of writing applying to his time, place, and social class, respectively:

- (1) The form is Baroque when everyone else is writing in Elizabethan style: some of John Donne's cackling metaphysical poems as opposed to Edmund Spenser's sweet and light pastoral poems;
- (2) The theme is the delights of nature and the countryside in a growing city being corrupted by industrialization: the Romantic poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge; and
- (3) The language is the lower class's vernacular instead of the aristocrat's standard: Chaucer's use of English in *The Canterbury Tales* in medieval times when French was the language of the aristocracy and of literature.

On the part of the reader, the foregrounded function of a literary discourse bears a relation to the sociocultural norms for literary discourse in his time, place, and social class. For example, the foregrounding of the practical (communicative/political) function may attract the attention of a socially dominant readership on whom the esthetic function for a literary discourse has held a grip for some time. Such was the case of socially conscious poetry (in opposition to the prevailing Formalism) during the rise of Marxism in Russia. The practical function was foregrounded and it dominated all other functions in literary discourse: theoretical, symbolic, esthetic.

When this practical function is constantly expected by the readership, it no longer attracts attention and may tacitly or otherwise be considered as the sociocultural norm for literary discourse. When the foregrounded practical function thus settles into a cliché, the readership may tire of it and may become receptive to works foregrounding other functions instead, any of which has a potential to become the next dominant 'norm' (in a structure of norms), and so on in the equilibrium.

The usual relation is that the foregrounded function of a literary discourse finds reception in urban intellectual centers (e.g. Manila and Madrid were attracted to the Philippine revolutionary poems before the overthrowing of the Spaniards from the colony), and among the elite (e.g. academic and poetry club/workshop readerships attracted to avant-garde poetry). But this is not always the case. Mukarovsky (1970) observes:

Whenever a tendency to regroup the social hierarchy arises in a particular collective, this tendency also affects the hierarchy of tastes. Thus, for example, the intensive development of socialistic attempts to eliminate class differences in the final decades of the nineteenth century was officially accompanied by the ... establishment of folk theaters...

The function, then, of a literary discourse is not necessarily the esthetic. Depending on the sociocultural norms of vertical/horizontal classes, the foregrounded function may also be the theoretical, practical, or symbolic (e.g., futuristic scientific discourse, political discourse, or prophetic discourse, respectively). In vying for dominance, these functions (in the structure of functions) relate to authorship/readership considerations in whose society and culture the norms find expression.

Depending on which norm is in effect and which dominant class exercises it, the collective response regulated will be positive or negative to the notion of foregrounding. From the writer's point of view, a violation of the norm will mean a regrouping of the

functions of written discourse such that the anti-normative function will be foregrounded in his writing. From the reader's point of view, a foregrounded function may or may not bring pleasure. If it does, this particular function may set the trend for subordinate readers, until the foregrounded function soon becomes a norm and ceases to attract attention. If the foregrounded function does not bring pleasure, no trend may be set, although readers of another time, place, or social class may later find the foregrounded function pleasurable.

At the center of the foregrounding-sociocultural patterning relationship, then, is man the sign maker. He it is who brings his personal values into the coding and decoding of a written discourse. Thus, a discourse structure is 'a stream of forces passing through *time* constantly regrouping but uninterrupted' (Mukarovsky 1978). Man's values, in turn, derive from the sociocultural structure that presents him a hierarchical system of norms vying for stability and validity. Taken as a sign, foregrounding in a written discourse points to a sociocultural reality whose supra-individual mind with its *sapienza poetica* (poetic wisdom, mythmaking) finds a signified (*signifié*) in the function, norm, and value foregrounded in the written discourse. Written discourse is used for mediation between members of a group and is understood only on the basis of this group's system of values.

To modify a passage from *Slove a slovesnost* ('Word and Verbal Culture' 1935), 'the entire dynamics of social development, the regrouping and struggle of individual social strata and settings, as well as class, national, and ideological struggle, all are reflected with intensity in the relationship between written discourse ["art" in the original] and society and in the evolution of written discourse ["art" in the original] itself' (quoted in Matejka 1982). Attention to the relationship of written discourse to social and historical settings provokes questions such as

- (1) Whether the social origin of the discourse writer in a specific period is identical with the class for which he is writing
- (2) Whether written discourse in a specific period responds to the social order of that period
- (3) Whether written discourse is written in opposition to its period
- (4) Whether a specific type of written discourse is created for one social class
- (5) Whether the representatives of different written discourse species of one identical written discourse type originate in different social strata.

## 5. ILLUSTRATION IN PILIPINO

To illustrate the point of the whole essay, here are excerpts from two translations of a written scientific discourse on vasectomy. The differences may be noted in terms of each writer-translator's perception of the translated language, of the projected reader, and of the projected self.

In this study of Gonzalez et al. (1983) on the preference for Pilipino terms related to sex and population education, sociocultural differentiation on the horizontal level (age, occupation, place of residence, and sex) influences the sex term preferences. Moreover, the youth preferred PNC terms, while adults preferred SWP (Surian ng Wikang Pambansa) terms; and Maignaying Pilipino terms were the least preferred. These differences in preference may be explained by a semiotics of the projected writer, reader, and discourse.

English original	Filipino Translation A	Filipino Translation B
1. Male sperm (seed) are made in the testicles ('balls').	1. Nabubuo sa bayag ang punlay ng lalaki.	1. Sa testicles nagmumula ang sperm.
2. The tubes (vasa) which lead from the testicles to the penis can be tied and cut so that when a man ejaculates ('comes'), he does not make a woman pregnant.	2. Ang mga tubo o anurang-punlay na nagmumula sa bayag patungo sa ari ay maaaring talian at putulin upang hindi magdalang-tao ang babae sa panahon ng pagtatalik.	2. Maaaring talian at putulin ang tubes na papunta sa penis mula sa testicles, para hindi mabuntis si babae pag nag-ejaculate si lalaki.
3. Fluid (semen) still comes from his penis (not quite as much as before) and he still has the sensations but the sperm cannot pass through to meet with the woman's egg.	3. Ang semilya ay manggagaling pa rin sa ari (bagamat hindi na kasindami ng dati) at walang pagbabago ang pag-nanais ng lalaki, ngunit hindi na makadadaloy ang punlay sa mga anurang-punlay upang sumanib sa itlog ng babae.	3. Tutulo pa rin ang semen sa penis (di kasindami ng dati) at pareho lang ang pakiramdam ni lalaki pero hindi na makakaraan ang sperm papunta sa ovum ni babae.

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