

A Structural Semiotic Perspective on Narratology

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Abstract

Semiotics principally investigates and explores the production and function of signs and sign systems as well as the methods of their signification. It is mainly concerned with how a sign signifies and what precedes it at deeper level to result in the manifestation of its meaning. For this purpose, it offers a set of unified principles that underlie the construction, signification and communication of any sign system. The literary text as a sign system serves as an artfully constructed fictional discourse that signifies only when a competent reader interprets its textual signs that are basically foregrounded by the application of different literary devices. Hence, the literary semiotics seeks to explain how the textual components get their significative value within a given literary discourse. In order to do so, the conventions, discursive forces and cultural aspects of the text should be taken into consideration in explaining the processes of signification.

Key words: Signification; Deconstruction; Assimilation; Accommodation; Lingual aesthetics; Fictionality

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INTRODUCTION

The distinctive concern of literary semiotics is to deal with both the theory and analysis of aesthetic signs, codes

and signifying practices involved in literary discourse. It provides a potentially unifying conceptual framework and a set of methods that can be applied for comprehending and explaining the structures and processes of literary signification. Its main goal is to offer methodological clarity to the study of literature by giving a new orientation to the previous literary theoretical stances. It critically investigates the rules and conventions of the system of literary signification that enables the literary texts to function as they do and to have the significance as they do have the members of a given culture. During the past five decades, many literary semioticians have attempted to present a semiotic perspective on the nature of literary narrative. Although their studies initially focused on the structural aspects of the narrative, they provided a relevant methodological foundation for the development of contemporary semiotic theories of literary narrative. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Saussure's semiological views formed the basis for the early structuralist postulates. It was later developed by the Russian formalists and used for the description and scientific analysis of the literary text. Although the Russian formalists did not completely succeed in giving a comprehensive account of the nature of literature, their notion of "literariness" was a significant contribution to the development of literary semiotics in the first half of twentieth century. Some of the earlier literary semioticians such as Vladimir Propp and Boris Tomashevski were mainly inspired by the formalist methodology that offered various structural approaches to the study of narrative. These approaches also provided the impetus for the further development of literary semiotics in the post-structuralist era. Indeed, the literary semiotics has now entered a new stage in which pragmatic and the hermeneutic aspects of the literary discourse have gained more prominence.

This article presents a critical estimate of the semiotics of novels. For this purpose, the different principles of literary semiotics are described as proposed by the

Russian formalists, structuralists and post-structuralists, particularly their contributions in the characterization of the semiotic aspects of literary narrative. Hence, this article tries to give a new perspective on the signification of narrative discourse by giving a new direction to the previous literary principles.

It therefore provides a semiotic method that can be applied for the analysis of novels.

1. SEMIOTIC NATURE OF LITERARY TEXT

Since the second half of twentieth century, there have been several attempts by various literary theoreticians such as Tzvetan Todorov, Algirdas J. Greimas, Roland Barthes, Gerard Genette and Julia Kristeva to account for the nature of literary narrative. They have contributed substantially to the scholarly study of narrative and have offered a remarkable variety of models and hypotheses for its analysis. The interaction of different theoretical approaches, with their conceptual sources in various humanistic, social, and natural sciences, has enhanced the scope and relevance of the present-day semiotics in general and literary semiotics in particular. Johansen states that

Looking at the phenomena from a semiotic perspective means studying them simultaneously as processes and products of signification and communication. Hence, both “mechanistic” and deconstructivist approaches are kept in check, the former because the dimensions of signification are integrated with the study of physical processes, the latter because a communicative point of view adds a pragmatic dimension to sign processes. (Johansen, 2007b, p.2)

Hence, the literary semiotics strives to equip itself by drawing its methodological apparatus from several disciplines in order to comprehend literary texts as the outcomes of complex cognitive processes, shaped and influenced by a certain culture at a certain time.

The primary factor that makes the signification of literary text possible seems to be the sign system of the text itself, which recreates the surrounding world in a fictional mode in the mind of the reader. By this way, it is related to the larger semiotic framework of the human mind that actually generalizes and predicts the significance of the text, through the cognitive activities of assimilation and accommodation. These two important activities play important roles in the process of literary signification. Assimilation is concerned with “treating an experimental input according to the models (schemata) that the person already possesses, and to use it for his or her own purposes. Accommodation means that mind’s models are adjusted and changed according to the new input” (ibid., p.5). The literary narratives themselves are experiments on representative human scenarios and relations; that is, a literary work is an institution among

other institutions. This emphasizes on the necessity of inclusion of a theory of mind for explaining the process of signification that takes place in the cognitive realm of the reader as a result of his interaction with the text.

The literary text thus serves as communicating means between the author’s ideological world and the reader’s cognitive world. As a sign system, it involves the lingual-aesthetic phenomena that make this communication possible through an aesthetically grounded fictional discourse. This discourse represents a complex constellation of sign systems and can acquire its significative value only through the creative mediation of human mind. Whether the narrative is factual or fictional does not make any obstacle or problem in the signification process because the “fictionality” of narrative does not necessarily mean that it lies. In other words, creating a fictional universe in the format of a literary text is not considered lying because it is a conventional and institutionalized communication within the society. The fictional text represents the mental states or events, or actions that might not have happened within our common universe of action, either in the past, or in the present moment, or are described most often in ways that transcend what is factual. Basically, fictionality is concerned with the relationship between the universe of the text and universe of experience and action that is intersubjectively shared. In fact, what is essential for the signification of narrative is a recreation of a conceptual image of the universe of the text by the reader. He actually recreates it by activating his cognitive frames. The more similarity the reader establishes between his own cognitive frames and the literary context, the more privileged he becomes in the act of interpreting the text. Sometimes, the reader may face with a complicated literary text that creates difficulty for him to interpret. It means that there are many types of fictional universes that are not easily matched with the experiential universe of the reader’s life world.

According to Johansen (2007a), the literary text possesses five salient features; such as license, fictionality, poeticity, inquisitoriality and contemplation that differentiate it from other ordinary texts. “Poeticity” is the main feature of any literary text. Johansen states that “poeticity transcends but includes the many devices that articulate the linguistic expression plane, meter, rhythm, rime, alliteration, assonance, and all the other figures of expression that play an important role both in lyrical poetry and in literary prose” (Johansen, 2007a, p.120). Here we emphasize on those literary devices that produce several aesthetic effects in the literary narrative. These devices mainly include figurative elements and symbolic expressions. Semiotically speaking, poeticity is

first and foremost concerned with surplus coding, i.e., with adding rules, in addition to language rules, for the production of literary texts, and for their reception too, in the sense that the reader is supposed, at least unconsciously, to understand and

respond to what is characteristic of the individual poetic texts.
(*ibid.*, p.121)

Thus, the poeticity of a literary text depends on the aesthetic expertise and creative imagination of the author that uniquely applies to the figural devices in the literary narrative. Hence, poeticity is not merely an ornament that is added to the text, rather it

is an internal structure, and force, that make it what it is, namely an argument not only because of what it says, or claims (other kinds of texts do precisely this), but because in the poetic text the what of the said and the how of the saying merge. (*ibid.*, p.122)

The poeticity principally causes the text to deviate from the ordinary norms and acquire connotative significance. It is indeed the aesthetic aspects of the literary text that makes the relationship between the text and the world to be indirect, posing before the reader a mentally challenging condition. As a result, the interpretation of the text requires aesthetically grounded complex cognitive activities by its reader. Another distinctive feature of the literary text is “inquisitoriality” that “concerns the relationship between writer and reader because the former attempts to challenge and enlighten the later” (*ibid.*, p.123). The inquisitoriality is an important feature of literary text that attracts the reader’s attention to the text. The literary text actually faces the reader with an inquiry for finding the roots of truth or fact of the story. Because of this, the literary text is articulated in such a way that it continuously suggests to the reader that there is something important in the text and keeps him interested in reading the text. Therefore, it directly offers itself to the reader’s “contemplation” for its signification. Literary discourse is a way of sharing a personal aesthetic experience or ideology between the author and the reader. This communication between them takes place in a distinct way because “normally dialogue and action are linked with each other; this link, however, sundered, or at least attenuated in the communication of literature” (*ibid.*, p.126). For this reason, the literary text basically has a paradoxical or abstract nature. So it calls for the reader’s contemplation by which it becomes a part of the reader’s psychic disposition, including his fantasies.

2. FORMALISTS’ CONTRIBUTION TO LITERARY SEMIOTICS

Semiotics is founded on the basic assumption that any sign acquires its significative value being part of a given system within which it is related with other signs. Any change in the structural organization of this system causes a change in its function and consequently the significance of the sign. Hence, the structuration or structural organization of any sign system plays an important role in its signification process. In a similar way, the signification of a literary text as a sign system depends on the analysis

of its structural organization. In the early decades of twentieth century, the Russian formalists focused on the structural aspects of language and the effects of these aspects on the “literariness” of text. The formalists offered a descriptive approach that mostly characterized the literary structure and the literary devices or techniques that determine the literariness of the text. They were more interested in the functional role of these literary devices that make a literary text to be different from other ordinary texts. According to the formalists’ views such as those of Viktor Shklovsky, Juri Tynyanov and Roman Jakobson, the literary devices cause a change in the function of textual elements, and thereby a change in their meaning. Hence, the literary devices have significant effects on the semantic content of the text, and consequently on the process of signification.

The formalists’ ideas, methods and studies have had a significant influence most directly on the development of “structuralism” and “semiotics” of narrative, particularly their notion of literariness that placed a great importance on the structural study of narrative; how a narrative is organized and developed by its components or by applying the literary techniques or styles. In fact, it focuses on the narration of narrative. In the studies of narrative, the defamiliarization process as suggested by the formalists is one of the key aspects of literary discourse that deals mainly with how a narrative presents the world in an aesthetically formulated discourse. For this reason, defamiliarization serves as a tool or an orientation in the study of structural organization of literary narrative. According to the formalists, like Shklovsky and Tomashevsky, the narrative has two main features called “fibula” and “syuzhet” that serve as devices or techniques of defamiliarization, which differentiates a literary text from a non-literary one. Fibula (story) designates the raw material of narrative. It is in fact a sequence of events, which form the underlying structure of narrative. Syuzhet (plot or discourse) is the aesthetic arrangement of that material. It is indeed the representation of the events in the discourse; it actually forms the surface structure of narrative. Both of these concepts, fibula and syuzhet, characterize the structure of a literary narrative and account for its literariness. However, the difference between the literary text and ordinary text is not so much a difference *in* language but *on* the presentation of the text.

The formalists thus has emphasized on the structure and techniques by which a fictional narrative is organized. In studying the structural components of narrative, they have focused on the plot composition (structure), the dynamics of internal structure of the narrative (story) and the organizing principles of narration (discourse). However, the formalists have treated a literary narrative as a structurally integrated autonomous whole in which its components are interrelated with each other in a coherent

fashion. This formalist narrative approach has remained a cornerstone of the foundation of literary semiotics in the first half of twentieth century.

One of the most influential formalist contributions to the study of narrative is Propp's *The Morphology of the Folktale* (1928). That was indeed a starting point for the characterization of the plot structure of a literary narrative. Propp has examined hundred fairy tales in terms of around thirty-one functions. He analyzed the plot components of Russian folk tales into their simplest irreducible narrative units. He has actually extended the formalist approach to the study of narrative structure. In the formalist approach, the sentential structures of narrative have been broken down into their smallest narrative units, which are called *functions* (Propp, 1928, p.21). The early French structuralists have taken Propp's theory of narrative as a basis for proposing their models for the analysis of narrative; Levi-Strauss presented his structural mythology which was actually based on Propp's narrative scheme, Claude Bremond used Propp's scheme in his *Logic of Narrative* (1966/1973) and Tzvetan Todorov also applied it in his *Theory of Literature* (1965) and *Grammar of Decameron* (1969).

Algirdas J. Greimas was also another influential figure in the study of narrative structure. In his *Structural Semantics* (1966), he refined Propp's views on narrative. In 1966, other literary semioticians, mostly from France such as Roland Barthes and Gerard Genette, devoted their effort to the structural analysis of narrative. Their shared aims were

to devise models for the analysis of the signifying elements in the literary texts with a view to constructing a comprehensive typology of literary genres based on their predominant rhetorical figures and "action scheme". Their ultimate goal was the establishment of the universal "grammar of narrative", the identification of the general rules regulating narrative discourse at large—that is, the langue or "master code" of narrative. (Waugh, 2006, p.266)

With the development and application of other fields such as cognitive sciences in the study of language, the literary semiotic has consequently undergone a fundamental change in its principle so that the formalists' notion of literariness was criticized due to its inadequacies in meeting its goals. It is now widely discussed by the prominent postmodern literary theorists that the notion of literariness is deficient and ineffective not only in distinguishing a literary text from other ordinary texts but also in the structural study of the literary text because it could not provide an explanatory framework for this purpose. On the other hand, it failed to provide an applicable method for the analysis of narrative. Trotsky says that

the methods of formal analysis are necessary, but insufficient, because they neglect the social world with which the human beings who write and read literature are bound up: The form of art is, to a certain and very large degree, independent, but the

artist who creates this form, and the spectator who is enjoying it, are not empty machines, one for creating form and the other for appreciating it. They are living people, with a crystallized psychology representing a certain unity, even if not entirely harmonious. This psychology is the result of social conditions. (Trotsky, 1957, p.171)

In a similar way, the current literary semiotics emphasizes on the role of reader in the process of signification that takes place with the consideration of the whole discourse of narrative. Therefore, for developing an adequate notion of literariness, one should take into account three factors; the foregrounding of narrative text, the reader's defamiliarizing response to the foregrounded text and the continuous modification of meaning in the reading process.

3. STRUCTURALISM AND LITERARY SEMIOTICS

Since 1960s, the literary semioticians' goal was to offer a general model of narration that provides all the possible ways by which stories can be narrated. They focused on the overall organization of narrative, mainly on the structural units that constitute the narrative. As Barthes notes,

for the structuralist analyst the first task is to divide up narrative and define the smallest narrative units. Meaning must be the criterion of the unit: it is the functional nature of certain segments of the story that make them units—hence the name functions immediately attributed to these first units. Such functions are basic units of action. (Barthes, 1977, p.88)

It implies that the narrative analysis inductively extrapolates meaning from individual units that constitute the literary discourse by their meaningful or logical correlation with each other. Barthes further argues that linguistics seems reasonable as a founding model for narrative analysis, but notes that discourse study will require a second linguistics by going beyond the sentence. He finds a homological relation between sentence and discourse, at least as far as semiosis, is concerned: A discourse is a long sentence, just as a sentence is a short discourse (ibid, p.83). The narrative is thus composed of the linguistic units that serve as functions. It means that beyond these units exists the second linguistics that is the function of these units; and the correlation of these units, i.e. functions, creates the narrative discourse. It indicates that "there is nothing in a literary work that can be seen and studied in isolation. Each element has a function through which it is related to the work as a whole" (Bertens, 2001, p.44). The functional units in the narrative are indeed the minimal semantic units. They constitute the main framework of the narrative.

Algirdas J. Greimas has developed his literary model which is based on the "narrative structure". In his book *Structural Semantics*, he has formulated his semiotics of narrative mostly on the basis of

a set of narrative models that could be applied to all forms of discourse. The first of these models, known as the "actantial narrative schema", is a reformulation and simplification of Propp's 31 functions that were found to be common to all stories. (Martin & Ringham, 2006, p.222)

As a result of the reduction of Propp's seven character roles¹, Greimas identified three types of narrative syntagms: *syntagms performanciels* (tasks and struggles), *syntagms contractuels* (the establishment or breaking of contracts), *syntagms disjonctionnels* (departures and arrivals).

Like A. J. Greimas and Tzvetan Todorov begins with the notion that there exists, at a deep level, a "grammar of narrative" from which individual stories ultimately derive. The most obvious characteristic of his narrative grammar is the manipulation of Propp's classifications. Initially, Todorov isolated three dimensions or aspects of the narrative: *Semantic aspect* (content), *syntactical aspect* (combinations of various structural units), and *verbal aspect* (manipulation of the particular words and phrases, by which the story is told). In contrast to Greimas who mainly focused on the semantic aspects, Todorov emphasized on both syntax and semantics. Todorov actually has made effective attempts for a systematic study of the structure of narrative. His analysis of the syntax of the stories of *The Decameron* reveals

two fundamental units of structure: "proposition" and "sequences." Propositions are the basic elements of syntax in Todorov's "grammar of narrative." They consist of irreducible actions which act as the fundamental units of narrative: e.g. X makes love to Y. In practice such a unit may appear as a series of related propositions, e.g. X decides to leave home; X arrives at Y's house and so on. A sequence is a related collection or string of propositions capable of constituting a complete and independent story. A story may contain many sequences: It must contain at least one. (Hawkes, 1977, p.77)

All the approaches offered by the literary semioticians so far were based on the structural semiotics. In fact, these structuralist semioticians were merely engaged in a search for the deep structures underlying the surface features. They have actually ignored the social aspects or pragmatics of the literary discourse and the role of reader as an interpreter in the process of signification.

¹ Propp concluded that all the characters could be resolved into seven broad character types in the hundred tales he analyzed:

- a) The villain who struggles with the hero.
- b) The donor who prepares and/or provides hero with magical agent.
- c) The helper who assists, rescues, solves and/or transfigures the hero.
- d) The Princess, a sought-for person (and/or her father), who exists as a goal and often recognizes and marries hero and/or punishes villain.
- e) The dispatcher who sends the hero off.
- f) The hero who departs on a search (seeker-hero), reacts to the donor and weds at end.
- g) The false hero (or antihero or usurper) who claims to be the hero, often seeking and reacting like a real hero (i.e. by trying to marry the princess).

According to Peirce's theory of signs, semiosis is defined as "...action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant." (Peirce, 1907, p.2, 411) In a similar way, Charles W. Morris in his *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (1938) defines signification as a result of grouping the *triad* "syntax", "semantics" and "pragmatics".

CONCLUSION

Whatever has been so far discussed about the semiotic nature of literary text makes it clear that literary text, as a sign system, is a composite, integrated and self-referential system representing the world through its discourse. It basically comes into existence from a harmonious and logical correlation of its minimal units within its system. This correlation is absolutely essential to make the literary discourse unique because the different units become intelligible only in the context of whole discourse that in turn becomes intelligible only through its principles. It is like a new game of chess, transforming the original individual significance of the signifiers by introducing them in new relationships, new contradictions, exactly like the process of the loss of so-called original values of the pawns in a fast moving game of chess. Analogously, creating a literary discourse is in fact creating a new structure of significance, a structure which is not a simple imitation of human reality, but a structure which presents a specific perception, and what is more important, a specific interpretation.

Therefore, the "semiotic analysis" of a literary text deals with the way in which meaning is produced by the syntactical structure of interdependent textual signs that are organized under the syntagmatic and paradigmatic forces of the discourse or discursive conventions. It implies that the process of literary signification constitutes three factors: Syntactical structure, semantic constituents and pragmatic aspects of the text. Here, we intend to discuss in detail these factors:

Syntactical dimension of literary text: The syntactical structure is the primary operation for the foundation of any kind of sign system. In accordance with the Saussure's semiological model which emphasizes on the structural aspects of sign systems, the task of the semioticians is to consider the systematic characteristics of the sign system. The primary goal is to find out the underlying conventions, rules or techniques by which the signs are interrelated and create a logical and coherent system. On the other hand, Peirce has defined the sign in the terms of his triadic model emphasizing on the relationship of the "sign" with other two factors; "object" and "interpretant". The same view should be taken on the linguistic signs. In fact, a linguistic sign:

represents and refers to a universe of discourse by means of

linguistic rules, cognitive models and discursive conventions. Thus, one basic dimension of a text consists in the triadic relationship between sign, object, and what is by Peirce called the interpretant of the sign (i.e., the rules, models, and conventions that make the text understandable). (Johansen, 2007a, pp.108-9)

If Peirce's triadic model is taken as a framework for the analysis of literary text, the textual elements can be considered as *signs*, its function as *object* and its argument as *interpretant*. Therefore, the literary text as a sign system is constructed by its elements that are organized in a logical linearity of the discursive conventions. So the first step in the interpretation of any literary text, i.e. a narrative, is to deconstruct the text into its elements such as settings, events and plot structures, and to find out the characters' traits, narrator, formal aspects of the text and the literary styles or techniques that have been applied for the organization of narrative. In fact, it depends on the reader's sense of the overall organization and patterning of the narrative and the way in which the textual elements fit together to produce a coherent discourse.

Semantic dimension of literary text: The literary text is composed of a sequence of minimal semantic units. A combination of two or several units forms a motif, and a combination of two or several motifs forms a theme and a combination of themes forms a narrative discourse. Then a literary text is a configuration of themes. So semiotic analysis of narrative concerns also with the 'thematic configuration' of narrative. The intention is to delineate the thematic patterns inherent in the narrative.

Pragmatic dimension of literary text: The pragmatic aspects of the literary text deal with the cultural aspects that are manifested or represented through its narrative units, carrying cultural semantic contents. These units indeed serve as socio-symbolic mediations that relate the literary text to a given culture. These textual elements can be thus interpreted by taking into consideration the cultural aspects of his society. Hence, semiotic analysis deals with the "figurative dimensions" of the novel and the intention here are mainly to decode the figurative elements such as metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, parody, irony and other symbolic components of the literary discourse.

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