Semiotics

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SEMIOTICS

Semiotic theory has had an important impact on sociocultural anthropology during the last half of the twentieth century and into the new millennium. Semiotics provides a way to study communication focusing not only on spoken or written language but also on all kinds of communicative signals or "signs." (That is why the field is called "semiotics," based on the Greek words for signs and significance.) For example, when people communicate with each other, they may use gestures or intonation patterns as well as words to convey ideas. Semiotics provides an integrated framework for examining these as they operate together in conveying meaning. Or, to take another example, a semiotic analysis of law could encompass not just the written and spoken words of judges and lawyers and litigants, but also the physical configurations of courtrooms and jails and other locations in which law operates. The way judges and litigants dress, the symbols used in courtrooms to depict ideas of justice or national identity, and so forth, can all become part of a semiotic analysis.This combination of many aspects of communication has been particularly powerful for anthropologists.

Sociocultural anthropology in particular has struggled to find analytic approaches capable of dealing with both material life and symbolic or cultural meaning. . Semiotics opened up an opportunity for anthropology to bridge these aspects of human life, because it permits researchers to analyze everyday practices, material conditions, symbolic systems, culture, and language as inextricably linked parts of human experience. At the same time, the development of semiotic approaches within anthropology also permitted sociocultural anthropologists to draw on the precision of anthropological linguistic analysis, and it allowed linguistic anthropologists to embed their analyses of language within the study of wider social phenomena. Thus semiotics has forged new links between the subfields of linguistic and sociocultural anthropology.

A Brief History of Semiotics in Anthropology

Beginning in the early 1960s, French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss brought semiotics into the anthropological mainstream, drawing on the work of linguists Roman Jakobson and Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure (who used the term "semiology" rather than "semiotics") had developed a powerful analysis of signs focusing on structural features of language. Saussurean linguistics distinguished between the abstract structure of language ("langue" – think of a grammar book, for example, or the way sounds combine to make words) and the realization of that abstract structure through spoken language ("parole" – think of someone actually saying something).

Saussure focused on the way structured oppositions or differences in language generated meaning. Within the abstract structure of language, for example, meanings sometimes emerge through the presence or absence of certain features like sounds. Thus English speakers distinguish between the words "but" and "bud" based on a very small difference in the final sound. (Linguists would call this a difference in "voicing," where "t" is not voiced but "d" is; if you put your hand on your throat while saying these two words, you can feel this difference.) On the other hand, the very same difference in sound does not cause a change in meaning if it occurs after an initial "s" in English: we do not think of "stop" and "sdop" as meaning two different things. Thus the internal relationships of sounds to one another in languages create differences in meaning. (This would be called a system of "phonemes," or meaningful sound differences.) In the example above, the presence (+) or absence (-) of voicing can be analyzed as a contrastive set. Variation in meaning depends not only on whether voicing is present or absent, but on the position of a particular sound vis-à-vis other sounds (does it follow an "s" sound at the beginning of a word in English)?

Saussure's structural account of language meaning also relied on a dichotomy between the "signifier" (the form the sign takes – so, for example, the sounds that make up the word "horse") and the "signified" (this would be the idea that we get from hearing the word – in the previous example, an image or idea of a horse). Notice that this theory does not include any mention of the objects in the world to which these signs refer; the "signified" is not any particular real horse, but is rather the idea of a horse that a listener forms when hearing the word "horse." A "signifier" and "signified" together form an individual sign, which gets its meaning through its structural relationship with other signs. As we have seen in the example above, structured variations in sounds in the "signifier" create variations in the "signified."

Levi-Strauss applied Saussure's model of structured system-internal differences in language meaning to the wider arena of cultural signaling in general. For example, he analyzed elements of myth ("mythemes") as contrastive components whose opposition created cultural meaning, arguing that this was parallel to the way that phonemes or sounds generate linguistic meaning. Levi-Strauss learned about Saussure's approach to analyzing language while studying with another famous linguist, Roman Jakobson. However, Jakobson took the position that there are important differences between the relatively clear (and internally structured) sound systems through which language works and the much messier (and contextually dependent) rest of language. Jakobson was a member of the Prague School of linguists (or Prague Linguistic Circle), a group that stressed the importance of language function as opposed to only examining language form. They also urged that linguists study language as dynamic and changing over time (this was called a "diachronic" perspective, as opposed to the static, one-time ("synchronic") snap shot that they viewed – some would argue mistakenly – as characteristic of Saussure's approach).

Levi-Strauss's version of semiotic anthropology was criticized because it ignored many important differences between sound systems in language and broader structures of meaning in society. When we move from the difference between "t" and "d" (phonemes) to the difference between killing one's father versus killing one's mother ("mythemes"),

we run into far more aspects of context and shades of meaning. How we define "mythemes" is much less straightforward than how we define voicing. In addition to this difficulty, structuralist approaches that focused on abstract systems of phonemes and grammatical categories within "langue" wound up missing the importance of "parole" or the actual act of speaking. This was not only true for sociocultural anthropologists interested in social and cultural phenomena generally. It also applied to linguists who sought to understand only language in particular; as it turns out, grammar and abstract linguistic structures are only a small part of how language itself conveys meaning. In subsequent generations, both semiotic anthropology and anthropological linguistics moved on to do a better job of including the "in-action" aspects of language, society, and culture.

During the 1970s and 1980s, semiotic anthropology once again began to attract attention as it reemerged in new forms. The clearest call for a "semiotic anthropology" came from the work of Milton Singer and his colleague at the University of Chicago, Michael Silverstein. Like Levi-Strauss, Singer drew on Saussurean linguistics, but he added a new element by also looking to the work of semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce. Singer felt that Peirce's work would offer anthropology an important tool for linking the analysis of meaning to its social context.

Peirce's theory of signs included a component not found in Saussure's work. Like Saussure, he was interested in the form of the sign (what he called the "sign vehicle" or "representamen") and the idea created in a listener's mind by hearing or reading that sign vehicle (what he called the "interpretant"). However, he also required that semiotic analysis include the study of the sign's "object" – the thing or concept that the sign stands for. Signs stand for their objects in different ways. For example, an architect's model of a planned building stands for that building by virtue of having a similar shape. Peirce called this kind of connection between sign and object "iconic." Some signs, by contrast, signal their objects by virtue of having a spatiotemporal connection with them. An example of this kind of "indexical" or "pragmatic" relationship would be the connection between a pointing finger and the object to which the finger points. (The "indexical"

connection is accordingly the most heavily dependent on immediate contexts.) Finally, some signs stand for their objects just by virtue of convention that makes it so: most words have this kind of relatively arbitrary connection to their objects. For example, the sounds in English that make up the word "chair" have come to indicate the items of furniture that we sit on just because of linguistic convention. Peirce labeled this kind of conventional connection "symbolic." (It is also referred to as "semantic" meaning, in contrast with the more heavily contextual "pragmatic" meaning.) Thus signs can be icons, indexes, or symbols depending on the manner in which they connect with their objects.

In the new form of semiotic anthropology that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, Singer and Silverstein combined Saussure's focus on language structure, on the one hand, with Peirce's interest in how signs connect with their objects, on the other hand. Their work demonstrated that Peirce's theory could push scholars to integrate issues of social context more systematically into the analysis of meaning, by requiring us to consider the relationship of sign vehicles and interpretants with their objects. Including Peirce's framework in a semiotic analysis, then, permits us to encompass but also move beyond studying the internal system of language. Through integrating the study of indexicality and pragmatics with other aspects of communication, a semiotic anthropology could now analyze not only the words people speak, but how, when, and where they talk – in other words, the entire sociocultural world opens up to this form of analysis.

Semiotic anthropology gained momentum during the 1980s and 1990s, drawing together multiple threads of work from various anthropological and other scholarly traditions. The work of anthropological linguist Michael Silverstein, in addition to blending Saussure, Peirce, and Jackobson, drew on diverse roots from linguistics, psychology, analytical philosophy, anthropology, semiotics, sociolinguistics, cognitive science, and literary theory, building a framework for empirically grounded research on communication in social contexts. Semiotic anthropology as it developed also integrated the accumulated empirical knowledge of research on language in context from sociolinguistics, ethnomethodology, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and

approaches like frame analysis derived from Irving Goffman's work. For example, sociolinguist John J. Gumperz used the concept of "contextualization cues" to study the way speakers use verbal and nonverbal cues to index their contexts of speaking. Semiotic anthropologists have drawn on the idea of "contextualization cues" in studying indexical and pragmatic aspects of cultural communication. Indeed, as we will see, there is considerable overlap between the anthropological linguistic and the sociolinguistic approaches.

Proposals for a renewed semiotic approach in anthropology proliferated during the last decades of the twentieth century, including a suggested focus on the crucial role of "semiotic mediation" in society. This focus highlighted the ways that signs and language mediate at many levels, from the basic mechanics of everyday interaction through the complexities of psychological development and of the dynamics of whole societies and cultures. On the one hand, these proposals drew from a long history of anthropological research on cultural symbols dating back to Boas and Ruth Benedict and continuing through Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas, and Victor Turner. On the other hand, the new semiotic approach also incorporated materialist traditions within anthropology and other social sciences. Even some of the leading Marxist scholars in anthropology began to incorporate this new kind of symbolic and semiotic analysis, as can be seen in the work, for example, of Jean and John Comaroff. The resulting rapprochement between symbolic and materialist analyses allows today's anthropologists to study power relationships and religious iconography, global economic dynamics and the semiotics of advertising, the reinvention of local tradition and new national political forms, the ideas and practices of NGOs – and numerous other topics – now brought together in an integrated research framework.

Semiotic Anthropology at the Turn of the Millennium

The twin concepts of indexicality and pragmatics have played an important role in the novel integrated semiotic approach that continues to develop in the early decades of the new millennium. As noted, indexical meaning is the meaning that signs derive from their immediate spatiotemporal contexts. Thus a pointing index finger means very little if we

don't know anything about the context to which it points. Similarly, there are parts of speech that are more heavily indexical than others. Words like "this" or "that," "now" or "before," (known as "deictics") rely heavily on the particular places and times in which they are spoken (and thus on "pragmatic" meaning). However, even with these kinds of heavily context-dependent words, there is always a residual "semantic" meaning that is not as reliant on a particular context of use. Take, for example, "now" versus "before." To understand exactly what is meant by any particular use of those words, we would want to know about the context in which they were spoken. But apart from some context-specific information, we already know that when people say "now" to index a temporal moment, they are generally talking about the then-current time, whereas when people say "before," they are talking about a time previous to another referenced moment. This little nugget of residual "semantic" meaning, which derives from a more abstract and conventional source in language, informs our interpretation of the meaning of those words in particular contexts.

Here we see the beginning of a very specific model of how social context and abstract symbolic or semantic meanings can interact to make communication – and community – possible. Scholars like Elinor Ochs and Bambi Schieffelin have employed these models in tracking how children are socialized into their communities through language practices. In political and legal anthropology, scholars like Susan Gal, Susan Hirsch, and Justin Richland have demonstrated the vital role of semiotics in struggles over national identity, citizenship, and justice. Psychological anthropologists like John Lucy and Anna Wierzbicka have tracked the interaction of semiotics with psychological orientations. It is no exaggeration to state that almost every conceivable aspect of human social and cultural life can be analyzed using this new synthetic semiotic approach. On the one hand, the turn to semiotics has introduced somewhat more precision into such broadly-conceived studies. On the other hand, as noted linguistic anthropologist Alessandro Duranti has remarked, there is a risk that this broadening has diluted the technical rigor of classical linguistic anthropological analysis. Thus, although the new synthetic semiotic model has advanced anthropological understandings in important ways, it is not without its controversial aspects as well. If semiotic anthropology continues to draw more

broadly trained sociocultural anthropologists into using linguistic analysis, the field will likely have to take more careful account of the potential pitfalls lurking beneath rising popularity.

On the positive side, semiotic studies in anthropology have found increasingly creative ways to trace the linkages between micro-level details of local interactions and macro-level developments reaching to national and international arenas. Concepts like "footing" and "entextualization," studies of the interaction of performance and audience, research on voicing in its social context, and other similar analytic tools have advanced our understanding of how layers of communication help to connect and constitute local and global orders.

One particularly fruitful avenue of research has focused on metalinguistics and linguistic ideology as key points at which linguistic and social structures and contexts meet. "Metalinguistic" analysis examines how language is used to reflect on itself (and this can happen at a conscious level -- as when we speak explicitly about how language works, or at an unconscious level – as when linguistic categories operate to regiment our understanding of how language works without any conscious reflection on the process). This line of inquiry has examined the complex modes of linguistic calibration required for speakers to actually comprehend one another, tracing the minute-to-minute processes by which metalinguistic processes connect language and social contexts. At the same time, this kind of approach has also been useful for analyses of wider institutional and political processes as they work in and through language.

Specifically, semiotic anthropologists have developed the study of metalinguistic processes at new levels, largely through extended consideration of how "metapragmatic" function and structure operate. If the pragmatic aspect of meaning depends on contexts of speaking, then speakers operate at a "metapragmatic" level when they use language to index (or point to) that context-dependent meaning. So, for example, if I were to say, "I'm not trying to be argumentative; I just want some clarification" -- I would be using language at a meta-level to talk about (and try to affect) the pragmatic meaning of my utterance. I would be highlighting the way the very words I was speaking depend on

context and audience. Notice that exactly the same words can mean different things depending on what "metapragmatic" label is given them. If members of my audience hear my words as "argument" (a linguistic label for a context-dependent type of speech), they are likely to take in what I am saying differently than if they hear them as a "request for clarification" (also a metapragmatic label). Words like "request" and "argument" are heavily metapragmatic. When speakers overtly index their own speech in this way, they are employing **explicit** metapragmatics, often in an effort to name or control the context-dependent meaning of an utterance. (This conception of explicitness is not the same as J.L. Austin's category of "explicit performatives," although there is some overlap.)

Metapragmatic structuring ranges from explicit to implicit levels, and is often not consciously reflected upon by speakers. At a broad institutional level, metapragmatic levels of language take the form of "linguistic ideologies," which have been described by semiotic anthropologists as clusters of metalinguistic ideas about the social functioning of language in context. Linguistic ideologies are generally socially shared among speakers in structured ways that reflect wider power relationships, stages of national or cultural or other struggle, etc. For example, the idea that speaking a particular language is evidence of ethnic or national identity is a linguistic ideology. Close analysis of these kinds of ideologies can permit anthropologists to achieve more integrated studies of the intersection of local language use and entrenched social hierarchies (or ongoing social struggles over culture and identity). Linguistic ethnographies in institutions like schools can capture this intersection with vivid precision.

As semiotic anthropology moves further into this fascinating nexus of micro- and macro-level processes, it stands poised to shed new light on important social and cultural problems, from the role of courts in social change, through struggles over gendered and racial identities, to the constitution of citizenship and safety in an ever-more connected global arena.

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Cross References: Ethnography of Speaking; Roman Jakobson; Prague School Linguistics; Ferdinand de Saussure; Symbolic Anthropology; Claude Lévi Strauss,

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