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City and citizen as a text and its author: A Semiotic Reading

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Semiotic reading of a text is a new academic tool for exploring potential meanings of a text. It is meant to shed light on the mechanisms of production, exchange and reception of meanings in texts. Given that according to Semioticians any chain of signs constitutes a text, the central argumentation of the current paper is that a city also can be read as a text, because city is a structure consisting of sign systems. Also, it is argued that the citizens as the authors translate their identity into the text of the city which is decodable by semiotic tools. Accordingly, semiotic reading of the city can contribute to the urban planners in finding the potential meanings produced by the urban sign systems by means of establishing intersystemic relations. Based on this argumentation the present paper sets out to apply Roman Jakobsonian and Walter Benjaminian readings to read the city. In Jakobsonian reading urban landscapes will be decoded by means of phatic, expressive and conative signs as used in applied linguistics, indicating how the citizens as authors translate their identities into the text of the city. In Benjaminian reading, Benjamin's own reading of the city will be discussed.

Keywords: Semiotic reading, sign system, urban landscapes, phatic, conative and expressive signs of identity, flâneur

1. Introduction

A text according to the Semioticians (see Hjelmslev 1943, Barthes 1964) is defined as a system of signs which produces meanings through establishing syntagmatic/ paradigmatic and diachronic/synchronic relations. Saussure (1966, p.67) defines it as a system of “signifiers” which make a reference to a set of “signifieds”. Discovering the relations between the signifiers and the signifieds constitutes the core theme



of semiotics. In fact, Semiotics is the academic study of the mechanisms of production, transfer and reception of meanings. To put it in a simple way, semiotics is a means to semantics. Semiotically, man can be defined as a sign-producing entity for the simple reasoning that all his gestures and outputs are meaningful and can be read as a text. As a construct by man, cities also can be read as a text to discover their hidden meanings. In view of the fact that in order for a text to be formed, linguistic signs should be juxtaposed in chains according to syntactical rules, the text of the city also should be governed by syntactical rules. In this metaphor, the urban landscapes stand as an equivalent for signs (words) and urban planning stands as an equivalent for the syntax. It seems that this text is co-authored by the citizens and thus can be regarded as a multi-authorial text. What comes following is an attempt to decode it through a semiotic reading.

2. A Jakobsonian Reading of the city

In his introduction to the language functions, Jakobson (1960) defines three main functions for linguistic signs 1) expressive 2) conative 3) phatic.

The expressive signs according to him enable the producer of the message to express his emotive states and attitudes. The conative signs persuade/dissuade the receiver of the message to do a specific action or to show a specific behavior. The phatic sign on the other hand establish or facilitate communications between people. Here an attempt has been made to decode some urban landscapes by means of these conceptual tools as propped by Jakobson. Our core argumentation is that the citizens as the authors translate their identity into the text of the city and that this translation can be decoded by means of Jakobsonian conceptual tools. This kind of decoding according to Jakobson is called “intersemiotic translation” which is defined by him as follows:

“Intersemiotic translation is the interpretation of verbal signs by means of non-verbal signs and vice versa” (Encyclopedia of Translation Studies, p.220). According to this definition, what we are doing in this paper is an intersemiotic translation, because we interpret the visual signs of the urban landscapes by means of verbal signs of an academic discourse.

3. Phatic Signs of Identity

Jakobson describes phatic signs as those that are oriented toward contact. In language this includes phrases which facilitate communication. For example, “It’s a nice weather!” is not a statement, but an invitation to a conversation. Other examples include questions like “You know what I mean?”

Which function as tests of the connection between the addresser and addressee. Applied to visual signs of urban landscapes, phatic signs can be those that serve as an inducement to social interaction. They are the indicators that this neighborhood or urban space belong to us that our socio-cultural practices are acceptable here. The following examples show the semiotic function of some urban landscapes which serve as phatic signs of identity:

Restaurants

The supply of ethnic foods in restaurants signals identity information about the people using these spaces. They signify the urban neighborhoods as belonging to certain ethnic groups. This means that food operates as a phatic sign of ethnic identity. Food shops and restaurants tend to advertise products that are in demand by the local community. For example, presence of Turkish food shops and restaurants supplying “Döner Kebab” in German cities can be the signifier of the fact that those neighborhoods belong to Turkish immigrants. Although “Döner Kebab” is becoming a popular street food in global cities with Muslim populations, such restaurants still signify immigrant spaces. Also the ubiquity of “Döner Kebab” shops in global cities offering Döner for non-Muslims can be the signifier of hybrid identities and of the co-existence of globalization and localization (glocalization). It’s just like home cooking’ – a message seemingly oriented toward those for whom Turkish dishes would be their home cuisine.

Immigrant services

Presence of certain kinds of businesses may signify the neighborhood as belonging to immigrant neighborhoods. Examples are some shops advertising calling cards or telecommunication services for Arab countries in Arabic alphabet and this phatic sign can tell us who the potential costumers of this business are and by whom the local market is attended. “Western Unions” also which supply money transfer services play the same semiotic function, because the costumers of the “Western Unions” are generally immigrant users transferring remittance to their families in their home countries. Pakistani groceries and Chinese shops function in the same way.

Dress style

The style of dress by the citizens in particular headscarves serves as a phatic sign for their Muslim identity. The observers of the neighborhoods whether they themselves are Muslims or not would be able to recognize the semiotic function of the style of dress (without being aware of it as a semiotic function), and in a sense to whom the neighborhood belongs.

Alphabets and signage of shops

Using foreign alphabets on the signage of the shops is a signifier of who lives here. For example, the shops which offer “Halal” meat for Muslim costumers tend to advertise “Halal” brand on the signage of their shops with an emphasis on Arabic Alphabet. This sign concurrently can be expressive, phatic and conative. It is phatic, because it signals the message that they feel at home in that city and that they are free to offer foods acceding to their own rituals. It is expressive, because it expresses the message that they belong to Muslim community and that their customers are of Islamic identity and that possibly in that area Muslim immigrants are living. On the other hand, it functions as a conative sign, because as will be discussed later it persuades the addressees (who are Muslims, or Muslim diaspora) to buy from those “Halal” shops.

Street vendors

Phatic signs can also signify social class identity. For examples the street vendors are identified as belonging to lower class strata.

4. Expressive signs of identity

Jakobson describes expressive signs as those that are oriented toward addresser. They enable the addresser to express his emotive states and attitudes. Following are examples of the urban landscapes functioning as expressive signs of identity.

Mosques

According to the above definition, mosques in European cities function as expressive signs of religious identity. Mosques signify not only the faith community, but also immigrant status. The buildings of mosques use Islamic architecture as well as Arabic alphabet to announce themselves. Both the Signage and the function of the building are expressive signs. They further signify the neighborhood as home to Muslims who live in the surrounding blocks.

Buskers and Artists

Artistic performances can function as expressive signs. For example, street music groups and buskers in the global cities have semiotic functions.

Socio-political Activists

Collective action can be expressive sign of identity. For example, seeing a group of protestors in the street carrying their national flags and placards with slogans in their native alphabet and language against the

political system of their home country can impart identity information about them, signaling the message that they are belonging to the community of asylum-seekers in that city.

Upscale and Downscale Districts

Upscale and downscale district can function as expressive sign of class identity. All things upscale are signs of upper middle class status and all things downscale are expressive signs of lower class identities.

5. Conative Signs of Identity

Conative signs according to Jakobson are those that are oriented toward addressee. They are meant to persuade or discourage the addressees to do something or to show a specific behavior or to change their behavior. Accordingly, any message encouraging, discouraging or warning the addressees can function as conative signs. Following are some examples of urban landscapes showing how they can serve as conative signs of identity.

Native Alphabets

Alphabets on signage and the façades of the buildings are conative signs of identity. For example seeing bilingual and multilingual menus in the restaurants signals the message that it is an invitation for the international tourists persuading them to order their favorable foods in a lingua franca. But seeing the menu monolingual is a disincentive for those lacking literacy in the language. Native alphabets are generally signifiers for the nationalistic orientation of the citizens and can signal the message that the people of that city are nationalist. The local alphabets in global cities can also be conative sign of ethnic identity. For example, when travel agencies or telecommunication services or restaurants in Milan advertise in Arabic alphabet, it is the signifier of an invitation only for Arab or Muslim communities and that those centers are possibly run by Arab immigrants and that those centers are possibly belonging to immigrant neighborhoods.

Slums

Socio-cultural landscapes also can operate as a conative sign. For example landscapes like slums are usually interpreted to be a sign of danger to outsiders. They signal the class identity of the residents in those areas.

Graffiti and Advertisements

The commercial advertisements, slogans and graffiti on the walls of the buildings are among the urban landscapes which have semiotic function. They function as conative signs, serving as incentives or disincentives of people in a bid to make a change in their behaviors or encourage them to a specific act, say participating in elections, supporting a political party, etc.

6. A Benjaminian Reading of the City

The philosophical ideas of German cultural critic Walter Benjamin regarding the concept of city are of significance for urban studies. To elaborate on the relation between city and citizen, he proposes his theory of language and subject-object dialectic. In his theory of language, he argues for an object language, a language of things as saying: “objects have their own proper language and through this language they communicate with us and with other objects (Benjamin, In Selected Writings, Vol.1, pp.62-74). And the central idea in his subject-object dialectics is that the identity of the subject is in part constructed by the object world (Benjamin, In Selected Writings, Vol.1, pp.62-74). Based on this dialectics and his concept of interpretation, or criticism (which according to him is the translation of the object language into human language), he comes to analyze the mutual interaction between city and city-dweller as saying: “The act of interpretation should be understood as a translation of the object language into human language and that the object itself determines this translation. (Benjamin, In Selected Writings, Vol.1, p.59)

Benjamin's point is that the object world determines subject formation. The object world determines the way we act and even what we think and thus the object world impact the formation of our identities. Based on this argumentation he comes to the conclusion that it is the city that shapes the identity of the citizen.

In his "A Berlin Chronicle", Benjamin employs the metaphors of memory and dreaming to read the city. By means of these metaphors he sheds more light on his subject-object dialectic as following:

"The material space not only exercises a decisive influence over the subject's identity, but also continues to affect the subject by shaping memory. The citizens of Berlin are Berliners, because the city of Berlin exerts its influence over all of its inhabitants, affecting both identity and memory of its subjects." (Benjamin, In Selected Writings, Vol.2, and p.609). In this argumentation he introduces his theory of memory as saying:

"People by using a space inscribe their dreams, their memories in that space. The space in turn impacts one's memory or dreams that occurred within that space. Once again the dialectic of materiality and subjectivity asserts itself. (Benjamin, In Selected Writings, Vol.2, p.445).

Employing the metaphor of "flâneur" and the above-mentioned metaphors, Benjamin embarks on reading the cities of Rome and Paris as following:

"Rome burdened by the weight of its history leaves no space for dreaming of the flâneur. Rome has too many dreams of its own. The city itself cannot allow the passer-by the freedom to dream. Rome is marked by sheer weight of its history. Rome dominates the relation between the subject and object, compelling the subject to follow only its patterns, denying the subject agency. Paris allows the flâneur to dream. During the 19th century, when flâneur emerges, Paris underwent a massive reconstruction. Buildings were torn down and modern buildings were built, but the scars of this transformation remained visible. The process of modernization while attempting to destroy the past left history behind as ruins and this destruction reaffirms the eternity of these ruins." (Benjamin, In Selected Writings, Vol.2, p.470)

So unlike Rome, Paris was filled with disjunctures between modern and traditional retaining the traces of its history as a remainder/reminder of the past. These very traces give freedom to the flâneur. This freedom to dream means that the flâneur is able to construct a new and imaginative relationship with the city. The city still determines the range of the dreaming, but in Paris as opposed to Rome, this range is a broad boulevard rather than a narrow alleyway.

7. Conclusion

Initially the concept of the text was problematized and defined according to its semiotic function. Based on this definition, the city was introduced as a text which is consisting of sign systems. Then Jakobson's triple linguistic signs including phatic, expressive and conative were applied to some urban landscapes and a semiotic reading of the city was provided and finally Walter Benjamin's philosophical reading of the city was discussed.

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