

A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF ENGLISH SHORT STORY

O. Smochin

*Lecturer of the Department of Foreign Languages,
Ion Creangă State Pedagogical University, Republic of Moldova*

The article is aimed to show how semiotic analysis of the narrative helps a student to understand the meaning of the text. It implies that the process of literary signification constitutes three factors: syntactical structure, semantic constituents and pragmatic aspects of the text. The type of undertaken research was that of action-research, because the results were put at the service of all students regarding the analysis and interpretation of texts in English. Discussion in details the factors as Syntactical, Semantic and Pragmatic dimension of literary text is described in the article.

Keywords: semiotic analysis; narrative; syntagmatic and paradigmatic; triadic model.

We all read literary texts because they are interesting, enjoyable or moving. This enjoyment, however, is only the first, though important step in the study of such texts. An important aspect of their study is that we must work on explaining how we come to understand literary works. It is popular at the present time to stress the idea that different readers all have different understanding of the texts they read. This must be true for some extent as we all have different experiences which may prompt us to have slightly divergent interpretations of different texts. However, fascinatingly, we often agree over our understandings of poems, plays and novels in spite of the fact that we are all different.

Aiming at the comprehension of the total significance of a text as a whole, we must be ready to account in some consistent manner for the existence and function of every text element of every level, for the way in which these elements are combined in creating the meaning, and for the associations they may evoke in the reader's mind.

We are apt to think that appreciation of art is always only innate: either the student is «sensitive», «gifted» and can «feel» everything in a most refined way, or he is «dull» and «it cannot be helped», and it is «wasting time to try and teach him». We shall try to show that this intellectual defeatism is unacceptable.

The approach that we take in this article is generally known as «semiotics» or «semiotic analysis». Although the term «semiotics» appears to suggest an overall concern with the study of (authorial) style, the main effort in semiotic analysis in the last 30 years or so has been to try to understand the relationship between the literary text, on the one hand, and how we understand it, and are affected by it, on the other.

Using knowledge derived from the evolutionary hypothesis of language development, as well as narrative semiotics, constructivism and our own experience, it was proposed to investigate whether these gaps exist in reality, compared to the ability to analyze and invent narratives. It would also examine whether exerting students in the application of a semiotic model of the narrative, this would improve their ability to analyze and understand the stories, their vocabulary and their ability to create narrative text [5, p. 54].

The experience we have achieved comes from practical experience. As lecturer of the English language, I have been forced to work with both teaching strategies and with analysis of literary texts.

In our practice of text analysis, we often experience some problems of students to understand and find elements of analysis in order to do work with a literary text. But the problem remains, it is a reality. In order to resolve this problem I conducted an experiment with students from the semiotic model for the analysis of literary narrative texts. Because of the need for a revision of strategies for teaching literary texts, we have inspired many studies of this type, and in particular those derived from the American Semiotic School of Ch. Pierce to know more about the semiotic analysis of narrative texts, to analyze it and to apply it to our students during the English courses. During the development of this experiment; we have seen how students perceive the analysis of texts; introducing some semiotic elements in the work with stories, which was achieved through a monitoring exercise on the field.

Thus, our main objective was to verify whether the application of some elements of the semiotic model of text analysis is a powerful tool and easy to understand at the time of the analysis and interpretation of narrative texts or not.

The term Semiotics has been the subject of various definitions, which according to [1, p. 5] could be grouped under two trends: a logical and cognitive, based on the theory of Ch. Peirce, who takes care of the semiotic mode of production of the sign and its relationship with reality, and the other is based on the assumptions of Saussure, founder of Semiotics or science that studies the life of signs in society. According to the same author, Semiotics deals with any system of meaning, then it has developed, initially in the area of verbal signs only, which gave birth to Linguistics.

This science has experienced a great development from the second half of the XX century, and, therefore, different schools distinguish them according to approach linguistic object. Among these schools, the structuralism has been wide spread, of which there are different versions, even if they all coincide in the study of language in itself and by itself, that is to say, not related to use and situation, as well as methodologies borrowed from other sciences [3, p. 78]. Glossematics, the school founded by L. Hjelmslev, postulates that linguistic structure is composed by two isomorphic levels: expression and content, each analyzable in a form and substance [3, p. 35]. This approach has been very productive for the study of phonetics and phonology, but it was more for the study of meaning, because it allows to define the fields in the traditional semantics (the substance of the content) from that of structural semantics (form of content: the underlying relationships between signs that produce meaning [4, p. 42]. It is from the formal or structural Semantics that we began studying the immanent meaning of the text, as a unit which manifest discourse. Thus; it was born the European Semiotics, more specifically, the English Semiotics as a theory of meaning. Although it inspired Hjelmslevian approach, it incorporated into its analysis, research that derives from the language of the utterance, structural anthropology and phenomenology [2, p. 120]. Numerous studies of this type, and in particular those derived from the French Semiotic school under A.J. Greimas identified four dimensions in the literary text that a semiotic study can approach: the narrative dimension, the passionate dimension and figurative dimension [5, p. 94].

Narrative dimension:

It refers to the logical structure of the action that takes place in the story and actantial structures that define the role of actors.

Other authors see the meaning of the narrative texts as an organization at various levels ranging from the deeper structures (the basic structures of meaning, the semiotic square, the *sémio*-narratives structures (narrative schema, the schema and the passionate actant scheme) and, finally, surface structures. Narration is the same action to narrate, to tell an event in its own way to achieve it. That is to say, it is in the process of enunciation. Narrative called «the phenomenon of state succession and transformation, part of speech, and responsible for the production of meaning» [4, p. 89]

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, Semantic and Pragmatic 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)» [3, p. 108–109]. 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*.

Text's analysis:

To analyze a text, semiotics begins with its segmentation in textual elements of which there are two models:

A) Ternary analysis: the text is divided into three units:

- Initial situation: it includes the time it determines the lack of the object.
- Intermediate situation: it narrates the attempts of the subject to fill the gap.
- Final position: This is the result of «the action» of the subject. It can be positive, neutral or negative.

B) Quinary analysis: In the quinary model, the text is divided into five sequences: initial situation (steady state), the trigger node (change the initial situation), action (caused by the trigger node), the result (solves the situation) and the final situation (transformed).

Methodological approach:

The type of undertaken research was that of action- research, because the results will be put at the service of all students regarding the analysis and interpretation of texts in English. Indeed, action -research purports to solve a real and tangible problem. Its objective is to improve the actual educational practice in a particular place. It is based on observation, reflection and evaluation, with a cyclical characteristic, driven by the concerned persons in order to intervene in their educational practice to improve or modify the educational innovation [6, p. 152].

We worked with three short narrative texts. This experiment was divided into several steps.

A) First step: We gave each student three texts and asked them to analyze them according to their knowledge. The results were as follows:

- Students reported only the actions and characters.
- They have not established an organized sequence of actions.
- They did not perceive similarities in the development of three texts.
- They did not formalize the results.

B) Second step: we described the concept of actant, subject, object, conjunction, disjunction, sequence, narrative and narrative program. Besides the explanations, they were given practical applications with other texts. We also explained what it means by the notion of lexical field based on the lexical items of the texts.

C) Third step: We asked them to analyze the three texts while applying the acquired knowledge. After the exercise, each student was required to present the results of its analysis, which was evaluated by his or her peers.

The overall results were classified into the following aspects: correct responses related to:

- Identification of actants.
- Identification of objects.
- Description of sequences
- Formulation of narrative program

D) Forth step: We asked students to make a list of common nouns, adjectives and verbs and then to form the lexical fields of each text. The result showed that students need in their majority, to improve their ability to identify different lexical categories and the capacity for abstraction to classify the words in lexical fields.

In a subsequent experiment they accomplished these objectives, using a semantic approach to characterize and develop lexical categories and lexical fields.

E) Fifth step: We have formed five groups of two students. Each group should present the final analysis of the three texts and defend their proposals to the other groups.

F) Sixth step: We asked each group to write a story starting from the semiotic model that was used for the analysis of texts. Each story was presented and discussed in front of other groups which have carried out their observations and were considered relevant.

In this step we found that the application of semiotic model facilitated students to order their ideas in order to build a story.

Results:

- The teaching of narrative analysis is easier with the practice of semiotic model.
- Learning specific concepts of semiotics is easier with examples and practices.

The practice of narrative semiotics analysis develops the ability to create narrative texts.

- Co-evaluation encourages reflection, the ability to argue and the fluency of oral expression in English.
- Teamwork promotes learning and gives some security to the student feels, because the group supports them.

Conclusion:

Taking into account the observations made in the previous exercise, we would like to say that the use of semiotic model for the analysis of narratives is an effective way to work. Students are satisfied with the proposed policy in that they improve their ability to understand, this is manifested in the active participation of students in class, we can also see by the enthusiastic comments on this. The study of texts in a semiotic approach allows them to understand the content, develop their analytical skills, and enrich their vocabulary, although this approach is not very easy to grasp at first sight. Despite some difficulties in understanding texts encountered by students, they showed great interest in continuing to work following this approach because it allows them not only to understand the text and enrich vocabulary, but also to go a little later in the meaning of the text and to find new ways of thinking about the meaning in the study of literary texts.

Finally, we are able to summarize the most important experiences that students have had from their productions and their own experiences.

- Possibility to have a higher level of English.
- Enrichment of vocabulary.
- Improved capacity for analysis and understanding of texts.
- Stimulation of motivation.
- Awakening of interest to read.



References:

1. Crystal, David (1987): The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 462 p.
2. Culler, Jonathan (1981): The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 239 p.
3. Johansen, Jorgen D. (2007b). «Preface.» Semiotica, 165 p.
4. Hodge, R. & Kress, G. (1988). Social Semiotics. Cambridge: Polity Press., 285 p.
5. Peirce, C. S., Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, 402 p.
6. Vladimir Propp. Morphology of the Folktale. 162 p.