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The Functions of Language: Social Semiotics and Discourse Analysis.

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1. Introduction.

It is generally agreed that social semiotics revisits De Saussure's doctrine of the 'arbitrariness' of the linguistic sign. This notion rests on the argument that the signifier holds an arbitrary relationship to the signified- in other words, that there is nothing about the round of appearance of verbal signifiers to suggest what they signify.

Social semiotics also addresses the question of how societies and cultures maintain or shift these conventional bonds between signifier and signified. This caves the socially determinist implication that meanings and interpretations are dictated from above, by the 'whims of an inscrutably powerful collective being, Society.' Therefore, social semiotics must respond to the question and explain how the social shaping of meanings work in practice. (Hodge and Kress, 1988).

As a matter of fact, a large number of semiotic grammars (see Kress and van Leeuwen,1996; Randviir, 2004) consider human communication to be a socially formed phenomenon which is definitely influenced by changeable sets of available 'resources' for making its meaning. As a result, these 'resources' within speech communities have come to represent the visual and aural modes of communication or what is commonly referred to as Multimodality: communication in and across a range of semiotic modes- verbal, visual, and aural, especially the visual mode given its growing importance in contemporary communication.

2. M. A. K. Halliday and Social Semiotics.

Social semiotics was undoubtedly influenced by Halliday's ideas. The theory synthesized a range of schools of linguistics, including warring divisions within mainstream linguistics (Noam Chomsky and his followers, Benjamin Lee Whorf's anthropological linguistics) and sociolinguistics (William Labov, Basil Bernstein, R. Brown, Dell. Hymes, Harvey Sacks, J.L. Austin). It also incorporated theorists of language from outside the discipline of linguistics; such as John Piaget and Sigmund Freud.

Michael Halliday introduced the term 'Social Semiotics' into linguistics when he used the phrase in the title of his book, Language as Social Semiotics (1978). This work argues against the traditional separation between language and society, and exemplifies the start of a 'semiotic approach', which broadens the narrow focus on written language in linguistics. Halliday points out that languages evolve as sets of resources which influence what the speaker can do with

language in a particular social context. He believes that the grammar of any language (namely English) is a system organized for the following three purposes (metafunctions):

a. Facilitating certain kinds of social and interpersonal interactions (interpersonal).
b. Representing ideas about the world (ideational).
c. Connecting these ideas and interacting into meaningful texts and making them relevant to their context (textual).

It is generally established that the major premises of Halliday's social semiotics is based upon the following five essential principles:

1. 'Language is a social fact'.
2. 'We shall not come to understand the nature of language if we pursue only the kinds of question about language that are formulated by linguists'.
3. 'Language is as it is because of the functions it has evolved to serve in people's lives'.
4. 'There are three functions, or metafunctions of language: ideational (about something); interpersonal (doing something) and textual (the speaker's text-forming potential)'.
5. 'Language is constituted of a discrete network of options'. (Halliday,1978)

3. M.A.K. Halliday's Seven Functions of Language.

The functional approach to describing language is one that has its roots in the traditions of British linguist J.R. Firth, who viewed language as interactive and interpersonal, 'a way of behaving and making others behave'. Since then the term 'function' has been variously interpreted. Michael. Halliday (1973), who provided one of the best expositions of language functions, used the term to mean the purposive nature of communication, and outlined seven different functions of language.

1. **The instrumental function** serves to manipulate the environment, to cause certain events to happen. Sentences like 'This court finds you guilty,' 'On your mark, get set, go!' or 'Don't touch the stove!' have an instrumental function; they are communicative acts that have a specific perlocutionary force; they bring about a particular condition.
2. **The regulatory function** of language is the control of events. While such control is sometimes difficult to distinguish from the instrumental function, regulatory functions of language are not so much the 'unleashing' of certain power as the maintenance of control. 'I pronounce you guilty and sentence you to three years in prison' serves as an instrumental function, but the sentence 'Upon good behaviour, you will be eligible for parole in ten months' serves more a regulatory function. The regulations of encounters among people-approval, disapproval, behaviour control, setting laws and rules- are all regulatory features of language.
3. **The representational function** is the use of language to make statements, convey facts and knowledge, explain, or report- that is, to 'represent' reality as one sees it. 'The sun is hot', 'The president gave a speech last night,' or even 'The world is flat' all serve representational functions, although the last representation may be highly disputed.
4. **The interactional function** of language serves to ensure social maintenance. 'Phatic Communion', Malinowski's term referring to the communicative contact between and

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among human beings that simply allows them to establish social contact and to keep channels of communication open, is part of the interactional function of language. Successful interactional communication requires knowledge of slang, jargon, jokes, folklore, cultural mores, politeness and formality expectations, and other keys to social exchange.

5. **The personal function** allows a speaker to express feelings, emotions, personality, 'gut-level' reactions. A person's individuality is usually characterized by his or her use of the personal function of communication. In the personal nature of language, cognition, affect, and culture all interact.

6. **The heuristic function** involves language used to acquire knowledge, to learn about the environment. Heuristic functions are often conveyed in the form of questions that will lead to answers. Children typically make good use of the heuristic function in their incessant 'why' questions about the world around them. Inquiry is a heuristic method of eliciting representations of reality from others.

7. **The imaginative function** serves to create imaginary systems of ideas. Telling fairy tales, joking, or writing a novel, are all uses of the imaginative function. Poetry, tongue twisters, puns, and other instances of the pleasurable uses of language also fall into the imaginative function. Through the imaginative dimensions of language we are free to go beyond the real world to soar to the heights of the beauty of language itself, and through that language to create impossible dreams if we so desire.

These seven different functions of language are neither discrete nor mutually exclusive. A single sentence or conversation might incorporate many different functions simultaneously. Yet it is the understanding of how to use linguistic forms to achieve these functions of language that comprises the crux of second language learning. A learner might acquire correct word order, syntax, and lexical items, but not understand how to achieve a desired and intended function through careful selection of words, structure, intonation, nonverbal signals, and astute perception of the context of a particular stretch of discourse.

The analysis of the relationship between forms and functions of language is the most significant task of discourse analysis, which encompasses the notion that language is more than a sentence-level phenomenon. A single sentence can seldom be fully analyzed without considering its context. We use language in stretches of discourse. We string many sentences together in interrelated, cohesive units. In most oral language, our discourse is marked by exchanges with another person or several persons in which, a few sentences spoken by one participant are followed and built upon by sentences spoken by another. Both the production and comprehension of language are a factor of our ability to perceive and process stretches of discourse, to formulate representations of meaning not just from a single sentence but from referents in both previous sentences and following sentences.

4. Social Semiotics and Critical Discourse Analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis is often treated as distinct from Social Semiotics, and not strictly part of semiotics. Yet, there are good reasons both conceptually and genealogically for seeing it as a branch of social semiotics. It was Norman Fairclough who first called his version of Critical Linguistics, 'Critical Language Studies' (1989), then 'Critical Discourse Analysis', naming a

field that has exploded over two decades, describing a research tool that proved attractive to a wide range of researchers.

There are many reasons why CDA ought to have situated itself in a semiotic framework. Power, its major focus, acts through verbal discourse, but not in words alone. The limitation to verbal language ties the analytic hands of CDA. One of the main types of discourse it studies, media discourse, policy discourse, and interactional discourse, only policy is represented mainly in verbal discourse. Increasingly the media are multi-media forms, and interactions have always occurred in multi-semiotic spaces.

In addition, Michel Foucault's concept of the 'discursive regime' (1972) is both a powerful contribution to social semiotics, and in need of a social semiotic framework. A 'discursive regime' is an abstract social system which specifies who can speak and what they can speak about, in what circumstances. There are crucial social semiotic questions about who institutes these regimes and how, and what lies outside their scope. Given all these over-laps it is arduous to distinguish between a discourse analyst and a social semiotician, or to single out CDA (with all its many affinities with social semiotics) from critical linguistics. It is evident that social semiotics and CDA largely converge upon the social mechanisms and their effects on political discourse and; consequently, represent central objects of analysis.

Conclusion.

It is a fact that language encodes the social system that determines the form of its internal organization. All linguistic interaction comes to be mediated through the two basic functions of ideational and interpersonal components. These are not just aspects of the use of language, but are at the basis of the system itself; every actual instance of linguistic interaction has meaning not only in particular but also in general, as an expression of the social system. In other words, the linguistic interaction is related to the context of culture as well as to the context of the situation. This explains 'how in the course of learning language a child is also all the time learning *through* language' (Halliday,1981); how the micro-semiotic exchanges of family and peer group life contain within themselves indices of the most pervasive semiotic patterns of the culture.

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