

Reading the word: two contemporary text-centred approaches to literary analysis

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This paper considers two contemporary approaches of text centered analysis: Semiotics and Sociolinguistics. It is written for students and teachers of English Extension.

Introduction

John Lye (2003) notes that: "Contemporary Literary Theory is not a single thing but a collection of theoretical approaches which are marked by a number of premises, although not all of the theoretical approaches share or agree on all of them." He identifies these premises:

1. Meaning is assumed to be created by difference, not by 'presence'. All meaning is only meaning in reference to, and in distinction from, other meanings; there is no meaning in any stable or absolute sense. Meanings are multiple, changing, contextual.
2. There is no foundational 'truth' or reality in the universe. There are only local and contingent truths generated by human groups through their cultural systems in response to their needs for power, survival and esteem. Consequently, values and identity are cultural constructs, not stable entities.
3. Language is a much more complex, elusive phenomenon than we ordinarily suspect
4. Language itself always has excessive signification, that is, it always means more than it may be taken to mean in any one context.
5. It is language itself, not some essential humanness or timeless truth that is central to culture and meaning.
6. The meaning that appears as normal in our social life masks . . . is not the world we do in fact occupy. The world we do occupy is a construction of ideology.
7. A text is a tissue woven of former texts . . . woven of historical references and practices, and woven of the play of language. A text is not, and cannot be, 'only itself', nor can it properly be reified, said to be 'a thing'; a text is a process of engagements.
8. The borders of literature are challenged by the ideas
 - a) that all texts share common traits, and
 - b) that all experience can be viewed as a text:

9. The nature of language and meaning . . . and texts are seen as more deeply embedded in and constitutive of social processes.

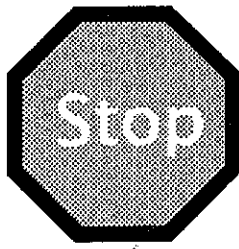
Two theoretical approaches used in contemporary text analysis which meet some of Lye's criteria are semiotics and sociolinguistics. In this paper I consider these two approaches and the primary theorist associated with each: Ferdinand Saussure and Michael Foucault.

Semiotics

The commonly acknowledged founder of semiotics is Saussure (Schleifer, 1997). He saw that there was a basic divide between language and what language meant. He further postulated that the words on a page were not what they represent. Saussure called this relationship a *sign* and established a formula for understanding the ways that signs create meaning in a culture:

Sign = the Signifier + the Signified

A signifier can be anything such as a word or picture that indicates or points to something. The signified is the different interpretations (meanings) or mental pictures that can be made of the signifier within a culture. Consider a stop sign: the shape combined with the word 'stop' means or indicates for drivers to cease movement. The words STOP need not even be on the sign for readers of the text to make a valid cultural interpretation of the sign. The colour red is also a signifier in this sign. In our culture the colour red means danger. Therefore the colour assists in signifying a potentially dangerous situation. In other cultures, Chinese for instance, the colour red has different signification. It signifies good luck. To adequately read the sign, readers must decide on the most appropriate signification or misinterpret the text.



Sign

As a text centred form of analysis, semiotics sees that texts as "objects constructed from a social system of signs." (Moon, 2001, p. 139) By exploring these objects such as characters, places, actions, and objects in a narrative, the text analyst can "establish a relationship between the text and certain cultural beliefs and values." (ibid). To undertake semiotic analysis the signifier can be separated into two types of meaning making: denotations and connotations (Robinson and Robinson, 2003). Denotation is the singular and literal meaning given to a signifier. Connotation is the implied meaning inferred by the signifier. It can be multiple. Consider the example above of the stop sign:

- The signifier is the entire stop sign.
- The denotation is a traffic signal that instructs road users to terminate movement completely before proceeding further.
- The connotations might include:
 - If I don't stop I could be fined.
 - If I don't stop I will be fined.
 - If I don't stop I could cause an accident that could kill or maim people and it would be my fault.

Consider a text like *Wuthering Heights* (Bronte, n.d.) and the scene where Cathy says to Heathcliff: "I am Heathcliff."

- The signifiers are I and Heathcliff.
- The signified denotation is that the two characters (Cathy and Heathcliff) share common values and emotions (not that they are literally each other)
- The connotations might include:
 - Kathy can not live without Heathcliff;
 - The two have such a strong bond that they think and feel alike;
 - That the two are 'soul-mates' sharing the same tortured spirit.

Consider initially the difference between Zapharelli's version of "Romeo and Juliet" and Baz Luhrmann's (1996). One is set in Medieval Italy and the other is set in an almost post-apocalyptic (post)modern world. The words are the same (though reorganized) and the characters are the same, but it could be argued that the meanings have been mediated by the social semiotics constructed in each version.



(source: <http://www.romeoandjuliet.com/>)

Consider the scene in Luhrmann's film where Romeo first meets Juliet and what each is wearing: Juliet (Danes) is dressed as an angel and Romeo (DiCaprio) is dressed as a knight. What does each costume signify? Also consider Danes coy look that she flashes at DiCaprio. What does her look tell about Juliet as a woman? What do these things say about Juliet as a character that a traditional version might not? Consider the use of guns rather than swords and the confusion of signifying the gun as a 9mm sword. What are the connotations for these changes? ¹ All of these things give readers messages about the text and position readers to view the characters differently.

¹ Social semiotics is popular in media and studies of popular culture. For examples of semiotic analysis visit the Media and Community Studies (MCS - pronounced MIX) site at: <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Sections/textian07.html>. The article "Semiotic Analysis of Teenage Magazine Front Covers" by Siân Davies is particularly interesting. (<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Students/sid9901.html>)

Figurative language and semiotics



Figurative language such as symbols, metaphors and metonyms, like images, photographs and descriptions, can also act as signifiers. The mind pictures created by these signifiers are important tools in semiotic text analysis. They act as short cuts for meaning making. Symbols work by replacing one thing or idea with another as a matter of convention (Moon, 2001). Take for example the statue of justice. The symbol signifies the impartiality of justice. The scales, the sword and the blindfold become metaphors for the impartiality of the court system, the weighing up of evidence and the swift and "terrible" justice dealt out to wrong doers. Metaphors, as seen from this example denote one thing that causes the reader to think of another. In this case the metaphor of blind justice connotes the impartiality of the legal system where 'theoretically' regardless of race, creed, gender or politics, people are given a fair trial. Metonyms are associative words. That is they are parts

of a phrase that that means a larger idea that act as a short-cut for readers. For example the phrase "the law" signifies the entire legal system. Symbols, metaphors, and metonyms have meaning because there is cultural congruence between the text and the reader.



Consider the two illustrations of "Blind Justice" above. What does the blindfold signify? Does it signify the same thing in both images? Consider the posture or stance of each image. What does each denote? How are the connotations different? Examine the scales of the crouching woman. Traditionally "Justice" is depicted as a "European" woman. Why might Blind Justice be depicted as a woman? What might it signify? Does the blindfold signify different things for each image? How does the reconstruction or transformation of Justice to a naked Afro-American woman change the reading? How might readings of the image differ with different people/cultures? How do you to read each version? What cultural background assist you to make that reading?

Practitioners of contemporary social semiotics argue that texts construct social worlds in which actions occur and characters function and interact. And, although the signifier might remain constant, the signification changes with the individual's cultural understandings and the time that the text was produced. Therefore, the role of the reader is an integral part of social semiotics (Eco, 1979). Allen-Reynolds (1997) explains this relationship with reference to advertising:

In semiotics, the 'reader' is seen as playing an active role The reader helps to "create the meaning of the text by bringing it to his or her experience, attitudes, and emotions" (Fiske, 1990:40). Thus, the reader's . . . life experiences, as well as expectations of . . . the advertisement, interact with the advertiser's output in determining the meaning of the communication. The job of the advertiser is to know the world of the target audience intimately, so that the stimuli created can evoke associations with whatever is stored in their memories. The advertiser's goal is that the messages encoded into the magazine advertisements will stimulate the reader to create meanings that relate, as closely as possible, to the meanings that they have attempted to generate. As Fiske observes: "the more we share the same codes, the more we use the same sign systems, the closer the two meanings of the message will approximate to each other" (Fiske, 1990:39).

Binary Opposition

The shift from structuralism, particularly Saussure's semiotics, to poststructuralism can be seen as an example of discursive colonization (Kress, 1991). One idea that was appropriated by poststructuralism, particularly Derrida, was the

idea of binaries. The idea of binaries extends back to Hegel's notion of the dialectic. Hegel postulated that every idea (thesis) had an opposite (antithesis) and these two result in a unified whole (synthesis), which in turn becomes

a new thesis. The idea of the dialectic, under Saussure, synthesized into binary opposites.

Moon (2003) defines binary opposites as "patterns of opposing features, concepts or practices" (p. 6). This is close to the way that Saussure and the New Critics used the term. What Derrida and the poststructuralists added was the social. That is, binaries, these constructs of opposites, were not 'natural' (although they were naturalised) and were culturally specific. Binaries were also seen, particularly by feminism as "mutually exclusive alternatives" (Herrett et. al., 2003, p. 34) where one set of the binary is privileged over the other. These binary pairs are recognized in Western cultures, but what is valued, shifts between cultures and discourses. A list of recognizable binaries might include:

- Good/bad
- Male/female
- Mind/body
- Reason/emotion
- Rich/poor
- Active/passive
- Civilization/nature
- White/black

Robinson & Robinson (2003) tease out a definition that is representative of contemporary text centered analysis and poststructuralist/postmodernist text-analysis:

Binary oppositions are opposite pairs of associations that we acquire through our participation in society. They affect our ways of thinking and acting. They often create meaning through the hierarchical difference between the terms of the pair. (p. 12)

From the list above, consider how a discourse might be disrupted if the valorized element was given negative value and the opposite devalued element was given positive value. Consider a transformation of a "James Bond" text such as *Goldfinger* or "Goldeneye" (the videogame or the film) where a patriarchal sexist discourse (men are valued/women are devalued) is naturalised and feminist discourse is devalued. What sort of things might we expect to happen if these discourses were 'flip-flopped' (reversed) in the transformed story? Who would have power? Who would be active and who would be passive? Who would have power and who would be powerless?

Binaries are also significant in the way representations are constructed and can be analyzed in texts. **Representations** are the way

that individuals and groups are presented in a text. Consider the representation of the pro-gun lobby in "Bowling for Columbine". The 'picture painted' in the film constructs the pro-gun lobby as socially irresponsible. This construction emerges from, and is informed by, discourse - in particular an anti-gun discourse. This discourse and representations of the pro-gun lobby in America was also constructed in the film "Runaway Jury" where gun manufacturers are represented as caring only about profit and having no concern for the emotional heartbreak of those who survive incidence like the Columbine massacre.

One of the effects of binaries is to marginalize groups; that is to metaphorically shove them into the margins; to 'decentre' or take the group out of focus. This is an issue taken up by world-centred theories such as feminism and post-colonialism. In mainstream American politics the anti-gun lobby is marginalized and represented as unpatriotic and on the lunatic fringe by groups such as the American Rifle Association and pro-gun lobby. In both films this representation is resisted and the pro-gun lobby, a generally marginalized group in American politics, has been brought to the centre (valorised) with the effect of devaluing the anti-gun lobby. The purpose of analysing texts using binaries, particularly from a world centered approach, is to bring the marginalized groups into focus and to give them positive value.

Sociolinguistics: poststructuralist text centered analysis

Post-structuralism is not a school, but a group of approaches motivated by some common understandings, not all of which will necessarily be shared by every practitioner. Post-structuralism is not a theory but a set of theoretical positions, which have at their core a self-reflexive discourse which is aware of the tentativeness, the slipperiness, the ambiguity and the complex interrelations of texts and meanings. (Lye, 1997)

Poststructuralism was a reaction to among other things the rigidity of structuralism and New Criticism. The methodology used by poststructuralist to analyze texts is called **deconstruction**. In particular, deconstruction looks for the inconsistencies in texts. Two

important theoretical tools of poststructuralist analysis are discourse and binary oppositions.

Theories of language in sociolinguistics can stem from either a psychological explanation, which places the individual at the centre, or the social explanation that attempts to account for language within that context (Kress, 1985). The methodology of structural linguistics assumed meaning was made possible 'by the existence of underlying systems of conventions which enable[d] elements to function individually as signs' (Young, 1981, p. 3). Structural linguistic analysis focused on the 'system of rules and relations underlying each signifying practice' (p. 3). It also attempted to produce explanatory model of that system. These systems were considered immutable and universal. Language was constructed as a self-contained, uniform and invariable system. As such, it was studied as a static system at a particular given point in time (Fairclough, 1989). Traditional structural linguistics, then, ignored the social and viewed the individual user as 'impassive and impotent in the face of a monolithic language system' (Kress, 1985, p. 3). In short, traditional structural linguistics ignored the way that language is used to make meaning in a social context.

Sociolinguistics, on the other hand, sees language as totally dependent upon the society and context in which it is used. Language is multifunctional and meaning is derived from the function it serves within the context where it is used. Language is about making meaning of the social world.

Language is a social activity that has developed 'both in the functions it serves, and in the structures which express these functions, in response to the demands made by society and as a reflection of these demands' (Kress, 1976, p. xx). The semantic systems of a language are derived from the functions of language. The functions are:

1. the function to establish, maintain and specify relations between members of societies
2. the function to transmit information between members of societies and
3. the function to provide texture, the organization of discourse as relevant to the situation (p ix).

In brief, then, the idea of social context is necessary to understand how people learn to make meaning. This is Halliday's (1975, 1978) most significant contribution to the study of linguistics and textual analysis.

Discourse, discursive practices and power

After the student riots in Paris in 1968, there developed a crisis in the dominant critical discourses of Marxism, structural linguistics and the history of ideas. With the discrediting of Marxist and structuralist analysis (New Criticism and Saussure) as analytic tools, a new critical device was needed that took into account language, discourse and discursive practices. It needed to be one that was not structuralist and could account for power and hegemony in other than linear historicist or economic determinist ways. Foucault's theories attempt to provide this.

Discourse

Discourse for Foucault (1971) is 'really only an activity, of writing in the first case, of reading in the second and exchange in the third' (p. 21). A discourse is a set of statements that make up and set the boundaries for a specific area of concern. It is controlled by its own rules and formations with its own truths and falsehoods. The statement is seen, as Foucault implies, in social context. Kress (1985) uses Foucault to inform his definition of discourse as 'systematically organized sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that they define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say' (p. 7).

Discourse, however, can not be seen on its own. It needs to be viewed with specific practices, the discursive practices that are incorporated within the discourse. For Foucault the analytic task is to identify particular discursive formations and the regularity of their practices. These formations and practices are 'embodied in technical process, in institutions and in patterns of general behaviour' (Weeks, 1982, p. 111) and, taken together, constitute the social. The discourse and its discursive formations also produce and define the object about which the discourse speaks.

Kress (1985, 1986) develops the concept of discourse further. He adds to the Foucauldian definition by incorporating into 'discourse' the idea of discursive imperialism. Kress (1991) suggests that discourses not only attempt to account for the area of their immediate concern, but that they also try to explain adjacent areas of concern in an ever increasing circle. In doing so, discourses act in an imperialistic manner to encompass other discourses. In this act of colonisation, discourses attempt to smooth out and bridge, any ruptures within the discourse so that it appears as a unified voice. Discourses - whether they be psychological, racist, democratic, sexist, religious

or whatever - seeks to present itself as a monoglossic (seemless) picture of the world that is natural, unchallenged and unchallengeable. In this way, discourse not only colonises other discourses, but it also colonises areas of social life: "discourses attempt to reconcile constraints, mismatches, disjunctions and discontinuities within that domain by making that which is social seem natural and that which is problematic seem obvious" (Kress, 1985, p. 10). An instance of discursive colonization can be seen in literary analysis.

The dominant discourse of the mid-twentieth century text-centered analysis was "New Criticism". This discourse influenced the thinking of educators and critics working in the area of literature and literary analysis and established as the 'only way' to do text analysis. However, new discourses that attempt to explain 'how texts work' have competed for legitimacy against New Criticism. In the field of literary analysis contemporary theories have colonised the domain that was for many years held by New Criticism. Indeed, a range of contemporary text centered analytic discourses, like post structuralism and semiotics, compete against each other for dominance and legitimacy.

Identifying discourse: deconstructing texts

Discourse refers to words and phrases, and their associated understandings, which are common to a specific social group or activity. Discourses are an activity of writing, reading, speaking and making meaning as a member of a social group. They are sets of statements about a specific area of concern (for example sport, race, romance, politics, education) that indicate what social-group members believe about the world. Member of a group establish their identity through discourse. They speak the same language, believe similar things and know how to interact with others group members and outsiders. Discourses can be identified through words (written or spoken), actions and beliefs. These words and actions indicate a belief about the world.

Discourses can therefore define, describe and set boundaries of what is possible to say and not possible to say. In doing this, discourses also define people's relationship to others; for example who has power, who can or can not speak, and what it is possible to speak about. The following table offers a way of identifying discourses. The table outlines two oppositional discourses (binaries) of war: Anti-war and Pro-war.

Discourse:	Beliefs	Words and phrases:	Actions:
Anti-war discourse	war is wrong and a senseless waste of life	negotiation, pacifist, non-violence, evil	marching in antiwar protest rallies
Pro-war discourse	war and violence are acceptable and necessary ways to solve disputes	glory, friendly-fire, fighting for peace, national security,	sending armies from one country to another; allocating resources to defence

Texts like the following extract from a speech by President George Bush justifying invasion of Iraq can be analysed to see what word and phrases indicate a dominant pro-war discourse. There are also other discourses such as religious discourse and a discourse of duty and honour evident in the speech. The entire text of the speech can be found at the U.S. Department of State website.

President Bush Addresses the Nation, March 19, 2003

<p>THE PRESIDENT: My fellow citizens, at this hour, American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger.</p> <p>On my orders, coalition forces have begun striking selected targets of military importance to undermine Saddam Hussein's ability to wage war. These are opening stages of what will be a broad and concerted campaign. . . . Every nation in this coalition has chosen to bear the duty and share the honor of serving in our common defense.</p> <p>To all the men and women of the United States Armed Forces now in the Middle East, the peace of a troubled world and the hopes of an oppressed people now depend on you. That trust is well placed.</p> <p>The enemies you confront will come to know your skill and bravery. The people you liberate will witness the honorable and decent spirit of the American military.</p>	<p>Discourses</p> <p>Military or pro-war discourse</p> <p>Discourse of duty and honour</p>
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In this conflict, America faces an enemy who has no regard for conventions of war or rules of morality. Saddam Hussein has placed Iraqi troops and equipment in civilian areas, attempting to use innocent men, women and children as shields for his own military -- a final atrocity against his people.

Now that conflict has come, the only way to limit its duration is to apply decisive force. And I assure you, this will not be a campaign of half measures, and we will accept no outcome but victory.

My fellow citizens, the dangers to our country and the world will be overcome. We will pass through this time of peril and carry on the work of peace. We will defend our freedom. We will bring freedom to others and we will prevail.

May God bless our country and all who defend her.

Religious discourse

(Source: U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/ris/rm/18851.htm>)

Discursive practices

The way that a person is defined in a text can be seen to be informed by different discourses. Similarly the way that a character is read is also mediated by the reader's own particular discursive position. Each discourse then make an object (objectifies) what it speaks about by its own discursive practices, by what is said by each about the literate or illiterate subject. Discourses, then, have material effects that impact upon the lives of people by defining them in relation to the rest of the social world. As Kress (1985) notes:

A discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organises and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about. In that it provides descriptions, rules, permissions and prohibitions of social and individual action (p. 7).

Not only do discourses and discursive practices define people in relation to others in the social world, they also subject people to power by legitimating discursive practices, institutions and truth regimes. For example, Consider the short story "The Larder" by Morris Laurie that highlights the wanton destruction of the natural environment. There are two discourses that can be seen to be present in the text. The first is a discourse of materialism. The second, which stands in opposition to this, is an environmental discourse. Underlying the materialist discourse is the idea that people have a right to go somewhere, and take what they want; regardless of the impact that those actions might have on the environment. In opposition to the materialist discourse is an eco-critical discourse that stands diametrically opposed to a materialist discourse.

This discourse constructs humans as part of the natural world. It also attributes to them the responsibility for protecting and taking care of the environment. By foregrounding the slaughter of the shellfish, the reader is positioned to see the action of the resort and the tourists as irresponsible environmental vandalism. In this way an environmental discourse is given the privileged voice and representations of real estate agents (materialism personified) are defined by their action (i.e. the discursive practices) as exploitative and given negative value.

According to Foucault, power is inseparable from discourse and discursive practices. Through discourses, power produces reality by constructing 'domains of objects and rituals of truth' (Foucault, 1979, p. 194). Power for Foucault is not a commonsensical top-down movement where subjects are acted upon unwittingly or unwillingly as in Marxist conceptions of power. Generally speaking, for Marxists, power exists in relation to an individual subject, or collective, exerting domination by force, coercion, violence (symbolic or real) or ideology, over another individual, group or class. For Foucault, however, power is not a property but a strategy. Rather than being possessed, it is exercised. Power permeates through discourse and in turn applies itself to:

the everyday life which categorises the individual, makes him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognise with in himself. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects (Foucault, 1982, p. 212).

The object of the analysis of power is undertaken, not to seek out who is in power but to identify how power installs itself and produces its effects. As such, power by definition is relational. It can only exist in relation to others and, in doing so,

designates relationships amongst those involved. Furthermore, power exists only when it is put into action. Therefore, that which defines power is not the ideological or the transcendental, but the material. Power, like discourse is visible through material discursive practices.

Conclusion

There is no one right approach to text analysis. Because paradigms shift and discourses come and go, today's 'right' might well be tomorrow's wrong methodology. I have documented two almost contradictory Theorists, Saussure and Foucault. Despite one being structuralist and the other being post-structuralist, both ways of reading are given voice as valid methodology in contemporary text analysis.

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