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The Semiotic Perspectives of Peirce and Saussure: A Brief Comparative Study

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this paper is to make a comparative analysis between two leading scholars' perspectives on semiotic theory, namely Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure. In addition, it is also aimed at discussing the linkage between communication and semiotic which can be grasped as a signification of symbol or simply as a study of sign in societal life. Apart from the communication field itself, the theory is commonly used as a reference in various fields such as philosophy, linguistic, arts and literature, archeology, architecture, mathematics and so on. The data has been attained by using content analysis technique of various studies on semiotic and related subject. This article is expected to generate positive contribution in underlining the significance of semiotic theory, not only towards the enhancement of the semiotic epistemology but also to other researchers and academicians in related fields or specific areas.

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1. Introduction

Semiotic derives from the Greek *semesion*, meaning sign, *semainon* which means signifier and *semainomenon* meaning signified or indication. Generally, semiotic is the study of signs or an epistemology about the existence or the actuality of sign in societal life. Many pioneers, researchers, practitioners and authors of semiotic such as

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Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes, Roman Jakobsen, Charles Morris and Umberto Eco (Eco, 1979; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993; Panuti & Zoest, 1996; Chandler, 2002) have agreed on the simple definition. For understanding and clearer purpose, semiotic accounts for everything that can be seen or be interpreted as a sign as postulated by Umberto Eco in his book entitled 'A Theory of Semiotics' who indicated that 'semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else' (1979; 7). According to Umberto Eco, that 'something else' does not necessarily exist exactly at the same time when the sign represent or replace its position. Therefore, Umberto Eco often refers to it as theory of lie, or deception because it can be used for misleading or deceiving others (1976, p. 6-7).

Tracing the historical background and its advent, especially during the development of the classical semiotic, the philosophy pertaining to the significance of semiotic in the life of mankind has begun about more than two thousand years ago by the Greek philosophers. Later during the medieval times, the meaning and the use of signs have been discussed in depth by the Stoici (Zeno) as well as other philosophers and scholars. However, the term 'semiotic' only appeared at the end of 18th century when introduced and applied by a German philosopher, Lambert. Later in the 20th century, the thought and the use of signs on a systematic basis began to gain public attention and till then the field of semiotic has continued to become a research topic and writings among scholars and academicians to date (Panuti & Zoest, 1996; Yarni, Erizal, Studs, & Amris, 2001). In the development of the modern semiotic history, there are two pioneers from western countries who have made big contributions towards the respected field, namely Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a linguist from Switzerland and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), a philosopher from America.

Thus, the focal objective of this paper is to attain a brief comparative analysis of semiotic theory between both scholars from two different approaches and continents, the one from Europe and the other one from America, namely the semiotic approach introduced by Peirce and Saussure. The justification of choosing both approaches are mainly because they have been recognized as pioneers of the respected epistemology in the history of modern semiotic. In addition, their approaches are not only confined within their respective area of studies but have reached and produced significant impacts across other disciplines. In other words, it is a multidisciplinary basis. To date, the semiotic approaches and concepts that they introduced have received widespread coverage and are often used as references in various fields and disciplines of thought that are not only narrowed to the field of philosophy and linguistic, but also arts & literature, such as music, theatre, movies and text analysis as well as communication, advertising, anthropology, psychology, archeology, architecture, mathematics and so on.

2. Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of sign

Ferdinand de Saussure is a linguist scholar who has developed the basis or groundwork of general linguistic theory. He is well-known as a founder of modern linguist. The emergence of the sign theory in the field of linguistics started when he felt that the theory of linguistic signs should be placed in a more general basis theory. Inspired and grounded from that thought, he has proposed the term 'semiology' in a few compilations of lecture notes taken by his students based on lectures given since 1907 to 1911, which eventually have been published as a book entitled 'Course in General Linguistics'. Finally, those works or masterpieces became a high-impact source of linguistic theory which is known as structuralisme (Grenz, 2001). Given below are the excerpts from Saussure which are considered as a catalyst for the emergence of semiotic field:

A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from Greek semeion 'sign'). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993, p. 4).

The gist and primary focus of Saussure's theory is the principle that emphasized language as a system of sign, and besides language there are many other sign systems that exist in the world of mankind. However, in his opinion

the system of linguistic signs or language is the most superior sign system compared to other sign systems that exist in the real world because it plays an important role in constructing reality. He focuses on the underlying system of language (langue) as compared to the use of language (parole or speech). There are several views or basic concepts underlying Saussure's theory of sign, namely the two-dimensional system, the consensus or conventional system, the networking relationship between signs system and the arbitrary system.

In a nutshell, Saussure's theory of sign gives more emphasis to internal structure devoted to cognitive thought process or activity of human minds in structuring the physical (material) or intangible (abstract) signs of their environments or surroundings, and among them is the structure of linguistic signs in the language system that allows them to function as human beings and communicate with each other. Saussure's theory is considered as the proponent to the thought that "language does not reflect reality but rather constructs it" because we do not only use language or give meaning to anything that exists in the world of reality, but also to anything that does not exist in it" (Chandler, 2002, p. 28). Saussure's principle is also known as structuralisme and has given the basic core to the mind of prominent scholars in other fields, and one of the most important is the approach of structuralisme by Levi-Strauss.

3. Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of sign

Charles Sanders Peirce is well-known as a pioneer of pragmatism doctrine who has provided the basic in the general theory of signs through his writings, and texts that have been compiled 25 years after his death in a single comprehensive piece of work entitled *Oeuvres Completes* (Zoest, 1991). Unlike Saussure who has introduced the term 'semiology', Peirce proposed the term 'semiotic', which according to him is synonymous with the concept of logic that focuses on the knowledge of human thinking process as portrayed in his writing published in 1931/1958:

Logic, in its general sense, is, as I believe I have shown, only another name for semiotic, the quasi-necessary, or formal doctrine of signs. By describing the doctrine as "quasi-necessary", or formal, I mean that we observe the characters of such signs as we know, and from such an observation, by a process which I will not object to naming Abstraction, we are led to statements, eminently fallible, and therefore in one sense by no means necessary, as to what must be characters of all signs used by a "scientific" intelligence, that is to say by an intelligence capable of learning by experience (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993, p. 4).

The main principles containing Peirce's theory are the human mind and sign boundaries, the three-dimensional system (triadic/trichotomy) and the relativity regarding the three typologies or taxonomies of signs (icon, index and symbol).

4. Comparative analysis

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) lived during the same epoch but came from two different continents, Europe and America. Saussure was born in Geneva, Switzerland whereas Peirce was born in Massachussets, United States of America (USA). Although they did not mutually recognized and knew each other's studies, interestingly both were born with the similar desire and thought which is to develop a field of signification, i.e to elucidate and to search the meaning behind signs and symbols (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993). The thoughts and approaches of these two leading and renowned scholars in semiotic have pioneered and inspired other followers and scholars. Consequently, several well-known scholars in the field of semiotic have arised, among them were Louis Hjemselev (1899-1965), Charles Morris (1901-1979), Max Bense (1910 – 1990) Roman Jakobsen (1896-1982), Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and Umberto Eco (1932-).

Terminologically, Saussure proposed the word semiology whereas Peirce employed the word semiotic. Conceptually, the principal concept of Saussure's theory initiated from the thought of a dichotomy or duality basis in which according to him, a sign consists of two focal components, namely signifier-the sound pattern (marker-sound image) and signified-the concept (the outcome/the interpretation/conception of the signifier). Signifier refers to something that is in a material form (physical), explicitly exist and can be distinguished by human senses. On the other hand, signified denotes to something literally and physically does not exist, which is in abstract basis (Eco,

1976; Zoest, 1996; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993; Chandler, 2001; Masinambau, 2001). Meanwhile, the relationship between the signifier and signified is referred to as the signification system. Saussure asserted that both concepts have a very close relationship and have mutual need and complement each other. It means that both cannot be separated, i.e. one aspect will not exist without the existence of the other (Chandler, 2001). Besides signifier and signified, Saussure's concept of dichotomy also refers to *form* and *content*, *langue* and *parole*, *synchronic* and *diachronic*, as well as *syntagmatic* and *paradigmatic/associative*.

In contrast to the binary concept of Saussure's theory, Peirce's theory of sign focuses on three-dimensional or triadic and trichotomy system. Peirce classifies sign into three aspects, namely i) sign or *representatum* or ground, ii) object which is also referred to as *referent*, and iii) *interpretant*. The first aspect is synonymous with Saussure's concept termed as signifier which means physical signs (explicitly exist) (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993) but does not have to be material in nature (Chandler, 2002). On the contrary, Saussure's concept of signified, is divided by Peirce into two components, namely object and interpretant. Object refers to something that is represented or exemplified by the sign (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993), which owns both properties of concrete and abstract in nature (Masinambow, 2001). On the other hand, interpretant means any meanings conveyed by the representatum about the object which was previously unknown (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993), and abstract in nature (implicitly exist) and does not exist in human perception (Masinambaw, 2001). The interactional relationship between those three concepts is denoted by Peirce as *semiosis* (Chandler, 2002).

Another difference is in terms of sign limitation. Saussure studied behavior and according to his views, a sign is resulted from an imagination or an activity of human minds that is expressed through language codes and understood by the individuals who are involved in the communication process. In other words, a sign for Saussure is something delivered by someone with a purpose and specific meaning intentionally, i.e. a process or a phenomenon that does not occur coincidentally or by chance. This means that according to Saussure, nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign. Implicitly, Saussure was trying to explain that not all things neither in human's life nor their environments can be considered as signs. It suggests that a sign has a certain limitation, subject to a system of convention, which means something that is mutually or commonly agreed by all those involved in the particular culture. For example, the alphabet and writing system, the traffic signals and so on. Thus, in Saussure's theory of sign, language is a sign system because language has been conventionally used to allow humans to communicate among them. In spite of that, Saussure argued that even though a sign is subject to a mutual agreement or conventional system, a sign also possesses an arbitrary characteristic which means that a sign can produce a variety of different meanings depending on different interpretations as Saussure stated that "there is nothing at all to prevent the association of whatsoever with any sequences of sounds whatsoever....the process which selects one particular sound-sequence to correspond to one particular idea is arbitrary" (Chandler, 2002, p. 26).

In contrast with Saussure's viewpoints, Peirce studied logic and as a philosopher who embraced logical thinking, he wanted to know about the way human beings think, that is, how people use their common senses or rationality (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). In the words of Peirce, people think through the signs, which enable them to communicate with each other and give meaning to anything that exist in their environment (Zoest, 1991). The basic principle of Peirce's theory is that everything can be a sign, as long as it has the ability to represent something according to the individual's interpretation and thought. In contrast to Saussure's view, Peirce did not confine the existence of sign as something that is purposely conveyed. By this understanding, a sign can exist coincidentally when someone has interpreted something as sign, even though it was not purposely meant or communicated to him. Peirce's ideology of sign encompasses everything whether it is created by human or not as long as it can be grasped and acknowledged by their minds (Eco, 1991).

Succinctly, the difference between Peirce and Saussure's orientations lie on the aspect of reality as well as the discipline of epistemology. For Peirce, the reality lies outside the internal structure of human and is not related to each other while for Saussure, reality has a bond with our physical or human minds. As for discipline, Peirce is in the field of philosophy, that queries the association between reality in total with the nature and the existence of the sign while Saussure is in the field of linguistics, that focusses on giving a review of the association between a sign which is considered as an aspect of word construction (Masinambow & Rahayu 2001).

5. Discussion and concluding remarks: Communication and semiotic

This paper has attempted to compare the theories of signs between Saussure's perspective of semiology and Peirce's notion of semiotic, the two prominent scholars of the related epistemology, while highlighting the

relationship between the field of communication and semiotic. In communication, semiotic theory focuses on methods of structuring and operating the symbols system, which means the ways symbol systems is structured and how those systems is operationalized. The association between semiotic and communication is clearly shown through the assertions or claims of several scholars, among them Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz (1993) who described communication as a human symbolic activity, while semiotic is defined as the study of sign system, which shall operate as a symbol or signal. In fact, Leeds-Hurwitz has stated that to understand the theory of semiotic, which covered concepts such as signs, codes and culture, she pointed out that there is a 'special fit' between semiotic and non-verbal communication (1993, p. xvii). Her statement is not something awkward due to the fact that both semiotic and communication constitute in a continuum, and can be implied as a support apparatus towards a big umbrella, i.e social culture. Furthermore, the three terminologies; semiotic, communication and culture have been integrated by Umberto Eco when he claimed that "*to communicate is to use the entire world as a semiotic apparatus. I believe that culture is that, and nothing else*" (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993, p. 17).

In addition, Umberto Eco (1979, p. 8) also claimed in one of his hypotheses that drive his research that, "semiotic studies all cultural products as product of communication. Therefore each of these products would seem to be permitted by an underlying system of significations ". Later on, he made an adjustment to his formulae by stating that "the whole of culture should be studied as a communicative phenomenon based on signification systems" (1979, p. 22). Therefore, in this sense, Umberto Eco seems to equalize communication with the primary concept in semiotic, i.e signification. In fact the two concepts are often matched together by Umberto Eco when he often wrote the signification and/or communication.

In a cultural process particularly, Umberto Eco claimed that methodologically, semiotic signification and communication are strictly intertwined, i.e having a close relationship or strong bond (Eco, 1979, p. 9). In addition, both semiotic and communication share many similar concepts such as symbol, meaning, verbal and non-verbal code etc. In a nutshell, the semiotic approach is appropriate to be applied with an assumption that any cultural manifestations can be seen as a process of communication, i.e any cultural phenomenon is also a sign phenomenon.

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