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## A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO DISCOURSE ANALYSIS WITH REFERENCE TO TRANSLATION THEORY

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1. Language is often said to be a system of signs used to communicate messages. Yet language signs contribute only a small part to the total process of communication. Many other signs are involved in conveying a message. In discourses, para-linguistic signs such as intonation, pause, spelling, paragraphing, punctuation, literary forms such as prose or poetry, compositional structuring, etc., along with extra-linguistic signs such as body stance, the wink of an eye, clothing, hair style, context and setting of a situation, cultural presuppositions, the furniture in a room (office, kitchen, bedroom), pools of water along a highway, road signs, etc., all contribute towards an understanding of what an author wishes to convey by the words uttered. Written texts have numerous ways by which extra-linguistic signs can be incorporated into a text—the most obvious being descriptive notes to fill out the setting of an event.

These 'other' signs restrict the language signs, often even to the extent that an utterance can convey exactly the opposite of what the word and sentence level of an expression seems to convey. For example, the sentence 'you are a real friend' can be said within various contextual frameworks and with varying intonation stressing different terms of the utterance. A particular context and intonation may communicate approval and appreciation. Or, within a given context, one may stress the word 'real' to disapprove of what has been done, even to censure. The same sentence can be uttered by stressing the word 'you' and addressing one of two persons present in order to tell the other one that what has been done was not at all what one would expect from a friend. Extra-linguistic and para-linguistic features signal how an utterance is to be understood.

2. On returning from the city of Samaria to the well where Jesus was waiting, his disciples found him in conversation with a woman. In John 4.27 we read that the disciples were greatly surprised to find him talking with a woman. But none of them said to her 'What do you want?' or asked him 'Why are you talking to her?' The surprise was triggered by the cultural convention of the time. Men did not talk with women in public, at any rate not a Rabbi such as Jesus. The conversation was a semiotic sign of an unusual situation: Jesus breaking through a social convention. And later on in verse 39 we find Jesus breaking another social

convention by staying with the Samaritans, a taboo for any orthodox Jew at the time. The cultural signs carry the essence of the incident recorded in Jn 4: the ministry of Jesus sharply contrasts the old and the new order. The gospel has no regard for petty human conventions. The disciples, however, knew Jesus for what he was and did not question his social behaviour. These conclusions come from extra-linguistic information triggered by the text.

3. Language as such is only part of a larger system of signs. To analyze a discourse, therefore, calls for going beyond the syntactic and semantic levels of the language code. A semiotic approach to discourse analysis is required since a discourse involves more than words and sentences. Using language involves a speech act, that is, language in context: a socio-linguistic event. As a matter of fact one can never use language except within a context. A semiotic approach to discourse analysis consequently involves recognition of multiple signs, inter-related and interacting, so that a particular utterance may have more than one level of meaning. For example, an utterance such as 'it's going to rain' can, in a given context, convey what the words as such signify, namely that 'rain is going to fall on the ground', but within another frame of reference it can also say that 'the crops will be saved', etc. The pragmatic situation, the context, determines how an utterance is to be interpreted. This means that on the word level an utterance conveys certain information, but *how* this word level information is *to be understood* in terms of its intention depends on the pragmatic situation. It involves language *in function*, that is to say: what the author is *doing* with the utterance, what speech act the author is performing. Thus the utterance 'it's going to rain' can be used to encourage and assure the receptor. Understanding an utterance involves far more than the lexical meanings of the words, or even their combination into sentences. Any utterance involves a complex network of layers, one of which is the lexical level, another the syntax level, another the level of reference, another that of the context, etc. Multiple signs contribute towards the understanding of an utterance.

For example the term *New Baytown* as the name of a town is in itself a mere language sign to refer to a particular populated area, but the name can also, and at the same time, be a sign of an ultra-conservative community, if such a town has acquired this reputation. In a discourse the mention of the name of the town can call up various connotations. For instance, in John Steinbeck's *The Winter of our Discontent*, the sentence 'a lady does not wander—not in New Baytown', suggests that for *lady* the meaning 'a woman of refined habits' should be applied, and that in the particular community of New Baytown such a woman would not loiter on the streets. In a different context, in which New Baytown has been referred to as a suburb of villainy, the term *lady* would probably merely mean 'a female person' and *wander* would be understood as 'walking about' without any negative reference. The connotative features of meaning associated with New Baytown are suggested by the semiotic values attached to the town or suburb in question, and these connotative features stipulate our understanding of the utterance, even to a larger extent than the meaning of the words themselves.

As a matter of fact, the same utterance may be used to convey quite divergent intentions. A sentence such as 'do you eat strawberries?' may be understood as a question asking information about a person's likes or dislikes of certain foods. It

may also be said to voice a reproach: 'you eat strawberries all by yourself; what about sharing with me?' But the same sentence may also be used to give a warning: 'what on earth are you doing. You know eating strawberries is not allowed'. The latter may be said in a warehouse to a packer of fruit, or to a person known to be allergic to strawberries. Multiple semiotic signs contribute towards our understanding of an utterance.

4. In oral discourse, facial expressions, gestures, intonation, silence, etc., are semiotic signs conveying important information. In written texts descriptive notes, referred to above, as well as choice of words, allusions, punctuation, etc., supply the necessary background. These are semiotic signs determining our frame of reference. Another extract from John Steinbeck's *The Winter of our Discontent* may illustrate the point:

Margie said, "Hi! You're busy. I'll come back later."	
She crossed the alley mouth and went into the bank. Joey Morphy lighted up the whole	2
barred square of his teller's window when he saw her. What a smile, what a good playmate,	
and what a lousy prospect as a husband. Margie properly appraised him as a born bachelor	4
who would die fighting to remain one.	
She said, "Please, sir, do you have any fresh unsalted money?"	6
"Excuse me, ma'am, I'll see. How much would you like?"	
"About six ounces, m'sieur." She took a folding book from her white kid bag and wrote a	8
cheque for twenty dollars.	
Joey laughed. He liked Margie. He turned her cheque round. "Do you want this in	10
twenties, fifties or hundreds?"	

To appreciate the significance of this little conversation one has to know the context in which it took place. The context provides the signs by which the meanings of the words and sentences can be understood. In line one Margie addressed the grocer, whose shop is next to the bank. In terms of this information the phrases 'fresh unsalted money' and 'six ounces' in lines 6 and 8 become significant of the lighthearted relationship between Margie and Joey Morphy. Without this setting, such expressions in a bank situation would seem very strange and out of place. This lighthearted relationship is also suggested by Joey Morphy's jovial reaction in line 2 when Margie enters the bank, as well as Margie's opinion of Joey Morphy as a friend (line 3). In fact, the novel occasionally describes the relationship between Joey and Margie as that of very close friends, but without any further pretensions. They like to be playful in their relationship, as is also indicated in line 10. The same attitude is signalled within such a frame of reference by the words 'bachelor' and 'like' in lines 4 and 10. Even the emphatic descriptive phrase 'who would die fighting to remain one' in line 5 along with 'a lousy prospect as a husband' in line 4, indicate that in the relationship between Joey Morphy and Margie, serious considerations are not at all envisaged. It is remarkable how many signals Steinbeck has built into the passage, in order to clearly mark the essence of what he wanted to convey. Reading this passage without the contextual background would result in a fairly awkward impression of the events. The semiotic signs condition our understanding of the written text.

5. A semiotic approach to a discourse takes cognisance of all possible signs, linguistic, para-linguistic and extra-linguistic, that may be relevant to understand and to interpret a text. These signs function as multiple layers which may

be conveniently grouped into three significant levels: (a) the *declarative level*, that is, the level of the mere statement, the bare facts as they are lexically and syntactically predicated; (b) the *structural level*, that is, the compositional features suggesting particular groupings, bundles or clusters of information, along with their interrelationship to one another, by which the focus of the discourse is signified; and (c) the *intentional level*, the purpose of the discourse, that is, what the author, or perhaps rather the text, seems to convey within a particular frame of reference—in short, what is the message. Though each level communicates a seemingly different set of features, the first leads to the second, and the second to the third, to convey the real purpose and sense of what a text has to say.

Very often, discourse analysis concerns itself mainly with the second level, because discourse analysis developed within a structural approach to linguistics. The methodology suggested by the present discussion stresses the necessity for acknowledging all three levels in terms of a semiotic approach. This, in fact, contends that discourse analysis involves a wider scope.

The following discourse (Luke 7.36-50) clearly shows the relevance of the three levels of interpretation signified by the semiotic features of the text.

The first level of reading a text, the declarative level, deals with the bare facts of the communication. In the case of Lk 7.36-50 we find the following: A Pharisee invited Jesus to have dinner with him. During the meal a woman known for her sinful life entered the room, stood behind Jesus by his feet crying and wetting his feet with her tears. Then she dried his feet with her hair, kissed them and poured expensive perfume on them. The Pharisee now concludes that if Jesus were a prophet he would not have allowed the woman to touch him. Then Jesus spoke to the Pharisee, telling him a little story about two men who owed money, the one 500 silver coins, the other 50. The moneylender cancelled the debt of both. 'Which one', Jesus asked, 'will love him more?' Simon had to answer that it would be the one who was forgiven more. Turning to the woman, Jesus reminded the Pharisee that the woman did what the Pharisee himself should have done. The woman, who had more to be forgiven than the Pharisee, showed more love. Then Jesus forgave her sins, to the surprise of the other people sitting at the table.

On this first level a number of semiotic signs are apparent. The story ends rather abruptly, and the woman never says a word. This immediately suggests that the story was not told by the author to merely jot down what happened at a particular dinner but that the author selected certain events to suit a purpose. The story is a vehicle for some message. This possible judgement becomes more probable when one considers that the story told by Jesus about the two men who owed money is applied to the woman and to the Pharisee. One feels that there must be more behind the events than what meets the eye. This is strengthened by certain cultural signs: the woman managed to get into the room without anyone stopping her. She was apparently no stranger in the household. She could even have been acquainted with the Pharisee. What she did to Jesus corresponded exactly to the customary tokens of hospitality at the time: wash, kiss, anoint—factors referred to later in the story: she did what the Pharisee should have done. His failure to perform such regular acts of hospitality suggests that his invitation

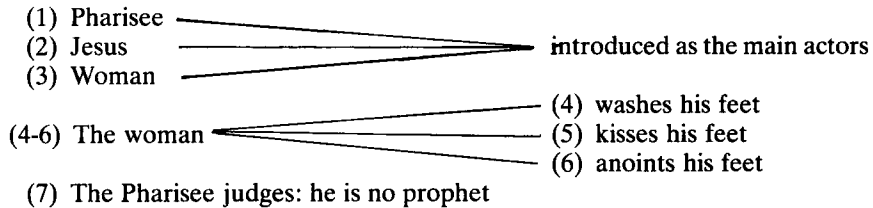
to Jesus was not one of friendship, but that there were other reasons involved. This is signalled by his thoughts, explicitly mentioned, namely that the Pharisee had doubts about whether Jesus was a real prophet. Perhaps the Pharisee invited Jesus to have dinner with him, not because he treasured his company, but rather to have Jesus at hand to question him or examine him.

A structural analysis of the story reveals how the focus of the discourse is on the Pharisee and his own self-righteousness, a fact which might have even more significance if he was indeed acquainted with this woman.

Structurally the story has two main sections: a narrative (7.36-39) and a dialogue (7.40-50). The Greek text of the narrative section has 7 sentence construction units, numbers 1-7 of the following outline:

- (1) A Pharisee invited Jesus to have dinner with him.
- (2) Jesus went to his house and sat down to eat.
- (3) In that town was a woman who lived a sinful life.
- (4) When she heard that Jesus was eating in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar full of perfume and stood behind Jesus, by his feet, crying and wetting his feet with her tears and drying his feet with her hair.
- (5) She kissed his feet.
- (6) She anointed his feet with perfume.
- (7) When the Pharisee who invited him saw this, he said to himself: If this man really were a prophet he would know who this woman is who is touching him; he would know that she is a sinner.

Structurally we have the following:



Then the story changes to a dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisee, called Simon, followed by a short dialogue between Jesus and the woman (although only Jesus talks) which in turn is interrupted by a response from the other guests, numbers 8-16 of the following outline:

- (8) Jesus spoke up and said to him: Simon, I have something to tell you.
- (9) He said: Teacher, tell me.
- (10) (Jesus said:) There were two men who owed money to a moneylender. The one owed 500 silver coins, the other 50. Neither of them could pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Which of them will love him more?
- (11) Simon answered: I suppose that it would be the one who was forgiven more.
- (12) Jesus said: You are right.
- (13) Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon: Do you see this woman? I came into your home and you gave me no water for my feet.

She washed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.

You did not give me a kiss.

She did not stop kissing my feet since I came.

You did not anoint my head with olive oil.

She anointed my feet with perfume.

Therefore I tell you: her many sins have been forgiven because she has loved much.

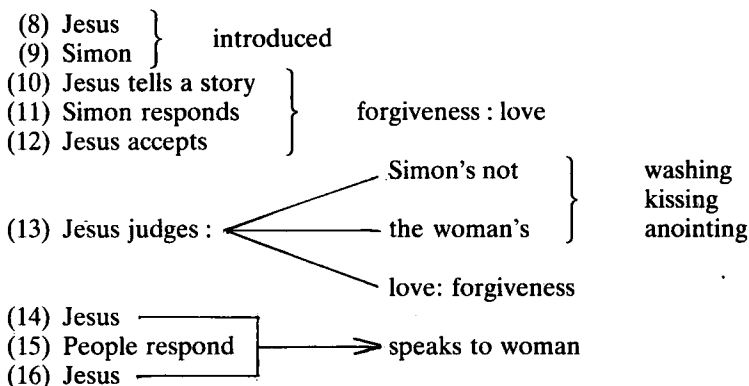
Whoever has been forgiven little, loves little.

(14) Jesus said to her: Your sins are forgiven.

(15) The others at the table began to say to themselves: Who is this man who even forgives sins?

(16) Jesus said to the woman: Your faith has saved you, go in peace.

Structurally we have the following:



Note that in the first section (1-7) the woman and the Pharisee react to Jesus. The Pharisee and the woman are the protagonists of the story. Jesus is in the background. In the second section (8-16), however, Jesus takes the initiative and reacts toward the Pharisee and the woman. Jesus now becomes the protagonist. In the first section the Pharisee finally dominates the scene, in the second section Jesus takes over vindicating the woman and denouncing the Pharisee. The second section also indicates structurally that the opposition forgiveness:love is the pivot point of the story. The Pharisee's answer (11) contains the essence of the story: forgiveness stands in a direct relationship to love. This is the theme of the story.

This brings us to the third level of interpretation, the intentional level. It seems that Luke uses the events to convey a message of utter irony: Jesus and his preaching is not for people (like the Pharisee) who regard themselves as righteous. Jesus came to minister to the underdogs, the outcasts, the sinners. His message is understood by these very people, while the respected of society, the privileged, the powerful, stand aloof. Those who can be expected to appraise the preaching of Jesus do not understand his message at all, while the despised and rejected really comprehend the essence of the message. The story illustrates the paradoxical impact of Jesus on our everyday life. He shatters our existence and

breaks through the clichés of our value systems. He uncovers our distorted world. We are shocked like the people at the dinner to experience how Jesus works. Because we do not love, we also do not experience the peace and amity of forgiveness. The story becomes a symbol of our own world. We see ourselves in the actors and events of the story.

6. Translating a text such as Lk 7.36-50 may involve a decision to render either one or more of these levels of meanings. Or perhaps rather to test the translation in terms of how people in the target language would respond to the translated text. Would they be able to recognize the structural relationships along with the other semiotic signs which enabled us to read the text as we have just done. It seems more and more desirable that Bible translations for the modern reader should have at least some footnotes, suggesting how the meanings of certain words and phrases are to be understood in terms of their contextual and cultural reference, in order to enable the reader to grasp what a text is saying. It is imperative to recognize that understanding comes from a wider area than that provided by the mere linguistic signs. Translation is not rendering one language into another language, but rather one discourse into another discourse by means of a particular language substituting for the source language.

Significant structural clusters may, for example, be suggested to the reader by means of the layout of the translated text. Even the order of sentences (and for that matter also of verses) ought to be changed if such a change would afford the reader a proper understanding of what the text is saying. Extensive research is needed to know exactly what are the general discourse patterns favoured by a particular language or even a particular community using such a language.

The closest natural equivalents of word or phrase meanings have been in focus for some time already and with considerable positive results. The same should be done for discourses. That is to say: what would be the closest natural discourse pattern to render Lk 7.36-50 into, say, language Z. This should be done with due attention to all other semiotic signs by which a reader understands a text. Translation requires a semiotic approach.

Noss, Philip A. (ed.): *Grafting Old Rootstock. Studies in Culture and Religion of the Chamba, Duru, Fula, and Gbaya of Cameroun*. Dallas, Texas: International Museum of Cultures 1982. xvi+247 pp., no price stated.

Nine of the fourteen contributors to this volume are expatriates. Several of the contributors have been connected with Bible translation and Bible teaching. The volume is divided into two parts, entitled "Culture and Society", and "Faith and Belief". The essay most directly relevant to Bible translation is a comparison by Thomas Christensen (pp. 221-231) between Gbaya proverbs and biblical wisdom literature, notably Proverbs and James.