Translating the University: Exploring Indexicality in Intersemiotic Translation

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the use of indexicality for understanding the emergence of social-cultural habits. Based on the work of Parmentier, it works on a methodology in which social-cultural artefacts or patterns are regarded as traces of the semiotic processes through which they were formed. It proceeds from a definition of translation as the imposition of constraints on semiotic material, i.e. semiotic work, and explores the effects of this work as indexes of the work. The article then considers data from the University of the Free State (UFS) in a demonstration of the possibilities of this kind of analysis, suggesting that the UFS is mostly constructing its identity around foreignizing influences and excluding indigenous links.

KEYWORDS

Indexicality, Parmentier, Semiotic Processes, Social-Cultural Artifacts

INTRODUCTION

Social and cultural phenomena are constructions that human beings create in response to their environment in order to flourish or at least survive as best they can. These phenomena take a variety of material forms, but they have one thing in common: Whatever else they may be, they are semiotic. Thus, a democracy, an autocracy, or any other form of political organization, for example, is, among other things, the effect of a meaning-making process. In Peircean terms, it is an Interpretant, the outcome of a translation process (Marais, 2018a; 2018b). Similarly, aesthetic artefacts of all kinds, scientific theories and technological innovations, legal systems, architecture, agriculture, sport or anything else that human beings do or make have a semiotic dimension and can thus be studied from the perspective of semiotics, as an Interpretant, as the outcome of meaning-making processes. Thus, one can ask of anything in the social/cultural domain: What does it mean? What does it stand for? Of what is it a sign? How has it been translated?

Studying the meaning of social and cultural phenomena falls within the domain of social semiotics with a venerable intellectual tradition stretching from, at least, Peirce and De Saussure, Levi-Strauss, the semiotic structuralists and systemic functional linguists to more recent versions of multimodal studies (Kress, 2010; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Van Leeuwen, 2005) and multimodal discourse analysis (Kress, 2013; Machin, 2016). While my work draws on this tradition, it explores a different emphasis, namely a method for studying the emergence or development of society or culture without recourse to language. If society/culture is embodied or materialized semiotic practice, we need a way to study it as embodied and materialized. This means that asking people why they did what they did will contribute to our understanding, but it will not suffice. We need to understand the practices/artefacts themselves, too. Therefore, I do not want to study, in Kress’ (2010) terms, the design of

DOI: 10.4018/IJSVR.2019070103
multimodal communication because I am not primarily interest in the design but in what the cultural phenomena index about the semiotic processes that caused them. I also do not want to analyze semiotic systems from a discourse analysis perspective, not because I do not think it important, but because I think there is more to social/cultural emergence than power. There could be, for instance, material constraints that need not be related to power.

My interest in the emergence of social and cultural phenomena is focused on what is commonly known as ‘development contexts’. Development studies, which is one of the fields of study interested in the emergence of society and culture, is moving towards approaches such as semiotics and translation studies to help them overcome the technicist assumptions in earlier theories of development (Kaplan, 2002; 2005; Pieterse, 2010; Westoby & Dowling, 2013; Westoby & Kaplan, 2014). Development contexts usually presuppose a clash of systems of meaning, and quite often, this clash is reduced to technical transfer. In line with work done in development studies, I am suggesting this (my version of) social-semiotic approach to be able to consider even the most technical of human endeavors in terms of the meaning thereof. What does it mean to build a dam? What does it mean to build a house this way and not that way? What does it mean to have a computer on which to write an article? However, I am trying to go further than these questions. I am focusing specifically on the indexicality of social/cultural phenomena as this allows some insight into the semiotic work that created them.

In this article, I thus bring together social semiotics and translation studies in order to explore the emergence of social/cultural phenomena. It has been argued convincingly that aesthetic artefacts are mainly iconic signs (Aguiar, et al., 2015; Morreira, 2015; Quiero & Aguiar, 2015), and it is also known that language entails mostly a symbolic character. What I would like to explore in this article is Parmentier’s (2016, p. 88) claim that ‘the study of indexical signs lies at the heart of social semiotic research’. A detailed theoretical argument about the validity and implications of this claim has to wait for another day. For this article, I accept Parmentier’s claim and use it as a framework to explore a number of translation processes at the university where I work. I chose the university because it is at hand, and it should suffice to explore Parmentier’s claim. The fact that I include development scholars in the implied audience for this paper, therefore, definitely impacts on the way in which I present the argument, which would have been different had I written for social semioticians only.

INDEXICALITY

Peirce identified a number of categories of sign. One of the sets of categories refers to the relationship between the Representamen and the Object. In this set of categories, he identified three types of relationships, namely iconicity, indexicality or symbolicity. If the relationship between Representamen and Object is iconic, it means that the Representamen ‘are like’ the Object in some way or shares ‘a quality’ with the Object in some way (Aguiar & Queiroz, 2013), such as with a photo, a painting or a sculpture (CP 2.247). An indexical relationship between Representamen and Object entails that the Representamen stands either in a physical or causal relationship with the Object (Merrell, 2000) (CP 2.248), or as Lefebvre (2007, pp. 7-8) say, the ‘… object acts as the efficient cause of the sign’. For instance, when someone points to something, the pointing finger is an indexical sign, or when someone sees smoke, the smoke is an indexical sign of a fire. Peirce formulated it as follows:

An Index is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object. It cannot, therefore, be a Qualisign, because qualities are whatever they are independently of anything else. In so far as the Index is affected by the Object, it necessarily has some Quality in common with the Object, and it is in respect to these that it refers to the Object. It does, therefore, involve a sort of Icon, although an Icon of a peculiar kind; and it is not the mere resemblance of its Object, even in these respects which makes it a sign, but it is the actual modification of it by the Object. (CP 2.248)
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