

Greimas Semiotic Square and Short Stories Reading Comprehension: A Case Study of Advanced Iranian Students

**Ferdows Aghagolzadeh
&
Reza Rezaei**

Tarbiat Modares University
Iran

Abstract: In the quest of finding a solution to a common problem and effective mechanism to develop the capacity for analysis and understanding of discourse, this article attempts to examine the efficiency of Greimas semiotic square in the analysis of narrative texts. Based on an empirical method and information gathered from ten advanced Iranian students of French language, our research shows the important role of this approach to increase the students' ability in analyzing narrative texts. Vocabulary enrichment, development of linguistic level and motivation in reading are the other positive aspects of applying this approach.

Key words: Greimas semiotic approach, narrative texts, teaching strategies, reading comprehension

INTRODUCTION

It is consistently argued that if a student does not know writing, he is unlikely to maintain the coherence of speech in a paragraph or a text, and he does not understand some apparently simple texts and is not be able to create a story. We do not doubt that in some instances, this may be real and may be the cause of the failure of some verbal skills that the education system failed to stimulate.

Using knowledge derived from the evolutionary hypothesis of language development, as well as narrative semiotics, constructivism and our own experience, it was proposed to investigate whether these gaps exist in reality, compared to the ability to analyze and invent narratives. It would also examine whether exerting students in the application of a semiotic model of the narrative, this would improve their ability to analyze and understand the stories, their vocabulary and their ability to create narrative text (Circuriel, 1991).

The experience we have had comes from our daily practice in the classroom. As a teacher of the French language, I have to deal with both designing teaching strategies and with analysis of literary texts. In the practice of text analysis, students often experience

some problems of understanding and finding elements of analysis in order to do work with a literary text. In principle, students should not have too many problems of this type, because they have already been in contact with the French for two years or more, and they should have an advanced level of competence, or at least an intermediate level. But the reality is the problem remains. It is for these reasons that we have been motivated to seek the possible causes of this low proficiency, especially after the admission of some students that the selected texts of French literature is a difficult subject to understand. The question is difficult compared to what? Is it the lexical items? Syntax? Analysis itself? Or teacher?

By asking all these questions, we conducted an experiment with students by using the semiotic model for the analysis of literary narrative texts. Also, because of the need for a revision of strategies for teaching literary texts, we have inspired many studies of this type, and in particular those derived from the French semiotic school under the aegis of A. J Greimas to know more about the semiotic analysis of narrative texts, to analyze it and to apply it to our students during the French courses. In the progress of this experiment, we have seen how students perceive the analysis of texts, introducing some semiotic elements in classroom work with stories, which was achieved through a monitoring exercise on field.

Thus, our main objective was to verify whether the application of some elements of the semiotic model of text analysis can be a powerful tool and easy to understand at the time of the analysis and interpretation of narrative texts.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Nastir (2004) in his paper "*Semiotics and its roles in the teaching of English as a foreign language*" emphasizes the efficiency of semiotics in English teaching. After a brief definition of semiotics and the vast presentation of the main current teaching methodologies, he supports the idea of the efficiency of the semiotics in its many methods especially in direct method, audio-lingual and in communicative method.

He mentions that the semiotic nature of language teaching is a complicated and an essential concept to study. In the language classroom, the primary role of the language learner is to transfer and exchange correct information with his/her audience. While doing this, the language learner makes use of the semiotic signs. Most of these signs are used unconsciously by the students and the teachers. Since semiotics is the combination of signs and symbols to convey information, the students and the teachers make use of a number of signs, some of which are iconic and some are symbolic. To illustrate, non-verbal and visual communication, cultural elements in semiotics and for vocabulary teaching, signs and symbols are used actively in the language classrooms. Finally he concludes that the students learn the linguistic and sociological aspects of language through methods. In this respect, the language teacher should pay attention to these semiotic symbols as a part of his/her language course. It should be borne in mind that the more the teachers activate the use of these symbolic signs and symbols through activities

in methods, the better the students achieve the social and linguistic aspects of the target language.

According to Erton (2006) the verbal and the non-verbal aspects of language teaching should not be kept separate since they are closely interrelated and interdependent. The use of signs, symbols and visual aids by the teachers help in the enhancement of the learning capacity of the language learner both at cognitive and meta-cognitive levels as they listen and try to learn a foreign language component in the classroom. He argues that semiotics is a very influential and essential field of study, because by making use of signs the learners are able to achieve a lot of information on various fields such as literature, art, architecture, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, etc. In other words, communication is the primary concern of semiotics. In the language classroom, the teachers make use of semiotics symbols to lead to a better understanding of the topic. By doing so, the learners find the opportunity to study the topics of a given course in a more informative and enjoyable way. In order to provide accurate and clear comprehension in the target language, the teachers use a number of methods and techniques in the classroom.

In another study, Azarello & Paolo (2007) have investigated the semiotic games and the role of the teacher within the Vygotskian theoretical framework. They introduced the two aspects of this framework. First, the teacher is seen as a semiotic mediator, who promotes students' internalization processes through signs. But some changes are proposed with respect to the classical Vygotskian approach. First, we extend the notion of sign to all semiotic resources used in the teaching activities: words (in oral or in written form); extra-linguistic modes of expression (gestures, glances,); different types of inscriptions (drawings, sketches, graphs,). Second, we consider the embodied and multimodal ways in which such resources are produced, developed and used. Within such a framework, we utilize a wider semiotic lens (the semiotic bundle, sketched below) to focus the interactions between teacher and students. Our semiotic lens allows for the framing and describing of an important semiotic phenomenon, which we call semiotic games. The semiotic games practice is rooted in the craft knowledge of the teacher, and most of the times are pursued unconsciously by her/him. Once explicit, it can be used to properly design the teacher's intervention strategies in the classroom for supporting students' internalization processes. Semiotics is a powerful tool for observing the didactical processes. However, the classical semiotic approaches put strong limitations upon the structure of the semiotic systems they consider. These results are too narrow for interpreting the didactical phenomena in the classroom.

He concludes the following; roughly speaking, semiotic games are good for focusing further how the signs act as an instrument of psychological activity in a manner analogous to the role of a tool in labor the teacher can promote their production and internalization. A first point is that students are exposed in classrooms to cultural and institutional signs that they little control of. A second point is that learning consists in students' personal appropriation of the signs meaning, fostered by strong social interactions, under the coaching of the teacher. As a consequence, their gestures within

the semiotic bundle (included their relationships with the other signs in the bundle) become a powerful mediating tool between signs and thought.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

The term *semiotics* has been the subject of various definitions, which according to (Bertrand 2000) could be grouped under two trends: logical and cognitive. One is based on the theory of S. Peirce, who relates the semiotic mode of production of the sign and its relationship with reality, and the other is based on the assumptions of Saussure, founder of semiotics or science that studies the life of signs in society. According to Saussure semiotics deals with any system of meaning, later developed, initially in the area of verbal signs only, which gave birth to linguistics.

This science has experienced great development from the second half of the twentieth century as evident by the establishment of a number of different schools of thought. Among these schools, structuralism has been widely recognised, of which there are different versions, even if they all coincide in the study of language in itself and by itself. That is to say, it is not related to use and situation, as well as methodologies borrowed from other sciences (Courtés, 1991). Glossematics, the school founded by L.Hjelmslev, postulates that linguistic structure is composed of two isomorphic levels: expression and content, each analyzable in form and substance (Courtés, 2003). This approach has been very productive for the study of phonetics and phonology, but it is more useful for the study of meaning, because it allows for definition in the fields of traditional semantics (the substance of the content) from that of structural semantics (form of content: the underlying relationships between signs that produce meaning (Fontanille, 1999).

It is from the formal or structural semantics that we began studying the immanent meaning of the text as a unit which manifests discourse. Thus, was born the European semiotics, more specifically, the French semiotics as a theory of meaning. Although inspired by Hjelmslevian approach, it incorporated into its analysis, researches derived from the language of the utterance, structural anthropology and phenomenology (Bertrand, 2000). Numerous studies of this type, and in particular those derived from the French semiotic school under the aegis of AJ Greimas identified four dimensions in the literary text that a semiotic study can approach: the narrative dimension, the passionate dimension, figuratively and enunciative dimension (Bertrand, 2000).

NARRATIVE DIMENSION

Narrative dimension refers to the logical structure of the action that takes place in the story and actantial structures that define the role of actors. Other authors see the meaning of the narrative texts as an organization at various levels ranging from the deeper structures (the basic structures of meaning, the semiotic square, the semio-narratives structures (narrative schema, the schema and the passionate actant scheme) and, finally, surface structures. Narration is the same action that is to narrate, to tell an event in its own way to achieve it. That is to say, it is in the process of enunciation.

Narrative called "the phenomenon of state succession and transformation, part of speech, and responsible for the production of meaning"(Galisson, Germain and Puren:1994, p. 89).

Actant/Actantial Scheme/Actor

The term actant comes from the grammar of L. Tesnière, for whom "the actants are the beings or things which, in any way participate in the action" (Greimas & Courtès, 1979, p. 3). In this sense, the actant is a formal syntactic unit. In the realm of semiotics, this term is used to refer to a functional unit of the narrative syntax. The actant is then defined as "the predicative relation, by its modal composition, its relationship with other actants" (Bertrand, 2000, p. 160). This means that the actor is an abstract entity and in speech, it is represented by the actant.

For semiotics, there are six major actants that do not necessarily appear in a story, in many cases, a clear actor at the same time manifests several actants and sometimes one actant is represented by different actors. It is considered that the actant structure is a relationship between six actants representing semantic axes. They are:

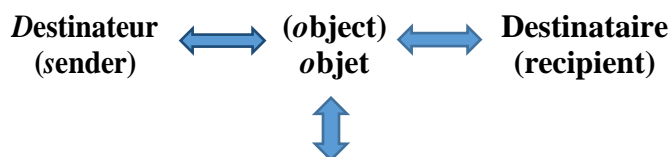
- a) axis of communication senderⁱ vs. recipientⁱⁱ or knowledgeⁱⁱⁱ.
- b) axis of desire^{iv} or the will^v (subject) vs. object
- c) axis of the auxiliary of force^{vi} / adjuvant or opponent^{vii}. (Séoud, 1997, p. 90)

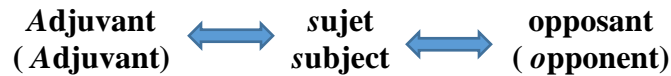
The sender is an authoritarian force that allows for object values around which the story will develop. These values are communicated to the hero, who is the recipient of the mandate and the subject at the same time. This actant, by mandate of the sender, or by its own initiative, is responsible for the research of object- value he wants to fill the gap. The remaining two actants help or try to prevent the action of the subject, which must acquire more competence (qualities) to perform its function.

Such competence refers to modal objects. Once acquired through events, they are qualified as the subject of (do), (can), (want), (must or should).

- The actant scheme is a graphical representation of the relationships between actants:

Figure 1
Semiotic Square in Courtès (1991, p. 56)





The sender is defined by the mode of doing: to know, to do, and by the authority to establish the object -value. The subject, in turn, is identified by its junction relative to object-value. The object in turn, is identified by its relationship with the subject: what we want, what we have or what we lose. Greimas and Courtes define it as: "the determinations with which the subject is joint or disjoint" (1979, p. 10). The adjuvant, according to the same authors is the positive "auxiliary; it corresponds to the force or to the power that help to carry out the narrative program of the subject" (p. 10). The opponent is the one who prevents the realization of the action of subject. In the discourse of the story, the actor represents one or more actants and values that define them.

Narrative Sequence/Narrative Program

Similarly as in the syntax of the sentence, the narrative sequence is conceived as the relationship between a subject and a predicate function (to, say, to be, to feel, to exist) through grammatical classes which is called verbs. In semiotics, narrative syntax also establishes the relationship between a predicate function (F) and an actant. A statement is represented as follows: $EN = F(A)$.

From the semantic point of view, the predicate may be a "^{viii}being" and "doing" especially as the narrative utterances (sequences) are classified by status statements (statements to be) and the statements which express (making or doing something). The predicate or function "be" is also the junction, that is to say, in the statements of status about the subject (actant) is in junction with the object. If the subject possesses the object, we can say it is in conjunction with object, if it does not possess the object, he will be in disjunction with the object.

To represent these two types of relationship, we use symbols \wedge/\vee

Conjunction = $S \wedge O$

Disjunction = $S \vee O$

Transformation is the transfer of the object from one subject to another with an operator subject, which changes the initial state set (the conjunction changes to disjunction or vice versa).

Narrative Program

It is a "basic syntactic operation of narrative that converts a status statement (disjunction, for example) into another set of state (conjunctive); through the statement of (do or make)^{ix}". (Bertrand, 2.000:165) and can be represented as follows:

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{NP} = \text{F}(\text{S}) \quad (\text{S} \vee \text{O}) \quad \text{—————} \quad (\text{S} \wedge \text{O}) : \text{conjunctive} \\ \text{NP} = \text{F}(\text{S}) \quad (\text{S} \wedge \text{O}) \quad \text{—————} \quad (\text{S} \vee \text{O}) : \text{disjonctif.} \end{array}$$

In traditional fairy tales, we can meet the following narrative program: "A king loses his daughter because she was kidnapped by a dragon. A prince fights against the dragon and returns the princess to her father. If we represent the king as (S'), the princess as (O) and the prince as (S), it is possible to formalize this narrative program as follows:

$$\text{F}(\text{S}) \rightarrow (\text{S} \vee \text{O}) \longrightarrow (\text{S} \wedge \text{O})$$

In a story, there are generally several programs that forms a narrative, which can make several types of relations:

- hierarchical arrangement: when a general program requires the completion of some secondary programs.
- succession: when programs appear in a logical or chronological order.
- independence: when programs are happening one after the other without an obligatory link between them.

The Types of Object Communication

As we said earlier, a transformation involves a transfer of the object, that is to say, a conjunction can be a disjunction and vice versa. This is known by the object communication, the process that generates an operator subject that is not necessarily different from the subject of the conjunction or disjunction. Some types of communication or processing are ownership, assignment, waiver, dispossession, renunciation +allocation and exchange (semiotic group association: 1979:24)

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The research undertaken was that of action- research because the results will be put at the service of all students regarding the analysis and interpretation of texts in French. Indeed, action -research purports to solve a real and tangible problem. Its objective is to improve the actual educational practice in a particular place. It is based on observation, reflection and evaluation, with a cyclical characteristic, driven by the concerned persons in order to intervene in their educational practice to improve or modify the educational innovation (Albert & Souchon, 2000).

Action- research involves flexibility and adaptability, its field of application is multiple, varied and can adopt various ways of achievement. Our study focuses on a common problem of French students for both beginners and those who have been trained in this language for a certain period, the lack of effective writing tools for a coherent discourse in a text or an ability to analyze texts and invention. Regarding the type of research, we believe that the remediation types are best suited to our work because it provides a remedy to what could be better (Galisson, 1994). Indeed, we found a lack of analysis on the elements of texts, perhaps by problems with reading acquisition and / or how to understand these materials:

The experiential method seemed to us the most appropriate one because of its characteristics to understand the overall study, because it works on particular subjects, and simultaneously it is a part of an interesting field work (1994, p. 95).

The choice of the method with which we worked is justified largely by the characteristics of qualitative research data, which we summarize as below:

- The researcher is the means of measurement. All the data are based on its criteria. The researcher must adopt a "disciplined subjectivity", demanding self-consciousness, a rigorous, ongoing reflection and recursive analysis
- Normal situations of classroom are studied in their natural context.
- Qualitative research does not prove theories or hypotheses. Rather it is a method to produce theories and assumptions.
- It has no rules of procedures. It is based on intuition; research is flexible in nature and addresses the phenomena generally.
- The design of research is emerging: we develop gradually as research progresses. We reformulate constantly the initial problem in order to confirm that the data contribute to the interpretation of the phenomenon.
- Categories are developed with frequent questions and generally do not allow statistical analysis.
- We could incorporate unplanned findings.

Practical work includes: a) intensive involvement and long-term topics, b) a careful record of what happens through field notes and recollection of documents (manuscripts, examples of work and students, pictures, tapes, videos, etc.) c) analytical thinking based on registers and documents d) a detailed description, using narrative techniques.

Based on field observations, through which we drew data and formulated the relationship between the observed facts, it is an exercise-centered learning (Courtés, 1994), where we described the approaches and strategies implemented by our class member's, composed of 10 students corresponding to advanced level in Iran institute of foreign languages in Tehran . An observation exercise on the course of several sessions was conducted, where students worked with fables and where it was necessary to recognize the basic elements of the semiotic analysis of narrative texts. We collected all the information about group work during these sessions (second half of 2013) and we have presented as steps with our own concerns related to teaching.

We worked with three short narrative texts of fables of *Lafontaine*, situated in a similar action and context. They were *Diary Woman and Milk Jug*, *The Fox and The Stork* and *Two Mules*.

A survey group previously conducted showed the acceptance of students for this type of text instead of expository and argumentative texts. The students said they were more accustomed to stories from their childhoods as they heard and read different tales. This experiment was divided into several steps.

- A) First step: We gave each student three fables and asked them to analyze them according to their knowledge. The results were as follows:
 - Students reported only the actions and characters.
 - They have not established an organized sequence of actions.
 - They did not perceive similarities in the development of three fables.
 - They did not formalize the results.
- B) Second step: we described the concept of actant, subject, object, conjunction, disjunction, sequence, narrative and narrative program. Besides the explanations, they were given practical applications with other fables. We also explained what it meant by the notion of lexical field based on the lexical items of the fables *The Crow and the Fox*, of *La Fontaine*.
- C) Third step: We asked them to analyze the three fables while applying the acquired knowledge. After the exercise, each student was required to present the results of the analysis, which was evaluated by his or her peers.

The overall results were classified into the following aspects: correct responses related to:

- Identification of actants.
- Identification of objects.
- Description of sequences
- Formulation of narrative program

According to the criteria mentioned above, there were between 50% and 75% satisfaction in terms of correct answers.

- D) Fourth step: We asked students to make a list of common nouns, adjectives and verbs and then to form the lexical fields of each fable. The result showed that students need, in their majority, to improve their ability to identify different lexical categories and the capacity for abstraction to classify the words in lexical fields.

In a subsequent experiment they accomplished these objectives, using a semantic approach to characterize and develop lexical categories and lexical fields.

- E) Fifth step: We have formed five groups of two students. Each group should present the final analysis of the three fables and defend their proposals to the other groups. The results provided between 85 and 90 satisfaction in the answers.

- F) Sixth step: We asked each group to write a story starting from the semiotic model that was used for the analysis of fables. Each story was presented and discussed in front of other groups which have carried out their observations and were considered relevant.

ANALYSIS

A-Textual Analyses

To analyze a text, semiotics begins with its segmentation in textual elements of which there are two models:

- A) Ternary analysis: the text is divided into three units:
- Initial situation: it includes the time it determines the lack of the object.
 - Intermediate situation: it narrates the attempts of the subject to fill the gap.
 - Final position: This is the result of "the action" of the subject. It can be positive, neutral or negative.

In this study, the chosen short story was the fable of *The Tortoise and Tow Ducks* by *LaFontaine*, the great fabulist of French literature in XVII century, which was taught to and analyzed on 10 students in the class. In this fable, it can identify three sequences:

- Initial situation: tortoise expresses a desire to see the world.
 - Intermediate situation: The two ducks, which are adjuvants actants, build an apparatus in order to carry it in the air and thus the tortoise begins the journey.
 - Final situation: The tortoise proclaimed itself as a Queen. This leads to the failure of its intention because at the time it opened its mouth, it left the machine that it carried in the air, it falls and dies.
- B) Quintuple analysis: In the quintuple model, the text is divided into five sequences: initial situation (steady state), the trigger node (change the initial situation), action (caused by the trigger node), the result (solves the situation) and the final situation (transformed).

B-Results

- The teaching of narrative analysis is easier with the practice of semiotic model.
- Learning specific concepts of semiotics is easier with examples and practices.
- Formal education of morphological and lexical aspects of language does not lead students to identify the linguistic categories, as these students have received multiple courses of grammar in French, and yet they were not able to successfully complete the corresponding period.
- The practice of narrative semiotics analysis develops the ability to create narrative texts.
- Co-evaluation encourages reflection, the ability to argue and the fluency of oral expression in French.
- Teamwork promotes learning and gives some security to the student feels, because the group supports them.

CONCLUSION

Taking into account the observations made in the previous exercise, we would like to say that the use of semiotic model for the analysis of narratives is an effective way to work. Students are satisfied with the proposed policy in that they improve their ability to understand, this is manifested in the active participation of students in class, we can also see by the enthusiastic comments on this. They were affected by this approach.

It should nevertheless be noted that these are difficult activities for some of them. This may be due to the limited vocabulary they have, lack of patterns in these practices and/ or reading problems in a foreign language. However, the study of texts in a semiotic approach allows them to understand the content, develop their analytical skills, and enrich their vocabulary, although this approach is not very easy to grasp at first sight. Moreover, the act of creating a text by applying the proposed model gives them the ability to clarify their ideas, avoiding redundancy and ambiguity, in particular developing their creativity and writing skills. Even if they have the feeling of not having opportunities to carry out this activity, it is a challenge for them because they are not used and they show satisfactory results.

This is very interesting because the students quickly understood the concepts of initial position, trigger node, action, settlement and final situation. These elements are necessary for the analysis of quandary kind. What may have complicated the work for them was, in the first level of analysis, the existence of several narrative programs within the same story. Another difficulty raised among students is that they get to this level of their studies with a poor command of the French language. We can say that at this point in their learning, they are at a low intermediate level, which causes them to have problems going through the teaching and learning process.

Despite some difficulties in understanding texts encountered by students, they showed great interest in continuing to work following this approach. This is because it allows them not only to understand the text and enrich their vocabulary, but also to comprehend better in dealing with the meaning of the text and to find new ways of thinking about the meaning in the study of literary texts.

Finally, we are able to summarize the most important experiences that students have had from their productions and their own experiences. Among others, these activities stimulated their motivation and improved their capacity for analysis and understanding of texts; they enrich their vocabulary level and eventually become more proficient users of the French language.

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ⁱ . Destinateur

ⁱⁱ . Destinataire

ⁱⁱⁱ .Savoir

^{iv} .Désir

^v : Vouloir

^{vi} .pouvoir

^{vii} .opposant

^{viii} .Etre

^{ix} . Faire