

Media and the Socio-cultural Aspects of Society

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Abstract:

This research paper attempts to reach some of the prevailing social and cultural characteristics of American society through the sociological analysis of some scenes of the episodes of the American cartoon series The Simpsons. This is because this series is one of the most popular animated series inside and outside the United States of America. It targets children and adults alike, and it became famous because it is one of the longest soap operas that depict the daily life of the American family of the middle class. Among the most important findings of the research paper is that American society as a consumer society rather than a product, and the American society does not care about some important environmental issues, as capitalism reigns in society, and there is a large gap between the middle class and the rich class, in addition to highlighting the excessive use of technology.

Key Words: Semiotics, connotation, Denotation, socio, cultural aspects.

Introduction

Animation, nowadays, is not only intended for children but for adults as well. Various modes of communication are introduced through this sort of media. Communication is more than verbal or oral exchange; human beings communicate with signs and gestures more than words. Sounds, facial expressions, and body language are used to convey our needs and requirements even before we learn how to utter a word. Both verbal and



nonverbal communications are complementary to one another. Nonverbal communication is ranging from facial expression to body language, and it precedes verbal communication.

Communication involves various modes, for instance, language, image, movement, music, sounds, and colours. Semiotics must be taken into account. Generally speaking, semiotics is the theory of human linguistic systems concerned with points of signification as modes of meaning-making within a cultural context (Chandler, 2007). Every person understands messages, such as words, images, colors, and shapes differently.

Semiotics argues that the choice of words, behaviors, and objects carry a certain meaning for every culture in which they originate or are used. These modes are found in innumerable forms, which are generally referred to as cultural texts. Semiotics is the study of signs or a sign system. Semiotic techniques enable us to view the language as a system to be extended to culture as a whole (Chandler, 2001).

Social semiotics concentrates on meaning in a social context including visual and verbal communication. Visual social semiotics involves the description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with images and how the things people say and do can be interpreted. Chandler (2007) views that semiotics is the study of signs assuring that images, words, sounds, gestures and body language are included. He also states



that semiotics is often applied in the analysis of verbal and non-verbal texts regardless of their medium. He argues that the real world around us is but a system of signs which we can explore through semiotics.

Saussure defines the linguistic sign as the link between the signified and the signifier. The signified is the psychological or the mental aspect of the sign, whereas the signifier is the material representation of the sign (Chandler, 2007). Noth (1990) illustrates the sign diagram offered by Saussure which involves three basic concepts: sign, signified and signifier. He argues that the sign consists of two elements: the signifier and the signified; thus, the sign is considered as a superordinate concept. In communication and media studies, a message turns to signs through the channel of communication and the receiver of this message. Media semiotics includes text, image, video, audio and tactile. To investigate the sociocultural aspects of society, the researcher attempts to examine the use of connotation and denotation through semiotic analysis.

Objectives of the Research Paper

The major aim of this research paper is to examine how media reflects the sociocultural aspects of society through the use of connotation and denotation in animation applying semiotic analysis of texts, characters, colours, gestures in the light of the socio-cultural aspects of the American society. Thus, we could have a deeper look at the values;



beliefs, lifestyles and practices of the American society, and how media could change the ways people live and interact.

This study can be beneficial to semiotic and socio-cultural sciences. It tackles various social and cultural issues in the American society such as consumerism, environmental problems, capitalism, the American family life, infiltration of technology into the society, the image of American woman and some political issues. All the above mentioned issues are revealed through the detailed semiotic analysis highlighting the use of denotation and connotation.

Review of Literature

The previous linguistic literature provides considerable studies which analyze media on the basis of various semiotic theories and elements. The review of literature involves various contributions of some linguists, connotation and denotation, definition of semiotics, the evolution of semiotics, types of semiotics, and non-verbal communication.

Jensen (2002) assures that media are a vital side in our life, and lots of academic and actual studies worldwide suggest the huge effect of media. There are a great number of messages especially in the shape of visual image which can be investigated. Thus, we need to analyze those images in a semiological method so that we can grasp how those signs work within the meanings behind them.



As for politicians, Noth (2004), in his study of the relationship between semiotics and ideology, illustrates how semiotics contributes to the study of the changing concept of ideology, and how political leaders can affect that system of norms, beliefs and political attitudes of the people. He argues that lexical semantics and syntactic structures in discourse reveal the disguised ideological viewpoints.

As for denotation, it is the first level of meaning; it signifies the constant meaning of a word regardless of all subjective assessments. It illustrates the literal or clear meaning of the sign; accordingly, denotation of the visual image highlights what people view away from cultural, social or ideological considerations. Barthes also asserts that the denotation holds some characteristics which make it primitive to connotation in meaning.

Denotation focuses on the basic meaning of the sign which does not rely on context or any subjective explanation like in connotation, for instance, the image of sunrise denotes the start of the day, and the break of night, whereas in connotation the sunrise can refer to a new hopeful day and the end of darkness.

From the Barthesian point of view, 'connotation includes both of the main meaning of the word in addition to the ideas which the word suggests. It is the effect caused by words, phrases and images on what they basically denote. Connotative signs have two types: personal and general (Cuddon, 1998).



Barthes used the term 'connotation' to refer to how the signs work. Connotation describes the communication which happens when the sign is mixed with the emotions of the users and their cultural values (Fisk, 1992).

Methodology of the Research

The data in this research are analyzed within the framework of semiotics. Saussure, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, foresaw the need for a holistic approach to the study of language and other sign systems, advocating a 'science that explores signs employed within society.

Making sense of the multimodal texts, moving beyond the traditional cognitive strategies and enhancing the readers' interpretive abilities is an important part of reading comprehension instruction. Images and texts are being combined in unique ways, and readers in today's world need new skills and strategies for constructing meaning in transaction with these multimodal texts as they are encountered during the social practices of interpretation and representation (Serafini, 2009).

Research Data

Based on a semiotic framework, the researcher attempts a detailed multimodal semiotic analysis of some scenes of seasons (28) and (29) of the American animated series, *The Simpsons*. One purpose of this study is to show the usefulness of semiotics in analyzing the sociocultural aspects of the American society.



The Simpsons is an American family animation which shows a strong American culture. It can be shown from the language of the figures used in the films. The United States, being considerably larger and more culturally diverse country and one without the traditional sharp class division of England, has always had several regional standards in speech (Chaika, 1982, P. 142).

Data Semiotic Analysis

In the framework of semiotic analysis, some sociocultural aspects of the American society have been highlighted as follows:

The First Aspect: Consumerism culture

Nowadays, people have become much more consumeristic. They consume excessive amounts of food and energy. People waste main resources such as oil, electricity, and water. The influence of this excessive consumption begins to negatively affect our life. Obesity, which is the cause of various health problems such as heart disease, cancer, and stroke, is getting more uncontrolled. Energy crisis also begins to affect our lives.

In figure (1): In the opening of season (29), episode (19) with the title 'Left Behind', Homer is eating lots of food so that he forgets all about going out to watch the solar eclipse with his wife. His only interest in life is food and he gets obese accordingly. His way of eating is so satirical. The researcher views that Homer's behaviour is intended to



provide an engaging way to get the message to real-life families to improve their diet leading a healthier life style.



Figure (1): Homer prefers eating to watching the solar eclipse with his family.

The Second Aspect: Environmentalism

Environment and ecology are unchanged themes throughout the show. Some scenes of The Simpsons clearly depict serious environmental problems. Figure (2) is an image of Springfield Power Plant owned by Mr. Burns where Homer works. Despite danger, the plant is located in the centre of the city. A large pipe pumps the nuclear waste into the lake which is the main cause of water pollution.

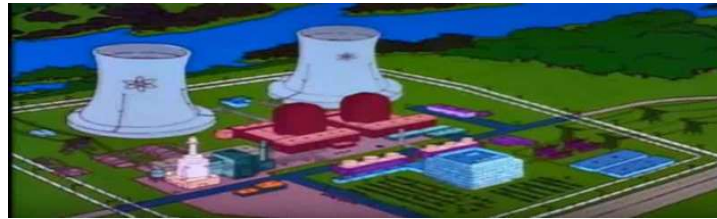


Figure (2): The Nuclear Power Plant by Springfield Lake.**The Third Aspect: Capitalism and the American Family life**

The spirit of capitalism is embodied in The Simpsons through two different social classes in the American society; the wealthy class and the working class. The wealthy class is represented by Mr. Burns, the owner of the power plant, while the working class is represented by the Simpson In season (29), episode (13) titled ' Three Scenes plus a Tag from a Marriage' Homer and Marge tell the story of how their life has changed after having children. It turns from a loving life to a miserable one.

Additionally, The Simpsons illustrates the topic of aging demonstrating the relationship of the family members to their grandfather; he lives in a nursing home where he and other old residents are neglected by the outside world. Old people are treated as useless. The Simpson son is a disobedient child who disrespects his parents and old people and misbehaves at school.

The Fourth Aspect: The Increased Infiltration of Technology into the Society.

In season (28) episode (2) there is a scene when Homer and his wife tries to remember the time when they have a serious problem in the past, so they had to see a therapist to help them communicate naturally. The problem lies in Homer who does not listen to his wife most of the time. She describes this problem saying " you were looking at your



phone half the time". This indicates the corrupting effect of technology and media on family relations.

Conclusion

Semiotics - the science of signs – was first introduced by Saussure as ' a science which studies the life of signs within a society'. Semiotics involves two main components; the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the material such as sound, image, or object. The signified is the mental and the psychological representations of things along with their relations to the outside world. Semiotic analysis is used to analyze signs in different areas such as communication, linguistics, anthropology, architecture, and medicine.

Media plays a significant role in our everyday life: it affects the way people live, think, and communicate with others. Through employing semiotic analysis, a wide variety of meanings, ideologies, values, and realities could be detected. In this paper, a semiotic analysis is conducted to study animation as a means of communication which displays certain sociocultural aspects of the society. Semiotic analysis can be applied to interpret different media texts such as films, advertisements, television programs and cartoons.



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مستخلص الدراسة:

تحاول هذه الورقة البحثية التوصل إلى بعض الخصائص الاجتماعية و الثقافية السائدة بالمجتمع الأمريكي وذلك من خلال التحليل السيمويط مشاهد حلقات مسلسل الرسوم المتحركة الأبيكي عائلة سمبسون. وذلك لكون هذا المسلسل من أكثر مسلسلات الرسوم المتحركة شعبية داخل الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية وخارجها. ويستهدف الأطفال والكبار علي حد سواء. وقد ذاع صيته لأنه من أطول المسلسلات التي تصور أحداث الحياة اليومية للأسرة الأمريكية من الطبقة المتوسطة.

ومن أهم النتائج التي توصلت لها الورقة البحثية هي إن المجتمع الأمريكي مجتمعا مستهلك أثر منه منتجا، ولا يبالي المجتمع الأمريكي ببعض القضايا البيئية الهامة، كما أن الراسماليه تسود المجتمع وتوجد فجوة كبيرة بين الطبقة المتوسطة والطبقة الغنية، بالإضافة إلى تسليط الضوء علي الاستخدام المفرط للتكنولوجيا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المجتمع الأمريكي- عائلة سمبسون- مسلسلات الرسوم المتحركة- التكنولوجيا

