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A Semiotic Analysis of Signs on Social Events among the Nandi People of Kenya

By

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Abstract

Semiotics is the study of signs. Signs are considered as anything which stands for something else other than itself. Many studies have been done on semiotics. However, studies on semiotics on Nandi culture are scarce. Since the interpretations of signs are limited to the cultural context, there was a need to study semiotics used in Nandi social events. This study therefore sought to analyze the signs used in Nandi social events. The objectives of the study were: first to find out the signs used in Nandi social events; second to explain the meanings of signs used in Nandi social events; finally, to describe the relativity of signs used in Nandi social events. The study was grounded on Charles Sanders Peirce's (1860) semiotic theory which offers a triadic model which consists of the form commonly referred to a sign vehicle, the sense made of the sign, and an object commonly referred to as a referent. This study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design. The study was grounded in Pierce triangle theory. The population comprised Nandi speakers aged between 40 and 60 years living in Megun ward, Kapseret Constituency, Uasin Gishu County. This age range was important because they have more knowledge on the cultural signs and symbols among the Nandi as compared to younger groups who may not be very conversant with the signs and symbols found in Megun Ward, Kapseret Sub-county Uasin Gishu County Kenya. Uasin Gishu County was chosen for its richness in the cultural practices which have been preserved in its original state as compared to Nandi which has become more cosmopolitan with different borders that seem to have influenced some of the signs and symbols used during different ceremonies. The study adopted the purposive sampling in selecting the participants. These participants engaged in semi-structured interviews with the researcher where they discussed their experiences of the use of signs in social events. Participant observation was also done to identify the signs used and how they were interpreted. A pilot test was carried out in Chepyakwai village, Kapseret ward which has similar characteristic to Megun ward. Data obtained was organized, coded and analyzed using qualitative method. The researcher first identified the signs by sorting them out from the data collected. The signs were analyzed using the semiotic theory which is the study of signs. In order to decode the meanings of the different signs found, the study used Pierce triangle theory. This triadic model was used to illustrate the relationship between the sign and what it represents. This relationship between the signifier and the signified was further analyzed to establish the typology of the signs. This was done using Pierce's tripartite classification: symbolic relationship, iconic relationship and indexical relationship. The results of the research show that there are several signs used in Nandi social ceremonies. These signs used in Nandi social events have different meaning. The study classified the various signs into symbols, icons and indexes. The study helps understand how signs impact interlocutors in Kenyan socio-cultural events and as such, helps to lay a foundation for future research in this area. This study also complements the available research conducted in the area of semiotics. The study recommended that language planners must come up with programmes to promote African indigenous languages in order to promote understanding of signs used in public functions and to address issues of miscommunication in intercultural set ups.

Key Words: Kenya, Nandi, Semiotics, Signs, Nandi, Social Events, Semiotics Analysis

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Introduction

The world today has been described as a global village. People are able to communicate to each other quickly and efficiently. Communication channels have brought us closer than ever before. However, in this communication age, there exist serious challenges in communication brought by culture. Interlocutors always have to tolerate communication differences as a result of cultural constraints. They are forced to adjust their communication skills in order to fit into different cultural contexts. This leads to a strain in the communication process and at times result in miscommunication and misinterpretations. There is a serious need for communicators especially in public functions to break these cultural barriers and reach out to other communicators who come from other cultural backgrounds. It has therefore become increasingly necessary for people to understand the codes used in various cultures.

Communicators usually use texts, speech and signs to convey information. The use of signs poses a serious challenge in a multilingual setting because signs are culture bound. A study by Elfenbein and Ambady (2002) for instance presents evidence that facial expression may lose meaning across cultural boundaries. This study shows that signs lose meaning with difference in culture and miscommunication is likely to occur where a sign is interpreted differently by people from different cultural understanding. This points out to the fact that signs lose universality across cultures. This calls for a study of the signs across different cultures in order for interlocutors to understand different signs used and their interpretations. The current study investigated the use of signs within a cultural set up. It built on the claim by this study that signs are culture specific.

The study of signs is referred to as semiotics. According to Chandler (2007) semiotics is the study of signs. It is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. The study of signs according to Chandler (2007) involves the study not only of what we refer to as signs in everyday speech, but of anything which stands for something else. Signs take the form of words, images, sounds gestures and objects. It also includes the study of how meanings are made and how reality is represented. Ogunkunle (2013) did a semiotic reading of the symbols of Yoruba traditional marriage.

The study sought to unravel the meaning of the elements of culture in indigenous marriage ceremony and unravel the meaning of the signs (objects) used in it. The study used Halliday meta-functions and Pierces conception of signs as theoretical framework. The paper justified the assertion that communication is multimodal and is a system of interpreting verbal and non-verbal signs. These signs cannot be isolated but are culture-bound in interpretation. It was also established that verbal and non-verbal languages have meta-functions. The study justified the assertion by Chandler that anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as ‘signifying’ something. The current study used the strengths of this study to analyze traditional events. Just like the study by Ogunkunle (2013), the current sought to find the meanings of signs used in traditional social events. It however utilized a different theory to analyze the data. The findings were in congruent and thus justified the earlier findings by Ogunkunle (2013).

A study by Sepehr (2011) aimed at investigating how considering a product as a sign is associated with product consumption and consequently how marketers apply semiotics to

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analyze a product and a market in order to know customers' needs and to understand the market potential. The study suggested studying the role of culture as a dynamic phenomenon which surrounds and interacts with human being all the time. In order to bring to fore the meanings of signs in the Nandi culture, the current study build on the suggestion by Sepehr (2011) that culture plays an integral role in human interactions. This was to fill the knowledge gap son that the marketers designing products targeting the Nandi people could use in order for their programmes to be successful.

This study used semiotic theory to deconstruct signs and symbols used by the Nandi speakers. The use of these semiotic tools revealed the meaning behind the symbols and will help interlocutors be better communicators. The Nandi, the subject of this study is a language which belongs to the Nilo-Saharan language family, called Char- Nile which is one of the six branches of Nile- Saharan family. It belongs to the Eastern Sudanic branch. The Nilotic group which is a branch of Eastern Sudanic family is again divided into three branches namely; Western, Eastern and Southern Nilotic groups. Many scholars have attempted to classify Kalenjin into various dialects. Some scholars argue that Kalenjin has nine dialects, while others argue it has thirteen dialects. Towett (1975) classified Kalenjin languages into nine dialects namely; Nandi, Kipsigis, Keiyo, Tugen, Sabaot, Marakwet, Pokot, Ogiek and Sengwer, Njemps and Lengwes of Baringo. This grouping was widely accepted by the Kalenjin sub-groups.

Nandi is one of the highly populated Kalenjin sub tribe which is said to be using 60% of nonverbal communication (Boen, 2004). The dialect does not have numerals and that is why they relied on gesture by using hand and fingers to count their animals. The study focused on a wedding ceremony and a funeral ceremony where we have a number of nonverbal cues used. The Nandi people have many rituals that are done in different occasions many of which require the use of signs and symbols. Traditionalists still carry out these rituals in ceremonies like marriage, funerals, circumcision, cleansing and others. This study therefore analyzed the signs used in these ceremonies in order to bring into fore their meanings and typology.

Statement of the Problem

Although many studies have been done on semiotic, signs are bound to culture and since there are differences in cultures and nationality so there is need to study use of signs within the social and cultural context. It is evident that signs and symbols vary from one culture to another and so a research should be done to identify signs and symbols with their corresponding meanings. Ideally, the use of signs and symbols is meant to communicate important messages and to reinforce verbal communication. However, since the interpretations of these signs are limited to the cultural context, members of the audiences who do not belong to the cultural group will connect the meaning signs with the speech. Currently, the guest in the social ceremonies comes from different cultural backgrounds and therefore there is a breakdown in communication when the speakers accompany many signs and symbols with the verbal communication. With all this therefore there is a need to study semiotics used in Kenyan social ceremonies. The researcher was curious to study the semiotics in the Kalenjin speech community focusing on the Nandi dialect. In addition, there is need to enhance cross cultural communication which is only possible when the reader is informed by the research. Readers from different cultures will thereafter be able to communicate effectively with a Nandi speaker hence promoting unity.

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Objectives

1. To identify the signs used in Nandi social events
2. To examine the meanings of signs used in Nandi social events
3. To describe the relativity of signs used in Nandi social events

Research Questions

1. What are the different types of signs used in social events in Nandi?
2. How are the signs used in Nandi social events interpreted by the participants?
3. How do the signs used in Nandi social events relate to what they signify?

Scope of the Study

Theoretical Framework

Saussure's model of the sign is in the dyadic tradition. According to this model, the two parts of a sign consist of a 'sign vehicle', and its meaning. Saussure defined a sign as being composed of a signifier (significant) and a signified (signifie). The signifier is described as the form that the sign takes and the signified is the concept to which it refers.

For Saussure both the signifier and the signified were purely psychological.

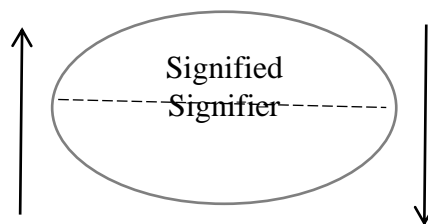


Figure 1: Saussure's Model of the Sign

Source: Chandler (2007)

Saussure considered both the signifier and the signified as non-material form rather than substance. Chandler (2007) however observed that nowadays, while the Saussurean model is commonly adopted, it tends to be a more materialistic model than that of Saussure himself. The signifier is now commonly interpreted as the material (or physical) form of the sign- it is something which can be seen, heard, touched, smelled or tested. The model considers the sign as the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is referred to as signification and it is represented in the Saussurean diagram by the arrows. The horizontal broken line marking the two elements of the signs is referred to as the bar.

Chandler 2007 claims that a sign must have both a signifier and a signified. It is not possible to have a totally meaningless signifier or a completely formless signified. A sign is recognizable combination of a signifier with a particular signified. The same signifier could stand for a different signified (and thus be a different sign). Similarly, many signifiers could stand for the same concept. This models stress that the signifier and the signified were as inseparable as the two sides of a piece of paper. They were intimately linked in the mind by an associative link and each triggers the other. Saussure presented these elements as wholly interdependent, neither pre-existing the other. Saussure argues that signs only make sense as part of a formal, generalized and abstract system. Conception of meaning according to him was purely structural and relational rather than referential. The meaning of signs was seen as lying in there systematic relations to each other rather than deriving from any inherent

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features of signifiers or any referent to material things (Chandler 2007). This model is associated with Charles Sanders Peirce commonly referred to as semiotic. This theory offers a triadic model which consists of the form commonly referred to as a sign vehicle, the sense made of the sign, and an object commonly referred to as a referent. According to Chandler (2007), to qualify as sign, all three elements are essential. The sign is a unity of what is represented (the object), how it is represented (the representamen) and how it is interpreted (the interpretant).

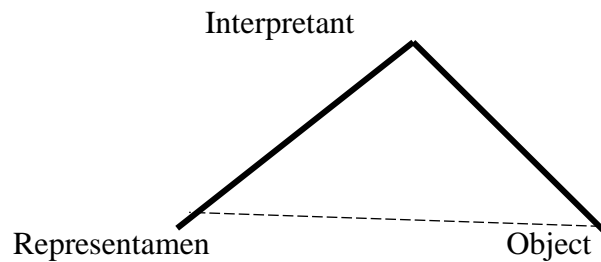


Figure 2: Peirce's Semiotic Triangle

The broken line shows that there is no direct relationship between the sign and what it signifies. The model explains that there is a mode of relationship between the signifier and the signified. There are three modes of relationship. According to Chandler (2007) Charles Peirce's offers tripartite classification. This includes symbolic mode of relationship, where the signifier does not resemble the signified but the relationship is arbitrary or purely conventional. The other mode of relationship is iconic, where the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified. The third mode of relationship is based on the fact that the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way to the signified. The study adopted both the Saussurean and Peircean models to read the signs used in Nandi social events. These models helped to identify the signifier and the signified in the cultural context. The models were also used to identify the meanings of the signs so identified and finally the mode of relationship between the signifier and the signified.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design. This is a design that incorporates qualitative methodologies thus enabling the researcher to describe events in greater depth as required and to engage quantitative statistics to organize information in meaningful ways. The qualitative aspects were applied in collecting and analyzing the various signs that were observed and recorded in videos, in describing their meanings and in categorizing the signs.

Nature and Source of Data and the Population

Primary data was collected directly from the respondents and analyzed. The primary data was qualitative. These primary data were obtained from 12 purposively selected interviewees. The study targeted Nandi speakers both male and female in particular the adults living in Megun ward. The target population comprised both male and female Nandi speakers aged between 40 years and 60 years. This group was considered mature enough to use signs and symbols that had semiotic potential.

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Sample and Sample Size

The researcher targeted *kokwet* (village) elders and other special categories such as women. It was established that there were at least 1 elder in every village and at least 1 representative of special groups would be picked in every village. This translated to an average of 12 people. To arrive at the required sample size, the following formula by Krejcie & Morgan (1970) was used: For the purpose of this research N (the population size) was 12, p (expected incidence) was (.50), d (accuracy) was 0.05 and X² (confidence level) was 95%. This resulted to 11.57 which is a sample size of 12. The researcher purposively selected two respondents, male and female from every village.

Sampling Procedures

Purposive sampling was used to get the specific data from the target groups. The researcher selected the participants who were representative of the population. Factors that could influence the population were put into consideration. These factors included selecting those participants who were culturally informed, cultural experts and the historians in the community. The researcher also selected participants from other groups like elders, the youth and women. 12 purposively selected individuals participated in his research and the researcher believed that these adequately the population targeted in this study.

Validity and Reliability

In this study, content validity was considered through scrutiny of interview questions to remove ambiguities and words that lacked clarity. The interview schedule and the observation schedule were counter checked by the supervisor. To ascertain reliability of the research interview and observation schedule, a pilot test was carried out in Chepyakwai village of Kapseret ward which has similar characteristic to Megun ward. This assisted in refining the interview and observation schedule prior to being administered to the respondent for the study.

Data Analysis

Data obtained was organized, coded and analyzed using qualitative method. The researcher first identified the signs by sorting them out from the data collected. The signs were analyzed using the semiotic theory which is the study of signs. In order to decode the meanings of the different signs found, the study used Pierce triangle theory. This triadic model was used to illustrate the relationship between the sign and what it represents. This relationship between the signifier and the signified was further analyzed to establish the typology of the signs. This was done using Pierce's tripartite classification: symbolic relationship, iconic relationship and indexical relationship.

Results and Discussions

Signs Used in Nandi Social Events

The study sought to find out the various signs used in social events among the Nandi. The study revealed that the Nandi are concerned about the specific site for the grave. In selecting the site, gender of the deceased is taken into account. For instance, a man is buried on the right-hand side of the main house and woman on the left-hand side or besides her husband's grave. It was also found out that the position of the sun was a sign that dictated the burial. Final burial rites among the Nandi is done in a ceremony and the final interment must be done afternoon, except for those who have committed suicide or that of an infant. A fire was also an important sign during mourning. Among the Nandi a fire is lit outside on all the

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nights of the mourning period, with mainly young men keeping vigil. The study revealed that two things are used to seal the marriage among the Nandi. The first is Segutiet (couch grass) for tying the Knot. Among the Nandi this was done literally and signified union of the bride and the groom. The other is beer for sealing the marriage covenant and for celebrating the marriage union. It was also found out that in the house of meeting, there is a definite sitting arrangement, with the family of the bride to be sited on one side, and facing the family of the groom to be seated on the opposite side. The groom sits next to the door, since it is a preserve for all Sanik (Son in laws). The leaders of the delegation (spokesmen) of the two negotiating parties sit in the middle and are surrounded by the other elders. The study revealed that once the dowry negotiations are completed, butter is brought as a sign of joining of the two families. The families now become bamwai, united in by butter-the warmth of the love of in-laws.

Meanings of Signs Used in Nandi Social Events

The study sought to establish the meaning of different signs used in Nandi social events. The study revealed that each sign used in Nandi social events has different meaning. It was established that signs used were always interpreted as signifying something. For example, body language such as falling on ground, lying on the ground, couch or bed, tears, placing of hands on the head and looking down, holding the chin with a saddened face was a sign of despair hopelessness, depression or sadness. It was found out that placing flowers on the grave signified love for the deceased while the cross on the grave was a way of memorialization of the deceased. Pouring milk on the grave was a sign of appeasing spirits of the dead. In the marriage ceremonies the Totems signify clan to which a family belongs while sitting arrangement in an engagement distinguishes the negotiating parties. Quiver as used in the engagement process signifies dowry while sacred plants being received/accepted indicates the family of the bride has given a green light for marriage of their daughter. It was established that when sacred plants are rejected it indicates the family of the bride have declined any marriage negotiations for their daughter. Butter indicates a bond/union between the groom's and bride's family while couch grass signifies tying of the knot. It was also established that the traditional stool (three legged) shows that the girl being married off is a virgin and receives honor of sitting on the stool. The stool therefore means purity.

The Relativity of Signs Used in Nandi Social Events

The study sought to find out the relativity of the signs used in social events among the Nandi. The relationship between the signifier and the signified was analyzed to establish the typology of the signs using Pierce's tripartite classification. The study classified the various signs into symbols, icons and indexes. For instance, the relationship between placing the body at the center of the sitting room (signifier) and communicating love and the centrality of the position occupied by the deceased (signified) is fundamentally arbitrary. It was also established that the idea of burying a man on the right and the woman to the left is conventional and was borrowed from culture whereas the position of the sun as a sign and its signified was indexical. The study established that the relationship between the gestures in a funeral and what they signify is indexical. There is a direct connection between the gestures and facial expressions used and the feelings of sorrow. The feelings of the mourner are directly linked to their body language. Fire was established to be a symbol this was because fire has been conventionally agreed upon to represent continuity of the lineage. With regard to signs used in weddings calabashes were found out to have iconic relationships with what signify. The signifier is perceived as resembling the teats of a cow and it also resembles the

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mammary glands. Blankets were considered as having symbolic relationship with what they signify. The blanket symbolizes the warmth and love among the relatives. This relationship is purely conventional. The heifer was established to have iconic relationship with its signified. It was found out to have the characteristics recognizably looking like the bride. The relationship between the sacred plants and what they mean is basically symbolic. It was established that the signification was simply an agreed convention and their usage was just a form of universally accepted norm among the Nandi people. The quiver was found to have indexical relationship. There was a direct link between the quiver and dowry. Twigs and gestures were classified as icons. While the relationship between butter, couch grass, and palm tree strands, milk, three-legged stool and beer and what they signify was found out to be symbolic because these signs arbitrarily represent what they signify.

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Conclusion and Recommendations

Use of signs is a key component in the communication process. Therefore parties in the communication process must seek to understand the meaning of signs in various social contexts. The study has brought out interesting findings on the use of signs in social events. Several signs are used in Nandi social ceremonies. These signs differ depending on the occasion. The study has revealed that signs are used to communicate various meanings. The study has also brought out interesting findings on the various modes of relationships existing between the signs and what they signify. It is therefore evident that communicators in social and public events must put careful consideration on signs so as to communicate effectively.

Recommendations

The findings in this study provide insights into the importance of studying indigenous languages. Language planners must come up with programmes to promote African indigenous languages in order to promote understanding of signs used in public functions and to address issues of miscommunication in intercultural set ups. The findings of this study could provide new perspectives on community training programmes such as farmers training, community health, loan orientation seminars and others. It would be beneficial to incorporate the findings highlighted in this study. The study suggests that use of signs influences the chance of community-based programmes. Community mobilizers may want to consider how their own performance and use of signs have a bearing on their sensitization programmes. The study suggests that the program officers must build a mindset over the importance of signs. It also suggests that policy makers and strategic planners of community programs must provide training on signs that mirrors the features used in the community. The study could also have an impact on the communication ability of the field workers in any programme. It provided new approaches towards social education, sensitization, advocacy, training and marketing. Those who carry out these programmes should be aware of signs and symbols specific to different linguistic communities or use competent interpreters. Findings from this study also suggest that communicators should learn to use signs associated with the occasion so that the attitudes advanced by the message are well received and understood.

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