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**Reproducing Meaning: A Dialogic Approach to
Sports and Semiotics**

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Reproducing Meaning: A Dialogic Approach to Sports and Semiotics

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Abstract

The wide variety of the components of signs stems from verbal communication to visual gestures, ciphers, images, music, and Morse code. Barthes' *Semiotic Theory* restructured the theory of analyzing signs and allowed for a new understanding and interpretation of signs through seeing diverse cultures and societies. Saussure's definition of the sign as a combination of signifier and signified led Barthes to further elucidate sign as connotative (cultural) and denotative (literal) processes. *Semiotics* can be applied to all aspects of life, as meaning is produced not in isolation but in totality, establishing multiple connotations and denotations.

In the article "The World of Wrestling" published in *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes focused on images portrayed by the wrestler resulting in understanding of the wrestler's image and the image of spectator. In Morse code, gestures can make any sport a spectacle of suffering, defeat and justice, representation of morality, symbols, anger, smile, passion etc., from which derive denotative and connotative meanings. Similarly, Thomas Sebeok identifies sign as one of six factors in communication, and which makes up the rich domain of semiotic research. These are message, source, destination, channel, code, and context. The present paper will focus on a dialogic relation between semiotics and sports, thus making it a text that reproduces meaning and represents certain groups. It focuses on various aspects of semiotics and their relation to sports. The paper also contemplates the versions and meanings of signs in sports that establish sport as an act of representation.

Keywords: Signs, Semiotics, Meaning, Representation, Sports, Asia

Introduction

Hippocrates (460-377 BC) is commonly believed to be the originator of the term *semeiotics*, the 'science of symptoms' fundamentally referring to medical diagnosis. Plato argued that signs and symbols are human constructs whereas Aristotle remarked that signs captured the truth that is reinforced by scholastics thus ascertaining signs as a reality. Locke, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding I*, integrated the study of signs into philosophy defining it as *semiotics*, and emphasizing the relationship between concept and reality. The study of Semiotics has *synchronic* and *diachronic* elements where the latter deals with form and meaning. The ability to recognize

signs is called *semiosis* while the meaning producing an act is called representation. Another feature of semiotics is interpretation which is also an important aspect of human understanding. The interpretation of signs is also based on social conventions, which is similar to the idea of the hermeneutics tradition.

Sports and Semiotics:

Roland Barthes in “The World of Wrestling” observes, “The function of wrestler is not to win, it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him. It is said that judo contains a hidden symbolic aspect...The function of grandiloquence is indeed the same as an ancient theatre, whose principle, language and props concurred in the exaggeratedly visible explanation” (16). Barthes draws parallels to theater in which the wrestling sport becomes the performance of the contestant and there is a catharsis (purgation of emotions) i.e. a display of emotions by the contestant and the opponent. The important and elementary sign of the wrestler is his physique which is a kind of expression similar to a theater performer. The idea, object or person has meaning symbolizing and classifying the codes. Players thus can function as a mode of communication which signifies meaning and which subsequently produces practices. For Barthes (1993), professional wrestling is much more than sport, exemplifying it as a spectacle of exaggeration because of its use of an abundance of floodlight and a demonstration of strong masculinity on the space or platform. Professional wrestling signifies a spectacle and drama displaying a dramatic dispute between protagonists and antagonists, leading to the consequent act of resolving struggle. These sports act as unspoken signifiers, making the sport a text. Thus, wrestling becomes an act of representation with many symbols, metaphors and meanings, defining the sport, players and nation.

Claude Levi Strauss worked on rites and sacraments, objects, customs, myths and folklores of primeval people in Brazil, analyzing the messages about the culture they communicated. He analyzed meaning by looking at rules and codes moving towards structuralism. In a similar manner, a player’s clothes, gesture and gaze can also communicate culture. The clothes, gestures and gaze of the player thus become signifiers which are subsequently converted into signs. The player’s life is based on production, use and representation. Thomas Sebeok discusses six major types of signs: *Symptoms*, a warning sign, *Signal*, *icons* as a resemblance, *indexes* as indication, *symbols*, and *name* as the identifier. All these signs can be found in a sports person involved in the game / or performance. Sports seen in a cultural context constitute an important element in communication. The language of sports also has oppositional binaries that make it an ideological construct. There are feuds between the opponents, as well as resolution of conflict. There is a spectacle drama, where specific gestures and images engender connotations.

Signs and Culture:

There is a relation between culture and the signs that a culture signifies. Cultures are also, according to Pierce, the sign preserving system that distributes signs to people for various practical purposes (Danesi 2002, 18). Although language plays an important role in producing messages, considering Vygotsky’s definition of speech as a microcosm of consciousness (Danesi 2002 18), non-verbal communication or signs constitute ninety percent of communication, forming an important element in conveying messages to the receivers. Messages can be made

through paintings, music, dress, gestures and other non-verbal communication known as the *code*. It is the code that forms the basis for context, producing a network of interconnected meanings. The structure of language and signs forms a meaning for specific events (Makus 2019, 499). The repetitions, exclusions, interruptions, connections and shifts in sign language which construct meaning and signs are then organized into language. Language is also any sound, word, image or object which operates as a set of sign and as the capacity to carry and express meaning (Hall 5). Hence sign is a language that conveys messages. Semiotics is more concerned with the meaning and how representation generates meaning focusing on the inter-relationship between individuals, image or object, culture and society. The communicative act, transmission of messages through signs or codes makes sports a suitable area for analysis.

Code

Saussure says *le code de la langue* i.e there is a code of language (Eco166). Thus, there are semantic codes, cultural codes, literary codes, codes of myths, linguistics codes etc. giving way to how systems communicate with among another. While interpreting the signs there are certain ideas that form the basis of human understanding. These notions are formed because of social conjunctions and practices. Primarily, it is language that produces social knowledge, information, decoding of symbols, theoretical understanding and acts an apparatus for thought process. Hall explains the signifying and codifying function of language making it more analogous to semiotics. He further remarks that Codes denotes signs to the maps of meaning which classifies the culture ... that has the whole range of social meanings, practices, usages, power and interest written into them (Hall, Hobson, Lowe and Willis 122). Codes restores the relation between notions and sign so that we can hear and understand meaning formed. Language and representation are important for constitution and reproduction of meaning in sports. Meaning and language are produced through culture that can be represented in the form of symbols and metaphors making it an essential part by which meaning is shaped and exchanged among the sport persons of various communities. The sport persons are the production of culture disclosing their identities. The two form of representation *mental representation* and *language* construct meaning from the structure of society /culture. Culture maybe defined as collective meanings and conceptual maps (Hall 1997, 4). The opponent and his code define the dialogical interaction of spectators, judges and players. Code has been an important area in structural semiotics as one which organizes signs into meaningful systems and represents a social dimension, rendering it a procedural system of related conventions. Another important method in sign communication is gaze, within which participants establish direct eye contact with opponents, where the corpus image seems to have dominance over the viewer. Within sports as a visual sign structure, the key signs reveal semantics generated by the game or player.

Symbols

Culture is said to be of political nature, according to Althusser and cultural hegemony is an indirect dominance which is constantly replicated to create a set social order. Sports players are the carriers of these cultural and social orders, playing the role of the dominating and the dominated, in which the game defines nations. For example, the game of football immediately represents its countries. Often times, sports become a sign of dominance and control. The use of

sporting metaphors and icons inspires the viewer who aspires to be like the players attempting to achieve a state of perfection. Another important feature of sports is that regarding gender. Here, sports permit symbolic acts such as women's empowerment. The women players become a positive image icon, for example, PV Sindhu, Sania Mirza, Mary Com, Geeta Phogat, thus becoming the markers of women's empowerment, and challenging ideologies of the sport as not an arena for solely male prowess. Here we see an expansion of the dimensions of sport in the terms of gender by not polarizing the game to specific genders. Women players subvert gender roles giving society ideal and new structures and role models, thus empowering women through sports icons. Women with public access in sports can become a symbol of strength, expression, courage and leadership.

Semiotic Model

The following semiotic model is used to analyze the language of sports. Jakobson's 1960s model of the speech event reformulates the langue / parole relationship within a communicative framework:



The addresser (coach) produces signs by sending a message to an addressee (player) through context and contact, which is governed by the code, thus leading to exchange of communication. Peirce (1991) remarked that semiosis is the relationship between a sign, an object and a meaning where the sign represents the entity in the mind of an interpreter. Sports and players function in cultural contexts, assigning them social and political value. Considering this, the language of sports constitutes an important part within the communication system.

Conclusion

A sport is a text of collective representation that indicates community and teamwork. Bogatyrev (1938b, 33) describes the dimensions of theatrical sign vehicles and remarks: What exactly is a theatrical costume or set that represents a house on stage? ... both signifies a sign and are not the sign of material thing" (in Elam 1980, 7). An 'armour,' a military costume,

may indicate for a particular spectators 'valour' or 'maniless.' Similarly, in a sport which is also a performance, gaze may signify challenging the rival or a sense of approval to the teammate. It is the message that is passed onto the teammate or the opponent. The non-verbal language of sports is a text that is composed of the codes of the sports person. It can be identified as a category of sign, metaphor, codes and symbols that render it more of a visual sign structure apprehended by the viewers in pure form.

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