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Sign Dramatization on the Day of Inauguration: A Cognitive Semiotic Approach to 2021 US Inauguration Day

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ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to explore the critical semiotic aspects of the overall American Inauguration Day in January 2021. This complicated and eventful day was one of the most remarkable scenes in the history of the united states for many socio-cultural and socio-political factors that can operate and interact beyond the scope of critical discourse analysis proper; therefore, the researcher pays credit to Genosko (2016) critical semiotic approach to encompass and absorb all the verbal and nonverbal signs as crucially needed and implemented in this study in order to rationalize the major indications and implications of those dramatic scenes since the dawn of that day till the end of the inauguration party. Hence, this qualitative study sheds light on the sociopolitical background of the Inauguration Day so that a myriad of critical signs can be properly and comprehensively contextualized and thus understood in light of the basic foundations of the triadic model proposed by Peirce (1931-1958) and the way it has been extrapolated in accordance with semioethics by Randviir (2004) and Petrilli (2014) in terms of human responsibility. The researcher has found that the sign dramatization on that memorable day was purposefully and cleverly knitted to serve a number of critical semiotic functions that had great sociopolitical effects on American politicians, American citizens and all spectators worldwide. The researcher has specifically identified and analyzed five major scenes; the overall scenes successfully employed a huge number of interacting verbal, auditory and visual signs as manifested during the live coverage, the Washington Post commentaries, CNN broadcasting, songs as well as Biden's Inauguration Address. This study has subtly manifested how such synergic aspects of these components were interwoven by the media and by the democrats in a way that demonized Donald Trump and glorified Biden's propaganda and/or perception of the American ideals envisaged in legal and ethical responsibilities.

Keywords: Critical discourse analysis, critical semiotics, Donald Trump, sign dramatization, Joe Biden, sign interaction, Peirce, Petrilli, triadic model.

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1. Introduction

The world in this digitized era has witnessed and is indeed witnessing a huge number of radical changes and noticeable upheaval every single day socially, economically and politically. Such dramatic and drastic daily events have changed the cognitive map of our ethno-semiotics and the matrix of our semioethics the role of which has been elegantly set and described by Petrilli (2009) in the cause that creates and boosts human awareness. Therefore, it is essential to understand how the world is interconnected and how issues such as “narration, history, duration, identity, subject, freedom, donation, conferral of sense from intentional consciousness, individuality, difference-indifference, interest, ontology, truth, force, reason, power, work, productivity, politics, war” are cognitively perceived within the Western culture (Petrilli, 2006, p.205).

The US presidential election season is one of the most vehement and audience attracting events that take place in the world next to the football world cup and the Olympics. About two billions of people of various ages, all colors and all political affiliations closely follow up the presidential campaigns from A to Z. Live coverage by all renowned international cable news networks, space channels and cyber media do promote this remarkable event every four years for many compelling ideological, economic and professional reasons; both US friends and enemies attentively wait for the election result on pins and needles because the identity of the new president can severely impact the whole world politically, economically, socially and militarily. Subsequent to such an overheated presidential race, wars can be launched on some countries or ended in some other places; industries can prosper or collapse; stock markets thrive or go on depression; new presidents and governments get elected in some countries and others get overthrown depending on the political affiliations of the new master at the White House; i.e. republican or democrat as well as on his/ her character, charisma, education or maybe gender!

In 2016, the then democrat president of the United States, Barak Obama, was preparing himself to leave the White House as the second term of his presidency was almost over. A new president to run the White House was campaigning in the meantime; it was the multibillionaire, Despite his low rating and various kinds of scandals that he went through, Donald Trump unexpectedly won the elections against one of the most prominent statespersons in the US history, Hillary Clinton; a former senator, a former secretary of the states and a wife of a former and one of the most popular US presidents, Bill Clinton.

Accused of rigging the elections as a result of allegations of cyber connivance with Russian, being involved in tens of corruption cases, bigotry, sex scandals, tax evasion, controversial tweets as well as racial discrimination and women-abuse, Trump relatively succeeded in running the Oval Office for four years at the national and the international arenas. His popularity increased and he gained a stronger position in his party, yet he lost the second battle when he ran for his second term in 2020.

In unprecedented circumstances of disastrous COVID-19 pandemic, the whole world was vigilantly watching the dramatic event of the United US presidential election that was held on Tuesday, November 3rd 2020 and culminated in one of the biggest wins of a president in the history of the United States in terms of vote number. The democratic ticket consisted of the former vice president Joe Biden and the democratic senator of California Kamala Harris. About eight one million voters cast their votes in favor of Joe Biden’s teams against Donald Trump’s. The results were rejected by Trump and some republicans, who accused their democratic opponents of deception and fraud and rigging the elections especially in some swing states and thus they asked for a recount of the ballots there. A huge number of lawsuits were filed by Trump’s team to overturn the results and to impede the Congress Electoral College officially certifying the results.

All Trump’s legal attempts and mobilizing tweets were fruitless. His sheer state of denial and outrageous instability led him to provoke masses of his followers to occupy the Capitol to intimidate the legislators and to stop the process of certification. The mobs took over the Capitol and destroyed parts of the building and a state of emergence was declared in an exotic scene of political turmoil that shocked the United States for the first time in its history in such presidential campaigns and presidential elections. Trumps fought against Biden’s victory till the last minute and he only conceded at the face value less than two weeks of the inauguration that took place on Jan 20th 2020.

2. Methodology and data analysis

The researcher followed a qualitative research method in this paper based on some close observations to the American socio-political arena during the past twelve years. The data in this study represent a sample of written, auditory and visual signs that were of great and substantial impact on dramatizing the scene of the Inauguration Day on Jan 20th 2020. These signs have been strictly spotted in some news papers, the CNN and some tubes presenting the official ceremonies of the inauguration itself and some major concomitant scenes preceding the event itself. The events, the speeches, the commentaries, the analyses, the music and Biden's speech itself were attentively examined and sorted; then all crucial signs were associated together in order to explain how such scenes and signs did interact together in a unique manner that reflected the complicated ideological struggle on the American arena nationwide and worldwide.

3. Theoretical background

Undoubtedly, it was Charles Sanders Peirce who made the first radical contribution to the study of signs and sign system in his triadic model which subsumes Saussure's Dyadic model that focuses on the arbitrariness of meaning between the signified and the signifier. Thus, the Peircean logical model shifted and expanded the scope of the Saussurean dichotomy in a comprehensive trichotomy of an object, a *representamen* and an *interpretant* whether the sign is symbolic, iconic or indexical and whether the interpretant operates denotatively, connotative or annotatively in terms of the tridimensionality of the object in terms of its *firstness*, *secondness* and *thirdness* (Peirce, 1938-1958).

This triadic perception has given rise to a wider, a deeper and a richer implementation of semiotic analyses to an enormously wide scale of fields such as philosophy, psychology, physics, biology, literature, translation and politics (Petrilli, 2016; Petrilli 2014, Sebeok, 1976). Therefore, the narrow limitations of the grammatical competence advocated by the Chomskians has been replaced by more comprehensive foundations of human semiosis by the Peirceans, so humans have been subtly described as semiotic animals (Petrilli and Ponzio, 2005; Deely, 2010). Thus, it is not Language which is species-specific but rather it is semiotics which exclusively marks humans as such in their unique ability to deliberately use all kinds of signs in their daily communication to manipulate beliefs, doctrines and ideologies.

Dewey (1946) stresses the notion that Peirce model of semiotics shows the exact relationship between signs, thought and meaning in a subtle logical manner. However, the critical semiotic approach to analyzing various cultural manifestations can be of a great extent of reliability and credibility because it caters for a vast spectrum of dynamic codes and dynamic signs that do exhibit an enormous degree of communicative interaction in terms of their 'indication, designation or likeness' whether these signs are vocal/auditory signs, visual signs, tactile signs, gustatory signs, or olfactory signs or a combination of such interwoven signs that may portray the overall communicative scene historically, theatrically, philosophically intellectually (see Brier, 2008). This amalgamation of overlapping ideological and non ideological sign distribution and/or sign coexistence can shape and direct the target audience into information channels, effect channels or both (cf. Genosko, 2016).

The scope of semiotics and semiotic analysis is almost infinite since it expands its goals from the very basic structural manifestation of the sign existence to the mechanic field of computational signification and sign processing. Therefore, the interaction between various disciplines and various perspectives enhances the fidelity and the authenticity of pictorial, oral and auditory sign interaction. Accordingly, Sonneson (1989) explains in his models of pictorial analyses how such visual representation of signs can be approached narratively or chronologically, rhetorically in terms of the figurative content of the sign and textually.

Fisch (1978) maintains that Peirce made a unique contribution to the general theory of meaning as he introduced the way signs mean what they mean in terms of their logical relations. This perception of signs and sign functions needs to be deepened as far as cognitive semiotics is concerned because at this level it can be one of the most successful tools that may help researchers explore and underpin major sociopolitical and ideological aspects of humans' interaction from different perspectives simply because our semiosis enables us to process different genres, different views and different attitudes simultaneously; thus we can factorially and collectively perceive and analyze a world of signs

interconnectedly in light of the interconnectedness principle, i.e. where they exist; why they interact and how they communicatively function in an overcrowded world of global communication (Petrilli, 2009).

The sign system one can explore in the twenty first century is quite impressive and sophisticated; however, our cognitive faculty and our semiosis can inevitably handle such complexity of signs and the way they are encoded and the way they can be decoded (Shackell, 2018). Such a systematic mechanism is what we as humans find and exhibit our utter pride in as we commute and as we communicate in this rapidly growing and amazingly interacting universe where legal and ethical responsibilities overshadow our dire daily needs socially, educationally, politically, psychologically and intellectually (see Thurlow, and Aiello, 2016).

Therefore, Perilli (2010) argues that such semiotic traits that humans enjoy as such entails a high degree of self-awareness that they must shoulder intellectually and ethically in what she describes as *semioethics* and responsibility. Such a universal responsibility is the milestone that marks our existence as *homosapiens* and as *homoculturalis* (See Eco, 1976; Danesi and Perron 1999). This argument hinges upon the very fact that animals can never found and culture or any civilization in a technical sense where as humans are the founders, the makers, the generators, the cumulators and the preservers of governments, monarchies, religious congregations, and all sorts of social, economic and political blocks and institutions at all times all through the history of this planet of the non-apes as a species that can enjoy and industrialize arts, songs and fine arts (see Keir, 2003).

4. Analysis and discussion

This section is mainly dedicated to analyzing and discussing the data that the researcher has collected appertaining various events that took place during the inauguration day. The data represents a wide range of phrases and sentences used in the inauguration speech itself with strict relevance to the visual and the auditory signs that accompanied the act of inauguration itself. Therefore, the scope of this paper, in general, and the core of this analysis, in particular, is not to analyze the speech of inauguration pragmatically, discursively or stylistically like what most scholars do whenever an inauguration takes place, but to examine and to extrapolate how various signs during the inauguration day were semiotically interwoven to reflect the semioethical aspects of that great event from a critical semiotic point of view (cf. Abbas, 2021; Bani Khaled and Azzam, 2021; Mahendra, 2021; Ramadan and Shamaila, 2021)

4.1. The Trump's departure scene

The inauguration Day showed an intensive interaction of various signs that reflected the then status quo of the US socio-political unprecedented ideological congestion. The dawn of January was unique at all levels as many space channels and cable news agencies had live coverage of the Trump's preparations to leave the White House because Trump refused to attend the inauguration ceremonies like his predecessors in a sign of resentment and defiance to and denial of the election results that brought Biden to be sworn in, so Donald Trump and Melania left the White House in the early hours of the day as it can be seen in (4.1.a.)



(4.1.a.)



(4.1.b.)

The picture in (4.1.a.) shows the late scene of the departure of Donald Trump and the First lady few hours before the inauguration speech. The facial expressions of both Donald Trump and Melania can reflect how the Trumps feel about the those critical moments; it was a day of mourning, depression and utter defeat for them; a no-more-first-couple. The second touching scene of that dramatic departure can be seen in (4.1.b.) as an integral sign of the first scene as Trump showed up alone while boarding Marine One and regretfully waving farewell to his personnel and to all his supporters who were watching that scene live. Furthermore, one can clearly observe how the events get more dramatized as in (4.1.c), (4.1.d.) and (4.1.e.):



(4.1.c.)



(4.1.d.)



(4.1.e.)

The two shots successively reveal how Trump's personnel look almost tepid and lukewarm in (4.1.c.) and how Marine One is almost disappearing gradually in the horizons of the White House behind the tree in (4.1.d.) and in the dark clouds in (4.1.e.) while an anonymous man waves to Trump and saying "it's a blessing to see him gone". As reported by the Washington post; annotatively, the waving sign is depleted of it's 'good-bye' and can be seen as a 'go-to-hell-farewell'! The shot itself is a rich dynamic sign that reflects a story of dreary psychological and disconsolate emotional state of Trump's on that gloomy day.

4.2. The Bidens' arrival scene

On the other hand, the scene of the new first couple, the Bidens, arriving to the White house hours after the first departure scene took place can be deeply comprehended and systematically analyzed in a way that depicts such sign dramatization of events psychologically, emotionally, socially and politically as it can be seen in (4.2.a.) and (4.2.b.) as opposed to all sub-scenes of (4.1.):



(4.2.a.)



(4.2.b.)

The new president and the first lady in (4.2.a.) are victoriously, confidently and cheerfully walking on a red carpet at the entrance of the White house; then they gleefully and enthusiastically hugging one another in a very expressive manner totally opposite to (4.1.a.) and (4.1.b.); juxtaposing these contradictory signs can schematically trigger the critical semiotic indications and implications that American voters and non-American observers can easily capture.

4.3 The parade scene

The Third dramatic event of the Inauguration Day was the Parade scene where many dynamic signs were cogently intertwined and employed successfully by the media to send a very critical message nationwide and worldwide as it can be seen in (4.3.a.) and (4.3.b.):



(4.3.a.)



(4.3.b.)

It is discernible that the American media cleverly presented various semiotic components of that great day including some presumably minor details that can be of major communicative significance. One can realize how such sign manipulation can be of serious impact as two D.C. police members show up in a vehement scene of obedience, dedication and discipline as one police Honor Guard member shows while holding and moving the American flag during those preparations as in (4.3.a.) and others show checking their uniform before leading the Parade at Pennsylvania Avenue; semio-ethically, these are dramatic signs of full an utter sense self-obligation of allegiance and responsibility.

Furthermore, the president's and the vice president's effective participation in the parade was eminently dramatic as they walk with their family members down the parade route as in (4.3.c.) and (4.3.d.) while Biden was defiantly bumping fists and Harris joyfully waving as a sign of triumph, joy and solidarity with their supporters along Pennsylvania Avenue and along the scope of the press cameras.



(4.3.c.)



(4.3.d.)

4.4 Inauguration ceremonies scene

This is one of the most influential scenes on that glorious day as a huge number of signs were critically exploited and communicatively performed on the capitol's arena in an attempt to obliterate the near past events of riot and chaos and disunity that Trump provoked and incited during the previous eight weeks. Every single sign of that overall scene was very indicative and purposefully tailored to serve conveying and indoctrinating a specific message to politicians in general and to normal citizens and people in particular as it can be seen in (4.4.a.) and (4.4.b.):



(4.4.a.)



(4.4.b.)

It was a marvelous sign of commitment and sense of responsibility when Amanda Gorman, an African American young girl, recited the poem “The Hill We Climb” as she appeared during the ceremonies in (4.4.a.). The poetess with all the implications of her young age, her black color, her confident performance and her outstanding poeticity made the inauguration totally different and almost erased sad days of grief and pessimism that swept all over this place as pro-Trump fans stormed the building. Here diction was the antichrist to all the Trumpean racist ideology and bigotry as she addressed the whole nation with here overt unifying words, “We seek harm to none and harmony for all... Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true.”. More remarkably, Gorman inspired sheer atmospheres of unity, sanity, liability and responsibility as she concluded, “The new dawn balloons as we free it. For there is always light, if only we’re brave enough to see it. If only we’re brave enough to be it.”

The other overwhelming part of the same scene was doubly effective when we consider and ponder on how and why the national anthem “The Star Spangled Banner” was sung by Lady Gaga, a top American singer, actress, philanthropist and one of the most influential figures in the states. Typically, the national anthem of any country is an emblem of unity, conformity and allegiance; however, when a national anthem is performed by an outstanding singer of great fame and popularity and an icon of success and philanthropy like lady Gaga, then the impact of the sign can be notably very prosperous and the communicative act itself can be very felicitous: “O say can you see, by the dawn’s early light, O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave; O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave”. These words that dignify “the land of the free” and glorify the “home of the brave”; i.e. people who believe in FREEDOM like Lady Gaga herself, Biden, Harris, Obama, etc.; and people who believe in BRAVERY like the American guards and soldiers who protected the Capitol weeks ago.

The inauguration scene was visually culminated in the swearing-in ceremonies of both the president, Joe Biden, and the vice president, Kamala Harris as it can be seen in (4.4.c.) and (4.4.d.):



(4.4.c.)



(4.4.d.)

The two historic scenes in these two swearing-in shots, (4.4.c.) and (4.4.d.), obviously show the utmost degree of legal, ethical and personal responsibility and accountability of the president and the vice president as they are committing themselves to the obligations of allegiance and fidelity as they take the solemn ‘Oath of Office’, the oath took by George Washington, which mandates that they serve

the nation according to the American constitution in (Article II, Section I, Clause VIII): they will to “the best of their ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States”; this brief phrase casts millions of questions concerning Trump’s utter fiasco in preserving, protecting and defending the constitution.

4.5 The presidential inauguration speech scene

Oftentimes, researchers and analysts in linguistics, psychology, rhetoric and politics try to analyze and dissect the Presidential Inauguration Speeches every term word by word and phrase by phrase (Ahmed and Shamaila, 2021; Bani-Khaled and Azzam, 2021; Siregar, 2021, et al). However, this is by no means the objective of this paper nor this section; rather, this very speech is considered and approached semioethically and critically as a scene which is closely relevant and substantially sequential to the integrity of the previous scenes of the Inauguration Day as a whole. Therefore, the speech is handled as another sign within a mosaic of other intermingling signs that constitute and consummate the deliberately designed code that relays an explicit anti-Trump message that Biden, Obama, Pelosi and their allies have tried to convey to all Americans and to the whole world during the past months of the presidential race.

Pledging to face the threat of “anger, resentment, hatred, extremism, lawlessness, violence, disease, joblessness and hopelessness”, and immediately after offering the canonical formalities of greeting all former presidents, House Speakers, dignitaries, all guests and all American citizens, Biden eloquently tried to strictly reinstate and re-crystallize all the signs that we have referred to and discussed in all the previous sections (1-4): the dire need for democracy, liberty, integrity, unity, indivisibility, sincerity, security, civility, humility as well as COVID-19 immunity; i.e. abiding by all the legal, the social and the ethical demands of responsibility and accountability as Americans and as humans. Biden’s Inauguration Address consists of 2373 words count-wise; however, it can be put it in a nutshell as a single sign in one hundred-word verbal text as follows:

This is democracy’s day. A day of history and hope of renewal and resolve through a crucible for the ages. America has been tested anew and America has risen to the challenge.... Let’s begin to listen to one another again. Hear one another, see one another, show respect to one another... We must end this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural vs. urban, conservative vs. liberal. We can do this if we open our souls instead of hardening our hearts... Sustained by faith, driven by conviction, devoted to one another and the country we love with all our hearts.

5. Conclusión

This paper specifically attempted to explore the cognitive semiotic aspects of the dramatization of signs on the US presidential Inauguration Day 2021. Unlike most researchers who always try to shed light on the discursal features and devices used by the presidents during the inauguration speeches as such, this researcher has tried to explore the whole scene on that day in order to capture the role of critical semiotics while examining the sociopolitical background spacio-temporally. This unique interaction between various levels of sign representation and sign manipulation can help audience and experts delve into the strategies, the tools and the techniques humans possess while processing a wide spectrum and mosaic of signs that constituted the overall American scene on that remarkable day in order to better understand the indications and the associations of such signs in their appropriate ideological and socio-cultural context. Further qualitative and quantitative research in the field of cognitive semiotics, in general, and critical semiotics, in particular, can be of great significance for ongoing and future multidisciplinary studies in humanities and in computational fields as well. Such studies within various cognitive semiotic perspectives can facilitate our cross-communication endeavors and enhance our coexistence as members of the same species, who are doomed to undergo the same destiny and to face the same calamities on this very jeopardized planet.

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Bio

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