

Semiotics of Intercultural Communication in The Study of International Relations

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the use of a semiotics approach in the study of International Relations. Semiotics is the study of signs and sign processes (semiosis), indication, designation, resemblances, analogies, metaphors, symbolism, meaning and communication. Semiotics approach is widely used in the studies of cultures, including in intercultural communication. In a simple term, intercultural communication is defined as human flow across national boundaries. Intercultural communication generally refers to face-to-face interaction among people of diverse culture. Intercultural communication is not a phenomenon that only takes place in the domestic sphere of a country, but also occur within the scope of global or international relations. International relations, according to some scholars, is a cultural phenomenon and the processes that occurred in international relations is essentially an intercultural communication or cross-cultural communication. Therefore, the processes in international relations can be explained using a semiotic approach.

Keywords: semiotics, culture, communication, intercultural communication, international relations.

INTRODUCTION

In the last two or three decades, approaches or studies on semiotics have begun to penetrate various disciplines. The semiotic approach was first used in language learning, which is closely related to the field of linguistics. In addition to language, semiotics initially developed in philosophy. However, currently, almost all social science disciplines have adopted the semiotic approach. In anthropology, the concept of semiotics was first used in 1978 by Milton Singer. In communication science, some pioneers of the semiotic approach include Robert Smith and Roland Barthes. Furthermore, the semiotic approach is also widely used in marketing studies, law, architecture, health sciences, sociology, cultural psychology, and even among international relations (IR) students.

In the study of International Relations (IR), semiotics, the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation, offers a valuable approach to understanding international relations or interactions in global society by analyzing how states, actors, and events are represented and understood through various forms of communication. It moves beyond traditional IR perspectives by examining the symbolic meanings embedded in language, actions, and material culture to reveal underlying power dynamics, cultural norms, and

constructed realities. Semiotics helps analyze how political leaders use specific words, phrases, and narratives to shape public opinion and construct national identities. For example, the use of "war on terror" as a label for certain conflicts, or the framing of economic policies as beneficial for all citizens, can be examined through a semiotic lens to understand their intended and unintended consequences.

Semiotics is also used to study how states use digital platforms and other media to communicate with foreign publics, shaping perceptions and influencing international opinion. This includes analyzing the visual elements (images, videos, emojis) and language used in social media campaigns and online interactions. Semiotics can be applied to understand how international organizations like the UN or WTO use symbols, rituals, and procedures to project authority and legitimacy. Semiotics helps analyze how national symbols, flags, anthems, and historical narratives contribute to the construction of national identity and shape perceptions of other nations. Semiotics is crucial in understanding how cultural differences influence the interpretation of signs and symbols, potentially leading to misunderstandings and conflicts. For example, gestures, colors, and even the use of silence can have different meanings in different cultures.

The term semiotics itself comes from the Greek *sēmeiōtikos*, meaning “observant signs” (Liddell, 2015). Semiotics, often also called semiology, is the study of meaning-making, or the study of the processes of signs and meaningful communication. Semiotics includes the study of signs and sign processes (semiosis), indication, designation, resemblance, analogy, metaphor, symbolism, meaning, and communication. Semiotics is closely related to the field of linguistics, which, for its part, studies the more specific structure and meaning of language. However, unlike linguistics, semiotics also studies non-linguistic sign systems. Semiotics is often divided into three branches: semantics, syntax, and pragmatics. Semantics is the relationship between signs and the things they refer to. Syntax is the relationship between signs in a formal structure. While pragmatics is the relationship between signs and signs that use agents.

In summary, semiotics provides a unique lens for examining the symbolic dimensions of international relations, revealing how meaning is constructed, communicated, and contested in the global arena. By analyzing language, symbols, and material culture, semioticians can offer valuable insights into power dynamics, cultural norms, and the construction of international realities.

THE MEANING AND SCOPE OF SEMIOTICS

The term semiotics is said to have first appeared in the 19th century by an American pragmatic philosopher named Charles Peirce. He comprehensively defined semiotics as a doctrine concerning the essential nature and fundamental varieties of semiosis (Peirce, 1989). While what is meant by semiosis itself is an action that involves the cooperation of three subjects, namely the sign, its object, and its interpretation.¹ Umberto Eco said that semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign (Eco, 1976). In the semiotic sense, signs can be words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects.

Contemporary semioticians generally do not study signs in isolation. They are more interested in studying the formation and exchange of meaning through text and discourse. Therefore, semiotics in a broad sense can also be interpreted as a study of all forms of formation and exchange of meaning based on a sign system (semiotics is the study of all forms of formation and exchange of meaning on the basis of sign system) (Sojjodi, 2016). For semioticians, “text” can exist in any media, and can be verbal or non-verbal, or encompass both.

Ferdinand de Saussure, who prefers to use the term semiology, defines this concept as a science that studies the life of signs in society (semiology is a science that studies the life of signs in society) (de Saussure, 1989). In a nearly similar formulation, Daniel Chandler said that semiology is a science

that studies the role of signs as part of social life (semiology is a science which studies the role of signs as a part of social life) (Chandler, 2016). Semiology examines the nature of signs and the laws or rules that govern these signs.

Semiotics is the study of signs, discussing action, usage, communication, and their significance. Semiotics can also be defined as a theory of the production and interpretation of meaning. The basic principle of semiotics is that meaning is created through the deployment of actions and objects that function as “signs” in relation to other signs. The system of signs is based on the meaning of complex relationships that can occur between one sign and another, especially the relationship of contrast and superordination/subordination (e.g., class/member, whole/part). Signs are deployed in space and time to produce “texts,” the meaning of which is interpreted by the mutually contextualizing relationships between the signs. Semiotics is the science or analytical method for studying signs. Signs are the tools we use in our efforts to find our way in this world, among humans and with other humans. Semiotics essentially aims to study how humanity gives meaning to things. To signify in this case cannot be confused with to communicate. To signify means that objects not only carry information—in which case they intend to communicate—but also constitute a structured system of signs (Barthes, 2009).

Thus, the basis of both semiotics and semiology is the concept of signs. Not only are languages and communication systems composed of signs, but the world itself—as far as it relates to the human mind—is entirely composed of signs. Because, if it were not so, humans would not be able to establish relationships with reality. Language itself is also the most fundamental sign system for humans. Meanwhile, non-verbal signs such as gestures, forms of clothing, and various other conventional social practices, can be seen as a kind of language composed of meaningful signs that are communicated based on relationships (Sobur, 2013).

Semiotics cannot be separated from language. As Ferdinand de Saussure said, language consists of a number of signs contained in a network system and can be arranged in a number of structures. Each sign in the network has two inseparable sides like two pages on a sheet of paper. In our lives, there are many studies on semiotics that we may not even be aware of. Like the language we use every day. Language is a sign that we utter every day to communicate, and there are many other signs in our lives as a means of communication. We are creatures called *homo socius* which means creatures that interact with other creatures of the same kind. We are in a group of families called society, in that society we have a

tool to interact with each other in the form of sounds called language, which is useful as a sign to convey information or other needs (de Saussure, 2016).

Semiotics experts have so far distinguished two types of semiotics, namely communication semiotics and significance semiotics (Hoed, 2008). Communication semiotics emphasizes the theory of sign production, one of which assumes the existence of six factors in communication, namely sender, code receiver, sign system, message, communication channel, and reference. Meanwhile, significance semiotics emphasizes the theory of signs and their understanding in a certain context. Here, the purpose of communication is not questioned, what is prioritized is the aspect of understanding a sign so that the cognitive process of the sign recipient is more considered than the communication process.

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was the main figure behind the birth of semiotics as a discipline. Other key figures in semiotics who can also be called the founders of the discipline are Charles Peirce (1839-1914), and Charles Morris (1901-1979), who developed behaviorist semiotics. Several other scholars then helped develop semiotics until it was finally studied widely throughout the world, including Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Algirdas Greimas (1917-1992), Yuri Lotman (1922-1993), Christian Metz (1931-1993), Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1966), Umberto Eco (1932-2016), and Julia Kristeva (1941-present). In anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss is known as a pioneer of structuralist semiotics. Jacques Lacan is known for developing semiotics within psychoanalysis. Meanwhile, Yves Delahaye, a pioneer of the semiotic approach to IR studies, was one of the first (Delahaye, 1977).

According to Daniel Chandler, semiotics is important because it helps us to move away from positing 'reality' as something that has a completely objective existence and is independent of human interpretation. Semiotics teaches us that reality is a system of signs. Studying semiotics can help us to become more aware of reality as a construction and the role that ourselves and others play in constructing that reality. Semiotics can help us to realize that information or meaning is not 'contained' in the world or in books, on computers or in audio-visual media. Meaning is not 'transmitted' to us, but rather we actively make meaning according to a complex interaction of codes or conventions of which we are usually unaware. Recognizing these codes is both inherently fascinating and intellectually empowering. We learn from semiotics that we live in a world of signs and that we have no way of understanding anything except through signs and the codes into which they are organized (Chandler, 2002).

Through the study of semiotics we become aware that signs and codes are often transparent and obscure our task of 'reading' them. Living in a world where signs are increasingly visual, we need to learn that even the most realistic signs are not what they appear to be. By making more explicit the codes

through which signs are interpreted, we can perform a valuable semiotic function: denaturalizing them. In defining reality, signs serve an ideological function. Deconstructing and challenging the reality of signs can reveal both privileged and suppressed realities. The study of signs is the study of the construction and maintenance of reality. To deny its importance, therefore, is to cede to others control of the world of meaning we inhabit (Chandler, 2002).

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Before delving into the discussion of intercultural communication in international relations, it is first necessary to understand the concept of culture. The renowned anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, says that the concept of culture indicates a pattern of meaning contained in symbols that are transmitted historically, a system of conceptions inherited and expressed in symbolic forms through which humans communicate, preserve, and develop their knowledge about life and attitudes towards life (Geertz, 2016).

According to Adam Kuper, because culture is a symbolic system, the cultural process must be read, translated, and interpreted (Kuper, 1999). The concept of symbolic culture, as interpreted by Geertz, is a hermeneutic approach, an approach commonly used in semiotic circles. This hermeneutic approach then inspired him to see culture as texts that must be read, translated, and interpreted. Paul Ricoeur explains that the construction of human knowledge is a structure of facts that are symbols and laws that they give meaning. Thus, human actions can convey meaning that can be read, a treatment similar to when treating texts (Ricoeur & Thompson, 1981).

Meanwhile, what is meant by intercultural communication is any type of communication and information exchange between people who refer to two different cultural frameworks. Intercultural communication is communication that occurs between people who have different cultures (can be different in race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic, or a combination of all these differences). As Stewart Tubbs said, intercultural communication is communication between people of different cultures. While culture itself is a way of life that develops and is adopted by a group of people and continues from generation to generation (Tubbs & Moss, 1977).

Fred Jandt (2013) defines intercultural communication as face-to-face interaction among people of different cultures (intercultural communication generally refers to face-to-face interaction among people of diverse culture). In his book entitled *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication*, Jandt directs his understanding of intercultural communication as cultural communication from various countries in the global community. Hamid

Mowlana is in line with Jandt, he defines intercultural communication as the flow of people across national boundaries (human flow across national boundaries), for example through involvement in an international conference where nations from various countries with different cultures gather and communicate with each other.

Intercultural communication is often used synonymously with cross-cultural communication. Cross-cultural communication is a field of study that looks at how people from different cultural backgrounds communicate. The concept of cross-cultural communication is used to understand how people from different countries act, communicate, and understand the world around them. Many in cross-cultural communication argue that culture determines how individuals encode messages, what media they choose to convey those messages, and how messages are interpreted (Lauring, 2001).

Cross-cultural communication consists of verbal and non-verbal aspects. Verbal communication can be defined as communicating thoughts through words. These thoughts can be ideas, opinions, directions, dissatisfaction, objections, emotions, and pleasures. There are two types of verbal communication: written communication and oral communication (speaking). Non-verbal communication, on the other hand, encompasses the overall body language of the person speaking, including posture, hand gestures, and overall body movement. Facial expressions also play an important role, as a person's facial expressions during communication often reveal their mood. Non-verbal communication can also take the form of pictorial representations, nameplates, or even photographs, sketches, and paintings.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Intercultural communication, or cross-cultural communication, is not a phenomenon that occurs only within a country's domestic sphere. In fact, recently, the study of intercultural communication on a global scale (international communication or international relations) has begun to receive serious attention from cultural experts and international relations experts. With the increasingly rapid phenomenon of intercultural communication on a global scale, experts are forced to reorganize the concepts, theories, and methods of intercultural communication and provide analytical tools to understand the phenomenon of intercultural communication in international relations.

Glen Fisher in his work entitled *International Negotiation: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* tries to review the process of cross-cultural communication in the context of international relations, where people from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds try to reach an agreement (Fisher, 1980). Houman Sadri and Madelyn Flammia in their book entitled *Intercultural Communication: A New Approach to*

International Relations and Global Challenges, besides explaining the importance of the intercultural communication approach in international relations, also elaborate on various basic concepts of intercultural communication in international relations as well as global issues related to cross-cultural communication (Sadri & Flammia, 2011).

The works of Fisher, Sadri, and Flammia represent several studies of intercultural or cross-cultural communication in international relations. These works also serve as an affirmation that various events in the practice of international relations (such as negotiation, diplomacy, trade, psychological warfare, and so on) are actually intercultural communication processes. Because they are part of intercultural communication, international relations practices can be explained using a semiotic approach, as is the case with cultural studies in general.

Thus, intercultural communication is no longer solely a part of communication studies. According to Sadri and Flammia, as it has developed, IR studies have also acquired a natural jurisdiction over intercultural communication phenomena, particularly when communication activities cross national borders. For IR experts, communication is a natural element of diplomacy, negotiation, and signaling in a global society. Diplomatic activities require diplomats to communicate their country's national interests to their counterparts from other countries.

In IR studies, in addition to the concept of interculturalism, there is also the concept of multiculturalism. Although the application of these two concepts in a global society is difficult to separate, they have distinct meanings. The term interculturalism refers to diversity among separate nations. The term multiculturalism refers to countries with diverse cultural groups, usually as a result of immigration or diaspora processes (Sadri & Flammia, 2011). For example, Indonesia is a multi-cultural country and through international relations Indonesia experiences inter-cultural communication processes.

In the theory and practice of international relations, the concept of cultural diplomacy is known. Here, culture is not only used as an instrument of a country's foreign policy, but also as a means to develop intercultural communication and cooperation between people from all over the world. As stated by Milton Cumming, cultural diplomacy is the exchange of ideas, values, information, art, and other aspects of culture between countries and their people with the ultimate goal of introducing mutual understanding (Cumming, 2003). Cultural diplomacy is a concept that is closely related to other terms, especially the concepts of cultural relations, intercultural exchange, and intercultural communication.

Cultural diplomacy is a fundamental mechanism for connecting cultures and promoting cultural diversity. In

the post-Cold War era, there is a growing need among the global community to understand different cultures. There is great hope that each of us can become a tool for conflict prevention. Intercultural communication, or interaction through the exchange of language, ideas, music, and art, is expected to improve communication between culturally opposed groups.

In addition to the concept of cultural diplomacy, constructivist theory is also known in IR studies, which implicitly takes into account aspects of intercultural communication in international issues. According to Mary Einbinder, constructivist theory in IR studies is the most suitable analytical framework to discuss how international structures are socially constructed and thus can be changed through ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and discourses that develop in global society (Einbinder, 2016). According to constructivism, the international system is formed as a common understanding between actors. Meanwhile, according to Jurgen Habermas, shared understanding can only be realized through communicative actions from actors (Habermas, 2015).

As the constructivist thinker Alexander Wendt has argued, shared social concepts construct the structure of the international system and are believed to be the driving force of that structure (Wendt, 1999). The principles and concepts of international relations can be socially constructed by actors if there is a continuous process of intercultural communication between them. The realization of world peace (as the goal of the birth of IR studies), can only be achieved through the creation of continuous intercultural communication (or communicative actions as intended by Habermas) within the framework of ongoing relations between nations.

SEMIOTICS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

As explained above, international relations are essentially intercultural communication on a global scale. Sustainable intercultural communication is the foundation for the realization of peaceful international relations. Akira Iriye even asserts that international relations itself is essentially a cultural phenomenon. At a deeper level, it can be said that international relations are actually a product of the interaction of different cultures (Iriye, 1997). As a cultural phenomenon, international relations can be explained using a semiotic approach, just like cultural phenomena in general.

Semiotics is not a completely new phenomenon in international relations. The semiotics of culture, as a system of symbols and meanings, has long been recognized as having important implications for intercultural communication and international relations. For example, the phrase "conversation of cultures" was used in Robert Redfield's article "Does America Need a Hearing Aid?", published in 1953 in *The Saturday Review*. This article applied and elaborated on the metaphor of face-to-face conversation as the ideal for

conducting international relations. Redfield further explained that mutual security depends on mutual understanding, and that understanding requires conversation. In international relations, it is essential to build a community of freethinkers, a dialogue of civilizations (Redfield, 1991).

The historical and ethnographic study of how national signs and symbols emerge and are sometimes transcended in the "convivial relations" of diplomacy is an important agenda for research in the semiotics of international relations. The study of semiotics in international relations requires not only linguistic expertise and a better understanding of international communication schemes, but also an examination of the social and cultural contexts of communication and the historical background of nations in international relations. In Redfield's language, the semiotics of international relations can be a "hearing aid" to listen to changing moods, explore persistent national structures, and understand universal human traits. In essence, the semiotics of international relations is useful for "listening" to intra-national communication as well as intercultural communication of multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural countries (Singer, 1991).

If we accept Margaret Mead's (1962) definition that semiotics is all patterned communication in all modalities, then it is quite easy to see how a study of the world's great civilizations with the help of a specialized discipline needs to study all patterns of intercultural communication in all modalities (Singer, 1991). The study of IR is the study of the interactions between great civilizations (see Samuel Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilizations in post-Cold War international relations). Thus, it is inevitable that a semiotic approach will be increasingly needed in the analysis of international problems.

The formal application of a semiotic approach to analyzing international issues began in 1987. At that time, a group of lecturers and students from several departments (including the Department of International Relations) at the University of Chicago began researching the semiotic aspects of American and Soviet nuclear policy issues. In essence, this was an interdisciplinary and intercultural project and a cultural conversation in which pure and descriptive semiotics were highly relevant. Because international relations are not just about geopolitics, economics, and weapons technology, but also about culture and symbols, a semiotics of international relations is needed to help "listen" and "translate" cultural conversations on the international stage in all communication modalities (Singer, 1991). As Redfield said, shared understanding is a necessary condition for the realization of collective security in international relations. In the literature of International Relations studies, there are many definitions of international relations. One simple

definition of international relations is made by Marcel Merle. He said that international relations is the ebbs and flows that cross borders, or tend to cross borders (Merle, 1987). The word borders, as mentioned by Merle, refers to the inhabited part of the world controlled by political units that we call states. The criteria used to divide states are based on the political and legal division of space in which the movement of actors in the international scenario occurs. Borders, in semiotic terminology, are the "signs" from which all signs adopted in international relations are derived.

Thus, the word border in Merle's definition is a central element in international relations. Merle's definition allows us to shift attention from states—or rather, from international actors—to "flows" that "cross" and "tend to cross" national borders. With this shift in focus, many factors (besides actors) become objects of study in IR studies as long as they are involved in cross-border "flows," such as the circulation of people, products, capital, ideas, and even discourse. Referring to Merle's definition of international relations above, we see a connection between the "domestic" and "international" dimensions resulting from the "international significance" inherent in the concept of "crossing borders." Therefore, every speech, statement, or law issued by a government (even when all of these are directed at its own people) can be important for the international community and especially for semiotics observers. Texts related to these matters are significant for semiotics, including those that are not intended to have effects beyond borders (de Carvalho & Menezes, 2011).

The semiotics of international relations is also closely related to diplomatic activities. As is well known, with the end of the Cold War, the topic of cultural diversity in international relations became increasingly present on diplomatic agendas. Many countries that were marginalized from the international system during the Cold War began to demand broader participation, both in the form of international diplomatic expressions and in the process of forming new international norms (de Carvalho & Menezes, 2011). Therefore, if in the past their behavior and linguistics were considered something odd, now they can also become a normal part of the conversation of diplomatic culture. The world of diplomacy is no longer dominated by the signs, symbols, meanings, and metaphors of large countries that hegemonize the international system, but has also provided an open space for the cultural emancipation of various actors in international relations. In this context, the semiotics of international relations becomes increasingly relevant and has a broader scope of study.

CONCLUSION

A semiotic approach is essential for the study of communication and culture. The world of communication and culture is replete with symbols, signs, emblems, meanings, discourses, analogies, and metaphors, which are the focus of semiotic studies. International relations is a cultural

phenomenon because it is essentially a process of intercultural communication. As a cultural phenomenon and a form of intercultural communication, the processes within international relations can naturally be explained using a semiotic approach. This is why the term "semiotics of international relations" was coined.

Although still marginal in international relations research, since the post-Cold War era, there has been growing awareness within the IR community of the importance of utilizing a semiotic approach in the study of international issues. Semiotic studies within the IR community have largely focused on post-Cold War diplomacy and negotiation processes. However, some studies have also focused on discourse analysis of various foreign policies and statements by world leaders in international events. Semiotics has found increasing application in International Relations, particularly in critical, constructivist, and post-structuralist approaches. It is often used to analyze how meaning is constructed in international politics, diplomacy, identity, and conflict.

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