Book Review

Mingyu Wang, Yong Chen, Hua Jin, and Hongzhou Lü: *Modern Linguistic Semiotics*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2013, pp. 602, Paperback 78 RMB, ISBN: 9787100094399.

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1 Introduction

In reviewing *Modern Linguistic Semiotics* by Mingyu Wang et al. in the context of the study of linguistic signs in China, I come to realize that this book applies linguistic theories to the semiotic research on text, sentence, and metaphor, and thus makes substantial contributions to the discipline of semiotics. This contribution becomes more salient in the context in which the study of signs in China, though still taking the meaning of linguistic signs as its main concern, has shown a tendency to widen its scope to include all kinds of signs. Semiotics is known as originating in the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and after a full century's development has grown to a field of study that investigates all kinds of signs, ranging from the signs of language to, for example, the signs of traffic lights. However, the key concern of semiotics remains unchanged, and that is the meaning of a sign, especially the meaning of a linguistic sign. In this respect, *Modern Linguistic Semiotics*, written by Professor Mingyu Wang with the assistance of his students Yong Chen, Hua Jin, and Hongzhou Lü, is such a modern-linguistics oriented endeavor that addresses the theoretical and practical questions concerning the meaning of linguistic signs. The book is a fully revised and much extended version of the same author's *Linguistic Semiotics* (Wang, 2004) and, more importantly, it contains the author's new conceptualizations of key issues concerning the meaning of linguistic signs. In this review article I introduce the contents of this new edition and discuss its contributions to the discipline of semiotics in relation to the present context of semiotics in China.

2 Introducing Modern Linguistic Semiotics

Modern Linguistic Semiotics is a 602-page volume, consisting of five parts, each part with several extensive chapters. In the first two parts, it discusses theoretical issues in and origins of linguistic semiotics, and in the last three parts it turns to practical semiotic research on text, sentence, and metaphor. In the remainder of this section I introduce the essence of the book and discuss some of its features.

2.1 Theoretical exploration

Part One, "Overview of Linguistic Semiotics", is composed of two chapters. Chapter One begins with discussing the features of a sign, and then moves to the discussion of semiotics. After outlining the original efforts of some semiotic researchers such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce in recognizing what a sign is and how semiotics differentiates from other academic endeavor, this chapter comes to an end with the author's understanding of linguistic semiotics, the key concept of the book. It argues that linguistic semiotics is a discipline in which the linguistic sign is its main research object and semiotic theory is adopted to do research on language issues (p.17). Starting from this argument, the several chapters that follow are devoted to the discussion of methodological issues of linguistic semiotics (Chapter Two in Part One) and various linguistic semiotic theories and approaches (the ten chapters in Part Two). The methods are summarized as those of structuralism, dichotomy, duality, and triangular, with an emphasis given not to the differences between them but to their shared attitude and epistemology in doing linguistic semiotics. The theoretical threads overviewed in the chapters of Part Two are those proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Charles Williams Morris, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Roman Jakobson, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman, Julia Kristeva, and Algirdas Julien Greimas. The theories are discussed in full, including a brief biography of the theorists, a detailed account of the theories, and discussions of the features of the theories.

As the above-mentioned theories are generally known to the readers of this review, I believe, I will not re-state them here. What I want to draw attention to is the way in which the account gives a thread of development from one theory to another. In Chapter Three of Part One, for example, Morris' identification of semiotics as composed of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics is shown to be closely related to Peirce's unity theory of "firstness, secondness, and thirdness"

(p.59). The account of Barthes' theory of semiotics is also made in relation to another linguist, namely, Ferdinand de Saussure, in that it develops Saussure's duality account of a linguistic sign as *langue* and *parole*, signified and signifier, and the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes (pp. 64–70). This relatedness of semiotic theories presented in these ten chapters strongly justifies the maturity of the discipline as well as the long history. In addition, the theoretical discussions of linguistic semiotics, extended from eight authors in *Linguistic Semiotics* (Wang, 2004) to ten by adding Julia Kristeva and Algirdas Julien Greimas, offers a fuller picture of the theoretical development of linguistic semiotics in the twentieth century.

This fuller picture, however, leaves Part Two something to be desired. In reading this detailed account of various semiotic theories, I find that some of the theorists are left not very squared with the title of this part. For example, the title "Theoretical Origins of Modern Linguistic Semiotics" presupposes that the theories discussed in Part Two are oriented towards modern linguistics, but some of the theorists are post-modernism oriented or post-structuralism oriented in essence. This is noticed in several places by the author of the book. Barthes, for example, is recognized as one who emphasizes the multi-meanings of a sign and thus features in post-structuralism (p.72). Eco, as is pointed out, by publishing *The Open Work* in 1962, becomes the main figure of post-modernist thought in Italy (p.77). In addition, Jakobson's proposal that language is a dynamic and functional system (p.89), Barkhtin's account of social, discursive, and ideological features of signs (p.109), and Kristeva's emphasis on the historicity and intertextuality of semiosis (p.136), all bear in one way or another on the features of post-modernist thought, post-modernist in the sense that the meaning of language is viewed as dynamic, unfixed, and depending not on certain contexts but on specific agents' ongoing perception of the context (see for example Tian and Zhang, 2007).

2.2 Linguistic semiotic research

The extended overview of the forerunners of semiotics in Part Two justifies linguistic semiotics as an established discipline that enjoyed a long history of theoretical development and research traditions. This serves to apply semiotic theories and methods to research on language issues, which is the set task of the book. In the following three parts, as it turns out, the author takes up semiotic research on such language issues as text, sentence, and metaphor, and from these he undoubtedly fulfills the ambition of the book, that is, to draw new

semiotic theories for linguistic research and a new significance of linguistic semiotics for the methodology of the humanities and social sciences (p.36).

Part Three, "Textual Semiotics Research", is devoted to the exploration of text, the complex structure that is not a simple series of signs but a conjuncture of vertically and horizontally moving linguistic signs (p.177). The research provides a model of textual semiotics that analyzes the integrity of a text paradigmatically and the coherence of a text syntagmatically, thus resulting in a paradigmatic-integrity approach and a syntagmatic-coherence approach. These two approaches are further developed by looking at the expression dimension and the content dimension of the text. For the paradigmatic-integrity approach, the expression dimension is analyzed in terms of substance and form, the former referring to the systematic characteristics of language, and the latter referring to the cohesive devices such as the title, beginning, and coda that justifies the type of text. The content dimension is also analyzed in terms of substance and form, but the substance here refers to the substantial information about the spiritual and material world, and the form refers to a macro-arrangement of the information such as "introduction-body-conclusion" structure. For the syntagmatic-coherence approach, the two dimensions of expression and content are analyzed in terms of substance and form as well, but what the substance and form refer to are different from those in the paradigmatic-integrity approach. For example, the substance of the expression dimension refers to the context within the text, or co-text; the substance of the content dimension refers to the context outside the text, or situational context. The form of the expression dimension refers to the logical thinking, or logical context; the form of the content dimension refers to the cognitive forms, or cognitive context. As such, these four types of contexts, namely, co-text, situational context, logical context, and cognitive context, are related to the coherence of a text, as is termed by the author, morphological coherence, pragmatic coherence, logical coherence, and cognitive coherence respectively.

This model of textual semiotics, termed as "joint principles of two dimensions and two sides", comes out of a sound review of the study of text both in the fields of linguistics and semiotics, including the disciplinary status of textual study in semiotics. Based on this review, the author goes further to discuss the features of text from a semiotic perspective, and proposes two basic features of a text, integrity and coherence, that correspond to the paradigmatic and syntagmatic structure of a text. To develop these two, namely, the paradigmatic-integrity approach and the syntagmatic-coherence approach, the author argues for two dimensions, that of expression and that of content, both of which are to be analyzed in terms of substance and form, the two sides of analysis. I can see that a convincing rationale for such a model of textual

semiotics is provided in the first chapter of Part Three. In the following two chapters of this part, detailed illustrations and discussions are provided for the paradigmatic analysis of textual integrity (Chapter Two) and the syntagmatic analysis of textual coherence (Chapter Three).

Part Four, "Sentential Semiotics Research", is devoted to the exploration of the sentence. The sentence as sign is recognized as a unity of "sentence" and "utterance", two opposites that stand respectively for the abstract sign of structure in the language system and the concrete sign of realization in communication behavior (p.318). This part consists of three chapters. Chapter One is a general account of the semiotic study of the sentence, explaining the layers of linguistic signs, offering a semiotic definition of sentence (see the above), discussing the semiotic features of sentence meaning, and the disciplinary status of sentential semiotics, reviewing some basic paradigms that are used in studying the sign of the sentence, and reviewing some semantic studies of the sentence as sign. Among these discussions and explanations, what deserves special attention for readers of this book is the proposal of the linguistic sign as layered and the sign of the sentence as meaning centered, as these two points serve as starting points for further discussion in the following two chapters of this part.

The layered feature of the sentence as sign is the focus of Chapter Two. Several types of layers are identified, such as a macro layer and a micro layer, on a structural basis. The different layers are recognized as very closely related, and the relatedness is explained in syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic ways. Syntactically, for example, the lower layers can paradigmatically constitute the higher layers; semantically, the lower the layer is, the more abstract the meaning it carries will be; and pragmatically, people might use the minimal sign to express the richest meaning at the layer of the sign. Based on this layered perspective on the sentence, Chapter Three proceeds to dwell on a linguistic semiotic model of layered meaning of the sentence. For this model, the layers of meaning of a sentential sign are recognized as deep, shallow, and surface, which correspond respectively to sensitive meaning, cognitive meaning, and situational meaning. These layers are the concern of a study that examines the process of moving from form to meaning. Complementary to this, the model goes further to examine the process of meaning to form, and studies the semiotic process in which a sign is interpreted or its meaning is generated in a certain situation (p.415). For this process, it proposes that, drawing on research from psycholinguistics and cognitive linguistics, the generation of a sentence goes through a pre-language stage, and language coding stage. At the pre-language stage, the material world is related to the utterance situation through a predicative act. At the language coding stage, the utterance situation and the

predicative coding are abstracted into sentence structure (this sub-process termed as a "first-layer semiotic process"), and then this abstract sentence structure is re-coded into a communicated uttering, known as a "second-layer semiotic process" (p.426).

This linguistic semiotic model of layered meaning is further used to interpret the meaning of metaphor in Part Five, "Metaphoric Semiotic Research". The rationale is like this: a metaphor is essentially a linguistic sign that generates its meaning via the signifier's layer movement. Chapter One of this part offers an extensive review of metaphoric studies, including rhetoric studies, philosophical studies, linguistic studies, and cognitive linguistic studies. By discussing the contributions of these studies to metaphoric studies and their limitations, the author argues that metaphor is in principle a linguistic sign, which can be studied in terms of the relation between the signified and signifier, the relation of a sign and the user of the sign, or rather, the relation of a sign and the material world in which the sign exists (p. 477). In the next two chapters, Chapter Two and Three, the author investigates the stable basis on which metaphor is produced (Chapter Two) and the dynamic mechanism by which metaphor is produced (Chapter Three). The investigation is made by examining similarities between signs that involve various factors, with iconicity on the stable basis and the metaphor maker (as well as the conditions in which similarities are made) on the dynamic part.

After investigating the ways in which metaphor is produced, the author proceeds to investigate the way of interpreting the meaning of metaphors. He resorts to the layered-meaning theory and highlights the progressive construct of signifier and signified in the making of meaning. As in Part Four, language is viewed as a complex system of layered signs, and the meaning of a linguistic sign is produced through the move from the material layer (the deep layer) to the language layer (the shallow layer) and still to the utterance layer (the surface layer) progressively, each move containing the signifier of the layer, but the signifier of the second and third move being the construct of the signifier and signified of the earlier move. Similar to the moves at the symbol level as described above, the progressive moves also happen at the thing level, conceptual level, and meaning level. At the thing level, for example, the deep layer is reflected as associated naming, while the shallow layer and surface layer respectively abstract naming and concrete naming. At the concept level, the three layers are reflected as moves from signification to denotation and to reference. At the meaning level, the three layers are reflected as moves from sensible meaning to cognitive meaning and to situational meaning. To illustrate this interpretation, a graph is used (p.546), which is helpful for a proper understanding.

3 Significance of the book for semiotics in China

In the Coda of this volume, Wang the author reflects on the features of his book, pointing out that the analytical tools of modern linguistics are used to do the semiotic research on text, sentence, and metaphor (p.601). He is right. Through reading the book, I feel strongly that the book is a thorough overview of the various semiotic theories, a good application of linguistic theories to semiotic researches, and a sound process of linguistic semiotic theory building. By applying paradigms and principles of modern linguistics to semiotic researches, *Modern Linguistic Semiotics* evidently bears the features of modernist thought such as duality and dichotomy. And by the linguistic semiotic research on language issues such as text, sentence, and metaphor, the book develops some convincing theories such as the "two-dimension-and-two-side model" and the "layered meaning model", which can be said to have laid a sound theoretical foundation for linguistic semiotics.

The in-depth discussions in the first two parts and the substantial explorations in the last three are not the only feature for which the book enjoys its wide audience. When taking into consideration the large number of published books on semiotics in China, one cannot but see a situation where various titles address semiotics in relation to such areas as media, film, and arts (e.g. Hu, 2014; Qi, 2013). In addition, the translated versions of French, American, and Russian semioticians' works occupy a large portion of the market. Against this background, Wang's new book is assuredly a welcome volume. It is welcomed because it is a Chinese scholar's theoretical work, and also his pioneering endeavor of ten years to apply modern linguistic theory to semiotic research, which in turn helps enrich the theories of linguistics and semiotics. There is reason to believe that, though semiotics may continue to include media semiotics and the like, linguistic semiotics will be a main part of semiotics in China, and this reviewed book will provide useful guidelines for linguistic research on the meaning of linguistic signs.

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