

FORMING SEMANTIC CONNECTIONS IN THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE

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In post-Soviet theatre, performances tend to shift their original (the playwright's) focus to that of the director. That necessarily brings about certain changes in the processes of establishing connotations in the play's semiotics. The paper will look at four types of correlations between the dramatic signifier and its signified, which are created visually and aurally. These correlations can be achieved by: creating parallels between the signifier's appearance and its acoustic manifestation; utilizing the physical characteristics of the signifier itself, which generate meaning-forming associations; using metaphoric associations while engaging the signifier in a physical act; mapping the signifier's intended use onto a separate theatrical action, which results in the transference of an outer action onto an inner one. As will be shown by several case studies of Russian and Moldovan dramatic performances these four types of correlations serve as a general basis for formulating more complex performative semantic structures.

Keywords: theatre semiotics, semantic structure, meaningful action, theatrical sign, metaphoric type of connection

“The semiotics of art occupies an important place in a general theory of sign systems. The semiotics of theatre is an important and until now still underdeveloped part of this complicated problem” [4, p. 402].

The Prague linguistic circle was the first to employ a semiologic method of theatre analysis. It was mainly due to contribution of O. Zich, J. Mukarovsky, R. Jakobson and others that a notion of *sign* became an integral part of a theatre theory. Petr Bogatyrev, a Russian folklorist and member of Prague linguistic circle, explored the sign structure of stage language in his work “Signs of the theatrical art.” Bogatyrev analyzed signs of different levels of perception, including mimics, speech, costume, hairdo, and movement. He pointed out that “stage props that function as theatrical signs during a performance acquire particular characteristics, qualities, and features than they have in a real life” [2, p. 10].

Sign is being understood as a result of inner connection between signifier and signified. The terms “signifier” and “signified” were used for the first time in F. de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* [6, p. 99–100]. These terms came into wide usage thanks to works of French structuralists R. Barts, A. Ubersfeld and P. Pavis. However, Ubersfeld defines theatre wider than “fixation of its sign nature” [7, p. 190] and Pavis confirms “the uninterrupted displacement of clear border between theatre and semiology” [5, p. 240]. This shows that sign problem is not fully explored.

Irina Gubanova, a Russian scholar of theatre theory, in her fundamental work *On theatre's sign nature* notes that “a capacity of notion *theatrical sign* is not explicit” [3, p. 15]. She concludes that “theater studies will have to return to the theoretical sources, theatrical practice will challenge theoretical modulations” [3, p. 24].

The purpose of this article is to analyze dynamics between signifier and signified on

particular theatrical examples. The aim is to study main elements involved into creation of meanings.

On the verge of the 21st century directors tend to create complex sign structures. As a theatrical sign is the smallest unit in meaning making chain it is necessary to study its constructing elements in detail. Connection between an object and its representation turns out to direct thinking from idea to object (director's idea) and back (spectator's idea).

Wide usage of meaning rerouting in contemporary theatrical performances allows to consider in detail relations between object (signifier) and object's representation (signified); to differentiate the sphere of an object and its representation, appearing as an image in one's mind and to discover principle of meaning making. Thus there were found out 4 basic ways of semantic connections making.

We see the content of the object sphere (as well as the object representation sphere) as item and action understanding item as a static representation of object (set, costume, make-up, scene, light, color, sound effects) and action as a dynamic one respectively (gestures, manner of movement, physical actions, intonation expressiveness). These very notions of item and action demonstrate 4 types of connection between signifier and signified:

- a parallel-subject type (item-item connection);
- an action-subject type (action-item connection);
- a metaphoric type (item-action-item connection);
- a parallel-action (action-action connection).

Parallel-subject type of connection

Speaking about associative connection between object and its representation, it should be mentioned that this is a connection between their exterior properties, so we speak about an audio-visual object related in man's mind to some associative image. In this case it is possible to say “it looks like...”

For example director tried to express the idea that gold as a symbol of power and wealth is a major aim of any ruler and can excuse any crime including bloodshed. In the scenic version of *Elizabeth I* by P. Foster presented by Moldovan director P. Vutkarau there appear an object of golden brocade. It covers throne-pyramid of England after it has been covered with a red train of executed Mary Stuart perceived by the spectators as a shed blood. The golden brocade in this context is associated with gold, a symbol of power and wealth the way to which for Queen Elizabeth I was poured with blood. Object *golden brocade* is connected to its representation *gold (power and wealth)*.

To some extent perception of an object can be influenced by its exterior similarity. Black rough rubber floor together with paved path passing through the stage in *King Lear*² produced by Y. Butusov brings about associations with soil, dirt (object – *black rubber*, representation – *dirt*). Eloquent pose of Lear performed by K. Raykin in the same production is associated with a male gorilla ready to fight creating a link between an object – *actor's pose* and its representation – *gorilla Lear*.

Representation can be provoked by elementary plastic movements. In *The Government Inspector*³ produced by P. Vutkarau shade of Khlestakov in the scene of bribe looks like both a spider and a multihanded dark god (dark side of Shiva Khali). It is interesting to mention that the two associations agree to the director's idea connecting the action to a voluntary and unconscious sacrifice made by the characters of the play to dark powers concentrated in Khlestakov. The link formed in this case is object – *shade of Khlestakov*, representation – *spider, bloodthirsty god*.

Associative link can be produced by changing some details of the object causing its identification with another thing. Cross with arch-like cross-beam over graves of murdered kings in *Richard III*⁴ produced by Y. Butusov is transformed into three-legged throne of a crowned murder which Richard (K. Raykin) chooses among many other variants. This very grave cross – throne turns into an execution block for the next victim Buckingham (D. Sukhanov). Spectators get the following associative links: cross – *grave stone*, grave stone – *throne*, throne – *execution block*.

¹ *Elizabeth I* by Paul Foster. Directed by Petru Vutkarau. Theatre "Eugen Ionesco", Chisinau, Moldova, premiere, 2004.

² *King Lear* by William Shakespeare. Directed by Yuri Butusov. Moscow Theatre "Satirikon", Moscow, 2007.

³ *The Government Inspector* by Nicolay Gogol. Directed by Petru Vutkarau. Theatre "Eugen Ionesco", Chisinau, retro-premiere, 2007.

⁴ *Richard III* by William Shakespeare. Directed by Yuri Butusov. Moscow Theatre "Satirikon", Moscow, 2006.

Associative *item-item* connection is widely used in modern theatre forming sphere of spectators' representation by means of visual forms, props, plastic scenes and sometimes acoustic effects. Sphere of spectators' representation in this case is connected with a speculative image evoked in their memory by an object offered by the director.

Action-subject type of connection

In this case connection appears between peculiarities of action carried out by signifier and associative image evoked by signified. Usually it is expressed by plastics, manner of movements, behavior, and intonation. The specific of this type of connection is that object (signifier) is a character performed by an actor

In a famous performance *Juno and Avos*⁵ produced by M. Zakharov special musical-rhythmical intonation of actors in masques representing bureaucrats evokes associative link to a mechanism and projects its features to the bureaucratic state apparatus. Thus here object is *manner of speech*, representation – *principal of mechanism*. Such technique of intonation expressiveness can project this or that symbolic images in spectator's mind.

Peter Trofimov (S. Kiryushkin) in *The Cherry Orchard*⁶ produced by I. Shats speaks about Christian values with some goat's bleating in his voice. It projects to the image of "eternal student" double aspect of a goat viewing it both as a scapegoat and a goat legged tempter. Object – *intonation of speech*, representation – *image of goat*.

In the mentioned above *King Lear* Earl of Gloucester (D. Sukhanov) appears over a piano making recognizable gestures and sounds of a parrot associated on the one hand with a bird and on the other hand with a soul of Gloucester. Spectators see objects – *gestures and sounds* and get representation – *a parrot*.

Representation in this case wholly depends on acting skills and gives actors a chance to take active part in creating semantic structure of a performance.

Metaphoric type of connection

This type presents combined associative connection reached through the actions of a mediator. Connection between object and its representation is built on the actions carried out over a signifier making it equal to signified and giving it some of signifier's attributes. Associative connection is evoked by the action and as a result representation is somehow put over the object.

⁵ *Juno and Avos (Junona I Avos)* Russian-language rock opera written by Alexey Rybnikov, poetry by Andrei Voznesensky. Directed by Mark Zakharov. The Lenkom Theatre, Moscow, premiere 1981, is one of the most popular performances until now.

⁶ *The Cherry Orchard* by Anton Chekhov. Directed by Iliia Shats. State Russian Dramatic Theatre named by A. Chekhov, Chisinau, premiere, 2004.

For example wooden table in Y. Butusov's *King Lear* pulled away by actor during the performance due to this action is associated with Lear's kingdom. As a result there appears metaphoric connection between a table and a state. Thus object – *table*, action – *pulling away* and representation – *Lear's kingdom*.

In the same performance Edgar (A. Osipov) runs along red cloth on the floor as if burning his feet on hot coals, creating association between object (*red cloth*) and representation (*hot coals*). As the cloth first symbolizes land of Lear's kingdom torn by Regan and Goneril running of Edgar creates metaphoric link between red cloth and a kingdom turned into hell by constant fighting.

Calling this type *metaphoric* we mean only the principle of connecting two notions having no resemblance to a metaphor as it is. Images created in spectator's mind very often have more to do with a notion or a process than a certain thing. Character of actions carried over an object plays a very important role in creating associative link to a representation. Besides it is quite evident that the choice of an object is absolutely free and the object gets some additional meaning only in connection with actions carried over it.

Parallel-action type of connection

In this case action is viewed as an object itself. Exterior action of a signifier illustrates interior action of a signified. This type of connection can be viewed as a symbolic action.

Action can be an independent object and project inner actions onto the sphere of representation. When Khlestakov turns daughter of the Governor on a billiard table telling her about his love (aforementioned *The Government Inspector* produced by P. Vutkarau) spectators understand that he turns the girl's head and his real intentions are as serious as gambling. In I. Shats' production of *King Lear*⁷ outer action of Edmond is burning his clothes while inner action is burning up passion, envy and thirst for power in his soul.

In production of *Elizabeth I* courtiers' hands are raised over the head of a bended knees Queen Elizabeth (A. Menshikova) and they move their fingers while she is making up her mind on prosecuting her sister. This action hints that the courtiers try to pull invisible strings and rule their Queen like a puppet thus revealing hidden mechanisms of power.

⁷ *King Lear* by William Shakespeare. Directed by Ilia Shats. State Russian Dramatic Theatre named by A. Chekhov, Chisinau, premiere, 2007.

The mentioned above examples demonstrate that outer action refers to the inner one staying beyond the lines of characters and revealing its symbolic meaning. It is also possible to state that physical actions of actors form basis of the majority of associative links and meaning parallels on the sign forming level.

To sum up it should be pointed out that an effective connection between object (signifier) and object's representation (signified) can be reached by:

- a parallel-subject type of connection – an association is formed on the basis of similarity of object exterior or with a help of its acoustic analogue;
- an action-subject type of connection – an association appears on the basis of physical action of the object itself;
- a metaphoric type of connection – an association is reached by means of special physical action of actors with the object;
- a parallel-action type of connection – object is perceived as an independent action getting a new symbolic meaning by moving its original meaning from the external plan to internal.

These methods form a universal basis for creating complex semantic system, including sign and symbolic structure.

It should be noted that directors often demonstrate a preference for parallel-subject (50 per cent) and parallel-action (26 per cent) types of correlation on practice. The least used is an action-subject type of correlation (8 per cent). Visual action of actors perceived as an object (signifier) plays the main role in building object's representation (signified) by significant parallels, this confirms Yuri Lotman's idea in his *Semiotic of the stage* that "the thing never plays an independent role in the theatre, it is only attribute of actor's action <...> it has been interpreted" [4, p. 418].

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