

Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School and the Development of Semiotic Studies in Indonesia

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Abstract

This paper proposes the importance of the infusion of Tartu-Moscow Semiotics School (TMSS) into the development of semiotic studies in Indonesia. Semiotic studies in Indonesia have mostly departed from the ideas of Peirce, Saussure, and Barthes, while TMSS has not been recognized by Indonesian scholars. The paper proposes two concepts of TMSS, namely 'text' and 'semiosphere', which would significantly enhance semiotic studies in Indonesia. Indonesian scholars usually regard text as a concrete artefact, causing overgeneralization that every artefact is text, as well as oversimplification that every text is concrete artefact. Semiotic studies in Indonesia tend to exclude text as the object study from its cultural context and to analyse it in its individuality. While, TMSS defines text based on its meaningfulness, authority, and cultural functions. Besides its function as message carrier, TMSS proposes three functions of text, namely creative, poetic, and memory functions. These functions are connection points between a text and its wider cultural and historical contexts and its dynamic aspects. Finally, the concept of semiosphere, an abstract model in which semiosis occurs and outside of which semiosis cannot exist, would drive a holism perspective, avoiding the tendency to analyse the discrete text in its individuality.

Keywords: *Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School; text; text function; semiosphere; sign system.*

1. Introduction

Literature was the first discipline that brought semiotics into Indonesia. Probably the first book of literature dealing with semiotic approach was "*Sastra dan Ilmu Sastra: Pengantar Teori Sastra (Literature and Literary Science: Introduction to the Theory of Literature)*" written by A. Teeuw (1984), a Dutch scholar specialized in Indonesian Literature. In this book, he fundamentally applied semiotic approach to analyze literary works. According to him, literature cannot be scientifically studied without involving its socio-cultural aspects, namely viewing literature as an act of communication. In this perspective, literature is a sign or a semiotic symptom (Teeuw, 1984, p. 42), which could be studied in some of its aspects, such as

the position of the author, literary text itself as a structure, the reader position and reading acts, the relation between literary texts and the literary system, and the relation between literary texts and the reality (Teeuw, 1984, pp. 42-57).

Further, semiotic studies in Indonesia have departed from the traditions of Charles Sanders Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Roland Barthes. These three figures are very popular among scholars in Indonesia. While, Tartu-Moscow Semiotics School (later will be abbreviated as TMSS), as one of the most important semiotic traditions in the world, has not been recognized by Indonesian scholars. It is very difficult to find any description of TMSS in the Indonesian semiotic texts or the application of TMSS in the semiotic studies in

Indonesia. Even though, TMSS ideas have widely been accepted and discussed within the global semiotic circles. This school has also the 'Sign Systems Studies', the oldest international semiotic periodical, established in 1964 by Juri Lotman, one of the founding fathers of the school.

This paper aims to show the importance of the infusion of TMSS into the development of semiotic studies in Indonesia. We may ask, what kind of discourse or perspective could TMSS enrich semiotic studies in Indonesia? This paper proposes two concepts of TMSS that could significantly enhance semiotic studies in Indonesia, namely 'text' and 'semiosphere'.

2. Text and its functions

In Indonesia, semiotics is generally regarded as an approach or method to analyse cultural texts, including media texts. For Indonesian experts, text is understood as a concrete artefact, such as painting, written text, photo, dance, and a variety of other concrete artefacts. Here, the basic characteristic of text is determined by its form. At glance, it confirms the notion of text in TMSS as a concrete object. Lotman and Piatigorsky (1978, p. 233) said, "Text may, however, be defined – if not logically, at least for working purposes – by pointing to a concrete object having its own *internal* features which cannot be deduced from anything else apart from itself." However, in the further discussion, we may ask, is every concrete artefact text? In this point, the distinction of text and non-text in TMSS is very important, since it is very difficult to find the topic of how to define text in the Indonesian semiotic books. Even, this unclear definition of text has somehow made overgeneralization that every artefact is text.

The TMSS emphasises the characteristic of text from its 'truthworthiness and cultural significance' (Lotman & Piatigorsky, 1978). In this perspective, not every utterance, or even concrete artefact, is text. Only something truthfulness and have certain cultural function could be considered as text. In a written culture, this distinction is related to the 'oral-written' differentiation, in which a meaningful thing will be written down, or generally expressed and fixed via certain material forms. According to TMSS, "Not every message is worthy of being written down, but everything written down takes

on a particular cultural significance, becomes a *text*" (Lotman & Piatigorsky, 1978, p. 234).

In the contemporary notion, this assumption should be further discussed, since it seems that nowadays not every written artefact takes a cultural significance. For example, we may discuss, does every Facebook, Twitter, or another social media status have a cultural significance? In my opinion, we should identify the degree from merely personal to cultural importance. Perhaps, every social media status has personal, but not cultural importance. On the other side, especially within the oral tradition, not everything that has cultural significance is written down. There are so many examples of this phenomenon. Just to give an illustration, the oral statement given by the *jurukunci* (caretaker) of Mt. Merapi during the eruption crisis, whether the local people should evacuate or not, is in fact more significant and truthfulness than the written order from the Indonesian government that always ask local people on the slopes of Mt. Merapi to evacuate immediately (Nazaruddin, 2013). In this case, we may infer that the oral statements delivered by the cultural leader are sometimes much more significant and having the 'textual authority' (Lotman and Piatigorsky, 1978), comparing to the formal written norms by the government.

Thus, the identification which one is text and which other is not is very important for the future development of semiotic studies in Indonesia. Moreover, the object study of semiotics is text itself. According to Tartu-Moscow school, text is a central concept of cultural semiotics, determined by its function in culture. It is a primary unit of culture, something that has meaning and functions in culture. Lotman and Piatigorsky (1978, p. 237) have emphasized, "For the study of culture there exists only those messages which are texts. All the others, as it were, do not exist, and the investigator leaves them out of account. In this sense it may be said that culture is the totality of texts or one complexly constructed text."

This perspective is very important for the development of semiotic studies in Indonesia, since one of the basic tendencies of semiotic research in Indonesia is excluding the object of study from its cultural context. The Indonesian scholar would usually examine the very micro of the sign relations (signifier-signified relation) in the object study. Usually they would start their study by breaking down the object study into

minimum sign unit, such as breaking down a movie into shoot or scene, or fragmenting a story into certain narrative elements, and then analysing the sign relations in these fragmented elements. Finally, they would propose some conclusions about the myths, ideologies, or structures; that should be concluded from these micro sign relations in the object study. Thus, something forgotten in this way of analysing text is connecting the text with its wider cultural context. This individuality trend of analysis is somehow strange as the first generation of Indonesian semiotic textbook, such as written by A. Teeuw (1984), as mentioned beforehand, has already emphasized the importance of socio-cultural contexts in understanding the literary texts.

In this point, TMSS notion of the text functions is significant indeed for the enrichment of Indonesian semiotics. Text functions could be defined as "its social role, its capacity to serve certain demands of the community which creates the text" (Lotman & Piatigorsky, 1978, p. 233). The function is point of connection between a text and a wider cultural context, or between addressee and addresser of the text. In this notion, a certain type of text could fulfil different text functions. For example, the oral statement given by the *jurukunci* (caretaker) of Mt. Merapi during the eruption crisis, which is religious text in its nature, has political function. It is a religious-mystical interpretation of the activities of the volcano, but once it is delivered, it will have political function as the basis for the local people on the slopes of the volcano not to obey the government command to evacuate, otherwise to follow what the *jurukunci* has said (Nazaruddin, 2013).

Lotman (1990) has criticized the transformational paradigm that regarded language merely as a mechanism or tool to convey the message adequately. It seems that this transformational paradigm is also widely believed among Indonesian scholars. In general, the Indonesian experts believe that there is inner structures, ideologies, or myths behind the texts that are not directly perceivable. The researcher would regard texts as the signifier and the ideology or myth behind them as the signified. The aim of semiotic analysis is to reveal these deep structures. This perspective clearly distinguishes between the content (thought) with the message (text). Thus, this view treats

the text as valuable, not in itself, but merely as kind of packaging from which the topic of interest is extracted (Lotman, 1990). A system will be considered successful if it is able to produce exactly the similar 'decoding' and 'encoding'. Receiver received the same message, which the sender has produced. According to Lotman (1990), there will never exist a fully succeed system. Communication always takes place in the notion of different and gap. In fact, the nature of communication itself is due to the discrepancy.

Then, Lotman proposed three other functions of text besides its function as the carrier of message, namely creative, poetic and memory functions. Explaining the creative function; Lotman has given examples via many kinds of translation actions, such as the fact that one text could be translated in many different ways and modalities and resulting in different texts in the same target language, or the fact that reverse translation would not end in the same text with its source. According to Lotman (1990, p. 14), "It is obvious that if the most hackneyed of poems is translated into another language (i.e. into the language of another poetic system) then the operation of reverse translation will not produce the input text".

The second function is poetic which is mostly dealing with literary text. It concerns not merely with the message of the language, but more importantly with the message about the language, a language that has switched its interest from message (content) into message carrier (language). Thus, language 'code' is more important than language 'message'. According to Lotman (1990, p. 15):

So, for example, when we stress the constancy of the message the fact that language precedes the message written in it and is available to both participants in the act of communication seems so natural that it is not specially remarked upon; even in complex cases the receiver first finds out some indications as to which of the codes he knows the message is encoded in, and then proceeds to the 'reading'.

According to Lotman (1990, p. 16), this function is obviously important in the history of art, especially in the work of the *avant garde*. In such inventory work of art, the language is unknown to its audiences, but however it should be learned, reconstructed and mastered by the

audiences. In this situation, the *avant garde* work, on the one hand is individualized as something new. But, on the other hand, it always has some common features for its audiences which serve as the basis of its interpretation and reconstruction. In my opinion, this poetic function is indeed fruitful to analyze, for example, a lot of cultural performances and rituals, in which the form of the rituals, the rhythm of the performances, as well as the language code of the spells (*mantra*) are much more constituting than their contents or messages. The tradition of ‘reciprocity rhymes’ (*berbalas pantun*) in Malay culture is a concrete example, in which both the participants understand that certain language forms, not the messages, are constituting the practice.

The third function of text is memory, by which a text would preserve the memory of its previous contexts. Lotman and Uspensky (1978), who has argued culture as long term memory of community, stated that the translation of facts or direct experiences into texts is invariably accompanied by selection, choosing certain facts which are conversable into systems of the text while forgetting others. Only the important experiences or facts for the given culture would be preserved as text, while many other unimportant facts would be forgotten. Thus, every texts raised not only from the remembering process, but forgetting as well. A very simple illustration is that a student will only make notes for the important statements from their teacher during the lecture, they will not record every words and sentences from the lecture. Culture as long term memory has the similar mechanism to preserve the culturally important everyday facts, and to forget another unimportant experiences as well.

For Lotman, the text is a condenser for cultural memory. Every text is a metonymy of a reconstructed integral meaning, a discrete sign of a non-discrete essence (Lotman, 1990, p. 18). Every text has its own ‘text’s memory’. Perhaps the simplest example is song. A song, as a single-discrete text, can be reminiscent of a certain memory, a particular event in the past. A national anthem could remind the history of its nation. For someone, a certain song can remind important events in his life in the past.

These three functions of text would enrich semiotic studies in Indonesia in minimally three notions. First, recognizing of memory function of the text will lead the investigator to connect

the text with its historical and memorial context. Second, taking into account the creative function in the semiotic research will allow the researcher to realize the dynamic aspect of text, especially the understanding that the text being studied should be investigated in its whole cultural contexts, in its complex relations with another texts. While recognizing the poetic function will allow the researcher to always keep the understanding of the dynamics between ‘form’ and ‘content’ of the text. These ideas are very significant to reduce the ‘exclusion’ tendency of semiotic studies in Indonesia as explained beforehand. In addition, the researcher will realize that his study of certain text will produce a metatext, which in turn will become another text. In the macro level, this perspective will lead to the definition of culture as a total translation; there constantly exist the process of translation and self-translation (Torop, 2008; Torop, 2011).

In this notion, we will find double articulations as well as double oppositions of text; these are statics – dynamics and part – whole opposition (Torop, 2003; Torop, 2006). The static dimension of text deals with the natural concrete text as Indonesian scholars usually perceive, such as a film, magazine, or pamphlet; meanwhile the dynamics dimension deals with the abstract-dynamic textualizable phenomena, such as culture as text, politics as text, or even natural phenomena as text. Commonly, the concept of text belongs to the cultural semiotics. But, this understanding could be applied to the wider notion, including natural phenomena, which can act as a text if the given culture is used to interact with the nature and signify the natural phenomena as a distinctly meaningful in culture. In another words, natural phenomena could be function as text since they are perceived, interpreted, and valued (Maran 2007; Maran 2010).

Meanwhile, a text usually consists of some parts, which every part could be regarded as a single text. On the other hand, the same text always exists in the broader text, which we usually say as context, which could be also regarded as a single text within the broader context, and so on. This could also be the interrelation between text and metatext, means that a text will usually stimulate the metatext, which in turn become the prototext in the higher level. The addition of these broader understanding of text will enrich semiotic

studies in Indonesia. According to the Tartu-Moscow school theses (1973, p. 38):

“The text has integral meaning and integral function... In this sense it may be regarded as the primary element (basic unit) of culture. The relationship of the text with the whole of culture and with its system of codes is shown by the fact that on different levels the same message may appear as a text, part of a text, or an entire set of texts.”

3. Semiosphere as semiotic space

Another theoretical concept that is important for the development of semiotic studies in Indonesia is semiosphere, an abstract model in which semiosis occurs. This concept has marked the basic idea of Lotman, also has distinguished his semiotic thinking with Peirce-Morris and Saussure traditions. Basically, Lotman did not agree with these two traditions because their atomistic view: depart from something simple as a micro-unit basis of semiotics, namely ‘sign’, to make generalization on the complex, say ‘sign system’. Thus, a complex object (sign system) is reduced solely to the micro-simple thing (sign). This reduction is then often seen as the ontological character of the actual complex object (sign system).

Instead, Lotman (2005) proposed the concept of ‘semiosphere’ as semiotic space, an abstract model in which semiosis occurs and outside of which semiosis cannot exist. The infusion of semiosphere as a theoretical perspective into semiotic studies in Indonesia has much significance, as well as many consequences. The first consequence is holism perspective (Torop, 2005). It is perhaps the most important, differentiating it from other models of semiotic analysis, which tend to analyse the small and discrete text in its individuality as the object of study, which in fact also happen in the semiotic tradition in Indonesia. In this notion, semiosphere can also be defined as the semiotic universe: the totality of individual texts and isolated languages as they relate to each other (Lotman, 2005). Thus, the basic principle of every semiosis lies on the ‘semiosphere’ as a ‘sign system’ or ‘semiotic universe’, rather than on a single ‘sign’. Thus,

semiospherical understanding regards culture as a large text, a big bundle of semiotic system that should be understood in its wholeness. Portis-Winner (1999, p. 36) stated: “Lotman’s term *semiosphere* subsumes all aspects of semiotics of culture, all the heterogeneous semiotic systems or “languages” that are in constant process of change and at a deep level have some unifying qualities.” In the methodological level, Geertz’s concept of ‘thick description’ is very relevant, refers to the capacity of the researcher to identify these distinctions and then reconstruct the whole picture on the basis of very heterogeneous, discrete or ambivalent data (Geertz, 1993).

As a theory, semiosphere is clearly more logic and makes sense than the atomistic view. Perception and communication processes that happen in the everyday life occur in the notion of semiosphere, not in the ‘atomistic sign’. That is, we perceive an object as a whole (as a semiosphere), not part by part (as a single sign). We perceive a car directly as a complete object; we do not perceive the tires, steering, lights, or another ‘signs’ of the car, and then we conclude that the object comes to our perception is a car. Also, in the communication process, we get the message from the other participants as a whole ‘message’; we do not capture pieces of messages one by one, word by word. The communication process occurs in the level of ‘sign system’, not individual ‘sign’.

The next consequence is the recognition of dialogue and hierarchy that exists in every semiosphere, underlying its ontological nature. Each semiosphere, according to Lotman, has homogeneity and individuality. A semiosphere has ‘the isolated nature’ of the other (non or extra semiotic sphere). The other is the other semiosphere. Therefore, in a dialogue or communication, there are two levels of semiosphere: the totalities of dialogue itself as ‘the whole semiosphere’, and semiosphere of the participants who are inter-connected each other (Lotman, 2005).

The dialogue could happen between one semiosphere and another semiosphere in the same level, between the part and the whole, between different periods of time (diachronic dialogue), or even within one semiosphere. The examples of the first type happen in the semiospherical dialogue between one individual with another individual, between one culture and another culture. Dialogue between

individual and his/her own culture, between organism or group of organism and their environment, or between member and his/her group collectivity should be considered as dialogue between part and whole.

As an isolated structure, each semiosphere has a 'core' and 'periphery'. Each semiosphere also has boundary, which represented by the sum of bilingual translatable: translating external communications into internal language and vice versa (Lotman, 2005). Because of this boundary, a semiosphere may establish contact with other semiosphere. Thus, the boundary unites two semiosphere, as well as distinguishes or divides them. Hereby the boundary of semiosphere is very important, in which the semiosis or dialogue happens more actively, by the help of which the semiosphere could translate external messages into internal language and vice versa, and establish contact with another semiosphere (Lotman, 2005).

This ontological understanding importantly influences the epistemological awareness, as Torop (2006) has claimed that every semiosphere could be analysed as a single entity, but the researcher should aware that each single is a part of bigger semiosphere. Conversely, every semiosphere consists of parts, each of which could be regarded as single semiosphere in their own, which in turn also contains of elements. Torop (2006, p. 309) argued, "It is an infinite dialogue of whole and parts and the dynamics of the whole dimension."

It should be emphasized that in the research processes, such dialogue happens in and through text which is being studied. It also means that this epistemological awareness is not only about how to threat and analyze the object of study, but also how to dialogue with them, which require 'the need' and 'the will' to establish the dialogue itself. As emphasized by Lotman (1990, pp. 143-144), "...the need for dialogue, the dialogic situation, precedes both real dialogue and even the existence of a language in which to conduct it."

4. Conclusion

This study has proposed two of the key concepts of TMSS for the development of semiotic studies in Indonesia, namely 'text' and 'semiosphere'. These two concepts are indeed important to revise what this paper has identified as 'exclusion tendency'. It refers to the general tendency of semiotic research in Indonesia to exclude the object study from its cultural context and to analyse it in its individuality.

TMSS definition of text that based on its meaningfulness, authority, and cultural function in the given culture is very important to be introduced to the semiotic studies in Indonesia. Then, it is very fundamental also to theoretically identify whether an artefact is text or non-text. On the one side, not every cultural artefact is text, while on the other side not every text is written down as concrete cultural artefact.

The TMSS idea of text functions within a given culture in which the text exist is also significant for the enrichment of semiotic studies in Indonesia. The function is point of connection between a text and its wider cultural context, or between addressee and addresser of the text. Three functions of text proposed by Lotman, i.e. creative, poetic, and memory, would enrich semiotic studies in Indonesia. Recognizing the memory function will lead the investigator to connect the text with its memorial context, understanding the creative function will allow the researcher to realize the dynamic aspect of text, and to analyse the text within its cultural contexts, while knowing the poetic function will keep the dynamics between 'form' and 'content' of the text.

Finally, the infusion of the concept of semiosphere, an abstract model in which semiosis occurs and outside of which semiosis cannot exist, is significant indeed. The holism perspective of semiosphere will avoid the tendency to analyse the small and discrete text in its individuality as the object of study. Semiospherical perspective views culture as a large text, as a semiotic system that should be analysed in its wholeness.

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