

Semiotic Discourse of the Socio-Political Sphere of the Modern Russian Society: Challenges of Multimodality

Andrei V. Babaitsev¹, Sergey G. Voskoboynikov², Tatyana V. Schukina³ and Inna V. Topchiy^{1,*}

¹Don State Technical University (DSTU), Russia

²Department of History and Cultural Science, Don State Technical University (DSTU), Russia

³Department of Document Science and the Language Communications, Don State Technical University (DSTU), Russia

Abstract: The article discusses the semiotic discourse of the socio-political sphere of modern Russian society. The modern challenges of multimodality of the socio-political sphere of modern Russian society are analyzed, taking into account the interdisciplinarity of meaningful sign and symbolic constructions. The semiotic discourse of the socio-political sphere is a certain type of interdisciplinary analytical research of socio-political communication aimed at interpreting the process of creating semantic meaning as social and political practice. Multi- in the term "multimodality" implies the fact that there are a number of modes available for reproduction by all members of a social or political community. The semiotic approach to the socio-political sphere of Russian society is utilized to accomplish this study. Furthermore, Studies of the concept of discourse, as well as the specifics of the use of this concept and the development of discourse analysis as a method in the socio-political scientific field, are taken into account to achieve the purpose of the study.

Keywords: Socio-political sphere, semiotics, sign, symbol, semiotic discourse, semiotic mode, discursive practices, multimodality, Russian society.

INTRODUCTION

Without the use of signs and symbols, it is not possible to imagine any sphere of human activity, including socio-political. This is due to the fact that signs and symbols are one of the "effective elements of the mechanism for regulating human behavior, they are of paramount importance when maintaining the existing regime or changing the power" (Babaitsev, 2008).

Today, the world of semiotics in general, and the semiotic discourse of the socio-political sphere, in particular, is changing very quickly, and in some situations and aspects it is lightning fast and unrecognizable, because it reacts to various challenges of reality much faster than others.

The need to study meaningful sign and symbolic constructions as not only forms mediating the socio-political reality, but also elements constituting the political sphere, was convincingly proved by the founder of the theory of politics, Murray Edelman. An adequate explanation of the political behavior of political actors cannot but take into account as an intervening variable "the formation of common meanings and their changes in the process of symbolic comprehension by groups of interests, the burden of

circumstances, threats and opportunities" (Edelman, 1971).

Social and political life activity of a particular language community is reflected in the immediate discursive practices and the actual signs and symbols. Such a quick response to challenges can take not only a linguistic, but also a multimodal form and involves all channels of perception (verbal, nonverbal; auditory, visual, digital) (Blinova, 2019).

Language or sign system, which is accepted in Western countries as a guarantor of what is determined by rational, necessary for scientific reflection, able to express any aspect of the existence and functioning of the socio-political sphere, is disputed in this position by other means of constructing meanings, as well as by other means of identity formation (Gafiatulina NK, Makadey, *et al.*, 2019). This kind of challenge is known as multimodality.

As V.A. Omelchenko and E.N. Remchukova emphasize in their work, with the emergence of the focus of multimodality, the very way of perceiving the world community and all its spheres has changed. The word prevailing earlier as the main medium of information has been replaced by an image that is expressed in the priority of the visual over the verbal. "The trend towards visualization in foreign philosophy has been spoken about since the end of the twentieth century. The phenomenon when graphic units

*Address correspondence to this author at the Don State Technical University (DSTU), Russia; E-mail: innatopchiy@yahoo.com, innatopchiy@mail.ru

penetrate into the social spheres of a person's life and are recognized as independent carriers of reality, (Omelchenko, Remchukova, 2018), is designated as pictorial turn, imagic turn or iconic turn (Boehm, Mitchell, 2009).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Studies of the concept of discourse, as well as the specifics of the use of this concept and the development of discourse analysis as a method in the socio-political scientific field, were undertaken by Phillips L., Jorgensen MV (Phillips, Jorgensen, 2008), J. Brown (Brown, 1983), T. van Dijk (T. van Dijk, 2009), M. Foucault (Foucault, 1996), N. Fairclough (Fairclough, 2009). Discourse has become an object of interdisciplinary study.

The semiotic approach to the socio-political sphere of Russian society can help overcome conceptual disunity in the field of socio-humanitarian knowledge: it is studied in the framework of sociology, semiotics, political science, computer linguistics and artificial intelligence, philosophy and logic, anthropology and ethnology, communication studies. Each of these areas approaches the study of discourse from its own positions, but some of them significantly influenced discursive analysis. Of particular note in this regard are sociology, political science and semiotics. The theory of social semiotics was developed by E. Adami, G. Kress (Adami, Kress, 2014), T. van Leeuwen (Kress, van Leeuwen, 2001), etc. Wherein multimodality is determined by these researchers through the concept of a semiotic mode - a set of resources combining several sign systems that are not limited exclusively to verbal, linguistic signs (Adami, Kress, 2014). The semiotic modus, used as an expressive means of discourse, produces a certain sociocultural and socio-political significance. Researcher G. Kress defined the semiotic modus as a socially formed and culturally provided semiotic resource for creating cultural and socio-political meanings in the field of socio-political communications (Kress 2010).

Examples of semiotic modes can be written messages, schematic and visual images, various layouts, gestures, facial expressions, speech, music, 3D objects, etc. (Kress 2010). A feature of visual modes is that they can offer several semantic interpretations. That is why when interpreting the text, verbal signs become secondary and are used to clarify visual information. The verbal elements of mixed texts act as signals and thus limit the possible interpretation of visual elements (Koller 2009).

Multimodality can be considered as a sphere of discourse study, and the very concept of "multimodality" and the main provisions of this theory were first introduced into scientific use and developed by Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (Kress, van Leeuwen, 2001).

The concept of "multimodality" is based on the philosophical meaning of the word "modality" (manifestation), not related to the linguistic category "modality" (relation); formed from the Latin concept of *modus*, which can be translated as "type", "method", "measure"; the noun "modality" means, according to the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, "the way an object exists or a phenomenon occurs (ontological modality)" (Zagidullina, 2015).

With the development of the theory of multimodality is connected the fact that the changes begin to occur not only in the media, in magazines, but also in the official documentation of various corporations, universities, government departments, i.e. in the socio-political sphere, as color illustrations and a complex layout appear in this documentation. Not only mass genres (cinema and popular music), the art of "high culture" began to be transformed, but also the field of socio-political communications acquired an increasing variety of forms and materials, which led to the mobility of the previously defined borders in the socio-political sphere of modern Russian society.

The application of semiotic discourse analysis to the study of various aspects of socio-political life, not excluding the study of the uniqueness of Russian political discourse, is contained in the works of Volokhonskaya MS, Kozhemyakina EA and others.

Socio-political symbols, interpreted as "a way of organizing the repertoire of the knowable (cognitions) into senses", as apriority semantic structures that help to understand messages, reducing them to a previously known one, in accordance with the concept of M. Edelman, are the basis of the mechanism that determines the perception of social reality, and, therefore, behavior (Edelman, 1971).

The theoretical and methodological base of this study consists of the conceptual provisions of socio-philosophical and political theories, as well as semiotics (semiology), revealing six basic concepts: semiotics, sign, symbol, semiotic discourse, discursive practices, and multimodality. When solving research problems, we used the content analysis of scientific articles,

general scientific methods traditional for all social sciences: analysis, synthesis, typological method, comparative method, etc. In semiotics, signs - symbols are most often called conditional or conventional, because their denotation is associated with a form of a kind of agreement, a tacit treaty concluded between social and political actors who use these signs. In the semiotic method, we made use of the fact that the sign is a generic concept, and the symbol is a species concept, and the symbol, of course, includes a sign component.

RESEARCH RESULTS

A sign is “a material, sensually perceived object, phenomenon, action”, replacing “another object, phenomenon or action” (Babaitsev, 2010). Sign, according to C.S. Peirce, can be anything possible, “which defines something different (its own interpretant) as referring to an object to which it itself refers in the same way. The Interpretant in its turn also becomes a sign and so on ad infinitum” (Peirce, 2000). A sign acts as a representative of another object, property or relationship. Any sign is a significatum, it means something, but is not always used as a denotation, i.e. it does not necessarily correspond to some meaning. As a rule, the similarity of the form of the sign with the designated object is lost in sign systems. Due to this, it can be stated that there is no correspondence between the structure of the sign, the content and the symbolically designated object (Babaitsev, 2010). It is important to emphasize that the sign and symbol, being equal semiotic objects that exist equally in the text, express the features of textual organization.

Representatives of symbolic interactionism believe that symbols tend to cause a certain group of reactions in the individual, similar to those that they cause in another. In addition, “symbolization constitutes objects that were not constituted before and would not exist if there were not any context of social relations in which symbolization occurs” (Mead, 1994).

In the study of semiotic objects, it is legitimate to proceed from the fact that the sign is a generic concept, and the symbol is a species concept, and the symbol, of course, includes a sign component, but it does not reduce itself to the sign. As A.F. Losev says, “the symbol of a thing is its sign, not dead and motionless, but giving birth to numerous, and perhaps countless, regular and individual structures, designated in general terms as abstractly given ideological imagery” (Losev, 1991).

A symbol possesses plurisignation - a semantic plurality, which involves the intersection of not only many, but also, which is very important, completely opposite, mutually exclusive symbolic meanings (Willwright, 1990).

As pointed out by AV Babaitsev, the meaning of a symbol is “always something different, in contrast, for example, to the meaning of a sign that is always concrete, and any uncertainty is simply absent in it” (Babaitsev, 2011).

Political symbol for the one, who perceives it, is both the expression of a particular idea, and a representative of some other symbols that surround him, and the manifestation of certain social and political relations, actions and interactions. It also presents the norms and values of the social or political group that produced this symbol (Babaitsev, 2011).

It is noteworthy that when describing the sign-symbolic space of the socio-political sphere, researchers give preference to such concepts as semiotics, political style, discursive practices, while the concept of “ideology”, which had a previously stable connotation of systematicity, lost its popularity.

Such diversification of terms is associated not only with the development of a wider range of empirical analysis techniques and the development of specialization within the political community, but also with modern trends in the development of the socio-political sphere associated with multimodality challenges.

Before answering the question: what is a semiotic discourse, it is worth to define the concepts of “discourse” and “discursive practices”. In a broad sense, discourse is a complex key parameter of the “unity of linguistic practice and extra-linguistic factors necessary for understanding the text, i.e. giving an idea of the participants in communication, their settings, goals, conditions of production and perception of the message” (Sociology: Encyclopedia, 2003: 288).

According to S.A. Shilina, today is popular the interpretation of discourse as a certain specific system or order of speech that exists in a particular area or socio-political situation (the significance that has strengthened in science as a derivative of the more comprehensive understanding proposed by M. Foucault) (Shilina, 2015).

The semiotic discourse of the socio-political sphere, from our point of view, is a certain type of

interdisciplinary analytical research of socio-political communication, aimed at interpreting the process of creating semantic meaning qua a social and political practice.

In the semiotic discourse of the socio-political sphere of modern Russian society, signs, as a rule, function in three main dimensions:

- firstly, the relation of signs to objects of socio-political reality and semantic concepts about them is semantics (the sign-object dimension);
- secondly, the relation of the social and political signs to each other is syntactics (sign - sign);
- thirdly, the relation of signs to a person (as a social and political actor) who uses these signs (sign - interpreter).

Categories of social / political semiotics reflect those social or political interests and needs of communities, the members of which "have developed and formalized their semiotic resources, and constantly (re) formulate them". According to G. Kress, they include both material means, modes, and intangible ones - conceptual means, categories that form the sociocultural and political world (Kress, 2016).

As emphasized by E.E. Brazgovskaya, "semiotics refers to:

- 1) the way the shape given to us in empirical experience replaces another object, which signals the presence of meanings and senses;
- 2) the degree of conventionality of these meanings;
- 3) the extent to which the semantics of the message is predetermined by discourse and predictable for the interpreter;
- 4) the fact whether the text can be formalized or, on the contrary, semantically blurred (entropy)" (Brazgovskaya, 2019).

Symbolic politics is often seen as a kind of substitute for "real" politics. It was in this interpretation that this concept was first introduced into the Russian scientific usage by S.P. Potseluev. According to his definition, symbolic politics is "a special kind of political communication aimed not at rational comprehension, but at the suggestion of sustainable meanings through staging visual effects." Symbolic politics presupposes "the conscious use of aesthetically-symbolic resources of power for its legitimization and consolidation through

the creation of symbolic political "ersatz" (surrogates) (Potseluev, 1999).

The important properties (qualitative modalities) of a sign that are suitable for use in the social or political spheres of Russian society are considered to be: communicativeness (the ability to exchange information, generalize it, and also reflect the most significant aspect of the subject), as well as reproducibility (in the act of social or political communication, the sign is not created for the first time, but is repeated, reproduced from existing signs) (Pavlova, 2013: 60).

The founder of semiotics, Ch. Morris emphasizes that each sign (political symbol is known to be a kind of sign) should be considered in three dimensions (meaningful, evaluative, prescriptive), "Although in some cases signs may be loaded more in some dimensions, and have zero loading in others" (Morris, 2001). Thus, the sign, as stressed by C.U. Morris is meaningful if it means the observable properties of the environment or the actor; evaluative if it means the final properties of an object or situation; and prescriptive, if it means how to respond to an object or situation in order to satisfy a leadership impulse (Morris, 2001).

The interpretation of a political symbol is not only the understanding of visible meanings and senses, but also a comprehension of most of the deepest meanings, an attempt to decrypt everything secret, hidden, unpronounceable. Moreover, an unambiguous, complete and final interpretation of a political symbol cannot occur. P. Ricoeur understands under the symbol "every meaningful structure wherein one sense - direct, primary, literal, means at the same time the other sense - indirect, secondary, parabolic, that can be understood only through the first one" (Ricoeur, 1995: 18). There are not just many meanings and senses in the symbol, they are intertwined and interpenetrating; some meanings can often be understood only through others.

Thus, semiotic discourse is considered today from the perspective of multimodality. Scientists involved in the study of the theory of social semiotics determine multimodality by means of the concept of semiotic mode, the definition of which was given in the corresponding section of the article describing research methods.

G.R. Kress, T. van Leeuwen (2001) distinguish three main theoretical points of multimodality in the study of semiotic discourse:

1. Multimodality assumes that the representation and contents of a statement are always based on the interaction of the modes. This is constructed through analyzing and describing the full range of tools for creating the meanings that people use (visual, conversational, gesticulating, written, 3D, etc.) in various contexts.
2. Multimodality suggests that there are certain extra-linguistic, semiotically heterogeneous resources to achieve a specific goal in the social and political spheres.
3. Multimodality admits that it is the norms and rules that are in force at the time of the formation of the meaning that are the basis for selecting the configuration of the modes to create this meaning (Kress, van Leeuwen, 2001).

Multi- in the term “multimodality” implies the fact that there are a number of modes available for reproduction by all members of a social or political community. Many of the modes are found in a wide range of communities: for example, writing, gestures, images (Kress, G., 2016).

According to S. Jewitt, multimodality can be interpreted as a certain theory, perspective, field of scientific or social research (field of inquiry), or methodological application (Jewitt 2009). In A.A. Kibrik’s opinion, the concept of multimodality refers to the distinction between sensory organs of the individual (as a social or political actor), primarily the distinction between visual and auditory channels. “Within each of these channels there are further, smaller differences, which are also covered by the multimodal concept. Therefore, in speech there is a segment (verbal) component and many non-segment (prosodic) parameters. The visual channel includes gestures, gaze, facial expressions and other aspects of “body language”. The written discourse is also perceived visually and, in addition to the verbal component, includes a whole set of graphic parameters, such as font, color, format, etc. Thus, the modern understanding of multimodality includes all this diversity” (Kibrik, 2010).

Note that another scientist J. Lemke introduces the concept of hypermodality to denote one of the methods of synthesizing verbal, visual and sound meanings in hypermedia. Hypermodality is not a simple combination of picture, text, sound, but a complex of implicit and explicit relationships between them (Lemke, 2002: 300).

According to the editors of a foreign journal on social semiotics, the latter is neither a specific theory, nor an industry, but represents a form of research that is quite applicable and acceptable to specific cases and problems of a socio-political nature. Social semiotics in the aspect of its multimodality is the meaning of words, images, signs, behavior, sounds, settings, etc., as well as their connection with the organization of society and everyday life in the field of socio-political interactions. Research in this area is carried out using methods such as linguistic and visual analysis, content analysis, interviews, political, economic and socio-political analyzes [<https://semioticon.com/semiotix/2010/07/social-semiotics-the-journal>]. Today, a variety of multimodal texts become the material of socio-semiotic or political-semiotic research: illustrated magazine and newspaper materials, advertising texts, works of art (theatrical performances, musical compositions, etc.), video materials, computer programs, various sites etc.

DISCUSSION

Today, the concept of “discursive research” of the socio-political sphere is used to designate discourse studies based on the intersection of the theory of discourse analysis, semiotics, methods of observation, description and analysis (including the analysis of multimodality challenges of the modern socio-political sphere of Russian society), as well as their practical application (Kovaleva, Maslova, *et al.*, 2019; Karapetyan, *et al.*, 2019). As S.A. Shilina writes in her thesis, “discourse studies and critical discourse studies have a large number of different methods of analysis in accordance with the objectives of the study, the nature of the object being studied, the interests and qualifications of the researcher, and other aspects. Therefore, one can find such methods and techniques of studying the structure of discourse and its strategies as content analysis; pragmatic analysis of speech and communication acts; rhetorical and stylistic, genre and other specifics of text structures (news, parliamentary debates, lectures, advertising texts, etc.); conversational analysis of speech; semiotic analysis of sound, visual material and other multimodal parameters of discourse and communicative interaction” (Shilina, 2015).

O.Yu. Malinova highlights two different approaches to the analysis of the socio-political sphere of Russian society (its ideological-semiotic-symbolic space): materialistic and idealistic. The first considers the dynamic development of the socio-political sphere of Russian society as a derivative of the evolution of the

political regime; the focus of the second aimed at ascertaining the internal logic of the development of various "isms" in Russian soil (often - with emphasis on the detection of deviations from the "classical" samples and recommendations to overcome any). As emphasized by O.Yu. Malinova, these two approaches describe only part of the picture that deserves attention and a more systematic study (Malinova, 2013).

As E. Gellner explains, similarities and differences in culture, as identification criteria, have existed throughout history, it is this similarity and difference that form the basis of the commonality of different groups and caused by the challenges of multimodality that formed the basis for the formation of nations. According to E. Gellner, different social status and different economic interests form different semantic socio-political cultures in the same society, and the age of post-industrialism does not cancel this at all (Gellner, 1991).

Many authors write about the multilayered and multimodal nature of sign-symbolic meanings. A.N. Whitehead emphasizes that a symbol will always have different meanings for different people. In his opinion, this is due to the fact that in any era, some people have dominant mentality of the past, while others - the mentality of present, the third - of the future, and the rest - "the mentality of many problematic future situations that will never happen" (Whitehead, 1999: 47). In relation to the Russian society, today there are many uncertainties in the functioning of this society and risks in the future (Shakhbanova, Kasyanov, *et al.*, 2019).

For the analysis of multimodal texts, they use a multimodal discourse analysis developed as an interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological approach based on social semiotics.

The semiotic discourse of the socio-political sphere has two dimensions: real and virtual.

In the real dimension, political discourse is "the field of communicative practices as a set of discourse events, this is the current speech activity in a certain social space, which has a process sign and is associated with real life and real time, as well as speech works (texts) resulting from this activity, taken in the interaction of linguistic, paralinguistic and extralinguistic factors" (Sheigal, 2000). As for the virtual dimension of political discourse, it is a semiotic space, which includes verbal and non-verbal signs oriented to the communicative sphere of the socio-political space (Sheigal, 2000).

A multimodal discourse analysis of semiotic space is aimed at interpreting communicative practices in terms of identifying meanings that slip away when analyzing certain aspects of communication of social or political actors (for example, expressed only in the form of a verbal exchange record). It is important that there are two areas of multimodal research (both in the field of interpersonal communication, where the semiotics of gestures, glance, facial expressions, movements, etc. are studied, and in the field of studying modern communications, which are the unity of the pictorial, textual, sound, graphic, etc. etc.) develop methods and techniques that embody the linguistic approach to reality (within the framework of "reading images", opening metaphors that pervade everyday life, attempts to identify features of modalities that make up the context of communication and fill social interactions) (Zagidullina, 2015). Thus, it is concluded that in the semiotic discourse of the socio-political sphere of Russian society, the most justified category for designating a text as a coherent whole is considered a multimodal semiotic text.

CONCLUSION

The main difference between the meaning and sense of a political symbol is that meaning is an objectification of sociality, historical, sociocultural, political and all kinds of other information encoded by semiotic means, and the sense is personal, semiotic information processed by the psyche, a kind of "psychic product", formed as a result of a collision of consciousness with internal and external realities.

Thus, political and symbolic codes include the meanings and senses of political life, limited by themes, affecting the structures of the life sphere in their concrete historical manifestation, and freedom of interpretation of a political symbol means separation according to the principle of perspective / problematization in social interaction, which allows the political symbols to perform an intermediary function.

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