

E-SCAPE AND ITS INDEXABILITY

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Abstract: The article presents research related to the investigation of electronic landscape (e-scape) and its socio-semiotic systems. It is based on a number of assumptions which need to be examined more closely in order to arrive at a conclusion which would elucidate to a greater depth the subtle structure of electronic communication and its semiotic representation, in particular the (ir)regularities between the individual semiotic structures as well as within them. This research article, furthermore, aims to contribute to the formation of a new register. What's more, the investigation of e-scape from a socio-semiotic perspective ought to bring to the front that part of research in electronic communication and mass media which has been previously either vaguely explored or has not been give chapter and verse in terms of the conveyance of the social meaning of semiotic structures underlying e-scape.

Key words: e-scape, semiotics, geosemiotics, computer display screen, semiosis, indexability.

Introduction

The article approaches the computer display screen as a special socio-semiotic zone, which is marked for various interaction encounters, visual semiotic sign vehicles as well as semiotic spaces. All such semiotic systems function as an aggregate, which constitutes the structural body of computer display screen (CDS). Apart from both individual semiotic systems of CDS as well as theory of the geosemiotic approach¹ to the investigation of language in electronic world, there will be a number of other theories applicable to e-scape for want of a deeper understanding of semiosis in individual semiotic systems, particularly place semiotics. In short, the present article delves into geosemiotic approach as well as briefly outlines

¹ The term *geosemiotics* has been introduced by Scollon and Scollon (2003). The authors argue that social actors interpret signs anchored in public environment by taking into account their actual location in the material world. The authors put together a concept which distinguishes three subdivisions; viz. *interaction order*, *visual semiotics* and *place semiotics*. Central argument of the study of geosemiotics, according to the authors, lies in the issue of *indexicality*; i.e. "the meaning of signs which is based on their physical location." (Scollon and Scollon 2003: xii). Besides the notion of indexicality, Scollon and Scollon are interested in how "the sign system of language indexes other semiotic systems" (*ibid.*: 5); i.e. the *indexability* of the world or, put differently, how natural language is made use of to index the world around.

prospective research on functional² and pragmatic aspects of semiosis in e-scape, which is to be understood as an environment using semiotic gambits suggestive of social infusion in its semiotic layers.

2. Indexability and geosemiotic approach

The world of mass media is a phenomenon which is constantly changing. The fact that it is now a part of everyday life strengthens its status as social semiotic. Nowadays, mass media are also materialised in the CDS. Therefore, the “CDS where several discourses meet (Ferenčík, 2011: 6)” is a potent subject for semiotic analysis. In other words, the CDS is indexable, i.e. “e-scape has the ability to locate language” (Scollon and Scollon, 2003: 6).

The property of indexability within the domain of CDS would be meaningless if not ascribed an interpretant which would designate something that the user could relate to; i.e. its pragmatic function. From a semiotic perspective, indexability is semiosis since the communicative aspect of all semiotic systems in the CDS is possible only by way of the process of meaning making through the property of being indexable. Owing to semiosis, the CDS improves on nature. Since indexability is indispensable in the process of semiosis in e-scape, several semiotic systems resulting from it are to be put forward.

2.1 Interaction order

Goffman’s socio-semiotic system of interaction order is applied to e-scape and, at the same time, designates a semiotic layer present in the CDS. The interaction order (IO) operates on two levels. The primary level of IO that is present during the entire “meeting” of the social actor with CDS is in Goffman’s terminology a ‘with’ because the social actor and CDS pay close attention to each other. At the secondary level, there is a difference between several forms which social actors come round to be engaged in every time an interaction with CDS happens.

² A linguistic model of M. A. K. Halliday (1985) insists on three essential metafunctions of semiotic system: -the *ideational* metafunction – ‘to represent in a referential or pseudo-referential sense, aspects of the experiential world outside its particular system of signs’;

-the *interpersonal* metafunction – ‘to project the relations between the producer of a sign ... and the receiver/reproducer of that sign’;

-the *textual* metafunction – ‘to form texts, complexes of signs which cohere both internally and within the context in and for which they were produced (in Chandler 2009)

IO as a semiotic system in e-scape at its primary level is an interaction, which takes into account the CDS and social actor only, regardless of environment in the wider sense. Other identifiable categories of IO as suggested by Goffman apart from the category 'with' are the following: single, files/processions, queue, contact, service encounter, conversational encounter, meeting, people processing encounter, platform event, celebrative occasion. All these IO categories are applicable to e-scape, unfortunately, to comment of each of them falls beyond the scope of this article.

2.2 Visual semiotics

Another semiotic system making up a semiotic aggregate is that of visual semiotics. The concept of visual semiotics is a borrowing from Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). This concept is important in the realm of e-scape research in terms of dealing with "how images represent the real social world" (Kress, van Leeuwen in Scollon and Scollon, 2003: 84). In addition, visual semiotics in e-scape is also interested in "how images mean what they mean because of where we see them, and in how we use images to do other things in the world" (Ibid.: 84). Put very simply, visual semiotics as a tool facilitating the investigation of meaning making processes in e-scape is interested primarily in three subsystems of Kress and van Leeuwen's concepts. In particular, e-scape from this vantage point investigates the following:

- 1) Represented participants
- 2) Modality
- 3) Composition

2.1.1 Represented participants

The term "*participant*" Kress and van Leeuwen use to mean "a construction element in a picture" (Scollon and Scollon, 2003: 86); and so it is used in this analysis of indexability of e-scape in the same sense. A construction element is a person in an image but the term also includes a block of text, graph, logo, avatar, etc.

This category is further subdivided into either *conceptual* or *narrative* structures. *Conceptual* structures "show abstract comparative or generalized categories" (ibid.: 86) while *narrative* ones "present unfolding actions and events, or, perhaps, processes of change" (ibid.: 86).

86). In other words, the latter is marked for dynamic action while the former is static in terms of the absence of movement.

2.1.2 Modality

‘*Modality*’ as a visual subsystem encodes the degree of validity or credibility of a picture in the sense that (at least in western cultures) the more faithfully a picture represents the world, the greater the degree of its modality. (Ferenčík, 2011: 9). This definition, when applied to e-scape, suggests that the higher the degree of modality, the more valuable the object is believed to be. Modality, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) takes into consideration colour saturation, colour differentiation, colour modulation, contextualisation, brightness, depth, etc.

2.1.3 Composition

The structure of composition discloses which elements are more salient and/or prominent than others. In particular, composition gives forth the following dichotomies:

- 1) centre – margin
- 2) left/given – right/new
- 3) top/ideal – bottom/real

These three categories cater for the presentation of information in relation to its importance. An object situated in the centre is thus understood as more prominent than peripheral objects, i.e. marginal.

At the same time, information on the left of the CDS is understood as *given* and, as such, already known to the social actor. By contrast, information found on the right is understood as *new* to the social actor. Often the *given – new* dichotomy is expressed by means of the *top-bottom* presentation of information. In each case, though, the subsequent information is revealed by scrolling the scrollbar of a webpage with mouse cursor either in a left to right or top to bottom manner. In addition, composition is marked for two information structures – *centred* and *polarized*. In fact, centred information represents a *centre-margin* dichotomy while polarized information stands for both *left/given-right/ new* as well as *top/ideal-bottom/real* dichotomies.

It appears that in e-scape the structure of composition is most apparent in the design of a webpage. However, the CDS’s desktop is also a space which is indexable in terms of its

composition; e.g. information on the desktop stores files which are placed in the CDS in a top/bottom, left/right manner, thus it is an instance of a polarized composition.

In other words, the *left-right*, *top-bottom*, *centre-margin* dichotomies separate electronic space into zones with affixed information values.

2.3 Place semiotics

Place semiotics (Scollon and Scollon 2003) is crucial to e-scape since it provides categorisation of places. Scollon and Scollon (2003) introduced the term place semiotics as a result of their investigation of discourses in the material world. When applied to e-scape, it appears to be a research subject of potent fecundity. *Place semiotics* covers a number of subsystems which provide for the typology of e-scape, code preference, inscription and emplacement of an object in space. Each subsystem of *place semiotics* takes on the meaning it is to convey, viz. code preference as an index or a symbol; fonts and layering to emphasize the meaning of an object; and, finally, the emplacement of an object offers an insight into both *frontstage* and *backstage* space in which such an object is anchored. Such indexical relationship “is very intensely present in the ‘tight’ digital environment of the e-scape, in which each spot is precisely localizable and indexable with different function”, (Ferenčík, 2011: 11); i.e. one object in e-scape takes on different meanings through its emplacement in cyberspace.

The semiotics of place is approached by way of identifying types of *semiotic spaces* and *semiotic discourses*. While the latter subsumes *infrastructural*, *regulatory*, *transgressive* and *commercial* discourses, the former includes both *frontstage* as well as *backstage* space.

The *frontstage* space, in addition, further distinguishes between *passage*, *exhibit/display*, *secure* and *special use* spaces as its constituents. As mentioned above, *place semiotics* is an aggregate of both *space* and *discourse* semiotics. What’s more, the former renders types of space which are accessible to the public, while space which is freely open is a *frontstage* space; and such which is closed to the social actor is a *backstage* space.

Moreover, the dichotomy *frontstage/backstage* further differentiates types of publics since what is closed to one group of social actors is, conversely, open to other groups. However, there is no strict line dividing open and closed spaces. In fact, there is a continuum between these types of space.

Space open to publics is called *frontstage* or *public*. Frontstage space yields types which allow for a certain activity to take place or, on the contrary, an activity is demarcated, though not strictly, to a certain type. Out of a plethora of possible types of frontstage space, there are at least four identifiable spaces covering most salient and usual space. These are as follows:

- 1) exhibit or display spaces
- 2) passage spaces
- 3) special use space
- 4) secure spaces

2.3.1 *Frontstage space*

Exhibit or display spaces in e-scape on the whole include such space which is open to the social actor but not to be altered in any way; hence the name. Thus, this type of space is multifarious with respect to its diverse nature; i.e. an open space is partially closed for any changes at the same time. Also included in this category are home pages of electronic media, such as newspapers, television. In fact, it is to be concluded that exhibit/display spaces related to the Internet are represented by home pages of most websites.

Passage spaces are such which are not prohibited to enter or are not understood as *special use* spaces. Ferenčík (2011:12) claims that passage spaces “are designed to allow a passage from one space to another”.

Special use spaces are utilized for a particular purpose, e.g. a composition of a written document (*Microsoft Word* text editor), a presentation with pictorial depictions (*Microsoft Power Point*, etc...). Special use space in this sense, therefore, subsumes all software programmes operating within the ambit of computer display screen.

Secure spaces according to Ferenčík (2011:12) “are accessible only for authorized users who need a key (password) to enter them”. This category exhibits a passage between *frontstage* and *backstage* space. In e-scape this includes all accounts safeguarded by specific means, of which most popular is password (e-mail accounts, internet banking, intranet, CAPTCHA for spam prevention, etc...).

2.3.2 *Backstage space*

Backstage space is an occluded one, i.e. such which is hidden from the sight of social actors but, nevertheless, present during the entire “interaction”. In other words, backstage

spaces are such “which are entered for the purpose of maintenance to deal with a problem/failure”, (Ferenčík: 2011:12).

An object is placed in the CDS not for the object’s sake. It is there to serve communication purposes. Interaction order between the social actor and his/her CDS is always bound to end up in at the least a pseudo-conversation. Therefore, several semiotic types are tangled in aggregates, which mutually interact and, accordingly, form an “interdiscursive dialogicity” (Scollon, Scollon, 2003). In other words, the individual types of semiotic systems in e-scape are small units which converge at one point to create a whole. As a result, it is necessary to approach place semiotics from the point of view of both the semiotic spaces as well as semiotic discourse. The former is analysed above while the latter is the point at issue in the following section.

There are four recognizable types of discourse in e-scape, viz.:

- 1) regulatory
- 2) infrastructural/functional
- 3) commercial
- 4) transgressive

Out of these four categories, *regulatory* and *infrastructural* discourses are understood as basic types of discourse in e-scape.

2.3.3 Regulatory discourse

Regulatory discourse “regulates an action by providing instructions on how to move around in e-scape”, (Ferenčík, 2011:13). It is realized by *negative politeness strategy*, e.g. a notification saying: “your e-mail session has timed out [because of inaction] please log on”. Other regulatory discourses are realized both verbally and non-verbally; a shape of the cursor, flashing or steady, indicating the point of insertion of information; cursor shaped as hand with an outstretched index finger points to a hyperlink. An example of regulatory discourse is such which asks for a repeated attempt to type in the correct password.

2.3.4 *Infrastructural discourse*

Infrastructural/functional discourse “provides information on the underlying organizational structures which facilitate the operation of the system”, (*ibid.*:13). This discourse is not visible and usually goes unnoticed by the social actor unless a situation arises; e.g. elapsed time while logged on results in being logged off and this is followed by a message carrying infrastructural meaning in order to help settle the situation.

2.3.5 *Commercial discourse*

Commercial discourse is “aimed at promoting commercial products and services”, (Ferenčík, 2011:13). Advertising is an integral part of e-scape. It is presented in several ways, e.g. as a window which is already a part of the frame of webpage or, conversely, a window which pops up suddenly once a webpage is opened. Sometimes a domain exhibits a rather odd type of advertising, e.g. a favourite webpage which contains a commercial web banner as its “wallpaper” in the background.

2.3.6 *Transgressive discourse*

Transgressive discourse is “interpreted as (deliberately) violating the ‘pure’ semiotics of a particular e-scape”, (*ibid.*:13). It is confounding to draw up boundaries between transgressive and commercial discourses for one could consider the latter to represent the former. In other words, an advert could be considered as transgressive or commercial at the same time. There are no strict rules with precise and clear-cut criteria delimiting the dividing line between commercial and transgressive discourses.

The three semiotic outcomes of semiosis in e-scape, viz. interaction order, visual semiotics and place semiotics, are taken over from Scollon and Scollon (2003), pioneer researchers of discourses in place. These semiotic layers are given social meaning for social actors interact in such an environment. E-scape as a sign vehicle designates spaces, discourses and interaction, which is closely associated with the material world. The investigation of semiotics resulted in its cooperation with geography, hence the authors termed this approach to meaning making by way of signs anchored in the physical world *geosemiotics*.

In addition to geosemiotics as a theory which works in e-scape, which is in this article understood as social semiotic (Halliday, 1978). The issue under consideration will now be pragmatic and functional aspects of semiosis in e-scape. Using these methods, it is expected to identify and analyse place semiotics in e-scape at a deeper level in order to understand the way how indexability is constituted as well as to find out whether indexability in e-scape operates on the same level in the subcategories of place semiotics or not. This article, however, will not give an exhaustive account on various levels of semiosis in e-scape for it is currently being studied. Therefore, only the theoretical assumptions this research is based on will be presented.

3. An outline of research on pragmatic and functional aspects of semiosis in e-scape

In order to understand semiosis in e-scape at a deeper level, it is necessary to probe what sign relations (representamen) there are with respect to their objects (designata). There are three triadic relations as argued by Peirce (in Palek, 1997:40); triadic relations of comparison (correlate 1), triadic relations of performance (correlate 2), and, finally, triadic relations of thought (correlate 3). Since e-scape is understood as a sign vehicle, the subject of research from the vantage point of Peircean semiotics will be to investigate what kinds of conditions relate a particular sign vehicle (passage space in e-scape) to its object; what kinds of qualities are inherent in a sign vehicle in order to be interpreted correctly. In other words, e-scape as a sign vehicle makes use of Percean second correlate of triadic sign relations (index, icon and symbol) but there are other relations that will be brought to light as well. Put simply, “spatial relations of signs might not correspond to spatial relations between things, but there might be a correlating relation such that for every spatial relation between signs holds some other relation between the objects denoted by the signs.”(Morris, 1938:27). Therefore, in e-scape a relation between the sign *special use space* and the object it denotes is brought about by its function in e-scape and is contextually bound by situational factors.

Secondly, the social semiotic aspect of e-scape will be examined using the theory of language as social semiotic (Halliday, 1978). By this method, a socio-semiotic aspect of semiosis in e-scape will be analysed. According to Halliday, language as social semiotic (in this case it is electronic landscape as social semiotic) functions as a way of interaction between the social actor and computer display screen (CDS). E-scape has a meaning potential and as a text,

it is marked for various situation types (context), which is, in turn, structured in terms of field, tenor, and mode (situational variables). These are related to ideational, interpersonal and textual components of the semantic system determining semantic configuration (or register), which ought to be relevant to the situation under way. All this is realized by a code, which is “the form in which we conceptualize the injection of the social structure into the semantic process” (Halliday, 1978:125). A code then serves as a semantic network making up a social structure. Similarly, place semiotics in e-scape functions in this way. The individual spaces and discourses are marked for similar meaning potential. In other words, e-scape as a social semiotic, is a network of social structure pragmatically interpreted by the user wherein the social actor must learn what to expect and how to react to certain objects in order to decode meanings embodied in it accordingly.

Individual categories of place semiotics in e-scape will be understood as an interaction. Each category of place semiotics will be examined for its integrating, predicting and controlling function and, in turn, pragmatic aspects of semiosis in e-scape will yield qualities and conditions under which a triadic relation of semiosis functions as well as which one trichotomic relation dominates others.

Conclusion

In conclusion it vital to stress the importance of e-scape as social semiotic since social actors seem to have made it resemble the physical world where social action takes place. To investigate spatial relations and their meaning potential in electronic landscape ought to bring no definite conclusion; in fact, it should attract critical reaction to spur on research oriented towards its better understanding. A socio-semiotic study of e-scape demonstrates that the science of semiotics is interdisciplinary in itself and that certainly a socio-semiotic/linguistic assumptions on which this article is based will yield interesting questions concerning its further improvement on nature.

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