From Isologic to Non-isologic, the Transition of Symbolic Communication

Wang Qi[1]

Abstract. Based on Saussure's study on structural linguistics, semiology was developed to explain the capability of communication in wide range of visual signs since 1960s', in which Roland Barthes played significant role. Among Barthes' rich terminology, a pair of concepts – Isologic signs and Non-isologic signs, which has been less studied by either Barthes himself or other scholars, indeed reflects not only a logic circulation of the development of communication by signs, but also the essence of learning and understanding.

Keywords: Isologic, Non-isologic, Semiology

1. Introduction

In the Swiss professor – Ferdinand de Saussure's masterwork – *Course in General Linguistics*, which was published in 1915 and was considered as a compulsory book of language study, the author dissolved the phenomenon of daily communication into three main concepts – the 'Langage', which is *"...many-sided and heterogeneous;... belongs both to the individual and to society..."*[2] and its two sublevel components – the *'Langue'*, which is the social side of the langage, and the *'Parole'*, which is the individual side of the langage.

Explanations on these three concepts can be found throughout several chapters of the book. Generally to say, Saussure declaimed that Langue *"is both a social product of the faculty of speech (langage) and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty."* And for parole, Saussure claimed that *"Execution is always individual, and the individual is always its master: I shall call the executive side speaking (parole)..."*[3]

By these definitions and explanations, it is clear that langue should be concrete things controlled by its inherent rules; and parole should be individual activities to use or produce langue. The former is focused on objective aspect and the latter is focused on subjective aspect. As the first pair of terms introduced by Saussure, in fact, langue and parole play a paramount role in his theory and construct both foundations of Saussure's linguistics and further development in semiology.

Accompanying with these three vital terms, other useful binate concepts were also evolved in Saussure's book. One of the most familiar pair for us is the *Signifier* and *Signified*, which stands for the two aspects of Sign and implies a relationship between what we can perceive from external expressions and what we can sense from the internal contents of the sign. Charles Jencks introduced them into the study of Postmodernism architecture language. Other key linguists like Roland Barthes further converted and introduced these concepts into semiology with some outstanding development.

2. Signifier and Signified

Barthes chose a pair of broad sense terms to describe essences of signifier and signified, which is different with Saussure's study mainly focused on the Spoken & Written Language. Inheriting from Hjelmslev, too, he argued that *"The sign is therefore a compound of a signifier and a signified. The plane of the signifiers constitutes the plane of expression and that of the signifieds the plane of content."*[4] This terminological exchange magnified their range in theory, and so put them in a positive situation to adapt the need of semiology. The "expression" is more ambiguous. It therefore could be any *"material"* containing all

[2] Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics* (London, Peter Owen Ltd. 1964), p.9.
[3] Ibid, pp.9,13.
[4] Barthes, Roland. *Elements of Semiology* (London, Thirty Bedford Square, Jonathan Cape, 1967), p.39.

the *"sounds, objects and images"*[5]. On the contrary, the "content" is more accurate. It indicates the psychological activities emphasizing *"a mental representation of the 'thing'"*[6]. If focusing on the built environment scope, clearly the concrete side of the built environment langue are all appreciable and tangible, so they are certainly the signifiers. Meanwhile, they are designed and meaningful, so can arouse our psychological responses – the signified.

Signifier and signified uncover the potential difference between the real objects and their psychological reflections; meanwhile very much imply the positive existence of the abundant different ideas to a same object.

3. Isologic Signs and Non-isologic Signs

Besides the "signifier and signified", Barthes further gave another binary taxonomy to the sign. In his opinion, above the "signifier and signified", the whole scope of signs should firstly be divided into the "isologic signs and non-isologic signs". They share almost no matching characteristics. In the conceptual scope of isologic signs, the signifier/signified cannot be dissociated and differentiated each other, therefore an imposed metalanguage is essential to understand the signified. However in the conceptual scope of non-isologic signs, the signifier/signified can be separated clearly and the meanings are easy to handle just through Spoken & Written Language. Put simply, the 'sign world' just includes two divisions. However, if probing into the deep essence of the signs, a deeper relationship between the isologic signs and non-isologic signs will be discovered.

Penetrating into the original meanings of the two terms, these abstract concepts can be reverted to common social activities.

- Firstly, the isologic signs cannot be understood without the help of metalanguages. Moreover, the metalanguages generally are scientific researches, artistic experiences or free thinking per se. So, indeed, the process of understanding the isologic signs can be converted into the process of studying the unknown scopes.
- Secondly, the non-isologic signs can be understood only by Spoken & Written Language. This means the non-isologic signs have been either discoursed or noted by others before and have been deposited in human civilization already. The process of understanding the non-isologic signs is the process of learning the known scopes.

Essentially, although all the artificial and natural things in the universe could be identified as signs containing meanings, not every single one can be rightly understood by humans from the first sight. Further, in our history, all the knowledge was developed step by step and everything, even the simplest one at present, must undergo a complex investigation. So, from unknown to known, from isologic signs to non-isologic signs, these are the ubiquitous transitions.

Some instances would be helpful to understand the transforming procedure. In his *The New Science* published in 1725, the important Italian jurist – Giambattista Vico suggested a "*poetic wisdom*" that is adapted to the thinking on the sensatory and illusionary expressions.[7] Through a series of studies on the formation of myth and primitive society, he argued that the gentile mankind only understood the whole objective world by "*poetic wisdom*", and correspondingly reconstructed their own world-views in their minds as myths. After thousands and hundreds years, the primitive people created a set of comprehensive system of supernatural power – the society of Divine.

This theory could be compared with the fact when the first group of primitive men emigrated from Africa to Europe in the prehistoric era – everything around them obviously was fresh and unidentified. Maybe they stared at the strange animals and plants but could not distinguish which was edible. Maybe they stood in the snow and felt freezing cold but did not know how to keep their bodies warm. Their former experience on the African savannah became useless. Their simple language and knowledge could not explain the new environment. Undoubtedly, they saw everything's signified as same as the signifier, which meant all

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[5] Ibid, p.47.
[6] Ibid, p.42.
[7] Vico, Giambattista. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1984), [779]

the original images or expressions of the objects. For them, all of these surroundings were isologic signs. Consequently, they began to try and study. Trying to eat unknown fruits, trying to challenge giant beasts, trying to live in caves, trying to sew warm clothes, our ancestors understood the new world slowly by practice, even some of their attempts were lethal. Sometimes a strong member in the tribe may become hero by killing a gigantic mammoth, whose soul would become immortal; sometimes they may feel so vulnerable facing to the terrible force of storm and flood, which were further personalized as gods and goddess. As Vico's gentile human-being, through the gradual construction of theological explanations, not only was the whole mythical world expanded by composing more new myths to explain more new natural phenomena, but also the interrelationships among the mythical gods were modified ceaselessly to look for a wonderful arrangement corresponding to the diverse natural environment. Clearly, the practice of understanding was the metalanguage they could use. And the metalanguage gradually evolved into complex system including increasing number of deity. The more they gained knowledge of the new environment and the more they could explain it by their language. Step by step, they could sum up their experiences as a massive structure of knowledge and teach their offspring to comprehend their new home. At this stage, the signified of sign became different from the signifier, whereby the latter were still the original images but the former have became the new explanations – the gods, the devils, the heroes or the lowness. Eventually, they were familiar with the environment, and settled in confidently. The isologic signs became non-isologic at last.

What the primitive men faced up to were the signs of natural objects. However, similar to the primitive men's experience, transformations from isologic signs to non-isologic signs were also normal stories in the civilized period.

The first English expedition that landed in India may have been startled by the great temples, which were isologic signs for them. But quickly, the former architectural & historical knowledge and the research methodology were adopted as the metalanguage to study the strange signs, and then the Indian architecture were recorded, described and introduced to Britain by English language. The isologic signs became non-isologic.

In 1972, in the process of enthusiastically promoting the idea of postmodernism in architecture, the key figures of postmodern architecture – Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown put forward the concepts of "Duck" and "Decorated Shed" in their well-known book – *Learning from Las Vegas* as two prototypes of creating meaningful architecture. Among these two, the Duck is derived from a duck-shaped building constructed at a Long Island duck farm in 1931. Venturi and Brown found it by chance and were inspired by it. They further epitomized that "*where the architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form. This kind of building-becoming-sculpture we call the duck...*"[8] However, before being noticed by Venturi and Brown, the duck shape building would only be a duck-like funny building to the locals. Apparently, the signifier is no difference with signified. It is a typical isologic architectural sign. Then after the publication of *Learning from Las Vegas* and being kept as one of the national heritage by the US government, the duck–like building was suddenly bestowed many philosophical meanings in the scope of architecture. It now stands for a design principle, a metaphor of architectural language and a memorial of the pioneers of postmodernism. In this case, its signifier has been differentiated from the signified – it is a non-isologic sign for us now.

Noticeably, the transformations between the isologic signs and non-isologic signs are ubiquitous. But different people will experience the transformations in different ways. To a single people or group at a certain moment, the transformation is simple and linear. This means that once a person has completed the conversion from an isologic sign to a non-isologic sign, it will be a very big chance for him or her to keep this sign non-isologic forever unless he or she lost their memory. The transformation will only happen once. However, if deducing the same transformation with a historical overview, it should be more complicated and different. Because not everyone learns something at the same time, it is possible that a same object can be recognized as a non-isologic sign or an isologic sign by different people earlier or later. If following the examples illustrated above, this phenomenon is also easy to grasp. For instance, the first group of primitive

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men completed a linear transformation from isologic signs to non-isologic signs. But they were not the only group of emigration. To the later tribes, they would repeat the same story again and again. Secondly, the English expedition was only the first group of British whom stared at the temples and finished the transformation. But the locals and other earlier visitors from other countries have been familiar with Indian architecture for generations. Similarly, after the group of students who assisted Venturi and Brown on the research project at the Yale School of Art and Architecture and would become the first group to understand the rich meaning of "Duck", the public only manage to understand this concept slowly by various media. So for a sign, in a broad sense the border between the isologic and non-isologic is naturally ambiguous. Analyzing from the examples, there are also four common principles anchoring the phenomenon.

- First, for every artificial innovation, from the moment it is invented it is isologic to everyone except the original inventor. However, for every natural matter, at the moment it is discovered, it is isologic to anybody.
- Second, with the current knowledge accumulation, information communication and education development, the transformation is not predominant in those homo-language circles. Excepting those professionals who explore the unknown by their special metalanguage – the research methodology and infants who learn about the world by their metalanguage – various learning methods, most people have established their knowledge store and can learn the signs directly by their abstract spoken & written language. Therefore, most of the surrounding signs are non-isologic for them.
- Third, to a sign introduced between different language circles, the transformation will be very obvious to the language circle in which the sign was introduced. Without translation or multi-linguistic capability, the people can transform an isologic sign to a non-isologic one with variant signifieds by their different tongues respectively.
- Fourth, with translation or multi-linguistic capability, an isologic sign can be transformed to a non-isologic sign with same signified by scientific explanation or with various signifieds by religious enlightenment, artistic experience or individual tastes.

So, it is clear that, in an overall dimension, not only will an isologic sign transform to its corresponding non-isologic one, but also a sign that has been considered as non-isologic in a group still can be perceived as isologic in others. That implies that the linear transformation process should operate as a transforming circulation, which contains a constant conversion of "isologic – non-isologic – isologic". For example, a totally new architecture style can be non-isologic only to the original architect but was isologic to all the others. Then the local people were the first group to be familiar with the style and transformed it into non-isologic. Consequently, over a long time, the visitors coming from different places began to study and transfer it from isologic to non-isologic signs again and again until maybe one day in the future all the people of the world will be familiar with it. On that day, the circulation from isologic to non-isologic will reach the very end in spite of the possible existence of uncountable different signified.

4. Conclusion – The Emergence of Signification

Comparing the two pairs of terms – signifier/signified, isologic sign/non-isologic sign, some similar features will be detected. Firstly, the possible emergence of a large amount of different thinking from a single sign can be explained by both of them. Second, the operational mechanisms of them imply the process of signification. In fact, these two binary concepts can be investigated in one system.

The interaction between the transforming circulation of isologic sign & non-isologic sign and the transforming process of signifier & signified can be interpreted thereinafter. When a sign is isologic to somebody, the sameness between the expression (signifier) and content (signified) means a lack of necessary background experience and knowledge. This shortness limits the essential associations and imaginations to create the personal signified. The following transformation to non-isologic sign is a process of exploration and study, meanwhile is an effort to build a different signified per se. Therefore, it can be claimed that the transformation between isologic sign and non-isologic sign is synchronous with the transformation from signifier to signified, and vice versa. The transformation from isologic to non-isologic is the exterior embodiment, but producing the signified from the signifier is the interior essence. Successively, if

considering the total amount of the signs of the universe in one system, with the ceaseless circulation among isologic signs and non-isologic signs, although the new things are constantly discovered at present and also will be continually discovered in the foreseeable future, it is still supposable that the total quantity of the non-isologic signs will keep increasing, which inevitably responds to the decreasing of the quantity of the isologic signs until all the isologic signs have been transformed into non-isologic signs to everyone in the world. This is merely a logic tendency. So to say, there should be a theoretical prediction that in one moment of the extreme remote future all the signs will be known and be considered as non-isologic by all of the people. That moment will just be the end of the circulation between isologic and non-isologic.

The whole process above can be demonstrated in following figure. (Figure: 1) Within it, the transformation from isologic signs to non-isologic signs compounds with the conversion from signifier to signified; a gradually narrowing grey circle indicates the total amount of the transformations and their theoretical end in the future. Then, in the entanglement among isologic and non-isologic, signifier and signified, what are produced belong to the numerous different significations operated in individual mind.
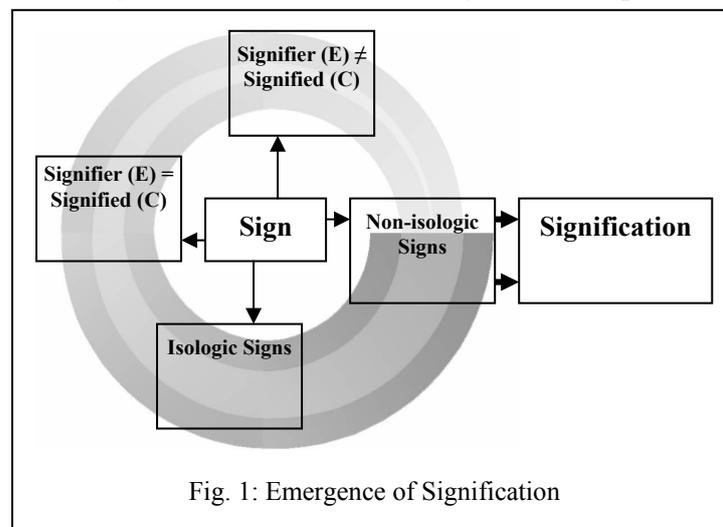
Fig. 1: Emergence of Signification

5. Acknowledgement

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