



## THE AMBIVALENT AND INDETERMINATE ROLE OF SIGN, LANGUAGE AND MEANING IN SOME WORKS OF UMBERTO ECO

**Mudasir Rahman  
Najar**

Ph.D, Research Scholar

### ABSTRACT

Studying Umberto as a very prolific author with discourses related to history, epistemology, ideology, this paper is to investigate the contribution of the author in highlighting the role of sign in the making of meaning across the textual structures. Eco with distinction has put semiotics along the domain of philosophy and tries to link the relationship of sign with the construction of discourses. His novels mainly focus on the theme of narrating the event and the relative nature of the varied. The main purpose of his novels is to unmask the traditional acceptance of meanings by means of literary discourses. He shows how perception and experience are at war in very process of narratives in asserting why certain paths are negotiable and others not. Eco also addresses the very duality of lying and authenticity of language in the world of journalism. This proves the need of return to journalistic province to explore the profession of journalism and any other literatures on the validity and determination of truth. These all literary cum intellectual practices help the scholars in particular and readers in general to live in space conducive for more innovative investigations towards reality.

**KEYWORDS** : Text, Sign, Language, Narrative, Meaning, Fiction, Reality, Discourse

### Brief Introduction of Umberto Eco

Umberto Eco (5 January 1932 – 19 February 2016) was an Italian novelist, literary critic, philosopher, semiotician, and university professor. He was born in the city of Alessandria, in Piedmont in northern Italy, and here he attended high school. He employs techniques of metanarrative, partial fictionalization, and linguistic ambiguity to create a world enriched by layers of meanings. Eco died on the night of 19 February 2016 at his Milanese home of pancreatic cancer from which he had been suffering for two years. He began seriously developing his ideas on the "open" text and on semiotics, writing many essays on these subjects, and in 1962 he published *Opera aperta* (translated into English as "The Open Work"). In it, he argues that literary texts are fields of meanings, rather than strings of meanings; and that they are understood as open, internally dynamic and psychologically engaged fields.

### Sign, Language, Meaning and Reality

Sign as source of language that in turn constitutes the levels of meaning in the structure of social and psychological interactions. Umberto Eco as a semiotician has taken this issues of sign and its role in the general semantic domain of our society. Umberto Eco's fiction has enjoyed a wide audience around the world, with many translations. His multilayered and meaningful novels are often multilingual with a deep critique on various discourses related to history, epistemology, ideology and some other related issues. Going back to the history of semiotics, briefly speaking, the main contribution in the field is of Ferdinand de Saussure who in his path-breaking work *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) gives the basic source of Structuralism. It was Jacobson who coined the term 'structuralism' in 1929 (Jacobson 1990, 6). Jacobson believes that the significance of sign must be extended to other fields of knowledge. In the same manner, Levi Strauss seeks the sign system in the fields of myth and kinship i.e. anthropology; Lacan in unconscious of human mind, i.e. psychoanalysis; Barthes in grammar of narrative as in Semiotics and neo-marxists in Marxist point of view and others in their own way with some innovative interpretations. Structuralist critics believe that all elements of literature may be understood as part of a system of signs (signifier i.e. the sound/graph and signified i.e. idea). They try to find something outside literature by looking for patterns in the literary texts and regard a work of art as closed system. In addition, they approach the text as static to a large extent and exert great influence on works of art, literary criticism and the determination of reality. Though later on the main trends of structuralism are challenged by the theory of deconstruction, it has still a certain relevance in the deliverance of meaning and in the interpretation of art.

Umberto Eco consolidated the importance of sign system to almost all the fields. He says the term semiotics not only what refers to sign in everyday speech act but of anything which stands for something

else including the human experiences and other phenomenon. Claudia Stancati in "Umberto Eco: The Philosopher of Signs" while referring to Eco who put semiotics on equal footing with philosophy and tries to trace the relationship of inference and indicated to the problem of referent that is of reality lying beyond language and thought. It also refers semiotic triangle's three components signifier, signified and referent. He also tries to substantiate the concept of semiotics in the textual structure of his novels by highlighting the play of signs in the determination of meaning. This challenges the essentialism of sign system related to the field of semiotics as well as semantics. In a paper, "Umberto Eco and the Echoes of Adamic Language", the scholar pays tribute to Eco through placing his work in conversation with a number of scholarly fields in which the idea of Adamic language occurs, including studies of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the Qur'an and Islamic tradition, the history of science, and early Mormonism. The article concludes by challenging some of the theoretical assumptions made about Adamic language, both by Eco and in early modern discussions, through a re-reading of Adam's speech in Genesis. Therefore, the need is to revisit the pages of history and analyses the essence, creation, consolidation of semantics spheres related to various fields of knowledge and numerous walks of life.

Moreover, Umberto Eco takes flight to the fields of poststructuralism and elucidates the social processes with scepticism and non-essentialist attitude. Norma Bouchard in the work "Eco and popular culture" works on the evaluations belong to a corpus of works of Eco that spans from the 1950s to the present. These evaluations reflect epistemological shift that ensued from the resistance to commercialized mass culture of an elitist, aristocratic strand of modern art theory and gave way to a postmodernist blurring. This blurring is the cause for the divide between different types of discourses

The main purpose of this paper is to highlight the probabilities of gaps in the routine exercises of our social interaction by the play of signs, language and manipulated narratives in some texts of Umberto Eco.

**The Name of the Rose (1980)**, is Eco's first novel. It is a historical mystery set in a 14th-century monastery. The novel contains many direct or indirect textual references to other sources, requires the detective work of the reader to 'solve' the complexities of interpretation of signs related to concerned objects. The title is unexplained in the novel that presents a remarkably post-structuralist analyses and the investigations. As David Robey in an introduction to the book, *The Open Work* writes as: Umberto Eco's first published book was the dissertation he wrote at the University of Turin, on problems of aesthetics in the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas. 'His first novel, published twenty-four years later in 1980,

continues this early interest in the high Middle Ages. As so many readers of *The Name of the Rose* can testify, few, if any, works of fiction have brought the cultural and intellectual world of this period, or of any other period, so successfully to life. But medieval studies have been only minor if persistent interest in Eco's work as a whole. Since he wrote his dissertation, his remarkable energies have been mainly directed at the problems and issues of the present: modern art and modern culture, mass communications, and the discipline of semiotics. (The Open Work, vii)

This indicates that Eco focusses on to highlight the fictionalisation of narratives to spread the reality of events and to diffuse the intellectual arena into the gaps of the social structure.

Birgit Eriksson in *A Novel Look at the Theory: About Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose and Foucault's Pendulum* from 'Central for Cultural Research, University of Aarhus, Aarhus, in 2000 talks about various issues regarding the works of Umberto Eco. About *The Name of the Rose*, he says that there is William as main character in the novel acting as a detective related to seven murders happened in seven days alluded to Genesis in the novel. The investigation is undertaken but to many twisted threads that leads us not to truth but to the level of ambivalence and delusion. This leads to the conflictual situation between William, the detective and Jorge, the librarian regarding the nature of investigation with one open and modern investigation of empiricism and reason; and another of authoritative and dogmatic. There is a semiotic cum semantic tension of interpretation in the novel, i.e. the interpretation out of doctrinal structure against the interpretation of deduction. In both of the interpretation, the truth is obscured by proliferation of signs. Hence, the reader goes back to original objects. Thus, we find the discovery of binary opposition between medievalism and individual conscience. In the preface of the book, it is claimed to reproduce faithfully a fourteenth century manuscript called Adso's Manuscript that in its turn has been found in the monastery of Melk by the great eighteenth century man of learning. Eco further says that in a state of intellectual excitement, I read with fascination the terrible story of Adso of Melk.

The novel mainly focuses on the theme of narrating the event and the relative nature of the varied narratives as Umberto Eco indicates to the motif of narrative in preface, "And so I now feel free to tell, for sheer narrative pleasure, the story of Adso of Melk" (T.N.O.R. 6). As per the analyses by *International Journal of Arts and Sciences* under the caption "The Neo-Baroque of Our Time: A Reading of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*", this novel reflects the Neo-baroque aesthetics, such as intertextuality and seriality, instability and untrustworthiness of reality, a strong sense of openness, and a reader's active role. Further, the novel expresses its preference for a 'labyrinth' structure through an encyclopedic sign system with seriality to demonstrate a fluid, constantly changing signification. This can contribute to expand the understanding of not only the past but also of ourselves today. And in the process of the narrative, the interpretation of signs plays the key role and in executed at two levels: the interpretation from deduction, i.e. the relation between the sign and the object always chancy and arbitrary in nature; and the interpretation from the doctrine, i.e. the debate on the relation of poverty and knowledge.

Hence, for both of the interpretations, the truth is deferred by increasing the signs of varied types. This leads to the tension of the interpretations of binary oppositions between medievalism and modernity; social impression and individual conscience from Plato's idealism to Bacon's empiricism. Once the semioticians way back to the original object to try access to the spheres of truth. Umberto Eco says that the idea of truth gives the morale to free the mind from the artificial shackles of traditional institutions. He once writes, To bear witness to the truth," William said humbly, "the truth shall make us free... Ah no! Jean de Baune exploded at this point, here we are not talking the truth that makes us free but about the excessive freedom that wants to set itself up as a truth! (T.N.O.R. 209).

In an article, "Umberto Eco between postmodernism and narrative" Umberto Eco's novels will be analyzed as postmodern and neo-realist narration. In his novels Eco does not only deal with questions of (literary) theory – such as semiotics, interpretation, and deconstruction – but also with ontological issues. Besides the striking examples of 'theory-aware' texts *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* consider the idea of a non-arbitrary perspective on the world. This preoccupation with one's identity takes the place of a pluralistic and multivalent approach chosen by Eco's postmodernist historical novels.

Therefore, the novel dilutes the authenticity of any particular level of investigation on the events that happened in the novel. This power of decentralizing the established way of narrating or investigating and social event or incident helps the readers to have the space for their expression. In this way, we may lead towards truth.

**Foucault's Pendulum (1988)** is the novel that highlights the story of three under-employed editors namely Belbo, Casaubon and Diotalleivi who work for the minor publishing house and decided to amuse themselves by inventing the conspiracy theory. This conspiracy they call "the plan" that is about a intense and intricate plot to take over the world by a secret order decided from the Knight's Templar. The main thread of the narrative is thus the development of the plan which we follow from the three men's first discussion of Casaubon's thesis about the Knights Templars. In this plan, world history is described as a flight between secret societies that have struggled over centuries to reconstruct a lost message. Hence, it deals more explicitly with interpretations and narratives we make of the world.

In a dissertation, "The Concept of Self-Reflexive Intertextuality in the Works of Umberto Eco" the research scholar reveals that there is relative nature of interpretation of the texts on semiotic, literary, philosophic and historic levels. Even against the displaced state of author in the times of Postmodernism, we can say that writer as well as reader have a certain contribution in the interpretation of the text out of their writing and reading experiences respectively. The above mentioned novel acts as an intellectual thriller laden with incredible variety of references, ranging from the African mythology to the medieval history and examine the nature and need for faith.

In one more dissertation, "Conspiracy Semiosis: An Analysis of the Intentional and Extensional Semantics in Umberto Eco's 'The Prague Cemetery' and Foucault's Pendulum" a researcher Mark Mackinlay is analyzing the semantic shifts across the linguistic conspiracies for some specific manipulations of narratives. This may lead to some disastrous distortions for the understanding of history and truth. Moreover, the revisiting to history for the search of the wrongs done to it in *Foucault's Pendulum*, leads to the social cum psychological anxieties across the history. This study of conspiracy semiosis turns the Eco's novels to the state of case studies and shows how not only language and understanding but also history is put to the sphere of doubt and skepticism.

Therefore, the novel elevates the thinking process of readers to understand the making of reality in the psychologically motivated world. This leads us to the light of investigating fields.

**In The Island of the Day Before (1994)**, set in the seventeenth when the new dawn has risen by discarding the geocentric concept of the universe; this metaphorically leads to the soulless man and centerless universe. In the plot of the novel, there is a man marooned or abandoned on a ship within sight of an island which he believes is on the other side of the international date-line. The island of past has been put into the world of obscurity. As in chapter 12, "The Passions of the Soul" of the novel the paradoxical statement is written with all emphasis as, "You must know that beneath this foolishness lies a mystery." That means there is untrodden path that is needed to be explored and analysed.

The main character is trapped by his inability to swim and instead spends the bulk of the book reminiscing on his life and the

adventures that brought him to be marooned. He attempts to provide solace to himself by writing a novel. The dominant theme of the novel is how perception and experience alter each other in a never-ending debate. The main focus is about telling, about the very necessity of narrative. The narrative proceeds through a series of flashbacks, often interspersed with commentary by an unknown narrator, calling into question the basis of reality, and the stability of meaning.

In one of the essays of the collection, Cinzia Bianchi and Clare Vassallo discuss on Umberto Eco's theory of semiotics. The essays in this collection seek to bring to a broader readership. In particular, these essays focus on the act of interpretation, on the formation of culture as a matrix of thought, on the perceptible and imperceptible acts of translation, and on the regulative theoretical hypothesis of the encyclopedia. Thus, the book ends with attempts Robertello finally made to reach that island with no mention of achievement of goal. After receiving serious head injury during the war times that puts him in a state of ambivalence wherein the confusion between time and space and the inability to separate reality from fantasy. From the critical point of view, Robertello's journey is analyzed by the modern perspective of scepticism regarding the validity of information, knowledge, reality and truth that in turn determines the standards of life. Thus, the elements of metafiction are so much focused to highlight the romantic base of the main character. With this find the continuous tussle going on between levels of truth and fiction in terms of the play of signs.

In another paper, "Umberto Eco's New Paradigm and Experimentalism" in the 1960s, the researcher analyses the results of a paradigmatic shift in the history of experimental writing. A shift that focuses on internal poetics in order to achieve a representation that includes the reader or recipient of the aesthetic (or cultural) experience, and which redefines experimentalism, giving it a new and autonomous sphere in the history of literature.

Thus, the play of narration is put to a sceptic note of reinterpreting the eventuality of the common routine happenings of life; that in turn would help us to redetermine the validity of reality.

**The Prague Cemetery** was published in 2010. As the novel tells the tale of a character between 1830s and 90s as a spy working for the various organizations. The main character is Simoni Simonini, a man whom Eco claims to be the most cynical and disagreeable character almost in almost all the history of literature. Brought up by his grandfather, a hater of Jews, he joined the employment of a dishonest lawyer who teaches him the art of forgery. He himself becomes the forger of political documents and an author of anti-Semitic texts. This skill brings him into the notice of Piedmont Government Sector Service and is ordered to destroy some heavily guarded documents. As the novel is mostly in the form of the diary writing by Simonini, he wakes up one morning to find that he has lost his memory power. While he decided to write all that he can remember, he comes across a very mysterious situation wherein he finds that somebody else already has written down what he remembers. As the novel deals with the text that is deliberately made ambiguous to reflect the conspiratorial facet of things, the text can unmask this practice by making the view seductive in turn. Once in the novel Simonini is told 'there is no need to find evidence because it is easier and cheaper to find one'. Hence, the novel contains the themes of history, intertextuality and unreliable narrative.

The novel is written in such a format that leads it into the two forms of reading or walking in a wood: one is to find the path more than once to get out of the word as quickly as possible and second is to understand how the word is disposed as it is and why certain paths are negotiable and other are not. That means there is a play under which one can deny what the textual structure asserts and at the same time one can affirm what the textual structure does not recognize.

In one more dissertation, "Conspiracy Semiosis: An Analysis of the Intentional and Extensional Semantics in Umberto Eco's 'The Prague Cemetery' and Foucault's Pendulum" a researcher Mark Mackinlay is analyzing the semantic shifts across the linguistic conspiracies for some specific manipulations of narratives. This may lead to some disastrous distortions for the understanding of history and truth. Moreover, studying the Jewish community as a responsible agency for human evil in the novel *The Prague Cemetery*. This leads to the social cum psychological anxieties across the history. This study of conspiracy semiosis turns the Eco's novels to the state of case studies and shows how not only language and understanding but also history is put to the sphere of doubt and skepticism.

In a dissertation, "The Shifting of paradigms of History on the Novels of John Fowles and Umberto Eco" the research scholar reveals significant changes in the paradigms of history.

Contrary to the suppositions of traditional history and historical fiction, it regards history as a narrative discourse and questions history's claim to know the past and assert to replace the authority attributed to historical sources.

In this paper, "Umberto Eco's *The Prague Cemetery*: A Game of Double Co-incidence", researcher Maria Spruyt takes the novel for the study of historical understanding of the misappropriated twists of fictional stories against the hidden realities. Through the novel under study, it has been asserted that human condition and especially the human nature has the tendency to commit both good as well as the bad deeds. Hence, there is no scope to categorize humans on communal basis.

Hence, the interpretation of any kind of communal, ethnic, racial or national characteristics is not to be standardized; because, this is being put to various misplaced discourses for the strengthening of essentialism that actually is not there.

**Numero Zero**, published in 2015 is set in 1992 and narrated by Colonna, a hack journalist working on a Milan newspaper. Being a struggling writer, he ghostwrites a memoir for Simej, a future head of Domani, a yet to be published newspaper. He plans to manipulate the base of truth to give flights to his stories by the means of series of well-placed linguistic and semantic turns to create illusion of reality. This sets a path for the future writers to break free the traditional journalistic standards and go for the new trends of media voice. There are the argumentative suspicions in the novel that tells up on the media coverage of many historical events across the globe. Because, the media is interrogated for its indeterminate projection of news for the various self-motivated political cum ideological propaganda. We have very crude evidences of sceptic approach to the reality, when a character's speech presented as below: "I'm not denying it, but my father taught me never to take news as gospel truth. The newspapers lie, historians lie, now the television lies. Did you see those news stories a year ago, during the Gulf War, about the dying cormorant covered in tar in the Persian Gulf? ... But I no longer trust anything. Did the Americans really go to the Moon? It's not impossible that they staged the whole thing in a studio—if you look at the shadows of the astronauts after the Moon landing, they're not believable. And did the Gulf War really happen, or did they just show us old clips from the archives? There are lies all around us, and if you know they're feeding you lies, you've got to be

suspicious all the time. I'm suspicious, I'm always suspicious. The only real proven thing, for me, is this Milan of many decades ago. The bombing actually happened, and what's more, it was done by the English, or the Americans." (19, *Numero Zero*)

This is indication to the deliberate composition of reality through the efforts of some chosen people. And it is they who decide what is to be called reality and what not. In addition, the novel offers a satire of Italy's bribery culture as well as the legacy of Fascism. As the main theme is lying, Eco addresses the very duality of lying that is intertwined with the authenticity of language in the world of

journalism. This proves the need of re-appropriation in either non-fiction or journalistic province. A lie is intrinsically linguistic and essentially semiotic. Since it is and it is not at the same time; and in the same respect as dualistic nature of signs work toward the creation of meaning. Thus, as a communicative/significate medium, language predicts, consolidates and legitimizes the paradoxical duality between lie and truth. It also reflects the hermeneutics of lies and fakes, and further gives a hint of the confusing momentum of meanings. Thus, the novel explores the profession of journalism and newspaper editors who try to highlight the dominance of power and material on the validity and consolidation of truth. Here, the power of storytelling is vehemently investigated for its validity and its composition.

Therefore, the main tendency of the works of Umberto Eco is about the sign, language, narration and the interpretation of the texts regarding the making or the discovering of various versions of reality. Hence, as per the above literature review, I find the cause that there is a certain necessity of taking up the idea of re-interpretation of Umberto Eco's novels for the further exposition of linguistic and semantic play across social sciences and humanities. This would in turn help the contemporary intellectuals to attain a sort of objectivity in the judgement of reality and the perception of truth relates ideas.

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