

An ethnography of communication of semiotic social practices in South Wollo

Abstract

This study is part of an ongoing ethnographic study on semiotic social practice in Wollo. The study was conducted in Kutaber, Alasha, Sulula, Haik, Dessie, Wogdy and Kombolcha in Wollo from 2011 to 2015. Data were collected from a range of live and recorded social events from different casual and non-casual events. The result of the study revealed that there are different non-language staffs exploited in the communication system of the people of South Wollo. Since the majority of the people in Ethiopia are illiterate, there are many semiotic signs used in different social practices. More than one hundred seventy eight semiotic social practices categorized fewer than twenty eight types were collected for this study. The analysis is qualitative description. Analysis was done based on the types and functions of each sign. The result of the study shows that there are many semiotic items that have continued to be used by the primitive society of Ethiopia. These Signages were used for generations and are still being used. The researcher noticed that many of them are being replaced by written languages. It is worthwhile to document and analyze how uneducated societies represent their public spaces using different semiotic resources.

Keywords: semiotic landscape, multiculturalism, sign, illiterate

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Introduction

Ethiopia is a land of diversity where many ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural groups of different kinds co-exist. There are many languages spoken in the country. Different cultures are exhibited through ways of dressings, living, eating and day-to-day activities. The majority of the people belong to Christianity and Islam in religion and Oromo and Amhara in language-based ethnic group. There is a lot of cultural and linguistic diffusion among the various groups because of contact. An extended and cherished relationship has been formed among the different ethnic groups of the country through migration, intermarriage and assimilation.¹

Ethnography of communication intends to provide a complete description of the communication behavior of a speech group. "Because people act within a world of objects human group life cannot be reduced to speech".² Communication takes place through linguistic and non-linguistic signs. Since communication is multimodal, spoken language cannot be adequately understood unless we consider non-linguistic semiotics.³

Critical discourse analysis has moved beyond language, considering discourses are often multimodal, realized not only through text and talk, but also through other semiotic devices as images.^{4,5} Ferdinand de Saussure defined what he called Semiology as the science of signs in which he defined a sign as any entity representing another entity.⁶ Semiotics is concerned with the analysis of both linguistic and non-linguistic signs as communicative devices.^{6,7} In semiotics, signs serve a communicative purpose. Any sign could be subject to semiotic inquiry.

As mentioned elsewhere the study focuses on the whole code of communication in the given speech group. "A code is a meaning system consisting of signs".⁸ Any sort of sign that is used by the speech community is considered. In this section, the non-linguistic semiotic signs of communication will be discussed. More than twenty eight signs were identified. These are Tule, Kitab, Ktab, dressing

styles (for females: Gufta with Kuta, direa and for males: Jelebya, Shirit, Timtam, Kalim, Gabi, Kufyit), hand shake (shake and kiss, abandoning opposite sex hand shake), nod (not allowed in religion but culturally required in mourn, greeting), sitting style, beard (length and thickness, colouring) meal (meat, exclusive meals (sambusa, ruz, shorba), drinks (bukri, shorba, absh, Kinito), sufra, Keriha, spitting, hand rubbing (for request to add chat), back and forth the tip of figures to receive blessings, curtain, incense, time, place, silence and so on. Out of these, only eight will be described.

Objective of the study

The general objective of this study is to explore the semiotic social practices of the multicultural society of South Wollo, Ethiopia. Specifically, the study aims at investigating the:

- Types of semiotic social practices,
- Meanings and symbols of the semiotic social practices and
- Functions of the signs used.

Materials and methods

Communication takes place through verbal and non-verbal signs. As mentioned elsewhere the study takes the perspective of the semiotics school that focuses on the whole code of communication in the given speech group. "A code is a meaning system consisting of signs".⁸ Any sort of sign that is used as a means of communication in the community is considered. In this study, the non-verbal signs of communication will be discussed.

Signs

The signs taken for the analysis of this study are traditional displays that are common for both literate and illiterate and that trespass the boundary of cultural groups. The approach of collecting data involved taking digital pictures of the displays in the public space.

Research context

The research context covers wide geographic coverage of the country in five towns. The semiotic landscape investigated is from areas in Kutaber, Alasha, Sulula, Haik, Dessie, Wogdy and Kombolcha. The corpus of this study includes an inventory of the semiotic landscape of major traditional signs in the streets of the selected towns.

Analysis

Varieties of semiotic social practices that are common across many cultural groups and that are common for both literate and illiterate society are selected for the analysis. The criteria for selecting signs for analysis include the type of sign, the commonness of the sign across many groups, the commonness of the sign across the literate and illiterate society.

Results and discussion of the study

Coffee ceremony

The coffee ceremony is genuinely used by both in the same way. There is a three level of coffee drink. There are elements such as ‘chis’ (smoke), ‘mirkat’ (blessing) or blessing and ‘buna kurs’ (a coffee meal).

The process is summarized in the following way list and table.

- A. Washing and roasting the coffee
- B. Inviting the attendants to smell the roasted coffee
- C. Grinding the roasted coffee
- D. Preparing the coffee with local pot known as jebena (pot)
- E. Offering the coffee to the attendants
- F. One of the elders offer blessing
- G. A meal is offered in a form of bred, or anything available
- H. Chis is put on the gacha (smoke material)
- I. The coffee is offered beginning from the blesser
- J. The coffee is offered three times
- K. The final blessing is offered Table 1.

Table 1 Buna Ceremoney

Names of coffee steps in amharic	Meaning
Abol	The first
Tona	The second
Bereka	Additional/Third

Coffee ceremony has its whole set and local materials as shown in the above figures. The people are fulfilled when the ceremony is complete. There is a saying ‘wolye lost their land while drinking coffee’. The saying implicates that the Wollo people are very much fond of coffee along its ceremony. A onetime coffee is prepared three times as the first, second and third step. Many of the Wollo people would repeat this ceremony three times a day. A great deal of time is spent on the process of coffee ceremony. However, people gladly do it every day. The coffee ceremony can take two hours on average Figure 1 & Figure 2.



Figure 1 Coffee ceremony sets.



Figure 2 The roasting, the grinding and the pot.

Silence

Sociolinguists in recent times recognize silence as an aspect of human communication (Mesthrie, 2009:185). Here the focus is not ‘silence as an absence of speech’ as in communicating nothing but as an aspect with communicative meaning. It is used to communicate a great deal in different situations. Silence is not communicating anything. There is a time when it is appropriate to say nothing and conduct the appropriate communication. Different people use silence to mean different things as determined by context.

Basso ⁹ who brought silence as an aspect of communication in research says, “Although the form of silence is always the same, the function of a specific act of silence varies from culture to culture... the knowledge of when not to speak may be as basic to the production of culturally acceptable behavior as a knowledge of what to say.”

Silence is used to show humility, respect and honor in the target speech group. For example, the target community pays great respect to ‘č’at’ (a local substance) through silence. č’at is a common substance chewed for the purpose of prayer in Wollo by Muslims. In the following extract, one informant narrates how they show respect to ‘č’at’ through silence.

We used to show our respect to ‘č’at’ with silence. When we are sent to exchange ‘č’at’ for grain... in our time, there was no money so we exchange things... when we are sent to get ‘č’at’, we are told to

say nothing no matter what. So, one day I was sent to exchange č'at for grain. As I walk to the č'at place, I saw a wild animal known as 'Shikrit' on the way. It is said that 'Once shikrit catches you, it would not let go until your uncle's donkey brays'. I was so afraid... but I could not go back... I said to myself 'The sheikhs sent me I am not after you.' He just kept going and passed me. I safely went. Still I did not talk.... I finally reached the 'č'at' place. I pointed to the 'č'at' tree to show the farmer what I wanted. He knew that I wasn't supposed to talk and he did not expect me to.... He saw the grain. He took the grain and he gave me the equivalent 'č'at' in the sack I took with me.... Still, we were not talking. I changed the road so that I would not meet the animal again. I got back and gave the 'č'at'... still not talking. Such was the manner we show respect to 'č'at'... but now...

Such is how the members of the target group show respect to 'č'at', a substance which represents prayer. Silence is used as a sign of respect.

Time

There are many things that time communicates in the speech community. There are some rules of doing things at certain times. Things supposed to be done during the day, at night and in the evenings are prescribed. It is not allowed to sleep at 'dusk prayer time' known as 'megrib' which is sun set. It is a sign of being alert and energetic to wake up as early as 'subhi' which is the time of the first prayer that is morning from five to five thirty. The following saying asserts this:

የቢት መኝታ የቸጋር ጎታ yā twat manta yāččəgar gota

የመገታ መገምሽት መገዳ መፍጅት yāmata mamašāt magādo māfəḅāt

Morning sleep is being an object of poverty,

Staying late at night is wasting fire wood. (42)

Going out of home from noon to early afternoon is not recommended. It is said that this is the time for spirits to move around. There are also days that people avoid taking a journey, Wednesdays and Saturdays are among these.¹

A person who arrives when the first round of coffee is being served is considered likeable; a person who comes at the end of a meal or at the third round of coffee is considered not likeable. A first buyer of merchandise is called 'ged' which means augury. There is a belief that the 'ged' determines the rest of the day's business. Not only the opening of business, but also the opening of a day is also considered a determinant factor for what the rest of the day would bring. If, for example, someone starts a day with a fight, it is said that the rest of the day would be bad and vice versa. When something bad happens, for example, if a coffee pot breaks, it is believed that there was something serious to have happened. The communication norm requires that people go mourning even after ten or more years. However, a good time for going to a place of mourning is in the morning not late at night.

Place

How people relate to their physical surroundings and the meaning of places also tells a great deal about the communication behavior of a speech group. In the community, there are places that are reserved for doing things. For example, for the performance of local group prayer with č'at which is locally known as dua (prayer), the places allowed

are known as Mejlis, Kelewa, Dorih and Taza. These are places for performing rituals and chanting menzuma. In places where these are not available, individual homes are used or a tent is pitched. At mosque, č'at dua is not allowed.

Rubbing own hands

People rub hands at dua sessions. They rub their hands to create a sound that the 'abbegar' (leader) can hear. The rubbing means 'give me more č'at'. They say 'č'at inna lijagered teshashto new yemigegnew' (Č'at and girls require more persuasion through caressing).

Spitting -'Tufta'

Spitting is used for two purposes. The first one is for blessing. The person who blesses says 'Tu' 'Tu' or 'Sweee' spiting on the person being blessed. The spitting sounds like 'Sweeee' or 'Tu tu, tu tu'. Sometimes they may not actually spit, but the act of saying 'tu tu' would suffice. However, the intension, or the true belief of the person who receives the spitting is a requirement for its real effect as the following saying states.

ይሆናል አይሆንም ታለ ቀልባቸው yəhonal 'āyhonm talā qäləbbāččāw

አንጎት ይሆናል ቢተፋባቸው። 'ā gwagot yəhonal bitäfubbaččāw.

If their heart suspects that it will or will not happen,

It will be only patch if they spit on them.²

The second purpose of spitting /'ተፍታ' tufta is to cast out evil spirit: 'አይን ናስ āyn nas disease of eye. 'Nas' means human in Arabic. 'Ayn Nas' means 'human eye'. It is believed that the eyes of some peoples cause sickness. This happens if such people have bad spirits. In order to cure the sickness caused by such people, anybody is required to say 'Tu' 'Tu' on the person to whom one is attracted.

Touching and hand shaking

It is assumed that touching has healing effect. The one who touches should be a respected person who is believed to have spiritual power. The one who gets touched is also assumed to have the belief in the healing effect of touching. The persons who touch say blessings as they touch. Example (43) explains this.

'Etan' (smoke)

Incense is a substance that produces a pleasant fragrant when burned. Upon mentioning the names of great people (dead or alive), the norm is burn incense and say 'in the name of so and so'.³ While someone blesses, incense is burnt. The local name of incense is 'adrus'. 'አጣን' 'ət'an etan' is the equivalent term in the other Amharic variety. They prefer 'ädrus አድሩስ' to 'አጣን' 'ət'an etan' because they use the literal meaning. 'Adrus' which means 'God perform what we ask of him'. The second term 'et'an', according to them, means 'God do not find us'. This is the direct meaning of the term Figure 3.

Meat

The target speech group claim that they (the Muslims and the Christians) differ in their meal. There is a strong belief that there is connection between meat and religion. A newly converted person to Islam is offered meat. Meat is considered to complete the conversion

²Public poem

³አሳቸው መጀን/ 'əsačāw māḅān

¹Many parents often changed journey in these days.

of religion. An informant's experience is worth mentioning here. He was a soldier at the time of the Derg regime. He had a deadly war just ahead of him. He was told to enjoy himself for the last time because he might not come back alive. Likewise, every soldier had to go out for enjoyment. The Muslim soldier went to a Muslim restaurant and had meat. He said he had to do that because, 'if I die, I wanted to die Muslim. I was eating Christian. I did not want to die like that.'

There is such a distinction made between 'Muslim meat' and 'Christian meat' because the animal was slaughtered in the name of Christian God (Egziabher) and Muslim meat comes from an animal slaughtered in the name of the Muslim God (Allah). As indicated in the following verses, the target speech community considers the meat slaughtered by Christians as unclean. The same is considered by the Christians of Muslim meat.

አዱን ያልቆና ትትቀጥን እንደጭራ	'äddunya taləqəna tətqät'n 'əndäč'ra
አንድ ላይ ይበላል እስላምና አማራ።	'änəd lay yəbälal 'əsəlaməna 'āmara.
ምን ይነወራሉ ሰውን ቢያዋርዱ?	mən yənəwwäralu säwn biyawwarədu
ያማራ የሰላምን መብላት ተለመዱ።	yamara yäsəlamun mäblat tälämmädu.
ጠጅና ስጋህን ተራቴ ላይ አንሳ	t'ägğna səgahn täfite lay 'änsa
እኔ ለበሬ ሸንጥ ጅስሜን አይሳሳ	'əne läbäre šənt' ḡəsmem 'äyəssassa
ባንድ ቀን ተርቤ ጅስሜን አይሳሳ	band qän tärrəbe ḡəsəmenkwa 'äyəsassa
ለጥቂት ቀን ብዩ አልበላም ነጃሳ	lä'təqit qän bəyyä 'äləbälam näḡasa
ወንዝ ለወንዝ ህጅ እበላሉ አሳ።	wänz läwänz həḡä 'əbälalu 'äsa.

When the world is coming to its end,
Muslim and Amhara eat together,
How can we ask if they embarrass others?
If they eat Amhara and Muslim meat together,
Take off your alcohol and meat from my face,
I am not eager for meat,
I will not get thin if I am hungry for a day,
I will not eat unclean for some days,
I will eat fish from rivers.⁴

Amhara refers to the Christians. The Muslims refer to the Christians' meat unlawful. The same applies by the Christians too.

These linguistic and non-linguistic features which have been discussed so far seem to be true of the other Muslim Ethiopians. The lexical and structural borrowings from Arabic are also similar. The language pattern of the speech community goes beyond linguistic boundary. This is affirmed by Romaine¹⁰ who said "A speech community is a group of people who do not necessarily share the same language, but share a set of norms and rules for the use of language. The boundaries between speech communities are essentially social rather than linguistic." This should be further investigated with empirical evidence if and how this is so.

Dedication of days of the week to worship

Worshiping in relation to the days of the week and attaching the days with saints is the most common phenomenon that the Muslims



Figure 3 Burning Incense while Blessing.

of this area adapt from the neighbouring community. This is known as 'Balat mabel'. There is no such thing as abandonment of work or 'ማበል' in the true sense of the term in Islam. However, the concept of attaching days to saints is definitely a concept borrowed from the neighbouring Christen community. The Christians gave each day of the month for saints, angels and spiritually holly personalities. Many of the days are holydays and work is abandoned. In the case of the Muslims, it is the days of the week that is attached to the worship of the saints in exactly the same way as the Christians concept of 'milja'. Friday is unique in this regard. It is dedicated to the worship of Allah which makes them similar with the rest of the Muslim worldwide.

The data for the label of days were obtained from the community elders. Coffee ceremony is at the centre of all the worship activities. Chat is chewed except on Mondays, Fridays and Sundays.⁵ Anybody interested could do prayer on personal interest but if s/he wants to get the help of those identified personalities, s/he should do it on the days specified. On Tuesdays, the help of Nura Husien, on Wednesdays the support of Abdu Jilale, On Thursdays the assistance of Nebi Endris and on Saturdays the help of Seyid Kedir is assumed to be obtained.

Many are known to be the fan of one particular saint, for example, Nura Husien. People would know him or her as a big fan and would always sit for Dua on Tuesdays. And he/she would narrate many adventures that Nura Husien brought to him whenever he prayed for help. Just like how the youth are known to be a fan of Arsenal, Manchester, Chelsie, Buna or other foot ball club, the target people are known to be fan of Nura Husien, Abdu Jilale, Nebi Endris or Kedir. A big fan of one personality could, however, be a big fan of the other too. And one person can have more than one day of worship. He could even be a big fan of all for it is not attached to competition Table 2.

⁵On Mondays, Fridays and Sundays, there is no significant saint for whom a day is dedicated. On personal basis; however, anybody can chew.

⁴Shekh Husien Jibril

Table2 Days of the week labelled for worship

Days	Labels	Remark on the way of commemoration
Monday ሰኞ	Day of the prophet የከርያችን ቀን	It is celebrated by fasting. Not all people celebrate this by fasting. Only those learned Muslims fast.
Tuesday ማክሰኞ	Nura Husien ኑራ ሁሴን	It is celebrated by chewing chat in the afternoon and possibly sacrificing bread or (anebabero, kita, or dabo) for the dead (amwatochu).
Wednesday ረቡዕ	Abdu Jilale አብዱ ጅላሴ	It is celebrated by chewing chat in the afternoon and possibly sacrificing bread or (anebabero, kita, or dabo) for the dead (amwatochu).
Thursday ሀምስ	Kemis prophet Endris ከሚስ/ ነቢ አንድሪስ	It is celebrated by fasting by the learned Muslims and the majority celebrate it by chewing chat at night.
Friday አርብ	Jimat/Juma ጅማት/ጁምአ	It is celebrated by congregation prayer in Mosque
Saturday ቅዳሜ	Seid Kedir ሰይድ ከድር (ቅዳሜ ቀደምቱ)	It is celebrated by chewing chat in the afternoon and possibly sacrificing bread or (anebabero, kita, or dabo) for the dead (amwatochu).
Sunday እሁድ	Sabbath ሰንበት	Nothing is attached to Sunday, it is free just like the Christians

Conclusion

Written signs are exclusively used for literate people. The uneducated society has long used audio and visual signs before the coming in to being of writing. The above signs are some of the types of signs used by the illiterate society of South Wollo, Ethiopia. The types of the semiotic social practice are manifold. They make use of audio and visual resources that could be accessible to many parts of the society including children and elderly who are uneducated. The functions served by the semiotic social practices are countless. They mediate literacy barriers; they index other functions besides the informative purpose they primarily serve and they reflect the norm and rules of interaction/communication in the society. Such use of semiotic social practice is very common in the illiterate society.¹¹

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Conflict of interest

Author declares there is no conflict of interest in publishing the article.

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