

Places at Crossroad Are Important: A Semiological Perspective

Shaoliang Xie

Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

Correspondence: Shaoliang Xie, Room 1017B, NO. 15 Zijing Building, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China, Zip code: 100084. Tel: 86-188-2963-3250. E-mail: adresstoliang@163.com

Received: April 28, 2019

Accepted: May 22, 2019

Online Published: June 3, 2019

doi:10.5430/elr.v8n2p21

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/elr.v8n2p21>

Abstract

Places at the crossroad of streets are signs. These signs can be analyzed from a semiological point of view. By means of semiological framework broadened from Saussure by Roland Barthes (1967), I examined the places at the crossroad of streets from the perspective of the binary opposition of signs: langue/parole, signifier/signified, syntagm/system, and denotation and connotation. Then, the perspective was adopted to analyze the real situation in Weinan City, one of the ordinary cities in China. The examination of places as signs will benefit linguistic and semiotic study in a particular culture.

Keywords: places, crossroad, semiology, culture, binary opposition

1. Introduction

Space as a sign has long been studied, especially, in sociolinguistics, just as Blommaert (2005: 223) indicated that “[p]eople speak from spaces”. Therefore, this sociolinguistic perspective seems to treat space, near to or far from interlocutors, as a sign in interaction through which people convey their meanings. Although the meaning is expressed and received by people as a sign proper, the space in the form of places and without people’s interaction can also belong to a semiological system if the sign is examined by semiological perspective other than just a single symbol. In this article, I will show places at the crossroad of streets are important in Chinese context from a semiological system. In a certain context, firstly I mean that place as a sign in a particular system is arbitrary, if not in a socio-cultural context, and secondly, I mean that the syntax (of the places) is a possible and conventional combination of the signs.

Crossroad is naturally important because two streets with the same and even breadth intersect each other at this point to make the area a “small square”, which is seemingly bigger than any of the single roads at any other section in either street. Due to the intersection of two streets, *ceteris paribus*, more people may converge at this point than any other point of each street, just like the water of rivers converges at a crossing point. Moreover, usually places at the crossroad are made the first slot when one, from the crossing point of the streets, starts counting the places along a street, and the places at the crossroad extended with a larger front, in contrast to other parts of the street. All these phenomena reveal in real life that the places at the crossroad are more important, yet need a semiological analysis. Therefore, that the places at the crossroad are important is an extension of a value system in semiotics, as Saussure (1974: 114) clearly indicated that “the value of a sign is determined by the relationships between the sign and other signs within the system as a whole” (Chandler, 2017).

2. Previous Studies

There are two groups of interrelated studies pertaining to the present research. The first group of studies focuses on the place as the contextual contribution to meaning construction. For example, Scollon & Scollon (2003) based on the idea of “geosemiotics” to study signs that the meaning of a sign or text such as road signs, advertisements, and the writing on the rock surfaces, etc. should be interpreted by considering their social and physical surroundings. This line of research distinguishes space from place, while the place is stable and the space is dynamic. The relation between them is that “space is a practiced place (De Certeau, 1984: 117), thus place is more physical and space socio-cultural. The ultimate goal of the researches is to find out how the space is constructed through the physical

surrounding together with socio-cultural conventions. Related studies investigated various particular places such as Tahrir Square (Aboeazz, 2014), local markets in Hong Kong (Lou, 2017), and library (Nichols, 2011), etc. The other line of research focuses on the linguistic landscape (Landry and Bourhis, 1997), which often has a broader physical scope than the former group of research. The purpose of this line of research is to find out how the social aspects of life are shaped and represented by linguistic realities. The researches often choose the multilingual or multi-dialectal places as the objects of studies, such as Tokyo (Backhaus, 2006), South African town (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009), and Seoul in Korea (Lawrence, 2012), etc. One thing needs to be noted here is that the two lines of researches are related; for example, the study of the linguistic landscape of South African township (Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009) also referred the place/space framework to explain their results. To sum up, the previous studies on places from semiotic perspective mainly treated the places as a dimension or a conceptual tool to study other signs or symbols within them. In other words, there is still a lack of study to treat the places themselves as the object of study, which might be more fundamental to find out meanings of the place per se. Therefore, the present study tries to address this issue from semiological perspective to reveal the structural meaning of the places in an ordinary Chinese city and implies that this study would benefit the study of non-linguistic signs in the semiology, and cultural studies in semiotics as well.

3. Langue and Parole

According to Roland Barthes (1967: 13) langue is “a purely social object, the systemized set of conventions necessary to communication, indifferent to the material of the signals which compose it”, while parole “covers the purely individual part of language (phonation, application of the rules and contingent combinations of signs)”. Therefore, the langue is the unseen system which is “exteriorized” by the parole, the actual articulation of the langue. Bathes (1967: 25) further stated that “there exists a general category language/speech, which embraces all the systems of signs; ... they are applied to communications whose substance is not verbal”, then he listed several non-verbal systems of signs, such as the garment system, the food system, the car system, and the furniture system. The places at the crossroad form their own system and their own “articulation”. Firstly, in a city there are a lot of crossroads, thus a large number of places affiliates the crossroads altogether as a system. At this level, we have a system of crossroads with their places, and these crossroads with their places can combine themselves in a linear syntax, one after another along a certain street. Secondly, of a particular crossroad, the places of streets themselves are another level of the system, which is my focus in this article. In this system, the places closest to the crossing point of the streets are a sign to show their importance, because the importance is showed by the buildings or institutions at these places. The difference of the non-verbal system of places at a crossroad from the human language is that “unlike human language their origin is in general utilitarian and not signifying” (Barthes, 1967: 34).

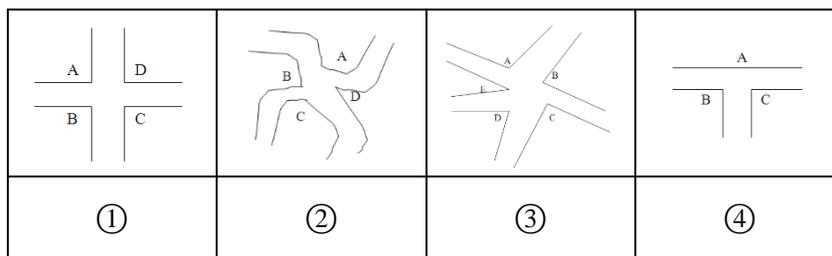


Figure 1. Places at the crossroad of streets

As shown in Figure 1, the first one is the “standard” crossroad with four important places of two crossing streets. What I discussed until now and later about the crossroad is the crossroad of streets within a city, especially at the populous habitat part of the city. Usually, the places in ①, A, B, C, and D, occupies both sides of neighboring places at the corner, making the places two-time large at the front, despite the real shape of the places. The langue of the system of the places at crossroad is the value of the places of A, B, C, and D, *et al.*, and also is indicated, at another level of system, by realizing by its “speech”, that is the different varieties of the crossroad, such as the different crossroads of ①, ②, ③, or ④, *et al.* However, as to my observation, the last example, picture ④, is unique because place A seems not as important as the place B and C any more. It is sufficed to say that the places at crossroad of streets can be seen from semiological perspective, with abstract langue in our mind, which is the abstract form of the crossroad on the one hand and the value of places on the other hand and with concrete realization of the langue, the parole, which is the different patterns of the crossroads at the first level and the buildings or institutions occupying the places at the second level, both to show the importance of the places.

4. Signifier and Signified

The places as a sign at the crossroad can also be analyzed in terms of the components of the signs: signifier and signified. On the one hand, we all have abstract crossroad places in our mind which are signified part of the places, and we also have the actual form of different crossroads with more or less than four places in our daily life as shown in the above figure, which is the signifier part of the places. On the other hand, we have places at the crossroad as the signified, and the buildings and institutions occupying the places as the signifier. Barthes (1967: 41) explained such kind of non-verbal semiological signs in terms of signifier and signified by stating that “these semiological signs, whose origin is utilitarian and functional, *sign-functions*”. These signs are essentially at two levels: semantization and functionalization. The semantization can be understood as the societal choice of a meaning of a sign in terms of its function, such as “the use of raincoat is to give protection from the rain” (Barthes, 1967: 41) with the confinement of raining atmosphere. Then, “society can very well refunctionalize it [the sign], and speak about it as if it were an object made for use: a fur coat will be described as if it served only to protect from the cold” (Barthes, 1967: 42). Therefore, the current discussion of the places at the crossroad is determined in a given society or situational context, with a particular arbitrary relationship between two *relata*, just as Barthes pointed out, with “anthropological value” (Barthes, 1967: 42). Hence, the realization of the importance of the places is a potential one, sometimes with no value attached to a place or the places, thus the places seem deceptively no importance at all.

5. Syntagm and System

Syntagm and system are also called syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes of langue. To put it simply, signs along the syntagm axes are combined linearly, and they can never be present simultaneously, but only in the sequence of one after another, while signs along the system axes are substitutable, according to Barthes (1967: 59), “the terms are united *in absentia*”. For example, in furniture system, “the system might be a set of the ‘stylistic varieties of a single piece of furniture (a bed)’” (Barthes, 1967: 63), whereas the syntagm is “the juxtaposition of the different pieces of furniture in the same space: bed – wardrobe – table, etc” (Barthes, 1967: 63). The relation between the two axes can be shown in the following diagram (Barthes, 1967: 67):

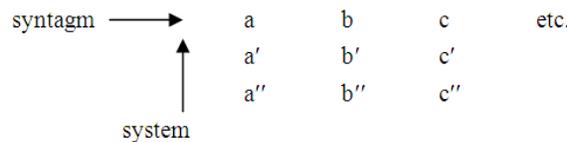


Figure 2. Syntagm and system

The framework can also be projected to the system of places at the crossroads, for the places along the street constitute a syntagm, and each place at the particular point of the street cannot be occupied by two buildings at the same time, thus belongs to system, because which can be substituted by another building, which means the presence of one excludes the presence of the others. In other words, the presence of one entails the absence of the others. Taking the standard crossroad as an example, the presence of A excludes any other A' or A'' at the same time at the paradigmatic level, the same is the next places A₁, A₂, etc. and their potential substitutes A₁', A₁'', and A₂', A₂'', etc.

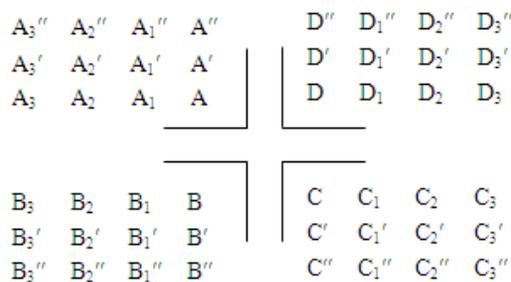


Figure 3. Syntagm and system of places at a crossroad

We have explained that the nonverbal system can be examined in terms of two levels of syntagm and system. In the real situation of places at crossroad, we may also find similar levels of system: at the syntagmatic level, we find each part of the street, for example, the area of part A, a syntagmatic combination of sets, that can be read as a syntax A A₁ A₂ A₃, or another potential syntax A' A₁' A₂'' A₃, etc., and also a system represented by possible substitution, for example, A can be substituted by A' or A'', or A₁ can be substituted by A₁' or A₁'', etc. All the syntagmatic combination in the real street is the arrangement of buildings along the street. The other areas (B, C, and D) of the crossroad also have the syntagmatic and paradigmatic level of signs. The elements of the matrix in above syntagm and system relationship can be realized along either side of the crossroad. In that case, the area of part A, we may have two matrices of syntax along either side of the neighboring streets, which means that along either side of the street exists an underlying system which is realized by a syntax, as shown in Figure 4:

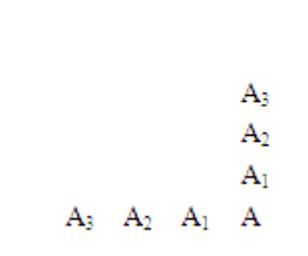


Figure 4. Two directions of the syntax of places at the crossroad of streets

6. Denotation and Connotation

If we look closely at the places at the crossroad of street, we can also find two levels of systems which both comprise “a plane of expression (E) and a plane of content (C) and that the signification coincides with the relation (R) of the two planes: E R C (Barthes, 1967: 89). Depending on “the point of insertion of the first system into the second” (Barthes, 1967: 89), two opposite sets of connotation and metalanguage are formed, as is shown in Table 1 (adapted from Barthes, 1967):

Table 1. Staggered systems of connotation and metalanguage

connotation				metalanguage			
2	E	R	C	2	E	R	C
1	E	R	C	1	E	R	C

Although the metalanguage cannot be easily found in the places at the crossroad of streets, the connotative phenomenon can be revealed by the connoted system. Firstly, the first system can be regarded as the pure state of space arrangement from “near to” to “far from” the point of the crossing point of the streets, which is shown in Figure 4. Secondly, the plane of expression is realized by the first system of the sequence of spaces which is more complex than the first one in the forms of various styles of buildings, types of institutions or shops, and other kinds of usage of the place, e.g. park, square, etc. To put it simply, the two levels of syntagm/system convey two levels of connotation/denotation, with one level being purely special and the other physical or material.

7. Application

Based on the semiological framework and the preliminary analysis of the places at the crossroad of streets, it is more practical in this part to look through the semiological lens at the places at the crossroad of streets in real life. The description of the streets is from my personal observation, which is especially based on the city Weinan I have lived for nearly 8 years, so the analysis is not purely subjective conjecture. It must be stated at first that by means of the

observation of the phenomena, we cannot project 100 percent correspondence between the real situation and the framework, for the framework provides just all the possible existences of the different realization of the framework, so each real-life presentation of the pattern of the places at the crossroad of streets is just one kind of all the possibilities or just a part of the whole system.

Firstly, I want to discuss the fact that the places at the crossroad of streets themselves are naturally important. As I just mentioned earlier in this paper, the places are important just due to the location of the places, for the places at the crossroad are the converging point of streets, and have an illusionary psychological effect on the perceived bigger size of the area of the crossroad, and more people might pass through this point of street than other parts of the streets. It is a mini square. Furthermore, I want to indicate that crossroad bears the markedness of the streets than any other parts of the streets, that is to say, the middle part of the streets is unmarked. Such markedness gives the important value to the crossroads of the streets. In Weinan city, I can find several places at the crossroad to show their value in contrast to other parts of the street. As all the citizens believed, there are two main streets in this city stretching horizontally from east to west across the main part of the city, thus there are several big crossroads when the two parallel streets meet vertically other streets. Figure 5 shows one of the crossroads formed by Chaoyang Street (horizontal) and Jinshui Street (vertical).



Figure 5. Crossroad of Chaoyang Street and Jinshui Street

(Source: <http://map.baidu.com/?newmap=1&s=s%26wd%3D%E6%B8%AD%E5%8D%97%E5%B8%82%26c%3D170&from=alamap&tpl=mapcity>)

As to my personal observation, two places at this crossroad is important than others along either side of the two streets, which is shown by the bigger building of “锅比盆大” (Figure 6), a name of hot pot shop to the northwest of the crossroad and by the important institution of the community “站南办朝阳社区卫生站” (Figure 7), a community hospital, to the southeast of the crossroad. But along any side of the street, other places are not as important as the above two places. “布卡斯咖啡厅”, a café shop is not at the exact point of the crossroad (Figure 5), where the place is occupied by “中国体育彩票” China Sports Lottery (Figure 8) to the southwest of the crossroad, and at the northeast part of the crossroad is a cake shop, called “心岸”. The last two places at the crossroad are at least as important as the places of other parts of the streets, if not more, but possibly more, especially for the cake shop.



Figure 6. “锅比盆大” a hot pot shop in contrast to other parts of the streets of either side
(Source: <http://www.earthol.org/city-325.html>)

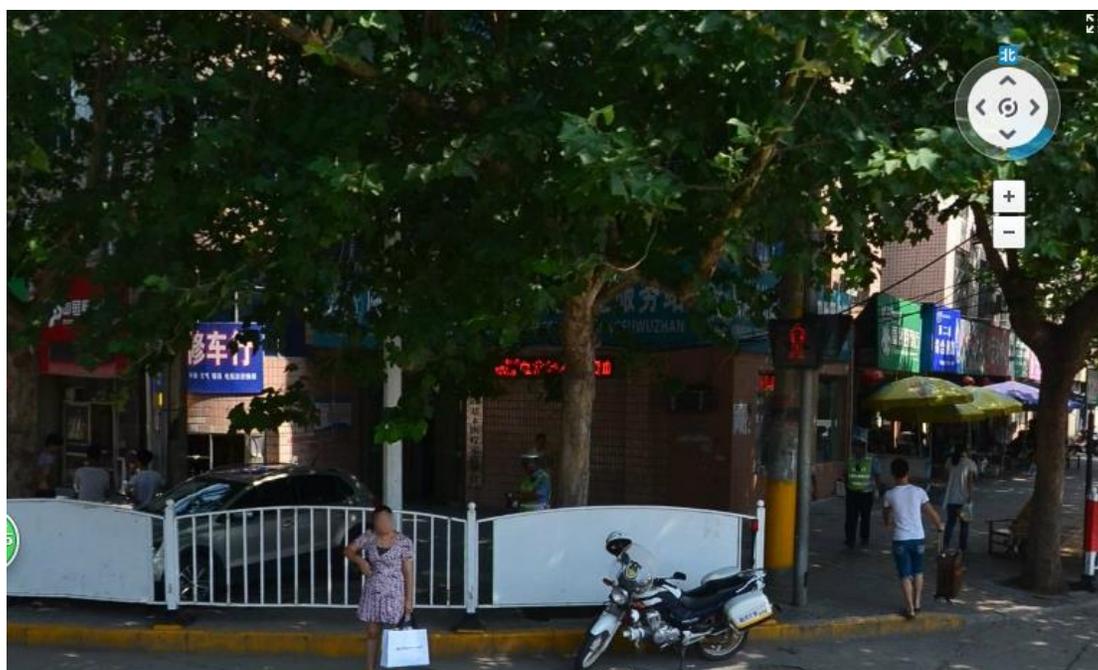


Figure 7. “站南办朝阳社区卫生站”, a community hospital
(Source: <http://www.earthol.org/city-325.html>)



Figure 8. “中国体育彩票” China Sports Lottery
(Source: <http://www.earthol.org/city-325.html>)



Figure 9. “心岸”, a cake shop (under decor)
(Source: <http://map.qq.com/#pano=31041017140714102834800&heading=47&pitch=7&zoom=2>)

There are some doubts about the places in the picture need to be clarified. First, the common situation is that these places occupied the area in the way that can face two crossing streets at the same time, as is shown similarly in Figure 4, the place of A, and here I present the pattern in a new figure:

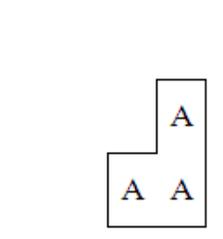


Figure 10. A pattern of place at crossroad occupied

Second, the importance of the crossroad places is echoed by the advertisement on the top of the “中国体育彩票” China Sports Lottery (Figure 8). The advertisement is about a school “桃园初中”, but the school itself is not there, so the advertisement seems conspicuous at the place, because it is at a crossroad. Thirdly, the picture from the online map was taken in the year 2014, so the cake shop in the picture (Figure 9) was under decoration, but now it is in business. This also indicates that the place at the crossroad is important because of its derived commercial value.

From the above observation, we can see the importance of the places at the crossroad of streets is indicated both by the location of the places themselves and the buildings or institutions that occupy the places.

Secondly, the syntax of the crossroad of the street also has particular characteristics, by the similarity or harmony of the shops or institutions along the streets, started but not essentially heralded by the shops or institutions at the crossroad. But it is not absolutely the case that similarity is kept in the syntax, but it is absolute that difference is excluded as much as possible. A typical example is also provided by one side of the street at the same crossroad of Jinshui Road that the government planned a street as a “Street of Delicious Food”. For the syntax of the places, the places are linearly arranged because one shop or institution can just occupy one slot of the places (in an abstract sense) other than two or more slots or in reality, institutions can just occupy a single place (in a concrete sense) at a time. But what we actually see is one single realization of the “meaning potentials” of similar shops or institutions along the part of street demarcated by the crossroad. The “similarity”, here, is just like the Wittgenstein’s (1953) “family resemblance”. This realization of places in the space works at the physical or material level.



Figure 11. Syntax of one side and part of the street

(Source: <http://map.qq.com/#>)

The syntax of shops at the crossroad of Dongfeng Street and Jingshui Road is another example to show such potential similarity of shops (Figure 12). We can see that the shop occupying the northwest part of the crossroad is a shop selling bedclothes, followed, one after another, by underwear shop, another underwear shop, healthcare drugstore, marriage ceremony shop, another underwear shop, another healthcare drugstore, another underwear shop, and a jade shop. These shops are arranged with a potential main theme and gradual transition of similar or slightly different but related themes.



Figure 12. Syntax of shops at the crossroad of Dongfeng Street and Jingshui Road (A & B)

(Source: <http://map.qq.com/#>)

The figure above has two parts due to the inconvenient combination of pictures into a whole, but the two pictures are arranged in a continuous sequence from left to right in accordance with a direction from south to north. In other words, the syntax of the side of the crossroad is started from A to B as a continuous whole with a linear arrangement. Therefore, usually in China, it is difficult to find the syntax in which the drastically different themes of selling such as restaurant mixed with the textile shops. It is often the theme of selling at the crossroad which at least determines the theme of one side of the shops.

Moreover, the syntax and system work at two levels, if the whole city is considered in terms of themes of selling distributed from street to street. One street with two crossroads at two ends is an element of a syntax of whole streets in the city. On the other hand, the different syntaxes in the whole city could be analyzed in terms of the paradigmatic arrangement, with the existing arrangement as the realization and other possible arrangements as potentiality. In this sense, the syntax of streets could be compared across different cities.

8. Conclusion

This article analyzed the places at the crossroad from the semiological point of view, by means of a framework in Roland Barthes' seminal book *Elements of Semiology*. I suggest, from the semiological point of view, the places at the crossroad of streets are signs, and can be examined by – langue/parole, signifier/signified, syntagm/system and denotation/connotation – the four binary oppositions, and also by the value of the places both within and outside the system. Places at the crossroad of streets are naturally important and are signs with conventional meanings. But this conventional kind of signs might not be always realized at the syntactic level, thus a “meaning potential”. The analysis of places at the crossroad of streets in Weinan City will lead to a further investigation in semiotics, which, in turn, will benefit the linguistic and semiotic study in a particular culture.

Reference

- Aboezz, M. (2014). The geosemiotics of Tahrir Square: A study of the relationship between discourse and space. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 13(4), 599-622.
- Backhaus, P. (2006). Multilingualism in Tokyo: A look into the linguistic landscape. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 3(1), 52-66.
- Barthes, R. (1967). *Elements of Semiology*. (A. Lavers & C. S. Trans.). New York: Wang and Hill.
- Blommaert, J. (2005). *Discourse: A critical introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chandler, D. (2017). Semiotics for beginners. Retrieved Jan 5, 2018 from <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/sem02.html>
- De Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. (R. Steven, trans.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Landry, R., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1997). Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality: An empirical study. *Journal of language and social psychology*, 16(1), 23-49.
- Lawrence, C. B. (2012). The Korean English linguistic landscape. *World Englishes*, 31(1), 70-92.
- Lou, J. J. (2017). Spaces of consumption and senses of place: A geosemiotic analysis of three markets in Hong

Kong. *Social Semiotics*, 27(4), 513-531.

Nichols, S. (2011). Young children's literacy in the activity space of the library: A geosemiotic investigation. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 11(2), 164-189.

Saussure, Ferdinand de. ([1916] 1974). *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. Wade Baskin). London: Fontana/Collins.

Stroud, C., & Mpendukana, S. (2009). Towards a material ethnography of linguistic landscape: Multilingualism, mobility and space in a South African township. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 13(3), 363-386.

Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.