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## SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF SPORTS AS A STRUCTURE

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**Abstract.** Based on the structural analysis three categories of the semiotic structure are identified, namely, form, content and meaning. In fact, in the semiotic structure of sport the rules of any competition are a form, i.e they are a language. The content of the sporting activities is a competition, which can be considered as a visual text. The significance of sport results in the completeness and semantic organization of the whole sports process.

**Keywords:** sport, contest, rules, uniform, content, meaning, language, text, diacode, monocode, structure.

**Аннотация:** На основе метода структурного анализа выделяются три категории семиотической структуры, а именно: форма, содержание и значение. По сути, в семиотической структуре спорта правила любых соревнований являются формой, т.е. языком. Содержанием спортивных мероприятий считается соревнование, которое можно рассматривать как визуальный текст. Значение спорта приводит к полноте и смысловой организации всего спортивного процесса.

**Ключевые слова:** спорт, соревнования, правила, форма, содержание, значение, язык, текст, диакод, монокод, структура.

## 1 Introduction

Sport has an incredible impact on people and modern communities. Currently, it occupies a significant place in the information cultural domain and it influences culture. However, sport comprehension as a cultural phenomenon does not correspond to the role it actually plays in society. We think that current cultural studies include Huizinga's approach. He notes that cultural processes cannot include sport activities (Huizinga, 1992: 222). The modern scientific tradition considers culture as a sign system, organized in a certain way. In this paper, we attempt to define sport as an iconic communication structure. The structural analysis is aimed at identifying the common features and processes that can be identical for the entire cultural domain and can unite sport with other cultural phenomena. Also, a semiotic approach to sport will contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon and its importance in modern society. The modern world is a universal communication space bringing together various countries and connecting different social events. Communication involves signs including the production of meaning. Semiotics analyses all cultural phenomena that act as sign systems and communication phenomena. This study suggests that sport can be considered as an original sign system where sportsmen and inanimate objects are signs. The athletes actions are coded and the code interac-

tion is perceived by the audience. In fact, the semiotic approach helps to clarify the symbolic nature of sport. Moreover, this approach transfers socially relevant information and value systems for any community. Sport is a corporal physical activity and competition carried on according to strict rules and regulations. The main objective of a competitive sport activity is to determine a winner. More specifically, sport is a conditional, game system that involves a communication sign system. Analyzing sport as a structure highlights the category of form (rules) and content (competition). Moreover, there is an additional category – a category of value (determination of a winner) that captures the essence of sport. In semiotics category of *value (meaning)*, in addition to *form and content*, represents an essential nature. In fact, the term *value* is derived from sign. If *the form signifies* “what” *the content signifies* “how”, *the value signifies* “why”. It should be noted that these semiotic categories do not belong exclusively to a sport, they can be applied to any cultural phenomenon possessing features of a sign system. Benvenist defines culture as “*human environment*” and points out that it can give a form, value and content to human life (Benvenist, 1974: 31).

Saussure suggests that language is a sign system that signifies concepts, and it is the most essential system of all semiologic phenomena (Saussure, 1977: 54). Therefore, we propose that sport

is a semiotic system. Sport can be considered as a language with its sign system, concepts and formal entities. Sapir states that “Language is a purely human and noninstinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols.” (Sapir, 1993: 4). Some scholars think that “Language is an abstract system of language units that have sign character and rules of their usage, including norms and patterns”.

This study compares sport performance and the sign system, and identifies their similarities and differences. The language can be classified as a verbal, natural and universal structure, and the language of sport can be considered as a visual, artificial and closed system.

According to Greimas, natural languages have a privileged position because they are a starting point for any changes and an end point for meaning transfer (Greimas, 2004: 17). Also, a language can be examined as the foundation for the establishment to establish of more complex structures (Lévi-Strauss, 2001:74). In this study the semiotic structure of sport is analyzed.

## 2 Literature Review

In the semiotic structure of sport, the form refers to competition rules that are represented by using a natural language. The system of language is a body of linguistic units (sounds, affixes, words, etc.), grammar rules, and the rules of lexical series (Saussure, 1959 [1916]). Athletes participate in sporting competitions taking into account the rules associated with the sport. Even if two players chase a ball into a wasteland in the absence of judges and audience, they are guided by the conditional system that exists virtually in their minds. We suggest that this conditional system as well as the language determines athletes’ actions. For example, if they hit the ball with their hands, they are playing volleyball, and if a ball is kicked, they are playing football.

Thus, sport as a semiotic structure has specific features in common with language as a linguistic structure. We suggest that the iconic organization of sports complies with the same rules that govern a language system. However, we have outlined some differences in this study. First, sport is an *artificial semiotic system*. The emergence of sporting activities goes back to the introduction of compe-

tion rules. Kicking ball games arose independently across multiple cultures. The English competitive ball game may be a prototype of soccer and it has been recognized since the XI century. The laws of the game were determined by the English Football Association in 1863.

Saussure states that language is a social product, a combination of essential conventions adopted by the community to ensure its implementation and ability to speak. Although language is a convention, it is formed *naturally and independently*. In addition, a language can change spontaneously (Saussure 1977: 47-48). In contrast, competition rules for sport are artificially created and they can be changed by the relevant sporting organization. Second, sport is a closed semiotic structure. The system of rules and regulations can be qualified as a significant communication system. Language is a great mediator. It is a means of communication between people. Language establishes relationships between individuals, with reality and with itself. Third, sport is a *visual* sign system. The visual text is not discrete and it is not broken down into signs, but it can be divided into different categories. In fact, the sign is always primary in the language. Signs written in a certain sequence form a discrete linguistic text. The next level in the structural analysis of sport is to examine sporting competition, i.e. *the content* of the semiotic structure of sport category.

Traditionally, in linguistics language is considered as *a form*. Language is a system of signs. It is contrasted with speech that expresses the content. Saussure outlines the distinction between language and speech. Language is a phonological, lexical, and grammatical system, which forms the basis of all utterances. It is the source that every speaker has to draw upon if the speaker is to be understood by other speakers of the language. Unlike the language, speech is the manifestation of language, and it is used by various speakers of the given language. Also, speech is an individual act of mind involving:

- 1) combinations where the speaker uses the language code to express his/her thoughts;
- 2) a psychophysical mechanism that enables an individual to objectify these combinations (Saussure, 1977: 52).

The combination is a sports term that has the same meaning as it does in Linguistics. We as-

sume that a psychophysical mechanism is a body movement (running, jumping, dribbling, throws, blows, etc.) used in sport for these combinations. So, Saussure's definition reflects the essence of sporting competition. It should be noted that speech is purely a linguistic term, and it is not really suitable for use in a sporting context, even in the semiotic ones. The term "text" is used in linguistics.

However, the term text has a much broader meaning in semiotics than it does in Linguistics. Semiotics interprets text as a communicative act, messages transmission. The term text could refer to the structural analysis of the *content category* in sport. The content of sport is a sporting competition between two or more athletes. It should be noted that there can be no individual act of expression in sport. The content of the competition and its essence is to compete, i.e. an athlete is supposed to have an opponent. Even if an athlete makes an attempt to break the record for diving or weightlifting a balloon, they compete to achieve the best result in a sport and to defeat their competitors' records.

Sport is a communication system that exists only as a collective act of expression and implies the interpretation of the text. This is one of the main principles of sport as a semiotic structure. Sport is a collective product and a communication system. In the semiotic structure of sport, the category *content* is represented by the physical (corporeal) contests. The denoted one is the athlete's body: gestures, and movements contribute to the meaning of a sign. In order to express content, these signs should line up in a certain syntagmatic row - the code, and to create the sense - the *meaning*. It is generally accepted that any sporting competition involves an opponent. Therefore, the code of one athlete interfaces with another's code (or with many other's codes). The main objective of contests is to win, i.e. "to realize" one's code and to destroy opponent's code. The interaction of the codes forms the text of the competition, which is perceived by the audience. The main points that determine the codes and the text of the competition are the opponents' idea (intention) and the implementation of their plan. The dynamic interaction of these elements and their resistance determines the nature of the text and makes up the content of the competition.

The compulsory presence of an opponent and his/her code defines the dialog of the text of the contest. Dialog relations are relations between all forms of utterances in speech communication. Russian linguist Bakhtin states "If we compare any two utterances in the sense-bearing plane they are in dialog relation" (Bakhtin, 1979: 296).

In the semiotic structure of sport, dialogical interaction of codes of the opponents do not exhaust dialogic relations of the competition text. Dialogic relations include all participants in the competition: athletes, judges and spectators. Bakhtin suggests that text is an reflection of our consciousness. When the text is an object of our cognition, we can speak about reflection of the reflection (Bakhtin, 1979: 292). We assert that this definition determines the essence of sports text. The rules of the competition, representing the category of the *form in sport*, are always objective, i.e. they are independent from the participants. The competition is a *content* of sport. Also, it is subjective because it includes the process (the opponents), and its assessment (the fans). The result of the contest is a category of the *meaning* that by nature is two sided: on one side it is objective in its form, given that contest or competition requires a necessary result that is judged and determined by a set of rules. On the other side it is subjective in its content as an ambiguous reflection of the outcome.

### 3 Research and Outcomes

There are various kinds of sporting competitions: races, two-rounded match, qualification matches and matches consisting of variable rounds. Echo notes that "the structure is meaningful if it functions as the code that can generate various messages". Analyzing the system transformations we can identify common features in the different systems (Echo, 2004: 342). Common characteristics are inherent to any contest format of a competition (match, tournament, championship) and its outcome. The necessary conditions for the sporting competition are defined by predefined rules and expectations, one of which is the expectation that all participants are somewhat equal within the competition playing field, (for example competitors have completed a series of qualifying rounds to reach the final to ensure the some level of equality within the playing field), and that there is only a single winner in the end. Competi-

tions consist of several stages. Such a long competition cannot be visual all the time, thus the process of the competition is transformed into the written form, e.g. a table or a protocol, that is a written text. Moreover, a text can be represented as an *intertext*, describing the content of the competition by the means of common language.

In fact, sport can be described as a visual sign structure with a closed system of communication relations. It differentiates sport from a language and other semiotic structures. We define the visual communication of competition as the “*visual sports text*”. Sporting competition is a *single semantic unit*, in which the visual sports text is perceived by the spectators, and then an outcome is recorded. Regarding individual events or matches, these events are called “*games*”. The term game is polysemic, and it is used in different contexts. In this study the term “*game*” is any sports event, and it is considered as a unit of competition. In fact, visual sports text can be perceived within a certain time interval between the beginning and the end of the game. The game is limited to time, space, or conditional frames. The game outcome is a part of the sports text of the competition and it describes the determination of the winner. A game can be divided into units (round, period, time) and the outcomes of these units are an overall outcome of the competition. The nature of a game as a function of its result, with regard to a competition, does not change its conditions: in sport, the game always starts with score 0:0, although some games allow for a draw as an end result. The competition may coincide with the game, if it consists of one stage or takes place in a short period of time. Visual sports text contains the interaction between participants’ codes or goals in a particular game. The minimum number of players is two (such as in boxing, tennis, chess), and the maximum number of participants is not limited (such as in marathons). There are two types of sports visual codes. In the first instance the competitors are simultaneously present in the game. Interaction of opponents’ goals are carried out directly, i.e. an athlete’s goal can be changed due to a change in the opponent’s goal. We define this goal setup as the *diacode*. There can be two or more participants of diacode as in e-dialogue. As for the second case the opponents are not presented simultane-

ously but they take turns. One athlete (or a team) appears on the sports ground having the *previously prepared code*. Code interaction occurs implicitly, and competitors do not interfere in each other’s goals or codes. We define this process as a *monocode*. Monocode can be represented by two athletes (pair skating) or more (synchronized swimming). Membership of a team is a prerequisite to monocode games. The text of the game is an integral work and it does not matter whether it is made of diacodes or monocodes.

As mentioned above, sport is a closed conditional gaming communication sign system. Visual sign structures make up codes, text and sports language. Visual sign structures are *basic* ones. Any item that is included into sporting competition is a sign. These signs are *subsidiary*. There is a great amount of subsidiary signs: pucks, sticks, balls, rackets, skates, football boots, uniform, emblems, sports grounds, scoreboards, gestures of referees, scarves, fan hats etc.

Semiosis, or sign process, is any form of activity, conduct, or process that involves signs, including the production of meaning. In the context of Morris’s study, semiosis consist of three inter-related parts: *significant*, *designat* and *interpretant* (Morris, 2001: 47). Based on ternary relations Morris examines binary relations of one sign with the other ones (*syntactic dimension of semiosis*), signs to their objects (*semantic dimension of semiosis*) and signs to interpreters (*pragmatic dimension of semiosis*). Syntactics, semantics and pragmatics study these dimensions (Saussure, 1977: 50). In the frame of our research we note that syntactics studies the category of form, while pragmatics deals with content and semantics examines the meaning. Some scholars claim that signs consist of three inter-related parts: a sign, an object, and an interpretant. For example, sign is the signifier (a written word). The object is signified (the object to which the written word attaches with cognitive meaning). The interpretant is the most innovative and distinctive feature of Peirce’s account. The ternary classification of Pierce examines a sign in relation to itself, to the denoted object and towards interpretant (Pierce 2001: 165-226).

While analyzing Pierce’s classification, we should note that at the level of both the sign and its relation there is a gradual ascent (through the rep-

resentation) from a simple form (relevance and presentation) to a complex one (convention and law). There are many interpretations of the semiotic triangle. Mechkovskaya states that concept of the triade introduced by the Stoics: the signified (concept)-signifier (sound image) – things have been meaningful and comprehensive for many years (Mechkovskaya, 2004: 25-26). It is established that the triangle expresses an interaction between three categories - form, content and meaning. These categories are manifested at each level of the semiotic structure, namely in the sign, text and language. Pierce describes sixty-six types of signs, grouped into larger classes in the trichotomy structure. The first trichotomy “qualitative, single, general” comprises the followings types of signs: qualiasign, sinsign, legisign. The trichotomies are aspects according to which semiosis can be observed, and three type of relations are examined. In fact, a necessary condition of any semiotic system’s existence is the compulsory presence of categories of form, content and meaning. The ratio of categories in each structural element changes and the form, content or meaning can come to the fore. Based on Pierce’s Semiotic Model (Triadic Model) we have developed a classification of sports signs where each unit refers to a certain visual phenomenon of sports communication.

There is also a group of signs classified as *meanings*, which we define as *key signs*. The interrelation between these signs expresses the outcomes of sporting competition. In linguistic literature this concept corresponds to the term “*keyword*”. Relating to visual sports text, key signs reflect the process of achieving a result and enable the proper comprehension of the concept of the game. It should be noted that key signs reveal semantics of games, they belong to the category of meaning, and the meaning in sport is the outcome. In sporting competitions, key signs are result-oriented actions that define the score of the match. For example, in football and hockey, key signs are goals, in basketball and volleyball key signs are points, in athletics – seconds and centimeters, in weightlifting – kilograms and grams. Also, key signs can be the results of certain segments of the match: a half, a single period, a set.

The second level of game perception is when the visual sports text is transformed into a written

one, the key signs can be represented as official protocol of the competition. The main function of the key signs is to specify the process of comprehension. Key signs involve common sense, the outcomes of game and content of the competition text. Thus, they minimize information. It happens due to the “non-essential” information, and the key signs are essential data.

#### **4 Conclusion**

The outcome as a sign expresses the meaning category and it is the significant key sign. The text of the game can be contracted to an outcome. In sport there are several criteria to determine the outcome. Based on these criteria, all kinds of sport can be divided into a number of common groups and doing so creates a semiotic classification of sports. The semiotic classification of sports is based on the outcomes (as a sign) that express the meaning category:

1. Quantitative criteria of outcomes. These include sports in which the winner is determined by objective indicators related to the system of measurement (the shortest time, maximum weight, the greatest height and length): weightlifting, skating, swimming, skiing, cycling.

2. Qualitative assessment/evaluation of outcomes, i.e. subjective assessment: figure skating, gymnastics, diving, boxing, wrestling.

3. Conditional criteria of outcome determination, e.g. team sports games when a team wins and gets more conditional objective points (goals in football, points in basketball).

4. Integrated criteria of evaluation. The quantitative, qualitative and conditional indicators can be combined. For example, in ski jumping the length of the jump is added to the assessment of the technique of the jump itself. This group includes different kinds of sporting competitions: modern pentathlon equestrian, shooting, fencing, swimming, and cross), nordic combined (ski jumping and ski racing), biathlon (skiing and shooting). Thus, the semiotic structure of sport is a unity of form, content and meaning. The same triadic division has any significant structure at any level of its system—in the sign, text and language. The category of form in the semiotic structure of sport is manifested in rules of the competition, that is a language by its nature. The content is competitions that can be represented as a text made up by ath-

letes` codes. The meaning of sport is to determine a winner. In the semiotic structure of sport, we define it as an outcome (winner determination) expressing the meaning category. To conclude, the semiotic analysis of sport makes it possible to reveal its essential meaning, to comprehend the general links connecting sports activities with other cultural processes. Also, the analysis reevaluates semiotics in order to discover other facets of this science.

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