

Review Article

Semiotics as Fruition of Complementary Perspectives - A Case Study Analysis of Sherdukpen Folktales *Ha Sat Sat*, *Dong Sat Sat* and *Chong Pon*

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Abstract: Semiotics, the study of signs and signification, is often misunderstood as a singular, monolithic framework. However, a closer investigation reveals a constellation of complementary approaches—from structuralist linguistics and pragmatic philosophy to cultural, narrative, post-structural, and multimodal perspectives. This paper critically surveys the foundational and contemporary thinkers in semiotics including Saussure, Peirce, Barthes, Eco, Greimas, Derrida, and Kress & van Leeuwen. It then applies these theoretical insights to a case study analysis of Sherdukpen folktales, particularly *Ha Sat Sat*, *Dong Sat Sat* and *Chong Pon*, demonstrating how semiotic analysis reveals deeply embedded cultural logics, moral codes, and ideological functions. The paper argues for a holistic understanding of semiotics as a diverse, dynamic, and context-sensitive interpretive framework.

Keywords: Semiotics, Complementary Approaches, Sherdukpen Folktales, Interpretive Framework.

1. INTRODUCTION

Semiotics is the systematic and interdisciplinary study of signs, symbols, and signification, addressing how meaning is constructed and interpreted across cultural and communicative contexts. Rooted in the principle that meaning is socially and contextually generated rather than inherent, semiotics investigates the processes of semiosis—how signs signify, evoke responses, and circulate within systems of meaning. While foundational figures such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce laid the theoretical groundwork, subsequent scholars like Barthes, Eco, Greimas, Derrida, and Kress have expanded the field in diverse directions. This paper reconsiders semiotics not as a unified theory but as a field of complementary perspectives. By integrating multiple traditions, the analysis becomes robust enough to decode complex texts—including indigenous oral narratives such as the Sherdukpen folktales.

Objectives

This research paper aims to:

1. Examine the foundational and contemporary approaches to semiotics, highlighting their theoretical distinctions and complementarities;
2. Demonstrate how diverse semiotic frameworks—structuralist, pragmatic, cultural, post-structural, and multimodal—can be synergistically applied to analyze indigenous oral narratives; and
3. Apply this pluralistic semiotic approach to two Sherdukpen folktales to uncover embedded moral, cosmological, and ideological meanings.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do various traditions within semiotics (Saussurean, Peircean, Barthesian, Eco's, Derridean, Greimasian, and multimodal semiotics) complement rather than contradict each other?

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2. In what ways do Sherdukpen folktales such as *Ha Sat Sat*, *Dong Sat Sat* and *Chong Pon* function as semiotic systems encoding cultural values, ethical codes, and social norms?
3. How can a multimodal, layered semiotic analysis enhance our understanding of oral tradition in indigenous storytelling?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in comparative theoretical analysis and semiotic textual interpretation.

Text Selection:

The primary texts are two Sherdukpen folktales (full versions are given at the end of this paper as Appendix-I & Appendix-II)—*Ha Sat Sat*, *Dong Sat Sat* and *Chong Pon*—collected through ethnographic fieldwork and oral interactions in West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh (sources: Mosobi and Megeji as included/acknowledged in the ICSSR-sponsored and concluded Research Project with final Report submitted by the present author).

Analytical Framework:

The analysis draws upon seven major semiotic perspectives—structural (Saussure, Greimas), pragmatic (Peirce), cultural (Barthes, Eco), post-structural (Derrida), and multimodal (Kress & van Leeuwen)—as interpretive lenses.

Approach:

Each folktale is examined along the key semiotic dimensions of: Binary oppositions (structuralism); Sign types and sign processes (pragmatics); Connotation and myth (cultural semiotics); Code and reader cooperation (Eco's theory); Narrative logic (actantial model); Oral variation and *différance* (post-structuralism); and Embodied performance (multimodal semiotics).

This pluralistic methodology allows for a layered reading of the narratives, uncovering both stable cultural codes and interpretive fluidity embedded in oral storytelling traditions.

2. Theoretical Framework: Semiotics and the Exercise at Meaning-Making

2.1 Structural Linguistics and the Arbitrariness of the Sign

Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (*Cours de linguistique generale*) posits the sign as a dyad: the signifier (sound/image) and the signified (concept). Meaning, he argues, is not derived from inherent properties but from relational differences within a linguistic system. His assertion that in language there are only differences (Saussure, 1983, p. 120) introduces a structuralist approach where meaning is systematically organized.

2.2 Peircean Pragmatic Semiotics: Icon, Index, Symbol

Peirce offers a triadic model: representamen, object, and interpretant. His categorization into icons, indexes, and symbols introduces a pragmatic and dynamic view of meaning-making. Signs are interpreted contextually, and the process of signification is iterative (Peirce, 1931).

2.3 Barthesian Myth: Ideology and Second-Order Semiosis

Barthes (1991) extends semiotics to mass culture, arguing that connotation layers ideological meaning over denotation. Cultural artifacts function as myths that naturalize social constructs. His analysis reveals how signs can covertly reproduce dominant ideologies.

2.4 Eco's Theory of Code and Cooperation

Eco (1976) conceptualizes culture as a network of codes governing sign production and interpretation. His concept of the "open work" highlights the multiplicity of interpretations within shared cultural constraints. The semiotic threshold defines the point at which a stimulus becomes meaningful.

2.5 Greimas and Narrative Grammar

Greimas (1987) formalizes meaning through the semiotic square and actantial model, identifying narrative roles such as Subject, Object, Helper, and Opponent. These structures reveal deep narrative grammars underlying diverse cultural stories.

2.6 Derridean Post-Structuralism and the Instability of the Sign

Derrida (1976) critiques structuralism by proposing *différance*—a concept suggesting meaning is both different and deferred. Meaning, for Derrida, is never fully present but is constructed through intertextual traces and contextual nuances.

2.7 Social and Multimodal Semiotics

Contemporary theorists like Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) extend semiotics to visual, spatial, and gestural modes. Their social semiotics emphasizes that signs are not neutral but shaped by ideology, power, and cultural practice.

2.8 Synthesis and Implications for Case Study

This pluralistic framework offers a powerful analytic tool: Structural: Saussure, Greimas; Pragmatic: Peirce; Cultural: Barthes, Eco; Post-Structural: Derrida, and Multimodal: Kress & van Leeuwen. These approaches collectively illuminate how signs operate across narrative, visual, ideological, and performative domains.

3. Applying Complementary Semiotic insights to a Case-study Analysis of Sherdukpen folktales

Ha Sat Sat, Dong Sat Sat (3.1) and *Chong Pon (3.2)*

3.1 Ha Sat Sat, Dong Sat Sat

Saussurean Binary Structure:

The folktale revolves around binary oppositions: humility vs. pride, abundance vs. scarcity, and ritual speech vs. mundane language. These oppositions mirror Saussure's insight that meaning is relational.

Peircean Performative Semiosis:

The magic bowl acts as an icon, index, and symbol. The incantation "Ha Sat Sat / Dong Sat Sat" functions indexically and performatively, producing food when uttered.

Barthesian Myth: The narrative encodes meritocratic ideologies: the morally deserving receive supernatural aid, while the envious are punished.

Eco Cultural Codes:

Listeners decode the story using familiar cultural codes: ritual speech, gender roles, and spiritual geography (mountains as liminal spaces).

Greimas Actantial Model:

Subject: Wangmu; Object: Magical Bowl; Helper: Ritual speech; Opponent: Rinchin; Outcome: redistribution of wealth and moral order.

Derridean Differance:

Variants in wording and outcomes reflect Derrida's notion of deferred meaning. Oral transmission ensures no final version.

Multimodal Embodiment: Gesture, tone, and pacing in oral performance instantiate the values of humility and greed, reinforcing the tale's moral code.

3.2 Chong Pon

Saussurean Structure: Truth vs. deceit, patience vs. greed form the tale's binary logic. The goitre becomes a visible index of moral status.

Peircean Semiotics: The goitre is an icon of deformity, an index of karma, and a symbol of dishonesty. Prayers are signs of alignment with sacred forces.

Barthesian Myth: The body is a ledger of virtue; deformity encodes moral failure. The tale naturalizes cosmic justice.

Eco's Cultural Codes: Listeners interpret through mercantile, ritual, and bodily health codes. The tale speaks simultaneously to traders, healers, and moral educators.

Greimas Model: Subject: Norbu / Tekchung; Object: Bodily healing; Helper: Spirits; Opponent: Tekchung's greed and cosmic justice.

Derridean Play: Variants replacing merchants with woodcutters confirm the sign's fluidity. "Goitre" becomes a mobile signifier.

Multimodal Dimensions: Oral performance uses gesture and tone to contrast Norbu's honesty with Tekchung's deception, embodying moral contrast.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that semiotics should not be treated as a singular, rigid paradigm. Instead, it encompasses multiple, intersecting traditions that together enable nuanced interpretation of texts and cultures. Structural, pragmatic, cultural, post-structural, and multimodal perspectives each offer distinct but interlocking insights into the mechanisms of meaning-making. The Sherdukpen folktales analyzed here demonstrate how this layered framework captures the richness of oral narrative as a vehicle of ethical, ideological, and cosmological signification. By embracing the complementary nature of semiotic perspectives, scholars can better decode the symbols and narratives that shape our understanding of the world.

Note and Acknowledgement:

This paper draws on Sherdukpen folktales—Ha Sat Sat, Dong Sat Sat (Appendix I) and Chong Pon (Appendix II)—as documented during my ICSSR-funded and concluded project “Folk Literature of the Tribes of the West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh: A Study towards Developing Sample Textbooks for Primary School English Language Education.” I gratefully acknowledge the narrative contributions of Shri Sang Tsering Mosobi (Ha Sat Sat, Dong Sat Sat) and Shri Tsering Dorjee Megeji (Chong Pon), as well as the assistance of Ms. Michi Nunya (then Research Assistant) and Mr. Rinchin Thongchi (Sherdukpen cultural expert).

Appendix-I: The folktale "Ha-Sat Sat Dong-Sat Sat"

HA-SAT SAT DONG-SAT SAT

Long ago, there once lived two sisters named Rinchin and Wangmu in a village. The elder sister Rinchin was more beautiful in appearance than her younger sister Wangmu. However, she was not very good in character. She was stubborn, envious and greedy. She was married in a well off family in the nearby village and led a comfortable life. Whereas, the younger sister remained poor and lived a very pitiable life in the village.

One day, elder sister Rinchin asked her younger sister Wangmu, “Sister my vegetable garden is turning to a weedy ground, could you please help me to clean it tomorrow? I will pay you for it in kind.”

Since Wangmu was poor, she had to earn her daily food by working at other fellow villager’s field.

She replied, “Yes of course, why not sister! As you see I don’t have any other means to earn my livelihood so I am in search for a work to feed myself. I will see you early in the morning in your field tomorrow”.

The very next day Wangmu reached Rinchin’s field and started to root out the weeds from the field. Meanwhile Rinchin reached the field neat and tidy. She did not lend any helping hand to her sister. Sitting on a flat wide stone she said, “Wangmu, since I have already taken bath, I do not want to get myself dirty in this dust of field. Could you please come up here and pick out lice from my head?”

Wangmu couldn’t deny her sister’s request and sat to find lice on her head. Like this, the day passed. In the evening Rinchin thanked her and gave her a small piece of raw meat in return for her whole day’s work. Wangmu put the meat into her bag and made her way back to her village. She was worried, as the small piece of meat wouldn’t suffice to serve as a meal for her children at home that day. She was very upset and tired too. So, she decided to stop for a rest mid way. While taking rest she fell asleep for a while. When she woke up, she found that her small piece of meat that she kept aside in a bag while resting was lost. She searched for it all around but didn’t find the bag. Now Wangmu was drawn deeper in anguish. Suddenly she saw a foot print on the ground. “It must be the foot print of the thief who has stolen my bag. I must follow it.” She started to follow the footprint, which led her to a big cave high in the mountain. She stole a look in the cave. There she saw an old but huge humanlike creature sitting inside the cave.

The old huge man was holding an antique bowl in his hand. Staring at the bowl, the man recited, “HA SAT SAT” and magically, delicious cooked rice came out of that antique bowl. Then man again recited, “DONG SAT SAT” and delicious curry came out of the bowl. The man ate up all the delicious food produced by that magic bowl. Hiding behind a big stone Wangmu was silently watched the whole ordeal.

After the meal, the old man kept his magic bowl aside and got ready for a nap. As the old man went into a deep sleep, Wangmu crept inside the cave. She went close to the sleeping old man and without a sound took the magic bowl and ran all the way to her village.

She kept on running till she reached her house. She was very excited to know whether the magic bowl would listen to her order or not. So as soon as she reached her house she looked intently at the bowl and hastily recited, “HA SAT SAT, DONG SAT SAT”. And as she had witnessed, magically, delicious cooked rice and curry came out of the bowl. Wangmu

become very happy. She cheered aloud out for joy and uttered to herself, "Now my miserable days are over! I can also live without hunger any more. Thanks to deity of holy mountains for giving me this magic bowl!"

Next day morning Rinchin visited Wangmu's home. Rinchin saw Wangmu in a very joyous state, smiling and busy with her everyday household tasks. Rinchin asked, "What happened my dear younger sister? You seem very happy today?"

Wangmu replied, "Yes, my dear sister I am very happy, I got a wonderful gift from the deities of our holy mountain yesterday. Now I don't need to pass my days in empty stomach."

Rinchin asked, "What did you get? Let me see it."

Wangmu took out the magic bowl and said, "Here it is. It has magical power to produce food." To show how it works Wangmu recited, "HA SAT SAT, DONG SAT SAT" and hot and fresh delicious food appeared magically.

Rinchin was astonished to see such strange thing happening before her eyes. Her heart started to fill with jealousy. She was afraid that her younger sister would now lead easier life than her. So, she promptly asked Wangmu, "How and where did you get this bowl, sister?"

Wangmu explained, "Sister, yesterday while returning back to village I stopped on the way to get rest, but I fell asleep. When I woke up I saw that the piece of meat I had earned was missing. So I chased after the thief following the footprint on the path that lead to a cave in the mountain inside which a huge old man was having his meal with this magic bowl. As soon as he fell asleep, I stole it from him and now it is here with me."

Rinchin was listening to it very carefully. As soon as Wangmu finished narrating her story, Rinchin rushed back to her house and got a piece of meat. Wasting no time, she went to the place where Wangmu had rested the other day, kept the piece of meat aside and pretended to sleep.

All this while, the old huge man in the cave was also in anger. He had been searching for his stolen magic bowl in fury. Outside the cave, the old huge man found footprint of a woman and he started to follow it. After about a mile he saw a woman sleeping on the path with a piece of meat kept aside. The old man assumed that it was she who had taken the bowl and that meat was a left-over of her meal and growled in anger; "Here it is who took my bowl, now I will take her with me."

The old man caught and tied Rinchin on his back. Rinchin was terrified, she cried and shouted aloud, "Help, help...I am not the one who stole your bowl. Your bowl was stolen by Wangmu, so please spare me." But the old man didn't understand human language and moved on towards his cave in the mountain.

Rinchin could not escape from the old man and remained in mountains forever and finally became family of the old man.

In the village Wangmu lived a happy life with her magic bowl, HA SAT SAT, DONG SAT SAT.

Narrator: Shri Sang Tsering Mosobi, Village: Jigaon, West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh

Appendix-II: The folktale "Chong-Pon"

CHONG-PON:

Once there were two merchant friends named Norbu and Tekchung. Both of them were suffering from goitre. This extra lump on their necks made them look very disturbing and ugly. Tekchung was cunning and greedy but Norbu was a gentle and kind person. To sell their goods and commodities both of them used to visit all their neighbouring villages every month. One day before their fixed routine time, during the time of a festival in the villages, Tekchung went alone to sell his goods without informing Norbu. Since he went alone, he got huge profits. So the day arrived to go to the village to sell their goods. Norbu came to Tekchung and said, "Hello, Rok, (friend), are you ready with your horses for tomorrow? Since it's a festival time this time we would mint lots of money out of our sale." Tekchung replied, "Oh friend, It is very unfortunate that I won't be able to go this time as I am not well. I have got severe headache since yesterday. So please this time you go alone and you will earn more profit." Norbu said, "It is so sad! It is the peak season of our trade and you are unable to go for sale. Any way take care and get well soon."

Norbu went back to his home to get ready for the next day's journey for his trade. Tekchung's wife heard all the lies that Tekchung had told his friend Norbu. So, she scolded her husband. "Why did you cheat and lie to Norbu? Tomorrow he is going to far off villages to sell his goods, whereas you have sold out the goods to the villagers in advance. Now the

villagers won't purchase any goods as they have already got them from you. He can't get his goods sold now at the villages. Don't you have any pity on your friend?" Tekchung replied, "Don't shout, and shut up, you ignorant woman."

Next day Norbu started his journey to the villages with his horse to sell his goods. But during his visits to all the villages he couldn't get a single customer as the villagers had already purchased the required goods from Tekchung. After visiting all the villages, he couldn't even sell a single item and was returning back to his own village. On the way it got dark, so he halted the night on the way under a big tree. Before he slept, he prayed to the mountain deities for his safety and protection from any mishaps.

At night when he was in deep sleep a group of human-like monsters came around him and discussed, "Oh, look at that man, he has a fresh meat on his neck. Let's take it. It would be a delicious feast for us." So, they took out the lump (goitre) from his neck and went away from there. In the early morning when Norbu woke up, he was surprised to see that his goitre was no more and he felt much relieved. He looked like a normal man now. Happy and content, he returned to his village. When Tekchung saw that Norbu's lump was missing, he couldn't help but ask, "Hello Norbu, how did you remove your goitre?" Norbu narrated the entire incident to Tekchung.

Now Tekchung also planned to do the same so that he could also get rid of the lump on his neck. He went to the same spot at the mountain where Norbu had spent the night. When night came, he also started to sleep exposing his entire goitre out. At mid night the same monsters came near him and began talking amongst themselves, "Oh this meat which we took last night was very hard to chew and was very tasteless, so let's give it back to him." The monsters took out the goitre that they had taken from Norbu earlier night and put it on the Tekchung's neck.

Now Tekchung got one more lump added on his neck. Early in the morning when Tekchung woke up, he saw one more lump added in his neck. He was terrified and nervous went back to his house. Looking at the double lump on her husband's neck she said, "I told you not to cheat and tell lie to others but you never pay a heed to it. It is the consequence of your ill heartedness. Now you must bear it for whole your life." Tekchin, "You were absolutely right. I should never cheat and play foul with others. Now I will never tell lies or cheat others".

Narrator: Shri Tsering Dorjee Megeji, Village: Rupa, West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh.

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