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Semiotic Analysis of language in David Henry Hwang's *FOB*

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Abstract

The current paper attempts to do a semiotic analysis of the play *Fresh off the Boat* abbreviated as *FOB* by prominent Asian-American playwright David Henry Hwang. *FOB* talks about the complex cultural identities and experiences of first-generation Asian immigrants and their American-born children. Adapting Ronal Barth's semiotics as the theoretical framework, the study explores how Hwang employs various linguistic, visual, and performative signifiers to construct and deconstruct notions of "Asianness," assimilation, the difficulties of belonging, and cultural hybridity. The play revolves around a meet-up that is filled with downsizing fresh comers to America leaving the characters in limbo which is between either settling for the host culture or maintaining their previous culture, a battle between acceptance and resistance that is full of symbolic meanings. The analysis focuses on how the play's title, character names, dialogue, stage directions, and symbolic props function as semiotic signs that convey deeper sociocultural meanings. It analyzes how these theatrical elements either reinforce or subvert stereotypical representations of Asian Americans, highlighting the characters' struggles to navigate their bicultural identities.

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Keywords: Barthes, symbols, semiology, *Fresh of the boat (FOB)*, code switching, Hwang

تحليل سيميائي للغة في مسرحية *FOB* لديفيد هنري هوانج

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المستخلص

تحاول هذه الدراسة إجراء تحليل سيميولوجي لمسرحية "Fresh Off the Boat" المختصرة إلى "FOB" للكاتب الأمريكي-الآسيوي البارز ديفيد هنري هوانج. تتناول المسرحية الهويات الثقافية المعقدة وتجارب المهاجرين الآسيويين من الجيل الأول وأطفالهم الأمريكيين. باعتماد السيميائية البنوية رونالد بارتس كإطار نظري، تستكشف الدراسة كيف يوظف هوانج مختلف الدلالات اللغوية والبصرية والأدائية لبناء وفك مفاهيم "الأسوية" والانصهار والصعوبات المتعلقة بالانتماء والتهجين الثقافي. تدور المسرحية حول لقاء يجمع المهاجرين الجدد إلى أمريكا الذين يترنحون بين الاستقرار في الثقافة المضيفة أو الحفاظ على ثقافتهم السابقة، معركة بين القبول والمقاومة مملوءة بالرموز. يركز التحليل على فك رموز عديدة مثل عنوان المسرحية وأسماء الشخصيات والحوار والإرشادات المسرحية والدعائم الرمزية كعلامات سيميولوجية لنقل معاني اجتماعية-ثقافية أعمق. كما تحلل الدراسة كيف تعزز هذه العناصر المسرحية التمثيلات النمطية للأمريكيين من أصل آسيوي، مسلطاً الضوء على معاناة الشخصيات في التنقل بين هوياتهم ذات الثقافتين.

الكلمات الدالة: بارت، الرموز، السيميولوجيا، *Fresh Off the Boat (FOB)*، تبديل اللغات، هوانج.

1.1 Introduction

Hwang was raised in a Los Angeles suburb alongside two sisters by Chinese immigrants. Hwang is the most well-known Asian American playwright and one of the most significant writers in modern theatre. He has also had a successful career, penning

plays, musicals, television shows, and movies for more than thirty years. As a senior at Stanford, Hwang wrote his first play, *FOB*, which had its premiere in his dorm. After that, he sent *FOB* to the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Playwrights Conference in Waterford, Connecticut. Hwang was overjoyed to see *FOB* produced by Joseph Papp, the artistic director of the Public Theater in New York City, and even more delighted that it had been accepted to the festival. He experimented with many playwriting genres and styles before penning *M. Butterfly* in 1988, which led some critics to classify him among the "great" American playwrights (Lee, 2015).

FOB was directed by David Henry Hwang himself. It introduced many themes and traits that characterized many of Hwang's later plays which talked about the immigration of Asians and their experience as immigrants, their dilemmas when it comes to assimilation into the host culture, especially the American society. It has also talked about his ability to incorporate other literary texts into his plays, lastly, his plays show the skillful incorporation of both naturalistic and non-naturalistic different staging methods (Oh, 2007).

In speaking of Hwang, Esther Kim Lee (2015), says that " he is a dialectical thinker who can hold contradictory thoughts in his mind simultaneously" (p. 3). In the writing process of his plays, convictions of realism are blurred slightly so they won't be completely thrown out of the picture. In his plays, memories are ruled out as reliable and appearances are deceiving, as he gains delight in exposing how fragile people's assumptions exposing troops and most of the time subverts them completely traditional theatrical walls are broken down only to reveal inside walls that remain intact (Johnson, 2017).

His plays give him the chance to explore himself in a variety of scenarios, as both the factual and fictional are interrogated in his surroundings. Hwang's personal life stories were incorporated into fictionalized drama beginning with his *FOB*, without explicitly pointing out differences between the two. Hwang uses theatre to examine issues close to his heart and has been very direct about it, but he has isolated himself from his plays, by blurring the lines between reality and fiction (Lee, 2015).

The play occasionally has the feel of a realistic, practically kitchen-sink family drama. At other moments, the play becomes more expressionistic and anti-illusionary due to the playwright's bold use of stage lighting, direct audience addresses, and the incorporation of Chinese mythology (Oh, 2007). For a single day, *FOB* takes place in Los Angeles, California, where a Chinese immigrant named Steve is greeted warmly by a Chinese immigrant named Grace, who has been in the country for ten years. However, Dale, a Chinese immigrant who was born in America, treats Steve with hostility because he believes that an immigrant should give up all of his traditions and culture and embrace the new one. Both men find Grace attractive, but Grace decides to court Steve, an unassimilated Asian man, and leaves Dale, an assimilated Asian who respects her decision of choosing the traditional Chinese man over the Americanized Asian man, Dale. In his playwright's note, Hwang explains that both of the Chinese American writers Maxine Hong Kingston and Frank Chin inspired him to write *FOB*.

The roots of *FOB* are thoroughly American. The play began when a sketch I was writing about a limousine trip through Westwood,

California, was invaded by two figures from American literature: Fa Mu Lan, the girl who takes her father's place in battle, from Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, and Gwan Gung, the god of fighters and writers, from Frank Chin's *Gee, Pop!* (Hwang, 1983, 6)

1.2 An Overview of Semiotics Theory

The theory of semiotics is significant because it offers a method of studying communication that focuses on all forms of communicative signals, or "signs," rather than just spoken or written language; it is called semiotics based on the Greek word for signs and signals. For example, through people's communication, symbols, gestures, and patterns are used to convey meaning, which can be examined by analyzing these signs and signals. Alternatively, it could be expressed through a dress code, for example, the attire of litigants and judges, the symbols used in courtrooms to represent concepts of justice or national identity and other such elements can all be included in a semiotic analysis (McGee & Warms, 2013). Thus, semiotic analysis focuses on identifying the various signs (words, images, symbols, etc.) within a text and examining how they signify or represent particular meanings, concepts, or ideas. This approach allows readers to explore the figurative and connotative dimensions of the text, revealing the deeper thematic and conceptual implications. T.S Eliot in "Sweeney Erect" poem, for instance, brilliantly uses two images of the human being of the previous eras, Aspatia and Ariadne, two female characters abandoned by their lovers, to plights of the modern people. (Mohammed, 2018).

Ferdinand de Saussure is a French philosopher and the father of semiotics. Who introduced the term of semiology, he states that:

Semiology (from the Greek *semeion*, 'sign'). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them...Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge (Saussure, 1983 as cited in Chandler, 2007, p. 3).

Thus, semiology is the study of signs in the society according to Saussure. The French philosopher divided semiotics into two parts, a part that is derived from the material aspects of a sign that is called a signifier and the second part represents the mental concept that is called the signified, for example, the black colour represents a signifier but from the other hand it is signified as to show people in mourning by the Javanese community (Pujiningsih, et al. 2017). Language, according to F. de Saussure, is essentially a depository, a thing received from without. In his opinion, the relationship between the signifier and the signified share an arbitrary relationship (De Saussure & Riedlinger, 1959). He gives an example of the word "tree" and how the sound that is uttered when the word tree is spoken has no relation to the idea that is conjured to the mind when the word is spoken or is about to be used in a particular context. Whether it is a tree in English, arbol in Spanish, or arbre in French all have no logical association with the actual tree, there is no feeling of treeness that these words offer.

The notion that variations in language are what produce meaning is another of Saussure's opinions, as he says that “the concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system” (De Saussure & Riedlinger, 1959, p. 117), for example child might respond to any four-legged animal like his own as a dog, even if he sees a lion, but it is throughout the accumulation of words that opposes the word “dog” the child is able to differentiate.

Semiotics is the study of analyzing verbal and nonverbal signs, if the text is verbally deconstructed or analyzed it is called linguistic analysis, the French philosopher, Roland Barthes was interested in the non-verbal side of signs, more precisely what are the hidden meanings of words in a culture. He made significant contributions to semiotics in particular as well as to linguistics in general. The theoretical framework of Barthes provides a basis for the analysis and understanding of sign systems. It has been shown that this theory is useful and practical for studying signals, analyzing their structural makeup, and expressing their significance. Barthes wanted a type of semiology that would cover all objects culturally that would offer in its method a metaphorical meaning. Many types of signs and items that have meaning can be analyzed through semiotics, even if they have no communicative aim, such as furniture, clothing, and dishes. Each item or object possesses a connotative quality that surpasses its denotative one (Rashid, 2022). Barthes determined that semiology is the discipline of examining ideas in form as the study's emphasis is on meanings unrelated to the substance. Nonetheless, it is crucial to take into account the unity of the interaction between form and ideological "historical" explanation (Jadou & Al-Ghabra, 2021).

In his article “Rhetorique de l’image” (1964), Barthes explained the semiological analysis by analyzing a photograph of a spaghetti advertisement, he explains how the advertisement is filled with signifiers and signified signs that go beyond their denotative meaning, like how the poster in the photograph for shows the fresh tomatoes and peppers are in the “signifier” position with lively colors, the poster also has a bunch of organic vegetables, which is signified that the product is health and fresh. These signs and connotations can be applied to the play. In this way, the cultural norms and meanings embodied in the items that surround us and have significance can readily be utilized as a means of portraying the fantastical. Through his analyses of signifier forms, Barthes aimed to shed light on how ideology functions and how the hidden and naturalized social relationships that arise in capitalist ideology are mythicized to make them seem universal and naturalized (Kükürt, 2016, p. 2173).

1.4 Semiotics analysis of David Henry Hwang’s *FOB*

One of the key semiotic elements in "*FOB*" is the title of the play itself. The abbreviation "FOB" is a derogatory term used to refer to Asian immigrants who are "fresh off the boat" - newly arrived and seen as culturally unsophisticated. However, Hwang subverts this contemptuous connotation by utilizing the term as the title, transforming it into a semiotic sign that encapsulates the immigrant experience and Asian-American identity. The play opens with a prologue in a place that resembles a class, a place to learn and gain knowledge. In this act, the main character, Dale is supposedly educating students or viewers (the audience) on what is meant to be an F-O-B. He asks the viewers what is like to be a FOB, to which he supposedly gathers unheard answers that only he can hear, which characterizes

the FOB, which includes that they have signs of stupidity, filthiness, and horniness, attached to this word FOB. “F-O-B. Fresh off the Boat. FOB. What words can you think of that characterize the FOB? Clumsy, ugly, greasy FOB. Loud, stupid, four-eyed FOB. Big feet. Horny. Like Lenny in *Of Mice and Men*” (Hwang, 1983, p. 13). The class signifies a place to learn but beyond that, it represents a place where biased opinions are given. The term F-O-B is a signifier for Asian newcomers to America (fresh off the boat). This term is used in a signified way that the FOB are stupid, clumsy, and ugly.

In his *S/Z* (1974), Barthes gives his theory of the five codes, in which he states that each situation can be decoded to reveal a hidden message that is beyond its meaning.

A mirage of structures... the sign of a virtual digression toward the remainder of a catalogue... each code is one of the forces that can take over the text (of which the text is the network), one of the voices out of which the text is woven. Alongside each utterance, one might say that off-stage voices can be heard (*S/Z*, 1974, pp. 20-21)

These codes consist of the proairetic, the hermeneutic, the semic, the symbolic, and the cultural code (Jadou & Al-Ghabra, 2021, p. 475). These codes exist in the first act of the play. The characters appear in the “back room of a small Chinese restaurant in Torrance, California” (Hwang, 1983, p. 12). Looking at the setting, a Chinese restaurant gives the idea of the existence of the Asian community, which tells the audience that the play is going to have some Asian elements, food, and clothes. In this act, Grace is sitting in the kitchen, listening to American music, Steve enters asking for a Chinese dessert, called “bing”, the dessert stands for the actual dessert but the connotative meaning behind it surpasses its denotative meaning, it could mean homesickness of a fresh comer to his country’s special dessert, or it could be some kind of resistance from Steve’s side, to ignore American food and not be affected by the American habits of eating.

The first code of Barthes's five code theory is the Proairetic code, which describes the parts of a story that give the storyline suspense. In a literary text, these suspenseful aspects serve two purposes. They first declare that something will happen, and then they release the tension by getting the reader to pay attention and react (Zaib & Mashori, 2014). In this act, Steve asks politely for his favorite Chinese dessert but gets ignored, as Grace points out that she has no more scotch tape left for her to wrap her box, Steve closes the radio which gives the feeling that this action might create some problems or raises the tension between the characters, which it did as her neglecting him as a customer and his constant nagging on getting the dessert he likes, leads high tension, even makes grace threatens to call the cops on him.

The second code is the enigma code, in which something mysterious and fantastical is happening. It alludes to all the cryptic, perplexing, and ambiguous textual features that arouse readers' curiosity to unravel their mysteries. The reader tends to reveal certain secrets in this instance (Zaib & Mashori, 2014). After Grace ignores Steve’s request for serving him “bing”, he becomes angry, and in turn she curses at him, saying that he is obnoxious and wondering who he thinks he is, to which the enigmatic part of the play appears, as Steve reveals that his name is in fact “Gwan Gung”, “the god of the writers, warriors, and prostitutes” a legendary Chinese warrior featured in Chin’s unpublished play,

Gee, Pop (1974). This leads the audience to wonder what is Steve's story and why is he saying that he is an ancient warrior named Gwan Gung, as this mystery appears it makes the audience ask questions repeatedly to themselves. This claim brings suspicion to Grace who tells Steve that if he is really an ancient warrior, he should recite one of Gwan Gung's favorite battles; as he is about to recite his favorite battle, the color on the stage changes to the color purple, which has both denotative and connotative sides. Directly speaking, the color purple is the color that is supposed to represent power or something that is of a great power, it also has a connotative meaning, like for example how this color reflects the actual exist from a normal play into the realm of spookiness and fantastical elements that entice the audience into wondering what is happening. This color is a fantastical theatrical element in performing the play which adds special and unique aspect to the stage.

In the play, Steve plays various characters; one of which is the character that shows the audience as the immigration officer and wonders why he is rejected five times by the country and sent back to his poor country.

Why will you not let me enter in America? ... I first come here, you say to me I am illegal, and you return me on boat to fathers and uncles with no gold, no treasure, no fortune, and no rice. I only want to come to America — come to "Mountain of Gold." And I hate Mountain and I hate America and I hate you! (Pause) But this year you call 1914 — very bad for China. (Hwang, 1983, p. 25)

He explains that he wants to come to America and he defines it not as America but as a "mountain of gold"; this phrase can be better understood by realizing that it refers to the "American dream", a land of opportunities where a person can build a fortune, so this phrase is better understood by implying its suggestive meaning or what Barthes calls the semantic code. It refers to those elements of a text which can better be understood by implying their suggestive and connotative meanings (Zaib & Mashori, 2014). This triggers the audience's awareness that the play revolves around the Asian community and its struggle.

The character names in the play also function as important semiotic signifiers. The protagonist Dale is an American-born Chinese man, while his friend Steve is a recent immigrant from Hong Kong, referred to as a "FOB." Their names exemplify the semiotic binary between the culturally assimilated Asian American (Dale) and the newly arrived immigrant (Steve). This dichotomy is further reinforced through the characters' contrasting attitudes, behaviors, and modes of speech.

One of the most difficult codes is the symbolic code because it resembles, to a certain degree, the semantic code that makes the reader or the observer unable to differentiate between the two. It refers to the idea of structured meaning in a way that allows for alternative interpretations (Jadou & Al-Ghabra, 2021). In the play the actions of the play show how Dale and Steve are both romantically drawn to Grace; in fact, their rivalry for her affection is reflected in their argument over lifestyle choices and customs of Graces: Steve wants to keep his Asian customs, while Dale believes that every immigrant must "decide to become an American." This means that symbolically speaking, claiming to be an ancient warrior and a god is not only for the claim's sake but it symbolizes that Steve

wants to preserve his traditions and not be conformed to represent an Americanized version of himself like Dale is. The audience needs to understand and collect the binary characteristics of Steve in order to better understand why he is behaving in this way.

Hwang gives another fantastical character within the character of Grace. After Steve asks her for her name, she tells him that her name is “the woman who has defeated Gwan Gung” (Hwang, 1983, p. 17). Although she first withholds her identity from Steve, the audience eventually learns that she is Fa Mu Lan. Grace pauses and speaks to the audience, “Fa Mu Lan sits and waits. She learns to be still ... But Fa Mu Lan, the Woman Warrior, is not ashamed. She knows that the one who can exist without movement while the ages pass is the one to whom no victory can be denied”. (Hwang, 1983, p. 17)

The final code of Barthes, which is the cultural code, which exalts that the code or information can be recognized by approaching the text as having some cultural significance in the domain of history, psychology, medicine, science or religion (Zaib & Mashori, 2014). By realizing that Grace is actually Fa Mu lan, the audience can interpret the play and understand it better by pointing out a common knowledge which tells the story of Hua Mulan, also known as Fa Mu Lan, and how it was rooted in a song recorded in the sixth century and in the eleventh century; the story of the heroine who fights in place of her father was retold.

It is of high importance to notice that Hwang's strategic use of language serves as a rich semiotic resource in the play. The juxtaposition of Standard English, Pidgin English, and Cantonese dialogue reflects the characters' varying degrees of cultural and linguistic hybridity. For instance, Steve's frequent code-switching between Cantonese and English signifies his liminal position, straddling the divide between his Chinese heritage and American environment. One prominent example is the characters' use of Pidgin English. Steve, the recent immigrant from Hong Kong, frequently employs Pidgin phrases such as "No can do" and "You give me face" when conversing with Dale. The semiotic function of Pidgin English in the play is twofold: It represent Steve's status as a "FOB" (Fresh Off the Boat) immigrant, whose English proficiency and cultural assimilation are still developing. The Pidgin serves as a linguistic marker of his outsider status within the American context. However, Hwang also uses Pidgin English to imbue Steve's speech with a sense of cultural authenticity and connection to his Hong Kong roots. The Pidgin becomes a semiotic vehicle for expressing Steve's Chinese heritage, which contrasts with Dale's more assimilated American-English vernacular.

Another semiotic dimension of language in the play is the characters' code-switching between English and Cantonese. When Steve reverts to Cantonese, it signals a shift in his emotional state or a deeper cultural/personal reference point that cannot be fully expressed in English. These code-switching functions as a semiotic sign of Steve's bicultural identity and the linguistic challenges he faces in navigating between the two languages. Ultimately, the semiotic function of language in "*FOB*" underscores the central theme of cultural hybridity and the struggle to forge a cohesive sense of self amidst conflicting cultural influences. It invites the audience to engage with the nuanced realities of the Asian-American experience.

Furthermore, Hwang incorporates cultural idioms and allusions into the characters' dialogue, which serve as semiotic markers of their shared Asian heritage. For instance, when Steve tells Dale "You give me face," he is invoking a Confucian concept of preserving one's social standing and dignity. These cultural references operate as semiotic signs that underscore the characters' Asian roots and their efforts to maintain a connection to their ancestral traditions. Through these linguistic devices - Pidgin English, code-switching, and cultural allusions - Hwang constructs a rich semiotic tapestry that reflects the nuanced, multilayered experiences of Asian-American identity. The language becomes a central means by which the characters negotiate their bicultural identities and assert their cultural autonomy within the American context.

Additionally, the play's stage directions contain semiotic meaning. Hwang's detailed descriptions of the characters' physical movements, gestures, and the setting's symbolic props (such as the jade elephant figurine) convey deeper cultural associations and the characters' internal struggles with their identities. Through these semiotic elements - the title, character names, language, and stage directions - Hwang constructs a theatrical landscape that challenges simplistic notions of Asian-American identity. The play invites the audience to engage with the complex, multifaceted experiences of navigating between cultures, ultimately highlighting the rich diversity within the Asian-American community.

1.5 Conclusion

The semiotic analysis of language in David Henry Hwang's play "*FOB*" reveals how the playwright skillfully uses linguistic devices to explore the complexities of cultural identity and the immigrant experience. This semiotic tension is manifested through the characters' use of language. The characters' code-switching between English and Cantonese likewise operates as a semiotic device, underscoring the internal struggle to reconcile their dual cultural allegiances. Through these linguistic choices, Hwang constructs a nuanced semiotic landscape that reflects the complexities of navigating between cultures. The language becomes a vessel for exploring the challenges, dilemmas, and ultimate resilience of Asian-American individuals as they forge their own unique identities. By analyzing the semiotic functions of language in "*FOB*," we gain deeper insight into Hwang's theatrical vision -one that challenges simplistic notions of cultural identity and embraces the rich diversity within the Asian-American experience. Moreover, Ronald Barthes' idea of the five codes fit to analyze each element in the play whether it is a color, gesture, or word, all can be used to decode David Henry Hwang's *FOB*. The codes provide readers with a fresh perspective on the importance of linguistic, visual, and imagery signs in *FOB*. Here, the plot is developed by the cooperation of the proairetic and hermeneutic parts; this incorporates the mysterious element of two ancient characters fighting in a kitchen restaurant that is more like a battlefield, and it builds upon the tension produced in the first place by denying Steve's request for a "bing" dessert. The play illustrates how Steve is more concerned with maintaining his heritage and customs than Dale is, and how Dale gives up these traditions to fit within the American community. The contrast between Steve's Pidgin English and Dale's more assimilated American-English vernacular serves as a linguistic marker of their differing degrees of cultural hybridity.

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