

Arash Ghazvineh* and Asghar Fahimifar

Behind the scenes of theatrical meaning: a social semiotic approach to inter- and intramodal interactions in performance

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Abstract: This article adopts a Social Semiotic perspective to meaning-making in theater, contending that such an approach is essential for comprehensively addressing the intricate interrelations among the diverse sign systems inherent to the theatrical domain. While existing scholarly literature acknowledges the complex nature of meaning construction in theater and underscores the importance of analyzing the interplay between various sign systems, there exists a notable paucity of in-depth explanations regarding the systematic modeling and further exploration of these interrelationships. Recognizing this gap, the present study endeavors to bridge this gap by demonstrating the efficacy of incorporating a Social Semiotic framework into the current discourse on theater semiotics. Through a comparative analysis of English and Persian renditions of Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*, this research illustrates the applicability of such a perspective in enhancing the understanding of meaning-making in theater as a rich multimodal text. The findings demonstrate that a Social Semiotic framework not only acknowledges the pivotal role of inter- and intramodal interactions in theatrical meaning-making but also offers a comprehensive toolkit for interrogating such interactions more effectively.

Keywords: social semiotics; theater multimodality; theater semiotics; *A Man for All Seasons*; systemic functional linguistics

1 Introduction

Theatrical performance, characterized as an enriched multimodal discourse, integrates an array of semiotic resources within interwoven networks of signs to effectively portray its fictional world to an audience. Within theater, a multitude of signs, distributed spatially on stage and temporally throughout the play course,

***Corresponding author: Arash Ghazvineh**, Department of Art Research, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran, E-mail: arash.e.ghazvineh@gmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2434-5786>

Asghar Fahimifar, Department of Art Research, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran, E-mail: fahimifar@modares.ac.ir

interact dynamically to bring the story to life on an otherwise empty space. The complexity of resources and channels involved in this process presents a challenging endeavor in accounting for the mechanisms underlying the creation of meaning within such artefacts.

Previous structurally oriented semiotic approaches to theater have proven inadequate in capturing the intricacies of the nuanced process of meaning construction specific to theater. These approaches have largely overlooked the dynamic nature of sign relations and their interpretations (Wolde 1996: 339–340), thus falling short in accounting for the richness and fluidity inherent in meaning-making of theatrical performances. These early undertakings primarily sought to elucidate theatrical meanings through preestablished code-based correlations between on-stage signs and their corresponding significations. However, as Elam notes, the process of meaning-making in theater is far too dynamic and fluid to be adequately explained by merely considering discrete objects and their representational functions (Elam 2002: 29).

Pioneering scholarly efforts aimed at elucidating the semiotic processes in theater (e.g., De Toro 1995; Eco 1977; Fischer-lichte 1992; Kowzan 1968) have acknowledged, to some degree, the multimodal nature of theater semiosis but have fallen short of explicating the mechanism by which its diverse sign systems synergically interact to shape the interpretations of spectators.

This study adopts a Social Semiotic approach to investigate how various semiotic systems work and cooperate in theatrical performances to create meaning. Social semiotics, emerged in the 1980s, mainly expands on Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (e.g., in Halliday 1978, 2019 [1961]; Halliday and Matthiessen 2014), which argues that semiotic systems are socio-culturally developed and organized resources used to fulfill a range of communicative functions among community members. The approach views meaning as an outcome of a continuous interplay among an array of semiotic resources available in any instance of communication (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014).

Since its emergence, Social Semiotics has integrated insights from various disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, and linguistics, to investigate the multimodal characteristics of communicative situations, spanning from face-to-face conversations to communications in educational settings. The application of Social Semiotics to the analysis of multimodal artifacts has demonstrated its significant value in examining phenomena that involve the use of more than one semiotic mode (see for example, Bateman and Schmidt 2012; Jewitt 2005, 2008; Lemke 2009; O'Halloran 1999, 2011; Wildfeuer and Bateman 2017).

Drawing on the Social Semiotic notion of multimodality and its fundamental idea of mode, this research will investigate how inter- and intramodal relations among diverse semiotic systems impact the meaning-making process in theater. To do so, two theatrical renditions of Robert Bolt's (1960) play *A Man for All Seasons* have been

selected. One performance was directed by Bahman Farmanara in Tehran, Iran, at Vahdat Hall during November and December 2014, while the other took place at The City Theatre Austin in Texas in 2016 under the direction of Jeff Hinkle.

Analyzing two performances based on the same dramatic text offers a valuable methodological insight, as it allows for a clearer demonstration of how varying interactions among semiotic systems shape meaning. The two performances are considered as two unique semiotic entities as each performance employs different combinations of signs, leading to distinct interpretations. By focusing on textually comparable segments from both performances, researchers can effectively investigate how these unique sign combinations and the inter- and intramodal interactions contribute to the overall meaning. Ultimately, this method allows for a more detailed exploration of the interactions among semiotic resources while emphasizing the important role of cultural influences in determining the meaning-making potential of these resources.

2 Social semiotic view on meaning: mode, affordance, and choice

Social semiotics, primarily grounded in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (e.g., Halliday 2019 [1961], 1978; Halliday and Hasan 1989; Halliday and Matthiessen 2014), conceptualizes meaning-making as a process that involves the fundamental act of simultaneously using an array of semiotic resources to create expressive structures that convey the desired meaning within a specific context (see, Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress 2010; Van Leeuwen 2005). Social semiotics posits that language is but a fraction of the broader spectrum of the cultural resources utilized in the construction of meaning (Bezemer and Kress 2015; Kress 1993, 2003, 2010; Van Leeuwen 2005). As such, it acknowledges and assigns comparable significance to other semiotic resources as an integral component of any communicative situation, thereby taking into account modal interactions and offering theoretical and methodological tools to approach the synergistic effects among modes.

A mode is defined within this framework as "a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning" (Kress 2010: 79). From a Social Semiotic standpoint, each mode has evolved and specializes in materializing specific meanings, leading to variations in meaning functions among modes within a multimodal ensemble (Bezemer and Jewitt 2018). In other words, in a multimodal text, each mode contributes a portion to the overall meaning based on the expressive capacity it has developed over the years.

The expressive potential of a given mode is, then, conceptualized in terms of its affordances, which, in this context, refers to "the potentials and limitations of specific

modes for the purposes of making signs in representations” (Kress 2010: 157). Consequently, various modes exhibit distinct levels of representational capacity and proficiency in conveying meanings (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001). For instance, language is commonly acknowledged for its heightened representational capacity in conveying abstract meanings, such as intricate ideas or arguments. Conversely, images are often recognized for their elevated representational capacity in capturing visual, spatial, emotional, and affective meanings. Sound and music are frequently ascribed a high representational capacity for rhythm, tone, and mood.

The affordance of a mode is predominantly influenced by the materiality of the mode as well as the collective endeavors community members dedicate to employing that mode in their daily communicative practices. Therefore, the capacity of a mode to achieve specific meanings is intricately tied to its recurrent utilization over time to address the communicative needs of a community of users. This repeated utilization gradually shapes the spectrum of meanings attainable through specific modes and the semiotic tasks they can fulfill within a given text.

Given the varying semiotic functions that different modes can fulfill, the concept of design emerges as a crucial factor in multimodal meaning-making processes. Design is defined as “the organization of what is to be articulated” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001: 50) and is the purposeful selection and arrangement of available resources into a structured configuration, guided by their potential meanings and their ability to convey the desired meanings.

Choice, thus, is another fundamental concept, which plays a pivotal role in the act of meaning-making within Social Semiotics. In this regard, Social Semiotics, in line with Systemic Functional Linguistics, is regarded as a theory that emphasizes meaning as a product of choice. These choices are made by an active sign-maker from a range of semiotic options that modes offer. Different choices, then, give rise to distinct embodied semiotic structures, which are employed as expressions to convey meanings. Consequently, the act of meaning-making entails navigating the modal resources and selecting options that one perceives as most accurately representing one’s intended message (for a detailed discussion, see Asp 2017; Berry 2017; Halliday 2013).

3 Performance: a multimodal ensemble

The examination of meaning in theater is intrinsically tied to the enduring debates on the dichotomy of Performance/Drama, with diverse arguments posited both in favor of and against the preeminence of meanings associated with each medium (see Alter 1981; Carlson 1990; De Toro 1995; Eco 1977; Fortier 2016; Schechner 1988 for a detailed discussion). Recent scholars (see, for example, Birch 1991; Elam 2002; Pavis

1982) have emphasized the significance of acknowledging a reciprocal relationship of a constraining nature between the two mediums. In this sense, the text constrains the performance by setting the framework for actions, movements, and dialogues, while the performance conditions the text due to its requirement for physical contextualization on stage (Carlson 1990).

From a Social Semiotic perspective, it is equally important to recognize that both drama and performance possess their own sets of socio-culturally developed semiotic resources that necessitate independent examination. Unlike drama, which primarily relies on the semiotic systems of language to convey meaning, stage performances incorporate a wider array of semiotic resources historically evolved within an environment characterized by the interplay of linguistic and nonlinguistic modes inherent to theater (Tan et al. 2016). Hence, a theatrical performance is an autonomous artifact, not only in its inherent performability (e.g., constrained by immediacy and ephemerality as discussed by McAuley 1994) but also in terms of its distinctive semiotic identity. It should be perceived as a multimodal sign complex designed from various semiotic resources such as lighting, sound, language, and others, collectively contributing to a spatio-temporal stream of meanings. The collaborative outcome of such interactions is a complex network of signs that collectively generate a coherent multimodal discourse. Therefore, an effective exploration of such a multifaceted entity demands a comprehensive examination of all active semiotic resources and, in terms of Greimas and Courtés (1979: 342), their “partial contributions” to the overall meaning.

On stage, as Kowzan (1968) argues, signs rarely appear in pure states; rather, they exist within an environment of continuous interactions of various semiotic resources. In such a dynamic context, for instance, “the linguistic sign is most of the time accompanied by the sign of the intonation, of the mime, of the movement and that all the other means of scenic expression – décor, costumes, make-up, sound effects – act simultaneously on the spectator as combinations of signs” (Kowzan 1968: 57). This combinatory effect where different scenic expressions “derive strength and precision from each other” (Kowzan 1968: 57) is further reflected in Fischer-Lichte’s (1992, 2008) conceptualization of theater as a dynamic semiotic system involving verbal and nonverbal communication, physical space, time, and the performer’s body. Such a perception of meaning-making in theater requires, as Carlson (1993) states, a holistic approach that takes into account the delicate interplay between various semiotic resources, including those of text, performance, and the physical environment.

In a seminal work, Pister (1988: 44–49) introduces a comprehensive “matrix of possible relations” that encompasses the diverse interplay of signs in theatrical performances. This matrix categorizes the relations among audio-visual signs on stage into three main types of identity, complementarity, and discrepancy, to which we will return in the coming sections.

While existing scholarly literature acknowledges the complex nature of meaning construction in theater and advocates for the analysis of the interplays among various systems of signs, studies lack in-depth explanations of how these relationships can be systematically modeled and further explored. Recognizing this gap, the current research seeks to address this limitation by demonstrating the efficacy of incorporating a Social Semiotic framework. By incorporating insights from Social Semiotics into the current line of studies in theater semiotics, this study aims to contribute to a better comprehension of the intricate dynamics of meaning-making in theater as a distinct platform of communication.

4 Performance as designed multimodal text

From a Social Semiotic perspective, any given performance can be conceptualized as a *multimodal text* crafted from an array of semiotic modes available at any unfolding moment. Defined as a multimodal text, performance is thereby perceived as “a sign complex designed with signs in different modes” (Gualberto and Kress 2019: 3). These signs are selectively employed from a pool of semiotic resources and through a selection process influenced by each mode’s meaning-making capacity. This theoretical stance allows for viewing the process of meaning construction in theater as a dynamic endeavor, wherein a “rhetor, designer, or producer orchestrates modes and other nonmaterial semiotic resources to produce texts as prompts, motivated by the interests of the rhetor, in a given moment...” (Gualberto and Kress 2019: 2).

This new perspective can be assimilated with early semiotic theories of theater, which recognized performance as a composition of various semiotic systems actively engaged throughout the unfolding performance. One notable contribution that encapsulates the essence of the earlier studies and holds particular relevance to our study is made by Kowzan (1968), who presents a comprehensive inventory of thirteen sign systems utilized in theatrical performances to make meaning. Kowzan begins with the *auditive* signs generated by actors, encompassing their spoken words and the paralinguistic effects embedded in their utterances. Additionally, he explores the visual signs emanating from the actors’ physical presence on stage, including *mime, gestures, movements, makeup, hairstyles, and costumes*. Furthermore, Kowzan discerns visual signs external to the actors, such as *accessories, stage decor, and lighting*, as well as auditory signs not directly produced by the actors, such as *music and sound effects*. Addressing the influence of cross-modal interactions on stage, Kowzan argues that “facial mime and gestures of the hand can underline the meaning of words, belie it, or give it a particular shade” (Kowzan 1968: 56).

Fischer-Lichte expands upon Kowzan’s framework and presents a list of fourteen sign systems that contribute to theatrical meanings. These systems are categorized

based on oppositions such as “acoustic/visual,” “transient/lasting,” and “actor-related/space-related” (Fischer-Lichte 1992: 15). Acoustic signs include sounds, music, language, and paralinguistic elements, while visual signs encompass mimetic, gestural, and proxemic signs, as well as various stage elements. The final category distinguishes signs related to actors from those related to the theatrical space itself (Fischer-Lichte 1992).

Pfister (1988: 245–249) goes further to categorize the dynamic interplay between the verbal and nonverbal elements of stage into three distinct classes: *complementarity*, *identity*, and *discrepancy*. He argues that in complementarity, as the predominant form of verbal/nonverbal interactions in the theatrical tradition, the meanings communicated through forms of linguistic expression are enhanced and given depth by “a coherent three-dimensional model of reality,” using other audio-visual elements (Pfister 1988: 47).

A notable example of this can be seen in staged performances of the play *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare (see, Shakespeare 2019 [1597]). Specifically, in the renowned Balcony Scene (Act 2, Scene 2), wherein Romeo and Juliet convey their profound affection for each other through poetic and impassioned dialogue, the dialogue between the two young lovers harmonizes with additional sign systems, including lighting, proxemics, movement, gesture, and music, to augment the emotional resonance of their love. The uttered words effectively convey the characters’ intense emotions and desire to be united despite the adversities they encounter, thereby establishing the dialogue as the principal sign system for communicating the characters’ thoughts and sentiments. Nevertheless, the dialogue is complemented by the integration of other sign systems to heighten the romantic ambiance. During staged performances of this scene, the nocturnal setting facilitates nuanced manipulations of lighting resources, a strategic choice that intensifies the emotional tenor of the moment. Furthermore, the orchestrated bodily movements of the characters, their gestures, proxemics, and gazes serve as additional signifiers that convey the depth of their emotional connection and mutual yearning. Moreover, music is strategically employed in these performances to further enhance the overall impact of the scene. Typically, soft and melodious background music is employed to underscore the romantic atmosphere, intensifying the emotional dimensions of the verbal dialogue. Without a multimodal perspective, the signs would not be understood in the same way, potentially leading to more lax and less definitive interpretations. Additionally, this multimodal interplay, integrating a spectrum of sign systems, substantially contributes to a more immersive and resonant theatrical experience that transcends the limitations of verbal language alone.

Another instance exemplifying complementarity can be observed in Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*, where the dialogues, laden with tension and emotional weight, harmonize with the decaying mise-en-scène (see, Williams 1952). In this play, the worn and deteriorating surroundings on stage reflect the dynamics

of the spoken interactions. The characters' expressions of despair, nostalgia, and shattered dreams are presented in conjunction with a diverse array of visual representations, which serve to deepen the audience's involvement, enabling them to experience the emotional weight of the narrative not solely through words, but also through the visual portrayal of the deteriorating surroundings.

Traditional examples of complementarity can also be found in Elizabethan dumb shows and the German baroque tragedy tradition. In Elizabethan dumb shows, silent prologues or interludes employed visual and gestural elements to convey essential information or set the thematic tone before the verbal aspects unfolded, or augmented the moral significance of the spoken scenes using mimetic additions. Similarly, in German baroque tragedy, allegorical tableaux integrated visual and physical elements with verbal expressions to convey intricate layers of meaning. In Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faustus*, for instance, Faust's internal struggles and moral dilemmas were symbolically represented in allegorical tableaux, wherein various characters embodied moral challenges (see, Goethe 1843).

Conversely, the *commedia dell'arte* tradition in Italy deviates from the dominance of language. In this form, improvised dialogue serves "only as an adjunct to, and a refinement of, what they could express by physical actions" (Styan 1960: 50), with the narrative primarily communicated through the physical and visual elements.

Identity, as a rather rare case in the theater history, involves the faithful replication of verbal signs through nonverbal systems, as exemplified in the ensuing excerpt from Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* (1961: 39):

WINNIE (*pause. She takes up a mirror*): I take up this little glass, I shiver it on a stone – (*does so*) – I throw it away (*does so far behind her*).

In this particular instance, the meticulous reproduction of verbal content through nonverbal means assumes a dual function. First, it serves as a guiding mechanism, directing the audience's attention to the enacted actions that mirror the spoken words. Second, and of greater significance, it creates a space for interpretations concerning Winnie's character. Within the context of the play, Winnie emerges as a character distinguished by a compulsive inclination to express even the most banal thoughts verbally.

This tendency is similarly observable in realist and naturalist theatrical works, wherein the verbal components are closely replicated by nonverbal systems. Such an intricate interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements contributes to the creation of a more authentic illusion, while simultaneously facilitating a nuanced interpretation of characters' psychological complexities and emotional landscapes.

Finally, discrepancy, as the third category, emerges as a relatively contemporary phenomenon, particularly observed in modern theatrical works. It manifests as a

disjunction between spoken dialogues and the performed actions. In such instances, this disjunction prompts diverse psychological and philosophical interpretations, encompassing considerations of characters' psychological states and motivations, or instances of deception, among other possibilities. In a more radical form, it may entail an irreconcilable incongruity between the verbal and nonverbal elements, which demands greater interpretive efforts to be logically explained. A notable illustration of this radical discrepancy can be observed in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1965: 94):

Estragon: Well? Shall we go?

Vladimir: Pull on your trousers.

[...]

Estragon: Well, shall we go?

Vladimir: Yes, let's go.

(They do not move)

In the case above, the radical discrepancy, which is recurrent in the whole play, serves multiple purposes. It not only suggests the characters' indecisiveness and highlights the discordance between their desires and their actual capabilities but also communicates a formal ideological stance that raises fundamental inquiries regarding the feasibility of intentional action. Consequently, the audience is compelled to grapple with these unconventional disparities, encouraging them to explore alternative interpretations capable of reasonably justifying such a significant discordance. This compels the audience to engage in a more profound examination of the various semiotic modes on stage, striving to discern the logic that unifies the verbal and nonverbal elements in a manner that meaningfully elucidates the stark divergence observed between them.

While these classifications may not fully capture the intricate interplay among diverse signs, they offer a nuanced framework for discerning the multitude of signs at work in theater. They facilitate a focused examination of the diverse signs that collectively contribute to the construction of meaning in theatrical contexts. Integrating the perspectives of Social Semiotics and the traditional semiotic view of theater, as expounded earlier, allows us to conceive of performance as an amalgamation of the diverse semiotic systems, converging at any given moment in theater to convey meaning. This integration enables us to comprehend the function of each system in relation to the others, as they dynamically interact and shape the overall semiotic landscape of the performance. By embracing this approach, we not only

gain insight into the meanings conveyed by different signs but also elucidate why certain signs acquire distinct meanings in specific situational contexts within the performance.

5 Discussion

For the purpose of analysis, the examined performances were accessed online, and videos were retrieved from online video sharing platforms,¹ making them easily accessible for analysis. As previously noted, specific segments of the plays were chosen according to various criteria. Scenes were chosen where they were recorded and presented through the perspective of multiple cameras, enabling a more nuanced examination of the unfolding narrative from diverse viewpoints and exploring the diverse signs employed on stage.

Additionally, scenes were chosen based on the narrative similarity existing between the Persian and English versions. Specifically, scenes faithful to the dramatic text were selected, creating an expectation of similarity in the staged performances. This selection facilitated an exploration of how identical narrative elements were staged using distinct semiotic modes. Furthermore, those scenes were selected that featured the use of multiple modes and sign systems to allow for an investigation into the interrelation and synergy among these modes in conveying meaning. Finally, the scenes chosen had the least interpretational inferences from camera work to enable a less biased examination of scene composition and actions. By employing these rigorous criteria, potential biases and confounding factors were mitigated, allowing for a focused analysis of the interactions among semiotic choices derived from diverse modes.

5.1 Play synopsis

The narrative of *A Man for All Seasons* (Bolt 1960) unfolds in sixteenth century England, centering on the final years of Sir Thomas More's life, the Lord Chancellor of England. The narrative revolves around the conflict between More and King Henry VIII regarding the king's desire to separate from the Roman Catholic Church. More, a man deeply rooted in religious convictions and moral principles, refuses to publicly support the king's quest to divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon, to marry Anne

¹ English version available at: Darren Scharf, *A Man for All Seasons*, YouTube, April 21, 2016. <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=LCxdsBhSzHk&pp=ygUVYYSBtYW4gZm9yIGFsbCBzZWZzb25z>. Persian version available at: <https://www.aparat.com/v/Itzma?playlist=802159>.

Boleyn and produce a male heir. More, anticipating that such actions would be deemed heretical by the Roman Catholic Church, staunchly opposes the king's demands, resulting in the king breaking from Rome and establishing the Church of England.

More's steadfast resistance to the king's wishes causes escalating tension, leading the king to employ legal maneuvers to discredit him, all of which prove futile. Recognizing the seriousness of the situation, More chooses to resign from his position and withdraw from the court until the matter is resolved. However, due to More's esteemed reputation, his resignation is perceived as an affront to the king, triggering further actions against him. Despite relentless efforts by the king to gain More's approval for the divorce, More remains resolute in his convictions.

As the narrative unfolds, the king's desperation intensifies, prompting the enactment of laws enabling him to sever ties with Rome and assert dominance over religious matters in the kingdom. Exercising supreme authority, the king uses personal allegiance to the crown as the standard and condemns dissenters. More's unwavering convictions and disapproval of the king's actions ultimately lead to his tragic fate, culminating in his execution by beheading.

5.2 Analysis

This section seeks to exemplify the complex interplay among diverse sign systems that converge to shape the theatrical meaning, using specific segments from the play as illustrations.

5.2.1 Act 1, scene 1

The first excerpt is from the first scene of the play, which features a soliloquy delivered by a pivotal character, the Common Man, who is attired in plain garments and speaks directly to the audience, expressing his dissatisfaction with the chosen costumes for a story centered on kings and cardinals. This so-called meta-theatrical technique of addressing the audience in a rather self-reflective and introspective monologue is realized through the collaboration of an array of verbal and nonverbal semiotic resources.

Initially, linguistic deictics, encompassing terms like "this," "here," and "I," are employed in both performances as indexical signs to establish both the dramatic *here* and *now* as well as a connection between the unfolding fictional world on stage and the auditorium. Moreover, a combination of proxemics, gestures, and mimes – classified as actor-related kinesic systems within Fischer-Lichte's (1992) classification – is employed.

In both renditions, the Common Man delivers his monologue from a position downstage, in close proximity to the audience. This deliberate reduction in distance

between the performer and the audience, reflecting a significant choice related to the proxemics system, influences the viewers' perception and interpretation of the performance in diverse ways (Aston and Savona 1991). Notably, it fosters a sense of intimacy between the audience and the Common Man while characterizing the Common Man as a secretive informant sharing information about the unfolding discourse (see, Pfister 1988). Furthermore, this arrangement, coupled with the actor's directed gaze toward the audience, establishes a hypothetical one-way conversation axis between the actor and the spectators that is maintained during the performance. This overall configuration establishes a framework for the subsequent interpretation of other signs throughout the performances.

Despite several commonalities between the two performances in sign selection, it is essential to acknowledge a significant factor that sets them apart in terms of proxemics. In the Persian version, the utilization of a larger stage space affords a broader spectrum of discernible proxemic options, which the audience may perceive as having significance. Conversely, the smaller stage area in the English version makes it more challenging to interpret certain proxemic changes as carrying meaning.

Facial expressions, established as an entrenched semiotic resource, also significantly contribute to the overall meaning of a scene. The face typically captures initial attention and has a high flexibility in making distinct and discernible material forms, thereby loaded with a rich array of meanings. In various theatrical traditions, facial expressions have evolved into a sophisticated system of signs, and a "dominating, complex, and at times also confusing source of information" (Fischer-Lichte 1992: 30). This source dynamically interacts with other audio-visual semiotic sources, collectively contributing to the overarching meaning.

In the scene under examination, facial expressions assume an even more pivotal role. In the initial moments of the Persian performance, the actor's facial expression implies a derisive cheer imbued with elements of ridicule. This is largely portrayed through the elevation of eyebrows, the formation of wrinkles beneath the eyes, an upward pull of the sides of the mouth and cheeks, and a partially open mouth with visible teeth. This combination prompts certain interpretations, which are further reinforced as other signs are integrated into the interpretive process. In this scene, this is ensued by an abrupt burst of laughter followed by the expression "It is ridiculous!" uttered in a derisive tone.

In contrast, the English performance portrays the actor's facial expression as indicative of surprise and annoyance. This is manifested through the raising of the eyebrows and the presence of horizontal wrinkles across the forehead. Furthermore, the eyes widen, allowing for clear visibility of the whites above. Simultaneously, the lower jaw drops, causing the mouth to fall open in the lower face. These features, when come together, near the potential to be interpreted as a display of annoyance.

This interpretation is reinforced by the utterance “It is perverse!” which conveys anger and displeasure rather than derision and is delivered in an angry tone.

The scene unfolds as the Common Man dons a hat, facilitating his shift into a new role as the household steward of More. This transition is communicated through a range of signs, with the clothing system being a notable element. According to Pfister (1988, 8), this system serves as a “visual nonverbal durative code” used as a means of characterization. Additionally, clothing choices also prompt certain interpretations regarding the characters’ socio-economic and psychological attributes. These choices carry culturally connotative meanings, as elucidated by Elam (2002). Throughout the play, the Common Man switches between various roles by wearing distinct pieces of clothing.

The semiotic resources of other sign systems also enhance such transformations. For instance, in the abovementioned example, the Common Man signifies his transition into a new role by uttering the phrase “Matthew! The Household Steward of Sir Thomas More!” and employing a language that aligns with the established generic conventions associated with that particular role. In conjunction with the resources of language and costume, gesture is also employed to accentuate the Common Man’s newfound role. After saying his new name and title, Matthew opens his arms wide as an introductory gesture, showing to whom the new title refers.

It should be evident that the act of putting on a hat does not inherently signify a shift in the social role of the actor. Likewise, the expression “Matthew! The Household Steward of Sir Thomas More!” does not automatically indicate that the speaker of those words is the subject of the statement. Additionally, the gesture of spreading one’s hands widely open does not independently carry the mentioned meanings; rather, the interpretation of this action is derived through the interplay of signs across the three systems. Each sign within each system possesses a potential range of meanings, and it is only through their interaction with signs from other systems that this range is narrowed down to a specific meaning. Thus, while the aforementioned signs from the three resources hold the potential to signify changes in roles, it is their amalgamation that substantiates this signification. In both versions, similar choices were made to create the impression, thereby demonstrating cultural similarities in the meanings ascribed to these material forms.

5.2.2 Act 1, scene 7

This scene takes place at More’s residence in Chelsea, where his household awaits the impending visit of the king to discuss More’s objections to the legitimacy of the king’s marriage. The scene depicts the conversation between the king and More. In both performances, the transition between this scene and the preceding one is marked by the use of lighting, a well-established theatrical technique, which here serves to

signify a spatio-temporal shift from Hampton Court to the house of Sir Thomas More. Unlike everyday life, on stage variations in light – encompassing brightness, color, distribution, and movement – are purposefully imbued with significance, owing to the extensive utilization of light as a dramatic tool over time (for a detailed discussion, see Pilbrow 1991).

In the English performance, the Common Man addresses the audience on a dimly lit stage, his presence barely discernible under a faint illumination. Subsequently, a modification in light intensity, rendering the entire stage clearly visible, signifies a transition to More's residence. Here, the abrupt alteration in light intensity serves as the focal point for conceptualizing the transition. Conversely, in the Persian rendition, the transition is conveyed through a shift not in intensity but in color. In this version, the Common Man stands in the downstage area, illuminated by a yellow-colored light, and the transition between scenes is marked by a change from yellow to blue. While the lighting system primarily prompts the spatio-temporal transition, the interpretation is further enriched by signs from various other systems, such as language, music, and stage conception. In essence, although changes in lighting possess the potential to convey a range of meanings independently, it is through the collaboration of multiple signs that a specific meaning is attributed to them.

In the English rendition, the alteration in lighting is accompanied by a resounding fanfare of trumpets, serving as a symbolic representation of the king's arrival in Chelsea. Subsequently, an increase in the volume of the trumpets signifies the king's approach offstage. This semiotic cue gains additional support through Matthew's verbal expression "The king?" coupled with a gesture of his right hand pointing toward the backstage area. Conversely, in the Persian version, the change in lighting is immediately followed by Matthew's utterance telling the audience that the king is paying a visit. As the fanfare trumpet is not a common element in Iran's popular culture, it does not hold any established significance for an Iranian audience. Hence, instead of the trumpet, a light music piece plays at the beginning of the scene, with its significance becoming evident only after More's daughter exclaims, "It is the king's anthem!" Otherwise, the music could have been perceived as a nondiegetic soundtrack.

In the Persian rendition, the king makes his entrance from the upstage center, positioned directly within the audience's line of sight, accompanied by a group of companions. As he descends the stairs, More's family members kneel in a gesture of reverence. Conversely, in the English version, the king's presence on stage is announced by the sound of a whistle, which, combined with the bustling activity of the household, contributes to the scene's heightened tension. This tension is followed by a moment of silence and the act of kneeling before the king. Among the various significations generated in this scene, the specific combination of signs employed serves to negotiate the social and power dynamics between the king and the household. These include the spatial choices derived from proxemic resources, the gesture of kneeling as a nonverbal

sign, the sharp whistle, and the subsequent silence as elements belonging to the auditory systems. The diverse semiotic resources employed are all aligned to manifest the social status and roles of the actors, aligning with the interpersonal meta-function of language in social semiotic terms (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014). Moreover, deliberate choices made from linguistic resources further enhance this power dynamics as the characters adapt their language to suit the context.

An array of signs is used to characterize the king in his first appearance on stage. Notably, a distinct contrast emerges between More and the king's language, as More adheres to the established generic conventions of the court genre, whereas Henry employs a more vernacular form of speech. This disparity is evident in the following excerpt (Bolt 1960, 27):

More: Your Majesty does my house more honor than I fear my household can bear.

Henry: No ceremony, Thomas! No ceremony! (*They rise*) A passing fancy – I happened to be on the river. (*Holds out shoe, proudly*) Look! Mud!

A similar departure can also be identified in the paralinguistic aspects of the king's speech in both performances. The king deviates from the expected norms associated with regal speech, consistently and tactlessly changing the tone, pitch, tempo, and loudness of his utterances. This incongruity between the customary language employed by a king and Henry's linguistic style serves as a focal point for various interpretations regarding his unorthodox character.

Signs from other resources further reinforce the king's characterization. Notably, his continuous and sudden physical movements on stage, in contrast to the relative stillness of other characters, align harmoniously with the dynamic nature of his paralinguistic elements. In the Persian rendition, these movements are particularly discernible due to the larger stage area. The amalgamation of these multiple signs collectively depicts the king as a morally lax individual with an unstable personality, who fails to embody the expected behaviors associated with his royal status.

5.2.3 Act 2, scenes 8 and 9

In the climactic final scenes, More's courtroom becomes the setting where he faces a death sentence by beheading on charges of high treason, allegedly for plotting against King Henry's authority. The stage is arranged as a courtroom by The Common Man, who takes on the role of a stage manager. As The Common Man prepares to leave the stage, Cromwell, King Henry's chief minister, intervenes and instructs him to don a hat. This action is accompanied by Cromwell's subsequent utterance (Bolt 1960: 86):

Cromwell: You're the Foreman of the Jury.

As previously mentioned, the combination of costume and linguistic resources can effectively signify a transformation in the character of The Common Man.

As the events proceed, the Persian rendition highlights Sir Thomas More's prompt and assured responses to the jury's inquiries, while the English version employs elements of hesitation and agitated movements to convey More's sense of desperation. These divergences in semiotic resources contribute to distinct depictions of More's emotional state and level of confidence in the two performances. Moreover, More's desperation is accentuated through supplementary semiotic means, including fidgeting, pacing, and other restless movements, as well as furrowed brows and facial expressions. These signs collectively suggest that More has a significantly higher level of confidence in the Persian version. This confidence is further reinforced through More's prolonged and purposeful gazes directed at the individuals present in the court. Furthermore, the occasional movement of his hand pointing at them serves as a sign that can be interpreted as a means to belittle the position of the jury. This is also evident in More's verbal responses to the jury's declaration of his guilt, exemplified by his elongation of the word "Maaaaaaaaster" in the phrase "Not so, Master Secretary" (Bolt 1960: 92), signifying his mockery of their authority.

In the transition between Scenes 8 and 9, subsequent to Sir Thomas More's pronouncement of guilt and death sentence, a significant transformation takes place on the stage, converting it into an execution ground. This alteration is prompted by a statement made by one of the jury members and followed by a set of audio-visual signs (Bolt 1960: 93):

Norfolk: Prisoner at the bar, you have been found guilty of the charge of High Treason. The sentence of the court is that you shall be taken from this Court to the Tower, thence to the place of execution and there your head shall be stricken from your body, and may God have mercy on your soul.

This statement establishes the spatial reconfiguration of the stage, laying the groundwork for subsequent semiotic modifications. Subsequently, Cromwell removes the Common Man's hat and replaces it with a small mask, designating him as a traditional headsman. He is also given an axe, further solidifying the understanding of his newly assumed role. A brief excerpt of epic music serves as a reinforcing sign for the scene transition, while the jury exits the stage. One of the previously occupied jury benches is inverted to symbolize the execution block, exemplifying the transformative power of sign interactions that can bestow new meanings upon objects when they come into contact with other signs. More removes his hat, places his head on the block, and awaits his execution. The headsman raises the axe and strikes More's head. Simultaneously, the stage darkens, accompanied by the dropping of Thomas' hat and the sound of an object hitting the ground, collectively signifying More's demise.

6 Conclusions

In conclusion, by adopting a Social Semiotic approach, this study endeavored to address the gap in existing theater semiotics literature concerning the systematic modeling and exploration of the interrelationships among various semiotic systems in theater. Through a comparative analysis of English and Persian renditions of Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, it became evident that the integration of Social Semiotics enhances our understanding of theater as a rich multimodal text. The findings not only affirm the pivotal role of inter- and intramodal interactions in theatrical meaning-making but also emphasize the efficacy of Social Semiotics in providing a comprehensive toolkit for more effectively interrogating such interactions. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of embracing multimodal perspectives to advance our understanding of the complex processes involved in creating meaning within the theatrical realm.

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Bionotes

Arash Ghazvineh

Department of Art Research, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran

arash.e.ghazvineh@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2434-5786>

Arash Ghazvineh is a current Ph.D. candidate in Art Research at Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran. He holds a master's degree in Dramatic Literature from the same university. His research interests are primarily focused on the of multimodality of film and theater, sign-processes and semiosis, cultural semiotics, and the semiotics of digital culture as well as intersemiotic translation.

Asghar Fahimifar

Department of Art Research, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran

fahimifar@modares.ac.ir

Asghar Fahimifar is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Art Research at Tarbiat Modares University in Tehran, Iran, with a Ph.D. in Art History and Philosophy of Art from the University of Central England. His research interests include art history, philosophy of art, and semiotics. Mr. Fahimifar has authored several books and academic papers in English and Persian, focusing on various topics such as the complex relationships between culture, art, and meaning-making processes.