

The Ir/Relevant Being: A Linguistic Analysis Of Semiotic And Social Construction Of Multiple Realities Of Self In A Beautiful Mind

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the notion of the Ir/relevant being through semiotic and social construction of personal reality, which is unique to every individuals' perception of language, in the text A Beautiful Mind. Linguistic signs play an important role in meaning making and reality construction of an individual, given the multiple layers of concepts associated with them. This research tends to emphasize on how socially acceptable meaning affects our experiences and society's understanding of the Self while tagging the reality of the insane person as irrelevant and that of the sane as authentic and relevant. The present research focuses on how our individual experiences help build our realities and ideas, which are embedded in our language by using Lukach's (2013) linguistic model for analysis. Furthermore, it challenges the notion of socially constructed standards of reality as authentic against the personalized individual perception of reality.

Key Words: Language, Reality, Meaning, Attitude, Behavior, Semiotics.

Introduction:

This research aims to explore how our realities vary because of our personal experiences and how society perceives them in creating the Ir/relevant being; those who conform to the socially accepted reality are tagged as normal/sane people while the one who fails to do so is named as the irrelevant insane person. Since different people have different experiences, we cannot say whose reality is more 'real' than the other. However, when the society tries to define realities for people, and tries to accept only some of those instead of treating them all as acceptable, people suffer. We link our realities with words and form our thoughts and worldviews based on our unique perception of those words. Whatever we construct through language reflects our thoughts and background knowledge, this is to say that the knowledge we gain is through the experiences of our senses. We cannot understand what we have not experienced, or we never been through. Human beings live differently and experience situations differently therefore, their responses and their attitudes towards people and situations

also vary. (Bowcher, 2018). We must never assume that meaning is shared i.e., words and what we associate with words varies with people (Locke, 1975).

Based on the idea we realize that different people have different experiences and hence different world view. But this difference does not necessarily make one thing right and the other wrong. The basic function of language is to communicate thoughts. Words are the components of language and ideas are the components of thought; words communicate ideas. These ideas are invisible and hidden from others and are reflected through our language. (Locke, 1975). Language is important for communication. It also plays an important role in the making and breaking of ideology and believes. It links one's knowledge of the world with his/her behavior or actions. The use of language reflects the thought process and the background of the individual (Brognolli, 1990).

Language has the ability to control and manipulate minds and the thought process. Different mediums can also be used to influence the minds of the viewers e.g. Media. Television is the basis of formation of the mind-set of the people of a society. (Ramakrishna, 2015) Television also shapes our reality and thoughts. It has the ability to widespread a certain ideology, a certain agenda or a certain message. Through this medium, people can be influenced on a larger scale in a very short span of time. (Pritchard, 2013).

Today's generation has an easy access to technology, which makes them an easy target of the media content creators. The media content includes films, dramas, music etc. Films convey messages and are considered an ideological medium. Certain ideologies are built through media. It is said that if you want a society to adopt or believe in something spread it through media and it will easily be done. (Poulsen, Kvale & Leeuwen, 2018).

Linguistic Analysis involves the study of words; lexical items as well as anything which stands for or refer to something else. Signs can be in the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. The analysts not only study signs as single units but as part of semiotic sign systems (such as a medium or genre). They study how meanings are made: as such, being concerned not only with communication but also with the construction and conservation of reality. A sign may be transmitted to us through different mediums. The word 'medium' is used in differently by different theorists and may include and relate to wider categories as speech and writing or print and broadcasting (radio, tv, newspapers, magazines, books, photographs, films etc.) or the media of interpersonal communication (telephone, letter, fax, e-mail, and online chat systems) (Chandler, 2014).

Synopsis of the Film:

The film is about a character named, John Nash, who was a brilliant mathematician and was schizophrenic. The story revolves around how he makes remarkable discoveries very early in his career and was considered an asset for humanity. His symptoms become apparent when he marries his wife, Alicia. Along with his mental health, he has to deal with people's reaction to it and their insensitive behavior. When he realizes that his condition was affecting his personal life, he starts his treatments and takes medicines for it. In the end, he questions people's conventional definition of sanity and chooses his own.

The story helps us take out signs and study language as a sign to understand the attitude and behavior of the characters. Linguistic analysis can be applied to anything which

signifies something - in other words, it can be applied to everything which has meaning for instance, any media texts (including television & radio programs, films, cartoons, newspaper and magazine articles, posters, ads, etc.). According to (Lazutin & Lazutina, 2016) language is not just a means to share and express ideas – it is a multifunctional medium that forms our worldview and affects how we think.

Thesis Statement

Language, as a semiotic system – a social phenomenon, reflects our realities and our unique individual culture. As part of a certain society, we are to treat all our realities as authentic and the rules that the society sets to define and label our realities lead to the society's imbalanced and distinct treatment of individuals because based on those very rules some realities are thought to be acceptable and others are considered less 'authentic' by the society. This research challenges the notion of the socially constructed Ir/relevant being in the text *A Beautiful Mind*.

Language, Meaning and Construction of Personal Reality

According to (Harrington, 2005), the language that we use to communicate and interact with other people consists of words and symbols that have meanings which are shared across different communities and people. Each word or symbol is unique because it carries meaning and communicates our individual feelings and thoughts. Meaning is not given to us - we actively create it with the help of complex effects of codes of which we are normally unaware. Becoming aware of such codes is both fascinating and empowering. We learn from semiotics that we live in a world of signs and cannot understand anything without signs. Through the study of semiotics and linguistic analysis we become aware that these signs and codes are normally clear and our task is to interpret them. (Bowcher, 2018).

Living in a world of signs, we need to learn that even the most real-looking signs are not what they appear to be, nothing is as it seems. In defining realities signs serve ideological functions. Deconstructing, questioning or challenging the case of signs can reveal whose realities are privileged and whose are suppressed. The study of signs is the study of the construction and conservation of reality. To decline or ignore such a study is like giving others the control of the world of meanings which surround us (Chandler, 2014).

Language has been used to communicate and for human interactions for thousands of years now, it is seen as a meaning making entity and through which one can understand and interpret human behaviors and attitudes. One of the broadest definitions states that language is considered to be the criteria through which people understand other people; how the other person is feeling and what state of mind is he/she in, along with their feelings and mental stability (Gottschalk & Gleser, 1969).

Signs and their meanings are or could be different for different people. Everyone has their own understanding, experiences and perspective about reality – what is real for them might not be real for other people and vice versa. As a society we cannot accept somebody who sees things differently and do not hesitate to label them or consider them insane. Being different does not mean being insane, it only means that there is a different or a unique approach towards things. (Locke, 1975). Language, signs and symbols construct realities for humans yet these

realities are not the same for all people. Perception varies because of different associations and understanding of signs and symbols. A word once perceived, becomes a part of the memory which is later integrated into reality (Barsalou, 1999).

The way humans perceive different signs depends on their cognitive abilities, it takes a lot psychological, social, linguistic, anthropological and physiological factors to decode a word and its meaning. In human interactions, one cannot keep these elements aside and try to understand meaning. (Erton, 2018). Language, it is understood, is the only tool that helps us create and share our realities. The words we use carry meaning and those meanings are not necessarily similar across cultures and communities. Each word has its own meaning and is part of our vocabulary because of an experience – an experience that we have with it and gone through in order to form our realities (Grace, 1987).

In the given text, had John Nash been completely insane he would not have struggled and accepted things as they were. It was a complete struggle on his part for his family because he understood that his wife and son were suffering because of his different approach.

Most of the work that has been cited is about the psychological aspect of the film and focuses more on the schizophrenia and its side effects. The previous studies see John as an abnormal person who saw numbers and his genius mind was full of such illusions and fantasies that he could not make sense of the reality.

One of the many studies on the psychological aspect of the film *A Beautiful Mind* talks about the symptoms and how did John Nash recover from his Schizophrenia. It sheds light on the story of the great mathematician and discusses other studies that have been done on the similar topic. (Rettner, 2015). In another study, Preda talks about the perspective of a person who has schizophrenia. The focus is on what can be learned about the patients and the disease from this film. (Preda, 2014).

In a similar study, the case of John Nash has been discussed under the symptoms of schizophrenia. This analyzes the experiences of John Nash in relation to his schizophrenia, its social effects and the support his family and friends provided him. The film has been studied in the light of how the John's behavior affected his relations with his family and friends and how it made his life complicated. (Rettner, 2015)

Wiersema, A. (2013), In her article *A Beautiful, Semiotic Mind* talks about the semiotic aspect of the film. How the semiotics affect John Nash's comprehension and meaning-making process in general. Another study, sheds light on the biographical and dramatic aspect of the film. It discusses the characters in detail. (Weschler, 2002).

Methodology:

The current research analyzes language in the meaning making process by focusing on the character of John Nash not as a case of a schizophrenic patient but how this person's experience of reality was different than the people around him i.e. how language created one individual's understanding of reality and as a result this linguistic construction affected people's attitude because of different experiences and different realities leading to changed behaviors and a completely different approach to the word 'normal' due to which he struggled to understand what was real and what was not i.e. different realities and their perceptions. This is a qualitative study of the film *A Beautiful Mind*. For analysis the text from the film was taken which was

released in 2001. The lead character of John Nash is played by Russell Crowe. It was produced and directed by Brian Grazer and Ron Howard respectively. The research is based on a linguistic analysis.

Semiotic construction of reality has many different kinds that explain the meaning making process and the interpretation of the words and signs used by individuals. In cognition one can look into all kinds of perceptions of meaning and at all levels i.e. from language to cultural representation of meaning. (Zlatev, 2018). Linguistic construction also helps us in understanding the vocabulary that we use in order to create and form ideas in our minds, which further enhances our language learning skills and teaching of language in different contexts. (Qadha & Mahdi, 2019).

The current research uses (Lukach,2013) linguistic model for analysis of meaning making and how it effects people’s perceptions and behaviors that talks about the different levels and concepts of meaning making, language use and interpretations of that meaning. According to (Zlatev, 2018), meaning is interrelated – with context and how an individual understands the intentions of the speaker depending on the context they are in. This helps build their reality or becomes a part of their overall experiences which later determines their reality. Without context, it would be difficult to not only create meaning but also to interpret it and provide an appropriate response.

Construction of Multiple Realities and the Ir/relevant Being in A Beautiful Mind:

The text has been analyzed considering language as a symbol and component of the social interaction and how it is a reflection of attitude and behavior i.e. the response in the context of the characters. While John Nash sees his wife leaving because he wasn’t “present” and almost drowned their child due to falling prey to his hallucinations. There comes a point when he realizes that the people he could see are not real because if they were they would grow like normal people.

John: “She never gets old. Marcee can’t be real she never gets old.”

(Grazer and Howard, 2001)

Linguistic Item	Meaning	Construction of Reality
Real	Exists	John’s ‘real’ was different than the people around him which was why there was a conflict.

At this point Nash could see that he was seeing, imagining things. He could understand that if the people or in this case the little girl was real i.e does not only exist in his imagination, she would grow old with time. But she wasn’t growing up and was still of the same age since he started seeing her. Here he also understands that his wife was trying to help him, and this is where he finally gives in the idea that he needs treatment. He could not really concentrate and

take up his responsibilities, so he stopped taking the medicines. Based on the idea of how realities are constructed (Zlatev, 2018) we understand that Nash was able to relate his reality i.e. what he could see and what was ‘actually’ happening around him.

Doctor: Why did you stop your meds?

John: Because I couldn’t do my work. I couldn’t help with the baby. I couldn’t respond to my wife. You think that’s better than being crazy?

(Grazer and Howard, 2001)

Linguistic Item	Meaning	Construction of Reality
Crazy	Not Normal - Mad	The idea of multiple realities being constructed here using the word ‘crazy’ i.e. people around Nash who did not share his reality and were unable to understand him resorted to calling him crazy.

What if what he could see was real and for John the people who did not share his experience were “crazy”. Who really decides what is right and what is wrong? What is real and what is not. We come to a realization here that maybe what the main character of the story was imagining and what had become a part of reality was the reality and not what was visible to the people around him. This idea leads us to the idea of reality construction and meaning in different social settings. (Bowcher, 2018)

Doctor: Schizophrenia is getting worse..

John: It’s a problem. That’s all it is. It’s a problem with no solution. That’s what I do, I solve problems. That’s what I do best.

(Grazer and Howard, 2001)

Linguistic Item	Meaning	Construction of Reality
Problem	An Unwelcome Situation	For people, Nash’s lack of awareness about his responsibilities was a ‘problem’ and for Nash his awareness was i.e. he knew well what the situation was like and how that was affecting people closer to him and himself.

From this utterance one can understand that the character is completely aware of his responsibilities and what is expected of him. Despite him not being “normal” he could make sense of the world around him and the expectations of his immediate family and friends i.e. what he should be doing helping around the house and being present for family. He is the

person who has always solved problems with logic and reason. Who thinks that everything can be reasoned with and he can solve it.

Doctor: You can't reason your way out of it.

John: Why can't I?

Doctor: Because your mind is where the problem is in the first place.

(Grazer and Howard, 2001)

He wants wants to make use of his genius mind which is habitual of solving problems with reason and logic

John: "I can work it out. All I need is time." (Grazer and Howard, 2001)

Linguistic Item	Meaning	Construction of Reality
Reason	Justification, Cause, Explanation	For Nash, this situation was solvable because how he saw the world and issues but for the people it was as if this was a problem with no solution because the place where they thought the problem was being caused was in Nash's opinion the very place the problem could be solved.

He knows he can solve it and get over his symptoms, wants the one person he loves the most to believe in him and trust him. The character has created meaning for himself and for the people around him, all that he wants is for them to see it the way he intended it. The different perceptions create different realities around Nash and he is then left to hope that people could understand his reality.

Doctor: Without treatment John the fantasies may take over entirely.

(Grazer and Howard, 2001)

Linguistic Item	Meaning	Construction of Reality
Fantasy	Imagining the Impossible	It was John's reality that people around him couldn't see and hence considered impossible or a game of John's mind. However, it was something completely possible and real for John.

For the other people they were fantasies because they couldn't see them and they haven't experienced them. But for John this was his reality or part of his reality which made him

frustrated that the people around him could not understand him and take him as abnormal. John was forcibly taken to the psychiatric facility and people constantly tell him that he needed treatment and calling it “fantasies” this was their attitude towards him and it was communicated to him through their language and behavior. When his wife thinks that John’s “hallucinations” are back - hearing him talking to someone outside while she could see nobody. When he comes in she asks him about whom he was talking to and he says it was the garbage man. She does not believe him and tries to confront him by saying that the garbage man do not come at night.

John: I guess around here they do

Alicia then sees a garbage man walking past their house from the window then he starts laughing to which she guiltily apologizes. (Grazer and Howard, 2001)

Man: Professor Nash?

(John stops a student and confirms if she can see the man calling his name)

John: Can you see him? He’s within your vision?

(Grazer and Howard, 2001)

Linguistic Item	Meaning	Construction of Reality
See	Visible, Detected by Sight.	John had accepted that people saw him differently and in their opinion he was not ‘normal’ so this difference made him look for confirmation about what he saw.

Since the “majority” did not share what was real for him they considered him insane. The idea of being seen as an insane person scares him now. After learning to dealt with his “reality” he has started confirming what he says and sees from the people around him to make sure he was in the “reality” and not imagining things or people.

Then turns to the man and says: “Forgive me, I’m just always suspicious of new people.” (Grazer and Howard, 2001)

John: I would’ve thought that the nominations for the Nobel Prize would have been secret. I would’ve thought you’d only find out if you won or lost.

Man: That is generally the case, yes. But these are special circumstances, the awards are substantial. They require private funding as such, the image of the Nobel is...

John: I see. You came here to find out if I was crazy. Find out if I would screw everything if I actually won. Dance around the podium, strip naked and squawk like a chicken. Things of this nature?

Man: (laughs) something like that, yes.

John: Would I embarrass you? (silence) Yes, it is possible. You see I..I am crazy.

(Grazer and Howard, 2001)

When the man comes to meet John, he is still wondering what John’s reaction would be if something overwhelming and unexpected like winning the Nobel Prize would happen. John understands and admits that he is crazy. But his way of talking and saying this tells the viewers that he was somewhat influenced by the collective attitude of the majority towards him. Yes, he accepts his “abnormality” but that too is a reaction to the attitude which has affects on his behavior.

When his friend comes to meet him he tries to play a little joke on him.

John: Have you met Harvey? (points towards an empty chair

Friend: Ummm, I..(laughs) John, theres no...

John: Relax, its okay. There’s no point in being nuts if you can’t have a little fun.

(Grazer and Howard, 2001)

Linguistic Item	Meaning	Construction of Reality
Fun	Amusement	John has accepted his ‘reality’ how he is perceived and what people think of him and can also laugh about it.

He can joke about it. The fact that he knows he is nuts and different from others, his acceptance to the reality is also a sign of his sanity.

When his friend asks him what he is working on, seeing John scribbling on the notepad

John: I figured if I dazzle them, they will have to reinstate me. But it’s difficult with the medication, because it’s hard to see the solution.

Friend: you know John, you should go easy. There are other things beside work.

John: What are they? (Grazer and Howard, 2001)

He is desperately trying to find the solution for his “problem” to fit in to belong and be a part of the “reality”.

In the end, while accepting his Nobel Prize, John questions the right and wrong and who decides it.

John: I’ve always believed in numbers, in the equations and logics that lead to reason. But after a lifetime of such pursuits I ask, what truly is logic? Who decides reason?

(Grazer and Howard, 2001)

Linguistic Item	Meaning	Construction of Reality
Logic	Valid, Strictly Within Reason	John is able to question not just his reputation but also the people around him. How does anyone justify what is real and what is not? And just because one cannot share another’s experiences does it give that person the right to call it wrong?

		Consider it without reason; not justified?
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WHO DECIDES REASON? Who can say what exactly is real? What's real for one person is not real for another but that does not mean that you label the other person as abnormal or crazy and his reality "a fantasy". You must be in other person's shoes to understand his side of the story and experience what he is going through. What Nash saw was his reality. He was considered a lunatic because people could not share or see what he saw i.e. it was not shared meaning. His hallucinations were normal looking, real-life people, not some aliens or fairies but the people that only existed in his mind. But to be normal he had to have a shared reality; same interpretations and same perception or understanding of the world. In order for the people around him to understand his surroundings and for him to make sense of the people around him better. This raises questions like was he really a lunatic when he could joke about it and understand that he was seeing things and understand that if what he was seeing wasn't real; since his ideas were not shared and people couldn't see what he could, then it is not real and does not exist and if this was not real then he should solve this "problem" and let it go because he knew it was not normal.

People around John Nash thought that whatever they think, they see is the reality and anybody who sees things differently is not "normal" or "sane". While John thought that if their reality was the "normal" why was not his also accepted? And why was he labeled or seen as somebody far from normal. In the end, he accepts their version and fights with all his will to be a part of the "normal" world. The people around him, his family, his doctor and his friends had a certain attitude towards him which made it clear that there was something wrong with John and this affected John in such a way that his confirming what he saw became the part of his behavior.

Conclusion

This research concludes that the people around John Nash could not see what he could and did not experience what he went through so they considered his reality a "fantasy". Just because you don't share someone's experiences does not make you right and him/her wrong. His idea of reality was different than the majority and that is why the majority had influence on his behavior and actions. Due to this influence, after he got it under control he started to get confirmation from the people around him to make sure that whatever he was seeing was actually there. This is a kind of influence the society had over him. The people who had "shared experiences" were influencing his thoughts and actions, their reality was the "privileged" one while Nash's was the "suppressed". This analysis also proves that one person's ideas, thoughts or experiences can not be perceived by another. (Landesman, 1976). Different people perceive reality in different ways. Due to this difference meaning and how one person looks at things varies. The society and the people around him had fixed approach towards reality and considered his reality a fantasy which created problems for them and John. This made John's reality "suppressed" and other people's shared reality "privileged". John was aware of his surroundings and the opinions that were being formed about him and his "abnormality". He

knew he had responsibilities towards his family; his wife and son. He wanted to apply logical reasoning to his “problem” that he thought just needed a solution. He was able to solve it and just needed time and at the end, he does succeed.

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