

The Problem of Social Semiotics

Perhaps some of the most interesting and provocative books we read are those that we find difficult to classify. Paul Thibault has published a very difficult book for those interested in neat classifications.¹ It is tough on us not only because it tears down the walls surrounding the various branches of semiotics or, more specifically, of what we might call linguistically based literary theory, but tough too in a second sense, one that underlines the fact that in this book Thibault is able to home in on a number of important concepts central to the enterprises of the sociologist, the linguist, the semiotician, and the literary scholar. Because of this difficulty in classifying Thibault's aims in his book, we have an intriguing interdisciplinary endeavour.

Thibault's book is able to force us to look upon ourselves and upon our work when we say that our central concern in academic research is with language and meaning. It also compels us to reflect very carefully upon what it means to write a commentary on something that someone has said or written. Based on, but certainly not limited to, the broad framework set up by the systemic linguist Michael Halliday, this book might be seen as a performing example of what is called social semiotics. Let me say from the start that I see the central tenets of this outlook consisting in 1) the claim that it is impossible to divorce precise and detailed analyses of real discourse from more globally oriented theory-making; 2) making theories about language, or about social structures in general, is itself a meaning-making practice and should thus be seen in the larger context of the ways in which social agents go about making meanings in their particular social environments; 3) makers and users of meaning participate willy-nilly in a dialectic of conservation and change of the systems of choice inherent in the different semiotics that they use; and 4) language and its context of usage are in constant interaction thereby precluding any theoretical outlook which seeks to explore how language merely indexes things as they are experienced outside of language.

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1 Paul Thibault, *Social Semiotics as Praxis: Text, Social Meaning Making, and Nabokov's Ada*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991. Pp. 303 + xiv. Can\$20.35.

The title of Thibault's book is followed by a curious subtitle: "Text, Social Meaning Making, and Nabokov's *Ada*." From the title page on, we are faced with the discomfort I mentioned earlier concerning how we might best describe what this book, printed in the University of Minnesota Press's series "The Theory and History of Literature," is supposed to be doing for us, or *to us* as readers. For indeed, the examples for analysis taken from Nabokov's work are few and far between (there are in fact just two examples which are thoroughly analysed) and Nabokov is very far from forming a central concern for this study. This latter observation can be easily confirmed if we simply glance at the Name Index where the entries listed under "Nabokov" pale in comparison to, say, Baxtin, Bernstein, Foucault, Halliday, Lemke, or Vološinov. Numerous maneuvers apparent in the book's presentations, different rhetorical moves used in the arguments presented in the text, and the very cover pages of this interesting text combine in a precise manner thereby prompting us to ask repeatedly: what is this book really all about and what is it trying to do to us as readers?

In the end, I must admit that the foregoing comments are actually nothing more than instances where I "experientially comment," to use one of Thibault's phrases (62), on the very things this book has in fact done to me. For if I take to heart one of the central lessons of this book, i.e., that theory-making is itself an example of socialized meaning-making,² then I must ask not only what Thibault is doing to me as I read and reflect upon what I have read but also what I as reader could possibly do to Thibault, or to those who might read this review. "Who is what to whom with this text? And how?" asks Thibault (235) in paraphrase of Jay Lemke.³ The present review will necessarily have to play on the vagaries and ambiguities suggested by the same structures of indirect discourse which are extensively analyzed in three of the book's chapters, and a first ambiguity will lie for us in the impossibility of knowing with any reliability whether the words I am now writing, and those I am recopying from my notes, are really to be taken as comments directed specifically at the unknown readers of this review or meant for the author of the book that I have just finished reading. A strong sense of ambiguity derives from a complicated speech situation where polyphony is created because of conflicts in what these very different readers may be believed to want of me. Shall I polemicize with what

is being said? Shall I deconstruct the arguments as I see them? Shall I give my impressions about what was said?

Perhaps the safest rhetorical stance, when dealing with such a difficult text, would go something like this: admit openly our incomprehension of many aspects of the book with the hope that this very stance will be interpreted as a mere rhetorical ploy, thereby exonerating ourselves of any possible charge of not really understanding what this book is actually all about. I keep asking myself, while thinking about the social semiotic framework spelled out in this book, whether it really is literary theory that I am reading. What is this "social semiotics" with which the author confronts us in the book? Indeed, while reading the book, I am at times overcome by a certain sense of bewilderment, owing to the loss of orientation in my usual ability to class theoretical texts more or less comfortably. What's worse, many theoretical texts that I very much admire, and others that I just plain like, are ripped to shreds by Thibault's tight analyses (for example Ann Banfield's work on reported speech) and I have to admit to not always knowing precisely why. In effect Thibault does some amazing things with a number of the theoretical texts he analyses and criticizes. But I would like to be able to predict with at least a bit of certainty which texts will find favour in his analyses and which texts will be discredited. And furthermore, I would like to be able to predict the precise reasons for these likes and dislikes.

In many senses of the word, Thibault's book comes across as being that of an outsider. Similar to the tight prose and dense sentence structures one encounters when reading Adorno (whom Thibault never quotes either), Thibault's theoretical writing forces us to read very slowly and to read over and over again certain sentences which are difficult to handle after the first go. Thibault likes Baxtin and Vološinov very much and I feel slightly more comfortable, because I too admire these thinkers, but then I realize that I am not exactly sure why he likes them. After all, other theoretical texts that I like very much, and which I even teach to my students, have fallen to the wayside (Benveniste, Austin) and I wish to know whether I am myself a theoretically sound thinker according to social semiotics. My questions boil down to a very basic and naïve one: whom should I be prepared to read, and furthermore whom should I be prepared to dislike, if I too wish to become a social semiotician?

For lack of a better term, I would call this disquieting aspect of Thibault's book the terrorist approach which underlies a few too many of his arguments. We are sometimes terrorized into believing that such and such a position is ideologically unsound after reading through and studying Thibault's detailed analyses. Two rhetorical tactics are adopted in the book which support this approach. They could be called first of all the rhetoric of the simple and secondly the use of disparaging labels to qualify theoretical positions essentially different from his own, although both of these tactics are really the same one.

2 "A theory is itself a social meaning making practice, which always stands in some articulated relation to a given community of social practices. It is not "above" or "exterior" to these, but is immanent in them. All theory making is both constituted and constrained by the patterned meaning making practices of some community, just as it is potentially constitutive of alternative patterns of social meaning making" (9).

3 Unfortunately, no mention of the obvious overtones of Raymond Williams's work is acknowledged at this point.

In turn, the rhetoric of the simple works in two basic ways. Things are, as I said, presented in complicated sentence structures and the theoretical framework in which Thibault exposes his theory of semiotic interaction is indeed elaborate and thoroughgoing. Such a state of affairs is after all totally justified, we might add, because language itself is a very complicated object of study and any theory of communication which makes language out to be something simple, is probably, as Max Black has said, *too* simple: "This labyrinth of language, in which we have wandered together, has no Ariadne's thread. One moral I have tried to suggest throughout is that any simple theory about language must be oversimple" (168). However we are constantly reminded in this work that things are even much more complicated than the way in which they are presented here. Examples such as the following are typical of this rhetorical move:

I will start then with the *oversimplifying* assumption that the various transforms of quoting and reporting discourse nevertheless maintain the experiential or propositional meaning of the projected clause as a constant. (63; my emphasis)

The complexity of these phenomena requires some *simplification* or idealization of the actual situation. Therefore, I shall start with the *simplifying* assumption that the two outer extremities of wordings and meanings in Table 2.1 represent the outer points on the language-as-action versus language-as-reflection cline. (61; my emphasis)

Just when readers thought that they were finally getting a handle on the many complicated issues being discussed, they are subtly made aware that things are not so simple after all and that they should be prepared for even more complicated analyses. If they thought that they had a bit of trouble understanding this complicated version, they are reminded that things are in fact even much more complicated than this and only something as complicated as social semiotics is able to deal with these complications. But even when Thibault does simplify things for us, we can justifiably ask what is so simple about the simple version of things that he decides to give us:

In simpler terms, we can say that the very important contribution that poststructuralism has made to our understanding of the plural and productive nature of social meaning making has occurred at the expense of a socially and politically situated praxis that is not confined to the text per se as the site of political praxis in the circumscribed domain of poststructuralist practitioners. (114)

The second use of the "rhetoric of the simple" goes something like this: when paraphrasing opposing theoretical points of view, use liberally the adverbial qualifier "not simply" to connote the idea that such positions are not complicated enough. The drift of these rhetorical moves is slightly different than, but nevertheless related to, what Karl Kosik once analyzed as the "nothing but" (14). In Thibault's book, we find numerous examples like the following two

sentences: "The autorecursion of the contextual hierarchy demonstrates that 'self' and 'other' are not simply constituents of an already given situation" (88); "Hegemony is not simply understood to be the domination of one position by another" (106). The suggestion of the many sentences which follow this tack is once again that others' theories are simple while Thibault's is not. This is where the problem of labels comes into play. Being complicated becomes a virtue and unvirtuously uncomplicated theories, that is, theories of the interaction between speakers and their social environments that do not follow the needs of social semiotics, are generally given the unflattering epithet of "folk-theoretical." Even if extreme complication is a virtue, we must nevertheless recognize that such theoretical sophistication coupled with very complex sentence structures will probably result in a certain amount of bewilderment on the reader's part.

In this context of bewilderment engendered by the purposeful complications of the text, it is interesting to examine a central argument, that of homologies, that reappears a number of times throughout this book. The use of homologies can be seen in a very problematic light. "The textual products and records of these transactions occur ... in some relation of homology to the dynamic social semiotic processes that enact them" (11). We might wish, for example, to turn the construction of homologies back on the theory of social semiotics as praxis by asking the following question: is the complexity of the sentence structure ever so prevalent in this study to be construed in terms of a homology between itself and the complexity of the theoretical model with which we must deal? We wonder, in other words, whether the theoretical text we have before us is itself a performative example of the very complexity of the theoretical model it seeks to explore. Happy with this seemingly appropriate analysis of the rhetoric behind this book, we are however quickly relieved of our illusions because, as we remember, Austin is one of those popular theoreticians who do not find favour in this book and performativity in particular is not at all a good commodity for social semiotics.⁴ Even within the confines of such a question as to the appropriateness of using the performativity label to describe what Thibault is doing, the effects of our bewilderment inevitably creep back into the picture. Not only are we deprived of the luxury of getting a handle on this text by describing it in terms of an intellectual event, and given the polemical tone of many of the pages I think that we are indeed confronted with an eventful theoretical text; but also Thibault has managed to turn the outsider/insider dichotomy around on us in his favour by forcing us to admit that it is we who

4 "Habermas (1985) is one of the few contemporary thinkers to recognize the reactionary and neoconservative character of postmodernism. Postmodernism's preoccupation with performativity, a decentered subject, and the reification of linguistic practice through the notion of a permanent state of linguistic innovation, defined in terms of an ontology of difference, helps us recall Vološinov's (1973, 159) concern with what he calls 'an alarming instability and uncertainty of the word'" (115).

do not understand the correct keys that are necessary for entering into the intellectual realm of social semiotics.

Once again we must ask what exactly this "social semiotics" with which we are being confronted is supposed to be. My theoretical insecurity is increased as I come across a plethora of unusual words and terms, sometimes defined, but sometimes not ("operationalized," "repunctuation," "experientialized," etc.) and such words often appear in bunches only to disappear a little while later. An important term such as "covary" is used liberally in the first sections of the text but is only defined for the first time on page 133. A little known Whorfian term "cryptotypes" is mentioned on page 76 well before the term is explained in a section dealing with Whorf's provocative, but widely misunderstood, theory of language (Thibault 184-187). These two examples are not isolated instances of the rhetoric of the text at hand. What this practice in fact does to the reader interested in following as sincerely as possible the many and difficult arguments of this theoretical piece is to create for itself at regular intervals a large number of secret messages that can only be solved, it would seem, by consulting the text further. In a move remarkably similar to Nietzsche's analysis of the birth of truth in his "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," the book we are dealing with sets up a number of mysteries which, following the rhetoric of the simple prevalent throughout much of the text, only it can solve because only it is complicated enough to be able to handle the complications involved. There is a problematic circular structure to this type of argumentation which gets exemplified by the numerous, seemingly harmless, sentences such as "I shall examine these questions more fully..."

This uneasy impression of a certain circularity in the rhetorical functioning of the book is reinforced by other elements as well. Numerous sentences, owing to their syntactic difficulty, almost seem to be based on a circular reasoning or, at least, seem to present tautological statements. In either case, they appear to be utterly unfalsifiable. The following sentence is an example of what we might call a soft measure of circularity: "The program outlined by Foucault for a theory of the subject situates the problem in relation to both typical and specific parameters of social and discursive practices in and through which subjectivities are made" (225). If we are patient enough to read this sentence a few times, I think this soft type of circularity will eventually disappear. Such is not however the case of many other examples of apparent circularity that we bump into while reading the book. In some instances we are simply unsure whether or not there is any circularity involved for reasons of a lack of clarity.

But I do not think that coding orientations simply express or are reducible to social class, nor are they uniquely determined by it. In order not to reify social class, it is necessary to demonstrate that the class character of a given social ideology is a function of the articulation of those configurations of prediscursive relations in a way that confers upon them a class character. (193)

In other instances, we cannot even determine whether or not there is a presupposed circular argument owing to the complexity of the sentences involved:

The differential distribution of the sociosemantic potential within and between contexts means that the positioned-practices and their voicings, which are specialized to the particular relations within and between contexts, construct specific heteroglossic relations of alignment, opposition, conflict, and co-optation among voices in the systems of heteroglossia of a given social formation (see chapter 2). The voices that are specialized to a particular configuration of insider and outsider relations in a given context are therefore positioned in relation to the systems of social heteroglossia of the social formation. (95)

And even if I am totally unjustified in sensing an apparent circularity in some of these complicated formulations, an impression which is reinforced furthermore by the constant and overabundant reminders of other passages in the book where the same problem is also discussed, it is nevertheless reasonable to pay attention to the rhetorical effect achieved by such complicated formulations and involved strategies of presenting the material at hand. The end-result is no doubt an unwelcome sense of suspicion harboured towards some of the important moves that Thibault makes in presenting his case. One of the main tenets of Thibault's study is the need to bridge the gap in semiotic studies between theory-making on a metasemiotic level and actual micro-analyses where we should be putting our theoretical ideas into practice. "What is important is an analytical strategy that does not assume a priori that the macro- and the microlevels are to be theorized on the basis of different analytical and epistemological criteria" (229). Thibault is entirely right to underline the importance of this aspect of his analysis. And yet, despite the willingness we may wish to extend to this very reasonable position, we begin to feel a bit suspicious as to the manner in which the specific analyses proposed are really supposed to be doing this chore. Theory seems to be breeding theory. Because of the air of suspicion cultivated by what I have called an apparent circularity, we have trouble in deciding whether the theory and the analysis really have to be so intrinsically locked together or whether the long and involved textual analysis of a few passages from Nabakov provides just one more link in a long chain of complications and self-justifications: "A theory that is not founded on the explicit microanalysis of formal patterns of realization is unable adequately to articulate the macro- and microlevels in relation to one another" (22). Such a statement, if interpreted uncharitably, can be taken as a truism: of course it is the case that if a theoretical piece does not have a microanalytical component to it there can be no explicit link between the theoretical statements and the microanalyses.

Despite therefore what Thibault says about the uselessness of the notion of performativity, there is a performative aspect to this book when we consider its relation with its potential readers. Theoretical bewilderment and unease are part of the effect of this performance. We must constantly ask ourselves what Thibault is really up to with his complex arguments and to whom he is really speaking. Does he intend to reach a select group of socio-semioticians or a much wider audience? As mentioned earlier, we are often reminded that "social semiotic theory and practice must go beyond such normative typologies and folk-rationalizations in order to explain how quoting and reporting relations function in specific domains of social practice in the social semiotic system" (78). Of course, I do not want myself to be characterized as a "folk-theorist," but I must ask myself whether or not I too am going to be classified as one when I ask the questions I feel compelled to ask of this text. Can Thibault's study engage in serious discussion with other methodologies in competition with his own without resorting to the claim that all such foreign methodologies are really only "folk-theoretical"? After much thought-provoking analysis of the limitations inherent in Ann Banfield's way of dealing with indirect discourse, for example, Thibault unfortunately falls into this kind of trap. I think it can be said that there are other legitimate ways to deal with language than in this "social semiotic" way. Thibault has nowhere demonstrated to the outsider that this "social semiotic" way is the only way. And so in many respects the greater part of the discussion about the limitations of Banfield's work — which is at first very convincing — boils down to saying that she is not a social semiotician. "But what is not considered is the functional status of the criteria of meaning attribution presupposed by the theory. She does not demonstrate how the concept of a center of consciousness is produced in and through specific social semiotic relations and processes" (78). But surely Thibault cannot expect everyone to be a social semiotician, even though the suggestion is made through the performance of the book's apparently circular rhetoric that anyone who is not a social semiotician is in the end a "folk-theorist."

The trick for the reader, it would seem, is to avoid somehow this disparaging label of "folk-theorist." And the question is: How? We are caught in a circular trap. Because once again it is obviously social semiotics which sets itself up as the judge of who is and who is not a folk-theorist and the outsider can therefore never know how to avoid the label except by turning to social semiotics. But to which social semiotics must we turn? In the last chapter of the book, Thibault provides a brave account of his personal brand of social semiotics, what he calls "neomaterialist social semiotics":

The neomaterialist social semiotic conceptual framework attempts to account for discursive subjects/social agents in terms of their constituting and constituted nature. It must account for the typical and atypical intersections and patternings of social meaning and practices in which social agents/discursive subjects are immanent. (222)

For example, I find particularly convincing and well formulated a number of definitions in this chapter of the book, especially this one which redefines the individual for us: "It is the structured and articulated social semiotic relations among positions-practices in a given social formation, and the social relationships (disjunctions and conjunctions) among typical formations, that define the individual" (227). Surely, however, it is appropriate to point out an important rhetorical slippage which has occurred in the difference of focus between the last two quotations. The quotation from page 222 speaks of *the* "neomaterialist social semiotic conceptual framework" whereas, in the example quoted from page 227, we are suddenly speaking about "the structures and articulated social semiotic relations" where the definite article no longer plays a generic role but works rather in an anaphoric sense. The problem here is that in a great number of passages Thibault slips between these different senses of what he really means about the status of *his* version of social semiotics. He does not make clear enough distinctions between a social semiotic which would be "out there" and the social semiotic which is his analytical tool for getting a handle on the complex relationships which are at work between human speech partners. Of course, an objection can be made that by implying that there is some kind of social semiotic "out there," I have probably missed Thibault's important point concerning the fact that theory-making is itself a social meaning-making practice. But even this reply does not take any of the sting out of my claims, first of all, that there might indeed be alternative theories to Thibault's for dealing with the complex issues that he very rightly spells out for us and, secondly, that there is an important distinction to be made between, on the one hand, what is here called the social semiotic and, on the other, what we could call social semiotic theory in general. As a result, some of the value of many of Thibault's important claims gets lost in the uncertainty engendered by this type of rhetorical slippage. When we read such a passage:

Social semiotics recognizes that, say, thematic meaning relations are enacted and used in and through specific social activity-structures with which they combine. We are not therefore concerned with a reified text-semantics, abstracted from the social activity-structures and practices that *enact* semantic meaning relations. (137. My emphasis)

We are unfortunately distracted from the significant issues that Thibault is addressing and we must ask ourselves *whose* social semiotics is this and *who* is the "We" who appears in the second sentence? If someone wishes to study these types of fundamental problems, such an endeavour can only be undertaken if one is not one of the "We's" referred to here and only if there are alternative social semiotic theories which will not be classified as folk-theories or, even more disparagingly, as "a poor man's linguistics" (147).

I have probably placed too much emphasis on some of the disturbing elements attached to the very real performative rhetoric active in this fascinating

book. As a reader interested in the problems which Thibault studies, and in particular as a reader interested in the complex relationships between theory-making and other meaning-making activities, I cannot help myself from falling into a certain state of amazement before the ease with which Thibault's theory sets itself up in a sort of circular labyrinth. It is possible to turn around some of the criticisms I have formulated about the apparent circularity of this text, but it seems to me that only by using the notion of performativity am I able to do this flip. There are many, many cross references in the book which present themselves both in a promissory fashion, with such phrases as "As we shall see below," "We shall explore below..." "At a later stage" and, in a reminder mode, references which produce such phrases as "As is suggested earlier," "See above," "As we noted above," "See chapter 3." The simple fact of the matter is that such phrases literally proliferate throughout the book and the promissory notes are not at all limited to the first half of the book nor are the reminders at all restricted to the later chapters. Very often Thibault states a position, repeats it a little while later, and even a second time (as in a Dostoevsky novel or, closer to home, like a Robbe-Grillet novel) where with each new repetition, new elements are attached. Or so it would seem. We ask ourselves once again, as we read, whether these repetitions are examples of a tautological or circular structure overall or whether they are the performative side of an overarching thesis, i.e., the premise that it is impossible to disentangle theory-making from other meaning-making practices in our social world. Thus we can latch onto what I have called the eventness of Thibault's theoretical piece, as we ourselves get caught up in its folds, spirals (85), or reoccurring typologies (64-65; 101-02). As everything gets less simple and more complicated, and as we travel along the spiral of the text, we become more and more enmeshed in the rhetoric of circularity. We understand at the same time that we cannot ever think ourselves out of our own social semiotic system by merely making a theory about it. The spiral or circular effect is less a liability than a performative plus factor: when I find for example a definition for the term "punctuation" on page 102, I now am forced to go back and reread the many passages to be found earlier in the book where this term also occurred.

Who is supposed to get trapped in the circles of the argumentation? Ideally, both Thibault and his reader: this is the exciting aspect of eventness or performativity prevalent throughout the book. For example, there is no real distinction between the analysis *per se* and the introductory remarks which are supposed to lead us into it. The introduction is at the same time both part one and chapter one and thus, from the very start, we are right in the thick of things. There is also a rich ambiguity in the use of *Ada* as a specific example which Thibault uses for his microanalysis. But is *Ada* really an example or is Nabokov's work an integrate part of the theory? Perhaps it is both, perhaps it is neither. Thibault claims that it is not cooked up to be a mere proof of the

theoretical claims developed throughout the book but it is nevertheless difficult not to feel that there is a bit too much of arbitrariness in the *choice* of the particular passages which are analyzed and reanalyzed over and over. And yet the very reoccurrence of the same passages throughout the book proper and again in the appendices reinforces the circular rhetoric about which we have been speaking.

It is important at this stage to stress the importance of the notion of choice. Not only is the notion of choice crucial to the functioning of Halliday's social semiotics (and Thibault is greatly indebted to Halliday's theoretical framework almost to the point of adulation), but also we can notice that the ambiguity with which Thibault himself deals with the notion can provide valuable clues to the crucial performative aspect of his theory. At one point, Thibault claims that "choice" is merely a "metaphor": "'Choice' refers to the probabilistic (rather than deterministic) nature of all social meaning making" (146). Thibault clearly avoids in most occasions uses of anthropomorphism in his theory of social semiotics. This principle no doubt explains to a very large extent the highly abstract quality of Thibault's writing. And he goes to great lengths to underline this important aspect of his theory: "In the following discussion the Speaker is defined in functional semantic terms as the Agent of the utterance in the context of transmission; the Sayer is the Agent of the verbal process in the projecting clause" (101). This systematic refusal to speak in terms of individualized human agents combines with a strange presupposition that change almosts occurs naturally (122; 145) and without the initiative of particular human agents. We would counter that people enact change, and that abstract notions do not *enact* anything:

The relations of alignment, conflict, opposition, and co-optation among discursive positioned-practices are regulated by the higher-order social semiotic codes. These regulate both the forms and the relations of production and distribution of material and semiotic resources. Specific configurations of these resources *enact* the social situation-types and the differential access of agents to these in a given social formation. (108. My emphasis)

When we read a sentence like the following one, we are reminded of the annoying ambiguity of a "the" when attached to the syntagm "social semiotic system":

The concepts of heteroglossia and dialogicity suggest ways in which the problematic of ideological conflict and struggle can be a starting point for a critical study of the ways in which texts and social discourses work to maintain and change the social semiotic system. (121)

If Thibault's book can be understood in terms of an event, what is this event intended to change? Change would seem to be an indication of irreversible time, something hinted at in this text. But if there is a close relationship between this particular theoretical text, on the one hand, and (theoretical) praxis and theoretical language practices, on the other hand, then we must ask what will our having read this book change. The complicated rhetoric of the text, coupled with the disparaging remarks about folk-theories as applying to just about anything that does not correspond to this particular brand of social semiotics, and this in addition to a purposeful use of foreign language sources (one wonders why Chateaubriand must be cited in the original for the little use that is made of the text and why a faulty translation must be the one provided), these factors combine to counteract one of the stated objectives of this impressive study, i.e., "to produce practioners ... and not theory per se" (17).

But surely the issue of producing practioners is linked to the issue skirted in this book, that of potential practioners' choices. In different social climates or different enunciative situations, varying choices can naturally be preferred according to long term and short term strategies in the process of theory-making and of meaning-making in general. But are there always the *same* choices available over time or are new choices also created under varying conditions? Thibault does not develop this concept of choice, only scares us away from an anthropological rendering of it. But he does not personally shy away from a curiously personified use of passive constructions, despite his own cogent analysis of what he calls "impersonal qualifiers" (107-08). Is theory being used here to teach or to proselytize? Thibault does not analyze his own uncritical relationship between himself and the authority figure posited in Halliday's work and we must ask ourselves whether the adhesion to social semiotics is supposed to be the result of a rational decision on the part of the potential practioner or a leap of faith. I would assume that Thibault would favour the first alternative, but then he must realize that there are real and immediate consequences to the rhetorical and performative aspects of his own theoretical piece. It is a shame that his superb work on the hierarchy of analytical levels does not always make its way through the amazingly complex vocabulary, the circularity of the rhetoric, and the abstruse sentence structures. The political comments of Thibault's theory often constitute vitally important statements about what we should be trying to do as theoreticians of language but we are not always sure how the technical sophistication of the study can be linked to the academic politics of recruiting potential practioners to the cause of social semiotics. Am I being "folk-theoretical" if I bring up these crucial issues? The greatest merit of Thibault's book is that it forces us to think long and hard about these very questions.

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