

Abstract

This paper was written to highlight the overarching ideas presented in semiotics and relate them to a personally interesting topic. Within recent years, I have developed a knack for Poker, and decided to write this paper on the topic in order to improve my knowledge and understanding in both fields. The majority of semiotic knowledge presented in this paper stemmed from my semester studies in Cog444 Semiotics and the Study of Meaning, and the reading of semiotician Marcel Danesi's "The Quest For Meaning".

A Semiotic Deconstruction of Poker

The goal of this paper is to assess the elements of poker in a semiotic perspective. The paper will assess various aspects of the game of poker, as well as some of the many styles that exist. Each section will also pertain to various semiotic terms, and give the reader a semiotic lens to view the game through. It will effectively infuse its reader with a general understanding of the development of poker, and how it can be seen from a semiotic outlook.

The second section of this paper will introduce the reader to the history of the game of poker, and the way in which it has developed overtime into the massive worldwide following seen today. This section will include the expansion of poker's semiosphere and the context in which this popularity growth occurred, including the transition from 20 to 50 cards, as well as the birth of Texas Hold'em. The reader will also see the massive growth of online poker.

The third section of this paper "The Language of Poker" will give an overview of the general table play of a poker game. It will analyze the methods of communication at the poker table and how its communicative terms have developed overtime. The language of poker will focus on table jargon and its importance in interplay between players.

The fourth section of this paper entitled "Poker Games" will talk about the syntagmatic and paradigmatic nature of a deck of cards, and begin to introduce the grammar and codes of Stud and Draw poker.

The fifth section entitled "Poker Hands" will introduce all the types of hands a player is capable of making in a game. As well as the syntagmatic rankings of these hands. I will introduce the semiotic principle of deconstruction in order to break down various hands and understand why they are ranked the way they are. We will go over the paradigmatic nature of flushes, as well as the syntagmatic nature of straights. The reader will begin to understand how a combination of paradigmatic and syntagmatic rules will create more difficult to achieve, and in turn stronger hands.

The sixth section "Poker Positions" will introduce the various positions that are taken when sitting at a poker table. There is a certain level of respectful proxemics which is

maintained at a poker table to ensure fair play. I will address the referential function [[43]] of the dealer, and how it is utilized to understand the order of play, and the positional responsibilities of players in a given round. I will explain how different positions at the table can aid a player's representation of hands. [[45]]

The seventh section "Poker Narratives and Hand Playing" will describe the art of telling a story while playing a poker hand. Similarly to the art of bluffing, even playing a real hand has its own representations and narratives. This is an idea that runs true throughout the entirety of the paper.

The eighth section "The Art of Bluffing" will explain the use of deception in a poker game, and the necessity to form narratives in order to represent hands in the case of a bluff. [[45]][[30]]. I will relate Jakobson's conative function of language to emphasize the art of persuasion in a bluff. [[3]]

The ninth section "Reading Poker Hands" will speak about the tells at a poker table. ((6)) I will introduce the ideas of kinesics, gesture and oculusics as a means of evaluating other players at the table. [[16]][[25]][[32]]. I will emphasize the diachronic and synchronic nature of actions in order to help evaluate the strength of your opponents hands. [[11]][[60]].

The conclusion of this paper will summarize the nature of poker in a semiotic lens, and the benefits of viewing poker from a different frame of reference.

The History of Poker

This section is intended to highlight the history of the development of poker as we see it today. It is a game that has been around for centuries, but has evolved into its most commonly recognized forms within the last 100 or so years.

Poker originated as a 20 card game, as opposed to the use of a 52 card deck we see today. It gets its name from the nature of the betting rounds its players partake in. This is what differentiates a poker game from any other card game. In this 20 card form, it utilized only the highest ranking of cards, Aces, Kings, Queens, Jacks, and 10s, and was hardly the game of probability and mathematical advantage we see today. "The skills required in order to succeed at the game were not so much about mathematics and logic, however, but about having the psychological sense to judge whether your opponent is a sucker, a bluffer, a sharp, or perhaps even a cheat." ((1)).

The poker semiosphere [[4]] saw its development to the common 52 card games we see today in the early 19th century. This helped shape the grammar [[18]] and structure of hand rankings which are utilized in a majority of poker games today.

The most popular game type played today is Texas Hold'em, which originated in Texas in the 1920s. This shift to the popularity of Texas Hold'em had changed the context [[7]] of the game, from a game of luck, to one which is more skill-based. This is where we began to see poker increase in popularity, with the writing of strategy books from many of the games' more successful players.

While Texas Hold'em continues to increase in popularity throughout the 20th century, we see its biggest boom in the early 2000s, with the development of online poker. Increasing anonymity and accessibility with the invention of online poker led to massive increases in competition. "Poker then enjoyed steady but niche popularity until the poker boom in 2003, when the aptly named, Chris Moneymaker, won the annual World Series of Poker Main event and a prize of \$2.5million after winning his \$10,000 entrance fee for the tournament in an online satellite tournament, the buy-in for which was \$39" ((3)). This led to a massive popularity growth, with individuals realizing they were capable of making large sums of money from the game. ((2))

The Language of Poker

This section is intended to familiarize the reader with the various terms that have arisen within the poker semiosphere, and how they have evolved overtime. It will be focused on the jargon which is utilized at the poker table, and its importance in the communication between players.

Poker utilizes special language to facilitate the communication between players at a table. This is an area where we can see the semiosis [[49]] of poker language, and its development which stems from the players themselves. The language of poker is consistently undergoing changes, and we see terms constantly morphing and growing, representing the idea of unlimited semiosis. [[65]] The culture of poker linguistics relates to Peirce's theory of sign in terms of thirdness [[64]]. When viewing the language from an outside lens, many of the terms would appear to be unrelated to the game, or written off as nonsense. But for players of the game, these terms are essential, and the game would never progress without them. ((4))

Some of the most important terms recognized in poker are related to the actions which a player is capable of taking when it is his turn. There are 3 basic moves a player is allowed to make. A check, a raise and a call. The first move, a check, passes the action to the next player on the table, a raise is indicative of a bet, in which the player selects an amount he deems worthy of his hand to cost to play. This gives other players the opportunity to call, which matches the bet a player has placed. A call is sometimes called a "flat", which is a term that has come into familiarity far more recently than the others. This development of the term flat, is just one example of the semiosis within the language of poker. An interesting gesture [[16]] is common in a player's decision to check, all poker players will recognize tapping the table with their hand as the equivalent to verbalizing the word "check". This is one form of gesticulant [[17]] non-verbal communication that is common at the poker table.

Often, poker hands have their own informal names which have evolved within the semiosphere. These hand names are derived from the image schema [[21]] represented by various pairs of cards. This is indicative of the Peircean philosophy of secondness [[46]], in which we see a relation between the visual signs, as well as numerical. Examples of this include, a pair of sevens recognized as "hockey sticks" or a pair of eights recognized as "snowmen", these

visual comparisons are made between the looks of a number, and a relationship to other similarities outside of the semiosphere [[3]].

Another interesting direct relationship we see is the iconicity [[20]] of poker chips, and their representation. These poker chips are used to imitate value to a player, and are often directly correlated to the amount of money a player has bought into a game for. They are used to place bets on a hand, without physically placing money on the table. Still, sometimes today cash games are played in which physical denominations are utilized, but this was seen more often in the older days of poker, now it is nearly an entirely chip represented game. ((2))

Poker Games

Overtime, throughout poker's increasing growth in popularity, we have seen the rise of Texas hold'em. This game grew to its immense popularity after the foundations for the games of draw and stud poker had existed for quite some time. This section is intended to highlight the similarities and differences between the two main categories of poker, Draw and Stud.

Draw poker begins by paying to play, you must supply an "ante" which is the term for the initial payment in order to receive cards from the dealer. This is a fairly stock-standard action required for any game of poker. Players who supply an ante are dealt 5 cards face down, and the dealer acts as the representamin [[44]] for the start of a betting round. The player to the left of the dealer is allowed to place the initial bets, and the others players follow suit. After bets are placed, players still in the game are allowed to discard their cards for replacements, in order to try and improve their hand . This is what is considered the draw. The draw is followed by a final betting round, and the remaining players reveal the cards. The highest hand wins. This is the initial poker structure in which many games are built off of. We see these conceptual metaphors [[4]] throughout all types of games, with similarities in antes, betting rounds, and hand rankings.

The main difference between Draw, and Stud poker is the visibility of opponents cards. ((7)) In draw poker, the only visible cards are those of your own and bets are placed blindly against your opponents. Yet, in Stud poker, there are a certain amount of cards which are dealt face up, for the entire table to see. This changes the information every single player has, and allows for different forms of hand representation [[45]].

Poker Hands

In order to begin to understand the hands behind poker games, it is important to understand the structure behind a deck of cards, as this is the code [[2]] in which the game is communicated under. A standard deck of playing cards consists of 52 cards, numbered 2-9, Jack, Queen, King, Ace. This is the essential syntagmatic [[62]] ranking of the cards, from lowest to highest value. These cards make up a single "suit", consisting of 13 cards. There are a total of four suits, Diamonds, Hearts, Spades, and Clubs. Cards in a different suit are paradigmatically [[35]] replaceable, therefore, a Jack of Diamonds, and a Jack of Hearts are considered to follow the same ranking. These ideas of paradigm, and syntagm seen in a deck of cards are structural

foundations to any game of poker. Generally speaking, the hand of the highest ranking wins a game of poker, but there are many variations which say otherwise.

The simplest form of a poker hand is what is considered a pair. This is holding two of the same number card, regardless of suit. Pairs are ranked against each other in the syntagmatic nature of the deck of cards, with 2's being the lowest pair, and Ace's the highest. Following a pair, is what is considered a two-pair. This is fairly self-explanatory, it is a hand which is built upon two-distinct pairs of cards. The holder of the highest ranked pair is the greater hand. The next hand ranking is a three of a kind, which is composed of three of the same valued cards. This is a considerably strong hand in any game type of poker.

As we move into more complex hands, the strength of hands also increases. There is a direct correlation between difficulty to build a hand, and the strength of said hand. Next up, we have a straight. Straights are built following a linear syntagmatic [[62]] code [[2]]. A straight is formed through five cards in a linear sequence. For example, 10-9-8-7-6, straights are then ranked against each other based on the highest valued card.

The next common poker hand is what is called a flush. A flush is a five-card hand which consists of any numerical cards that follow the same suit. Any five hearts, diamonds, clubs, or spades within one's hand creates a flush. For a hand to be considered a basic flush, it is not ordered.

Now we move to a full-house, which overtime has developed to go by the name of a "boat". Full-houses are created when a player maintains a combination of a three-of-a-kind and another pair. For example, a hand held AAKK is what is considered, "Aces full of kings".

Moving further in hand-strength, we arrive at a four-of-a-kind, which is simply put, a hand composed of four of the same numerically valued cards.

Finally, there is a straight flush and a royal flush. A straight flush is a combination of the straight and flush hands, and consists of five ordered cards all of the same suit. This is one of the rarest hands in the game and therefore one of the strongest to hold. The only hand to beat a normal straight flush, is a royal flush which is simply the highest ranked straight flush. It consists of Ace, King, Queen, Jack, 10 all of the same suit. The chances of a royal flush are 1 in 2.6 Million.

These are all of the hands seen in the wide variety of poker games at a card player's disposal. The entire structure of these games are built upon holding some form of these hands, and players place bets based on their perceived strength, often blindly against other players. It is an important characteristic of a good poker player to make correct decisions under conditions which lack information. Players will use various signs, gestures and narratives to attempt to decipher what hands other players are representing. This will be described later in the section entitled "Reading Poker Hands".

Poker Positions

Poker positions are an underrated but important part of the game. Each position at a table changes the viable hands a player is capable of playing, and understanding this immediately puts

certain players at an advantage. Each position at the table has a name which is based off of its location in relation to the dealer.

When speaking about poker positions, the dealer is the recognized as the representamen for the rest of the table, and each position is aptly named according to the dealer's position. Cards are dealt to the left of the dealer, and the first players to be dealt cards are considered early positions, while the last players to be dealt are considered late positions.

All player positions have a syntagmatic indexical relation with the dealer. The dealer position is considered “On the Button”, moving clockwise the positions are Small Blind, Big Blind, Under The Gun, followed by middle positions and the cutoff. The reason these positions are valued differently is due to betting order. Blind positions are required to place bets regardless of their cards, hence the symbolic relationship between their names and the actions they are required to take. Blinds enter the pot without knowledge of their cards. A player is considered Under The Gun because he is first to act, and has no knowledge of what other players plan to do at the table. This is considered one of the worst positions to hold at the table, and when a player bets from here they are expected to have a strong hand. Players sitting in a late position are said to have a distinct advantage because of the available information at the table at their time of action. If you are last to act, you are completely aware of what every other player has chosen to do with their first turn. ((7))

This is one aspect of poker that is important to study initially in order to begin to improve at the game. It is a simple step to take to gain an advantage over novice players, learning when cards are meant to be played within positions and when to fold them. After understanding the general structure of poker hands, positions are an easy next stepping stone.

Poker Narratives and Hand Playing

Alongside every poker hand should be some form of narrative and representation. A player should understand the context of the hand he holds and formulate a story to tell with it. This section will speak on the diachronic developments of a hand throughout the game, and the deconstruction of hands based on incomplete contextual knowledge.

The narrative of a poker hand is similar to the narrative of any story, you are creating a series of events in order to make your opponents believe you hold certain cards. This narrative does not necessarily mean you are holding a bluff, but if you have a strong hand it is often important to represent it that way. This will help you achieve the goal of any poker player, busting your opponents and making a profit. In a game full of weaker players, you may find table talk as an important place to fool your opponents and string along your narrative utilizing conative functions. [[3]] ((4)) The ability to persuade other players with functions of speech could prove to be valuable in a home game. However, against well-respected players, actions like this are hardly as functional. When playing against strong players, your narrative must stay infallible or else you will find yourself easily exploited.

As you progress into further betting rounds, there are certain actions which only make sense based on your previous decisions, and diverging from these standards will leave your play exploitable by a knowledgeable player. Diverging from a narrative is an easy way to see you marked as a fish, or a sucker.

The Art Of Bluffing

Bluffing is historically one of the most well known aspects of poker, and to many, one of the biggest reasons they play the game. In actuality, bluffs should be far more strategic than the novice player may first believe. A good player bluffs far and few between, but when they do it is often very difficult to decipher the truth.

The goal of a bluff is making your opponent fold a hand which is better than the one you hold. Successfully bluffing is often based on your representation at a table overtime. If your players know you well, it may make it more difficult to bluff. Yet, for example if you often bet with strong hands, you could potentially slip in a bet with a weak hand, and your opponents may believe your strong representation.

It is important to recognize that bluffing is not analogous to lying, and it is often involved with many aspects of truth to make your bluff appear real, and stronger. ((7)) Bets are not viewed in a synchronic manner, and this holds true when betting bluffs. They are always a part of a narrative, and if you want your opponents to believe you, they must fit the narrative. This is a common trend throughout any poker hand. Representing involves taking particular action in order to make your opponent believe you have a particular holding, this is detrimental to a bluff. It is also important to ensure your bluff is supported by other conveyable information at the table, such as visible cards.

Reading Poker Hands

Reading poker hands is what marries the poker mathematician, along with the poker psychologist. A truly good player is a combination of both, the most profitable kind of poker is one in which you are truly able to read your opponents. Humans have mannerisms, some which are subconscious, and to someone trying to read a poker hand, these are absolutely your friend. This section will highlight some poker “tells” and the study of humans natural signs [[31]], gestures [[16]], kinesics [[25]] , and oculesics [[32]] and how they lead to some players' massive advantages at a table. I will also talk about reading poker hands through the general synchronic [[60]] and diachronic [[11]] developments of hands throughout various betting rounds in a game. You will begin to understand how some hands make more sense for an opponent to hold, in comparison to others as a hand progresses and more cards are visible.

Some great poker players are known for their ability to play the other players at the table as opposed to the cards. Poker is a game which can easily evoke strong emotions, and these emotions to an untrained player will lead to subconscious actions. When studying players, you

may often notice forms of ticks or repetitive mannerisms which can indicate whether a player may have a weak or a strong hand. Caro's Book of Poker Tells highlights many of these tells. One great example is the natural sign [[31]] of nervousness. Often a player will tremble and display signs of nervousness when he is holding a very strong hand ((8)). Remembering simple mannerisms like this can lead to massive advantages against ill-knowledged players. Another tell which Caro highlights as a feature of a **dangerous** player deals with their tendencies to make eye contact with other players. He insists, a dangerous player will often look away from other players, as opposed to a weaker player, who believes he is showing strength by staring into the eyes of his opponents. This is just scratching the surface of the countless signs players reveal at a table, and a study of such mannerisms could be nearly endless. Players may also reveal their hands with forms of communication, they may release information through an emotive function [[13]] of speech, leading you to read them as weak or powerful. This could be recognized by the tonation of their voice, or emphasis on certain words.

Hand-reading is a process which takes place both synchronically and diachronically, as in you can attempt to place your opponents on a given hand at a certain point in time, but their possibilities of hands also evolve throughout the rounds played. In its simplest form, hand-reading begins with trying to understand why a player makes a decision to raise, call or fold. There are many factors which can affect what a player holds, including table position and bankroll. When you see a player who is consistently betting/raising a hand as rounds progress, you can assume the hand he holds is strong in comparison to the cards shown on the board. This allows you to put him on a strong range of hands. Whereas someone who has bet, but then slows down as more cards come out, may not necessarily be on as strong of a range. As poker is an extremely complicated game, this is a very simplistic surface-level understanding of how to read hands. You should always be thinking about how a player's hand looks currently, and how it is capable of progressing as more cards are made available in later betting rounds. A simple example of this is if a player has 2 hearts in his hand, and another 2 hearts are shown on the board, this is not necessarily a strong hand at the moment. But, if there are more cards to draw, he has the potential to make a flush, which is one of the strongest hands to hold at the table. This is a prime difference between a synchronic ((60)) hand analysis, and a diachronic ((11)) hand analysis.

Conclusion

In this paper, I related the culture of poker and its structure to the world of semiotics, making ties for the reader to understand poker through a semiotic perspective. The reader is introduced to some of the major semiotic ideas, such as syntagm and paradigm, which are essential building blocks of poker's semiosphere. The semiotic ideas of nonverbal communication are also discussed as an essential part of poker, and the culture behind it. Semiotic narratives are decipherable in nearly any domain of reference, and this paper will help highlight the metaphorical relations between domains in a semiotic lens. Poker is a game which

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is filled with signs, and it is a common saying that every action at a poker table conveys information. Viewing the game from a semiotic perspective gives another lens to see the truth in this statement, and is a valuable insight for analysis and improvement.