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The construction of meanings in relation to language and religion: a study into the Mahabharata

Abstract: The current article is an investigation into language in a narrative religious text, specifically how the semiotic resource of language is used to construct meanings in relation to language and religion. The religious text chosen for the study comes from two retold versions of the world’s largest story, “the most cherished of all Indian classics, the Mahabharata” (Dharma 1998: 1). The article will attempt to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the elements of generic/schematic structure in the text? (2) How are the elements of generic/schematic structure related to language? (3) How is language used to bring out the various religious themes in the texts? The generic/schematic structure shows that the story chapters appear to have been organized the same way. The discourse phases are signaled by two incidents, two complications, two reactions and two resolutions in the story. Ideational meanings are embodied in both congruent and metaphoric ways. Catenative verbs are used to form a chain of events. Mood and comment adjuncts are used to provide interpersonal meanings of appraisal and judgment. Textual adjuncts are used to provide thematic prominence and contribute to the semantic continuity of the text whereas circumstantial adjuncts of time, place and manner serve to enhance the meanings expressed by choice of process types and participants. In the story certain actions acquire symbolic meanings. It is through these symbolic meanings that religious, cultural and spiritual ideologies come to be construed. Examples of symbolic meanings explicated from the texts are the depiction of Ganga’s divinity, the curses and blessings of a sage and how religious merit is obtained. Detailed analysis of the role of language in expressing meanings related to sacrifice, renunciation and the fulfillment of vows in religious discourse may enhance cross-cultural understanding and may be of interest to language practitioners and spiritualists.

Keywords: generic/schematic structure, Mahabharata, narrative Systemic Functional Linguistics

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