

# Semiotic Approach to Globalization: Living in a World of Glocal Things

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## Abstract

This paper is an effort to discuss the concept of glocalization from a semiotic point of view. In order to carry out a semiotic analysis of globalization or glocalization, first globalization needs to be defined from a semiotic perspective. Therefore, first an explanation of globalization and glocalization in semiotic terms is provided. Some believe the ongoing process in the world cannot be best described as globalization and it should be called glocalization. According to this approach, the ongoing universal process is a combination of globalization and localization leading to new diversities, not uniformity. With a structuralist approach to semiotics a better understanding is gained on how glocalization may affect the world in which we are living. After a theoretical argument on the semiotic definition of globalization and glocalization, the results of a number of in-depth interviews with people who have experienced living in two different cultures will be analyzed in a qualitative method to provide further insight on how glocalization might work.

**Keywords:** code, globalization, glocalization, semiotics, typology.

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## Introduction: The Semiotic Meaning of Globalization

The exceptional growth of communication technologies and the emergence of the global communication industry have made people far apart in the world into “neighbors”. This has led to the convergence of cultures and cultural values of these new neighbors (Mele, 1996). This has encouraged many studies on globalization.

This neighborhood has been named “alternative citizenship” (Turner, 1993), “alternative culture” and a “new co-existence” (Ameli, 2003) has brought about many new experiences and a vast freedom of choice for people.

This “continual space” (Ameli, 2004) has brought together very different cultures very quickly. Some arrived at the conclusion that the world, under the process of globalization is going towards uniformity. In fact, many have seen globalization as the opposite of localization, through which a uniform culture is replacing past ethnic cultures.

According to Barber (1992) “tribalism” and “globalism” are the two main fundamental principles of this age which are unavoidably in conflict with each other. Therefore, as we are moving towards weaker national borders and a shrunk world, we are conquering tribalism (or localism) in favor of globalism. However, an opposite opinion exists which believes globalization is not a one-way trend, it is fading local resources. Based on this view the global trend might even strengthen or *reconstruct* local production.

Discussing the meaning of *glocalization*, Ronald Robertson (1995) rejects the idea that globalization is forcing the world towards uniformity. He believes that globalization is not a process in which locality is set aside; rather globalization and localization are two synchronic, complementary and internally linked processes. He argues that defining globalization as an absolute uniform-making process and then placing this uniform making in contrast to distinct making is a mistake that leads to a wrong understanding of globalization.

According to this belief, globalization is not essentially in contrast to local affairs (though these two come into conflict with each other), rather what is usually a local affair is fundamentally part of global affairs and these two in cooperation with each other, create diverse cultures which are sometimes stronger than local cultures.

Even if we assume that globalization has created a “single text” which is being sent to the entire world in a standard fashion, due to the existence of “different contexts” whether historical, cultural, social or economic in different parts of the world, the result of globalization under different contexts will not be the same (Ameli, 2004).

This study is after a better understanding of the issue, from a semiotic perspective. It aims to see whether or not studying the semiotic meaning of globalization and glocalization can help us better understand these processes. To contemplate globalization/glocalization from a semiotic perspective first it is necessary to see how these concepts can be understood in semiotic terms.

### **The World, a Large Code**

In semiotics, a language is seen as a code that is composed of a number of elements and structures (Chandler, 2007). Elements of a language are the words, and the structure is made by the grammatical rules that define the relations between the words (Nöth, 1995). This is not limited to spoken languages. Other sign systems are also seen as codes, consisting of elements and rules/structures (Gramigna, 2013).

From this perspective, all the components and structures in the entire world is a code. There are rules that define the relationships, positions and functions of these components (Holdcroft, 1991). What allows a semiotician to see the world as a code is discussed below.

The nature of the world from the perspective of a semiotician and other social scientists is very different from the nature of the world from a physicist or a chemist. For example, a physicist sees the world as the materials and constant physical laws that make it exist and work regardless of humans. Even if people never appeared on earth, these laws would exist.

Semiotics is not the study of materials, regardless of human involvement. Semiotics in fact deals with signification, and signification deals with meaning and whenever meaning comes into play, an intelligent mind is involved (Lucy, 2001). According to this view, the identity of anything that exists in the world is understood from a human point of view. Significations are formed and understood in the mind and, the world is made up of things and concepts that humans see or know and those things and concepts are what humans understand them to be.

In this view, the world in its entirety is a code, composed of elements and rules. The elements are all the 'things' and 'concepts' that humans know or use. The rules explain the functions, positions and meanings of the elements and define the way they are in relation with other existing elements.

This paper aims to define the changes known as globalization, based on this perspective. Obviously, this paper is not concerned about the reasons and tools of globalization, such as the growth of international trade, technological innovations in instant communication, etc. rather,

it discusses the end result of these processes. There are two points to consider regarding elements and their possible changes.

1. When the world is defined as a series of elements, both objects and concepts should be taken into consideration. The elements that shape the world are both observable elements and elements shaped in the mind. As far as a human observer is concerned the world consists of things like computers, the sea, pizzas, and also concepts such as fear, democracy and power.
2. The changes in the world as defined from the perspective of an intelligent audience can be both cognitive and/or behavioral. In other words, the existing objects and concepts in a society can be studied from two perspectives.

The cognitive level is concerned with what people think, know or understand. At this level, one would ask questions such as: does a person know what a pizza is? What does he/she think about democracy?

At the behavioral level one would be concerned with people's actions and behaviors regarding the objects and concepts. In this level, one would deal with questions such as: "Has someone ever had a pizza or is it a part of his eating habit?", or "Has democracy affected the lives of the people in the society?"

Based on what was said, the world can be seen as a complex combination of *perceptions* and *behaviors* regarding different *objects* and *concepts*. Therefore, any changes that occur across the world (including the changes due to globalization) would be necessarily due to changes in these factors.

According to this view, the changes in any part of the world can be due to any of the following changes:

1. New objects or concepts may be added to the existing elements or some of the existing elements may be lost or abandoned. New machines are invented; new concepts are created and new words are coined. Also, machines and tools get outdated and concepts are forgotten over time. If the world is a combination of things and concepts (altogether: elements), then it is continuously changing due to changes in the number of elements that make it. The increase and decrease of elements can be also a result of communication with other nations; a phenomenon that has accelerated due to globalization.
2. A Change in the rules related to these elements. The way we use things, the way we think about different concepts and the way things and concepts are understood or perceived related to other elements change all the time. These perceptions and

usages are defined as the grammatical rules that define the role of the elements of the world code. The code is under continuous reform due to the changes in these grammatical rules.

Globalization has resulted in both of the above-mentioned types of alterations. Objects and concepts have constantly been brought from different parts of the world and have become part of the available elements in new areas. The transfer of elements occurs both on cognitive and behavioral levels. People from different parts of the world get to learn about different clothing fashions, eating habits, as well as other political systems (cognitive change) and these elements (clothing fashions, eating habits and political systems) undergo change (behavioral change).

Globalization is not equal to the development of transportation, international trade, increase in human immigration and technological breakthroughs in the field of information and communication. These developments can be the origins of globalization. However, if human immigration to different parts of the world and communication technology innovations had not been followed by changes in culture, knowledge and the behavior of people, globalization would not have been the phenomena it is today.

It is also obvious that globalization is not absolute in terms of *spread* and *intensity*. Globalization is relative in terms of spread, meaning that those who speak about the world getting more similar everywhere do not mean absolutely everywhere. One may be alarmed about the results of globalization only by seeing a similarity between the large cities of different countries.

In addition, globalization is relative in terms of intensity. If only 20% of people's behavior and perceptions in different parts of the world change to be similar, we may already be warned about the effects of globalization. Having said that, for the sake of simplicity, in the following argument globalization is dealt with as if it is an absolute concept.

If globalization is explained using the changes in the elements that make the world and the rules that define the relations between them, *glocalization* (Ritzer, 2003) must be also definable using the elements and the rules.

### **Glocalization from the Perspective of Codes**

During the process of globalization, effects or messages originated in a part of the world may influence other parts. These forces may change the *elements* (for example by introducing new objects to the people of a society), or the *rules* (for example by changing the function of a product or the meaning of a social behavior).

Assume an object used in a society is introduced into several other societies and the new object is adopted by the receiving societies with the entire rules related to it. In such case one can assume that perfect globalization has taken place. This would be the case, if for instance pizza is exported from Italy to other parts of the world and from then on it is cooked in the same shape and taste everywhere, and also the cultures, behaviors and perceptions associated with eating it are identical.

But perfect globalization may not happen, in case one of the following issues arise:

1. Different parts of the world adopt the element, but change it (for instance by cooking pizza with a different shape or taste)
2. Different parts of the world adopt the rules differently (for instance the culture around serving and eating the food develops differently).

The former Soviet Union tried to portray the *Hammer and Sickle Emblem* as a symbol of supporting ordinary workers and bringing justice to the masses. The symbol was transformed into a global symbol, perhaps partly due to the economic and military power of the former Soviet Union. But did all people perceive the symbol in the same manner?

This paper is not to answer this question from a historical perspective or by passing a judgment. However, assume that in parts of the world the symbol was perceived as a symbol of the freedom of the oppressed against capitalism, and in other parts as a sign of dictatorship. With this assumption, is the hammer and sickle emblem a global symbol? Yes, because it is known globally. At the same time, is the symbol local? Yes, because it is defined locally: An element which is both global and local is called *glocal*.

The Soviet Union's hammer and sickle emblem, while it hadn't been introduced to the people of the world, was a local symbol. Someone who did not know the symbol would probably pass a wall painted with it every day and never see it. When the symbol was introduced internationally, it became a global symbol in terms of shape and after that people could *read* it. However, a symbol can be called global only if people everywhere interpret it in a uniform way and even have the same feelings about it.

Similar cases can happen regarding all types of elements including both objects and concepts. The culture of using bread in Iran is different from the West. In Iranian families, at breakfast time, usually one of the family members goes out to the nearest bakery to buy traditional Iranian bread hot from the oven. In many cases the bread is brought home to be eaten with cheese and sugared tea.

Now, one of the products imported from the West to Iran is the

French Baguette bread. There is a tendency to see the baguette as an item brought to the Iranian lifestyle by globalization. In fact, this is correct to some extent since the type of bread has brought some of its *sandwich functions* with it as well. However, consider another use of this type of bread in Iran: members of a family wake up for breakfast, the husband goes out to buy hot baguettes and returns to have it with cheese and sugared tea with his wife and children. The baguette that is consumed in this way is global only in terms of the physical shape (element). However, in terms of the function and role it plays in the context of the Iranian culture, it is local: Hence it is a glocal baguette.

This is the main point about the semiotic meaning of glocalization. In order for a thing or a concept to become global, first it needs to be seen in different parts of the world; that is it should be placed as an element in the codes of the different parts of the world. In this sense, the object or concept has acquired a global *form*. However, the entry of an element into the cognition and behavior of the people of the world does not mean that it is the same all over the world with its social, political, economic and cultural implications. The perceptions, uses and functions of an element can sometimes be so different in various parts of the world, that it can be considered a completely different thing in each part of the world.

Under the second scenario, elements emerge from different parts of the world and become part of the code in other parts. These elements, however, when placed in the context of local elements and rules, form new combinations and the rules governing them are also shaped differently. This process is glocalization which is “composed of globalization in terms of form and localization in terms of content” (Beyer, 2007).

This paper does not aim to generalize major global processes. However, evidence shows that the current changes in the world are possibly closer to the second scenario (glocalization) rather than the first (globalization):

Globalization in terms of form is fundamentally much easier than globalization in terms of content. For an object or concept to be globalized in terms of form, it is only necessary for it to become visible to the people of the world. Then people may want to import, produce or use it. *Seeing* other parts of the world and *importing* things and concepts, are the two characteristics of our global world today. However, importing things and concepts with all their contextual properties does not seem to be that easy for the reasons below:

1. The media, which are the central tools of globalization, have a much greater capacity in introducing the form and shape of objects and concepts to the people of the world. However, they

have far less capacity in conveying complexities and meanings. The media can easily promote various products and concepts such as *freedom* and *welfare* to the entire world but they are unable or at least very weak in conveying the complexities and social and cultural issues related to these issues and the deep or contextual meanings associated with them.

2. Societies and different socio-political systems resist fundamental changes. In each social, political and cultural system, there are powerful institutions that resist change, specially if change threatens their values and interests. These institutions are not limited to governmental and non-governmental agencies. Each person has a series of values, beliefs and interests which are hard to change. This is the idea psychologists explain by the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962). Unlike fundamental changes, just introducing new elements to people far away seem to be the easiest task nowadays.
3. The limitation of economic, geographical and environmental resources does not allow human beings to easily change their lifestyle to the lifestyles they see in other parts of the world.

The Chinese language has a unique characteristic, which if looked at in an allegorical way can show the identity of a glocal concept. The people of the vast Chinese land have a common written language however people from different parts of the country read the same language differently, meaning that the Chinese language is uniform in writing but different in reading (Kane, 2006). It means that people from two different parts of China may be able to write to each other but unable to speak to each other in person. Glocalized features have one form but people of each part of the world read and perceive them differently.

### **A Preliminary Investigation**

Based on the above argument, a semiotic definition of globalization can be presented as bellow:

Globalization is a process in which effects from one or several parts of the world influence other parts and affect the way people *think* or *act* regarding specific *things* or *concepts*, and as a result, the elements (things and concepts) are shaped or reshaped in a similar way in all those areas.

In a similar way, glocalization can be also defined as below:

Glocalization is a process in which effects from one or several parts of the world influence other parts of the world and affect the way people *think* or *act* regarding specific *things* or *concepts*, and as a result the



elements (things and concepts) are shaped or reshaped differently in different areas.

From the definitions above, the dominant process in the world is likely to be glocalization and not globalization. This does not mean that the world is not changing. The world is changing, but the outcomes of the changes in different areas seem to be different from each other. Having said that, to assess global processes in a large scale and examine if the main ongoing process is diversification or similarization is beyond the scope of this work.

In the next section the possible processes of globalization or glocalization are examined with more detailed ways in which they may happen. For this purpose, a combination of in-depth interviews to gather data as well as further theoretical analysis are used. People who had the experience of living in two different cultures were interviewed and asked to list and explain existing glocal phenomena in the cultures they experienced. In addition, a glocal or global phenomenon was theoretically explored in an effort to offer a more detailed typology of how globalization and/or glocalization may take place. Finally, the examples of glocalization and globalization gathered through the interviews were classified into the categories offered in the theoretical discussion.

## Interviews

People who have the experience of living in two different cultures for several years must have witnessed and be aware of phenomena that are similar or different in the two cultures. These people were assumed sources for the preliminary data needed for this study. In-depth interviews were conducted with a dozen of them. The interviewees were mainly people who lived in Iran and the West. Among the interviewees, there were both Iranians who live in the West and Westerners who live in Iran.

Obviously, the interviewees are not experts in the field. So, an explanation was provided as to what phenomena the study is looking for, i.e. things or concepts that existed in both cultures and were understood or used similarly or differently. Some examples were given (for instance the bread example used in the first section of this paper) in order to help the interviewees, have a better understanding. Also, their attention was shifted to different fields by asking them to think about different things such as clothing, food, cultural events, concepts, etc.

A list of things and concepts with the explanations why they seemed to be different in different places were gathered. Then, the list was analyzed to omit repeated items, or ones that were too similar or overlapping.









## Typology of glocalization

Through the process of globalization and/or glocalization effects from a part of the world influence other parts and make changes to the existing elements (things, concepts) in those areas. As argued before, these forces may affect the elements or their structural relations with other elements.

Having this in mind a typology of globalization/glocalization was developed by trying to list all possible combinations between local and foreign forms and structures. Assume a foreign product is imported into the country for the first time. This encounter may lead to a number of conditions such as the following:

- The new element is adopted without replacing any existing elements.
- The new element is adopted, but leads to the demise of an element in the receiving culture.
- The new element is adopted by the receiving culture and forms new phenomena. This may lead to the creation of different phenomena depending on the way the new combination takes place.

A more detailed typology is presented below. When a foreign item (object or concept) is introduced to a society, any of the following cases may happen.

1		Foreign adopted, local kept
2		Foreign adopted, local abandoned
3		Foreign adopted, used in a local context
4		Local used in foreign ways (adoption of structures)
5		New item created (e.g. through fusion), used in a local context
6		Local items used in a new context (creation of glocal structures)
7		Foreign item used in a new context (creation of glocal structures)
8		New item used in a new context (new items and new structures created)

The eight categories seem to be the possible situations that may result from an encounter between a society and new elements. Examples provided by the interviewees were tried to be classified according to the above typology.

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1 Foreign adopted, local kept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Many countries adopted fast food restaurants while they kept their local restaurants.</li><li>- Iranians use Western ties as an item of clothing.</li></ul>
2 Foreign adopted, local abandoned	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- In Iran Santa Claus (known as Papa Noel) is increasingly accepted in the culture while the country's new year character called Haji Firooz is losing significance.</li><li>- Using computers and many other technologies have replaced traditional systems of doing things.</li></ul>
3 Foreign adopted, used in local context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Many marriage-related ceremonies, traditions or concepts such as baby shower, wedding shower, Christmas party, bridesmaid/groomsmaid are imported in Iran but they are modified according to the needs and interests of Iranians.</li><li>- In Iran cocktails and drinks such as mojito are imported or made but they are modified and usually drunk free of alcohol.</li><li>- Food items such as baguettes are increasingly used in the context of Iranian food system.</li><li>- The concept of democracy is foreign to many countries that imported it from the West. In Iran the concept of democracy has been used and implemented in the context of local needs and interests. A similar argument can be made for other political concepts such as independence of powers.</li></ul>

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Local used in foreign  
4 ways (adoption of  
structures)

- Some traditional types of food in Iran are served based on Western fast food culture. Dizi as an old traditional food that had its own serving environment is nowadays served like a fast food. It can be delivered to people's homes in changed dishes modified according to the needs of the new type of serving.

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New item created (e.g.  
5 through fusion), used  
in local context

An example can be new types food that are, for instance, made by the combination of local ingredients (such as eggs) and imported ingredients (such as pizza cheese) and may be considered new types of food. However, they are used within the local eating culture.  
An example is carrot jam which is unfamiliar to many Western people.

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Local items used in a  
6 new context (creation  
of glocal structures)

- An example mentioned by the interviewees is Pizza Ghormeh-Sabzi that is the combination of a pizza and a traditional local food. However, the food is served as a pizza in its fast-food serving culture.  
- Sandwiches and fast food restaurants were imported to Iran. Nowadays many types of local sandwiches can be seen in Iran's fast food restaurants, such as *brain and tongue* sandwich.

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Foreign item used in  
7 new context (creation  
of glocal structures)

The examples mentioned in the interviews did not include a case that we could understand as falling under this category.

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New item used in new  
8 context (new items  
and new structures  
created)

The examples mentioned in the interviews did not include a case that we could understand as falling under this category.

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## Conclusion

This paper attempted to offer a perspective on the issue of globalization that provides a better analysis on global and local concepts and how they are formed. Whether a phenomenon is global, local or glocal can be examined by its different manifests and latent aspects. In the first section of the paper the concepts of globalization and glocalization were defined in semiotic terms and attention was given to their different layers. In the second section, the different ways in which these different layers may be affected to create glocal phenomena and new diversities were investigated.

One should bear in mind that the eight categories cannot be classified based on the ones that lead to globalization and ones leading to glocalization. The reason was explained in the first part of the paper. In fact, any of the eight categories can lead to globalization if the end result of the process is identical in the different parts of the world. Also, any of the eight types can lead to glocalization if the end results of the processes are dissimilar in different areas. That being said, at the theoretical level, categories three to eight are about the synthesis of local and non-local items or contexts and those cases are more likely to result in glocalization, and not globalization.

The experiences of the people who were interviewed showed that when people encounter things or concepts from other societies, they may adopt and use them with no obvious change or they may adopt and change them. They may also adopt them and use them in different ways or within different settings. Moreover, when a foreign thing or concept is adopted, local objects or concepts may remain unchanged or they may change or be used in different ways or within different settings. The paper first presented a theoretical discussion aimed at clarifying how globalization and glocalization may occur and then gathered evidence showing that globalization and glocalization actually happen in all of the abovementioned ways.

As a result, one can predict that the outcome of the ongoing global changes would not be the same in different locations. If Iranians take their most traditional type of food (Ghormeh-Sabzi) and make a new type of Pizza, people from other parts of the world may do similar things with their own traditional food and modern ways of cooking. The outcome would be (1) different from what existed in that location; (2) different from what was introduced by the foreign source; and (3) most probably different from the glocal outcomes created in other locations.

Now, judging where the world is actually headed would only be possible through studies that can show which trends are dominant in

the ongoing world processes. The current qualitative study has provided a framework based on which quantitative works can be performed in order to show the nature and the outcomes of the dominant global and glocal changes in the world we are living in.

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