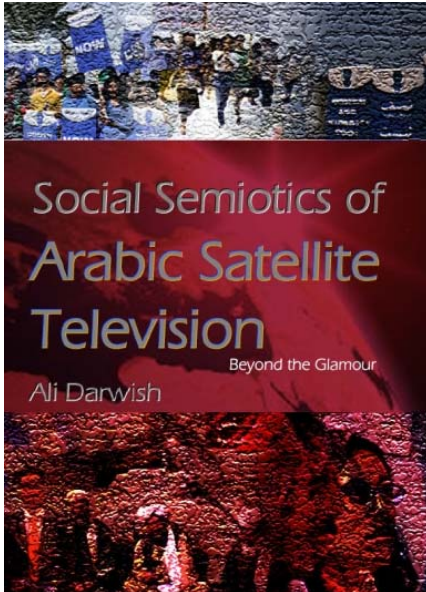


## Expostulation and Reply: A Social Semiotic Axe to Grind?

Ali Darwish

*Reply to Hania Nashef's review of Social Semiotics of Arabic Satellite  
Television: Beyond the Glamour.*



Reviewers are usually people, who would have been, poets, historians, biographers, if they could. They have tried their talents at one thing or another and have failed; therefore they turn critic.

— Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772 – 1834)

I do not normally respond to book reviews, positive or negative, but I will make an exception in this case. Both author and book have been misrepresented in this less than one-page review<sup>1</sup> of 394 pages of a well-researched doctoral text, and it is important to set the record straight here and correct some of the reviewer's misunderstandings of the purpose, thesis and approach of the book, refute the reviewer's egregious claims and tackle the ethical questions which this collegial review raises.

At first glance, the review looks positive, and any author and publisher would be thrilled by such a "positive" review. Not until you reach the sour end, where the reviewer makes a series of unsupported claims, which I will refute one by one later on. But a second critical reading of the review within the framework of social semiotics discourse analysis reveals hidden, insalubrious messages. First, the reviewer claims that the author "provides in-depth analysis of *what he terms* social semiotics" [emphasis added]. This could be taken to mean that the reviewer is not

convinced that the “in-depth analysis” conforms to social semiotics or that she is not aware that there is an established discipline called “social semiotics” that is not the invention of the author. In either case, the implication is daunting. Teachers of writing skills and professional writers know that qualified statements leave room for interpretation; they connote an attitude, raise suspicion and cast doubts about the credibility of the work being reviewed. While this technique is commendable in expository essays to avoid absolute statements and avoid running the risk of logical fallacies, in book reviews the language is referential and precise, leaving no room for misinterpretation or dubious attitudes towards the work or the author.

The reviewer conveniently overlooks to inform the reader that the author of the book is an established scholar in media and communication, in addition to his specialization in translation and that this is not his first book. In case she did not know (however doubtful) there is a list of publications right after the flyleaf listing at least 15 books by the author. She also fails to tell the reader that the author holds a PhD in Media and Communication, a piece of information that is crucially relevant to the book review and the information given to the reader to establish the credentials of the author. Conversely, she is right on the mark telling the reader about her own credentials in teaching news-writing, cultural studies and journalism in her bio data in the footnote. Yet again she conveniently fails to tell the reader in the same space that her PhD from University of Kent is in fact in English literature and has nothing to do with media, journalism or communication. An oversight? One would be quite naïve to believe it was. Obfuscation of facts? More likely! In an academic world that hangs so much importance on paper qualifications and rank, this is more than an oversight. Of course, one is not ashamed of being an Assistant Professor of Arabic and Translation Studies at such a prestigious institution. By the same token, a critical reader of the review would ask the valid question about the credibility of someone talking about media issues from outside the media circles.

## **REVIEW OR CRITICISM**

It is not clear whether the intention of the reviewer was to write a book review or a criticism. This is a problem that many unseasoned reviewers face and the distinction is all too important if the work is to be done justice. Apparently, the reviewer does not know the difference. I will tell you why. Asked about her intention after the review was published, she could not tell me. When I explained to her the two types of review, she claimed it was a descriptive review, but the text we have at hand does not

meet the requirements of a descriptive review. As Hooper (2010) reminds us, a descriptive review is broader, more encompassing and less specific than criticism, which has a specific focus and a concentration on one and usually one quality.<sup>2</sup> When she was told the difference, she changed her mind claiming again that it was criticism. When she was challenged again, she was caught in her own egregious claim and had no answer.<sup>3</sup>

Assuming that she knew what type of review she was writing, ironically, in her rush to find fault with the book, the reviewer falls prey to her own irrationality and rash generalizations. She claims that the author “at times tends to generalize; in addition, the book has factual inconsistencies”. She does that without producing a shred of evidence to support her claims. The reviewer seems to have one version of the truth; her own confined reality. Challenged about the so-called “factual inconsistencies”, she cited *ex post facto* one trivial example that did not conform to her own gospel of the truth in the historical account of Arabic television. This seems to be her principal gripe with the book. But as I argue, her claim is unsuccessful. It is her word against the word of the author. And one need go no further than the list of her modest credentials as critic and author.

### **THE MYTH OF GENERALIZATION**

There is a widespread myth among starry-eyed academics that generalization is a taboo in research. But they invariably confuse valid generalizations, which are the ultimate goal of research, with rash generalizations that are not based on observed patterns and phenomena. Most intellectual endeavours start with observation of a specific phenomenon or event, and generalizations are then made based on such observation. Generalizations would lead to extrapolations from sample populations or specific case studies depending on the data and type of research. Let’s face it! Our reviewer does not seem to be aware of this basic process of research. Before rushing to condemn the work in such a hasty and shoddy manner, the reviewer should have examined the presuppositions of the so-called generalizations. She owes it to the reader of the review if not to the work itself.

### **EGO ABOVE CONTENT AND THE ILLUSION OF PERFECTION**

Most amateur book reviewers focus on form above content. In our colleague’s case, focus on form trivialities and confusing proofreading with organizational structure of the book places ego above both form and content, despite the fact that the book has an errata page glued to the

inside of the back cover and the fact that I had drawn her attention to the occasional typos when I gave her the book. But this is not surprising in a culture that places more emphasis on glossy publications with very little substance (see Darwish 2010). The tendency to expect books with “zero-defect” proofs is an illusion that many inexperienced writers and even book reviewers suffer from. In over 38 years of working as a technical writer, information designer and documentation engineer in more than 25 international organizations, and a personal library of over 4000 books, I have developed a hobby of collecting defective books published by the largest and most prestigious publishing companies worldwide that have several editors, typesetters and proof-readers working on one book at a time. Most publishers understand that the process of book production is a human activity that is never perfect. Just-in-time and good-enough approaches have been adopted by many organizations in the last thirty years and despite the advances in automation of many manual tasks, essential work remains human-driven. Only recently, I bought a book that had been reproduced from a scanned library copy, marked with handwritten reader comments and annotations. Does that detract from the value of the book?

Yet our colleague’s claim that the book “could have benefitted from better proof-reading, which would have made it stand better as a unit rather than independent chapters without clear transitions” demonstrates inexperience in information design and totally ignores the stated plan of the author. This is what I say in the preface to the book:

The six chapters that follow in this book tackle a range of interlocking social semiotic themes. Each chapter discusses a specific aspect of Arabic satellite television.

What does that tell the reader? The book structure delivers on that promise. This is a nonfiction book, and spoon-feeding the reader was not part of the design; yet the reviewer approaches the book as a fiction or a novel that is supposed to take the reader from one chapter to the next. It is a basic principle in book reviews that all criticism should be backed up by examples. Sadly, our reviewer fails miserably in that respect. Cutting through the reviewer’s pomposity and condescension of expert pretence, how would have proofreading made the book stand better as a unit? Those in the know know what proofreading involves. It is the last stage in book production to read the printer’s proofs to detect and mark errors before publication. It is an advanced stage in book production and does not deal with the organizational structures of the book or chapters in a book.

Whether it is a descriptive/analytical review or a criticism, the reviewer fails to tell the reader about the thesis and topics of the book and the reasons for the claim that the book contains “independent chapters without clear transitions”. The reader walks away from this book review with little knowledge about the content of the book, how many chapters it consists of, what topics or themes each chapter covers, what hypothesis the author posits, who the intended readers of the book are, and whether the book delivered what the author promised on the outset, and so on.

## **THE ETHICAL QUESTION OF REVIEWING A COLLEAGUE’S PUBLISHED WORK**

Interestingly, of all the books produced in the last 12 months about Arabic satellite television, our colleague here chooses to review the book of a new colleague in her university. While the reader should not expect the reviewer to sugar-coat her review and negative comments are expected; in some cases welcomed if they are valid, genuine and backed up by examples, the review should not be a stage for the reviewer’s ego tripping at the expense of the book, its author and the readers. By the same token, it is rather surprising that the editor of the journal published the review at all. Both the reviewer and the editor are colleagues of the author and work in the same faculty. This raises a serious, valid question about the ethics and motives of publishing the review.

As I observe elsewhere (Darwish, 2010), academic collegiality forbids colleagues to review books written by other colleagues within the same institution, or worse still, within the same faculty. Whether it is a positive or negative review, one has to view such a review with suspicion, no matter what the declared intentions of the reviewer may be. Reviewing the work of a colleague who works in the same institution constitutes a **conflict of interest** and calls into question the credibility and objectivity of the review. To avoid conflict of interest, high-impact journals do not allow reviewers to review the work of authors who work in the same institution. Announcing to the reader that both author and reviewer work in the same institution is not enough to clear the journal or reviewer from the charge of conflict of interest, real or perceived. The organizational relationships between author and reviewer play a critical role in the reviewer’s evaluation of a colleague’s work and in how the review is perceived by the readers. In this connection, the Code of Ethics of the University of Southern California for example, classifies reviewing a colleague’s paper as a more insidious form of conflict of interest, along with power differentials, insider or privileged information and student-mentor issues.<sup>4</sup>

The most outrageous justification given is that the review was intended to promote the book. Authors and publishers know exactly that a negative review certainly does not do that. Beneath the ostensibly positive comments and silent platitudes run deeper motives and intentions and a subtext of collegial rivalry. It is similar to saying “this woman is gorgeous, but her nose is too big”, or “this bodybuilder’s body is perfect, but his head is too small”. Would the reader want to buy the book “in spite these flaws”? Those in marketing communication know very well the impact of surreptitiously induced negativity on consumer behaviour.

While it is unfortunate that one has to respond to criticism by a colleague in the same institution, injury must be repelled; and the reader must remember who cast the first stone.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> which you can read on <http://www.gmj-me.com/>

<sup>2</sup> See Hooper, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> The reviewer came to my office to explain why she did the review in the manner she did. Remember, we both inhabit the same faculty building.

<sup>4</sup>

[http://www.usc.edu/admin/provost/oprs/private/docs/oprs/pnp/Policies\\_and\\_Procedures\\_Draft\\_copy\\_10106.pdf](http://www.usc.edu/admin/provost/oprs/private/docs/oprs/pnp/Policies_and_Procedures_Draft_copy_10106.pdf).