

Exploring Media as Text

COMM2112
Theories of Communication and
Persuasion
19 March 2008

Cultural approach vs. Process approach

- Process approach
 - Communication as a transaction between two autonomous, independent individuals
- Cultural approach
 - The working out and negotiation of meaning by people
 - Within the context of cultural ideologies, structures and processes

The nature of media

- Process
 - Media are the channels/instruments we use to distribute or multiply the distribution of information
- Cultural
 - “Media are not so much ‘things’ as places which most of us inhabit.”

Branson & Stafford (2003)

Key questions – Process approach

Where communication is seen as a transaction between two autonomous, independent individuals

- Who
- Says what
- Through what channels
- To whom
- With what effects?

Key questions – Cultural approach

Where the focus is on questions of meaning within their total context

- What's going on in the totality of the situation, rather than individual acts of communication?
- What social, cultural and personal factors constitute the structures within which communication is taking place?
- What meanings are being generated and exchanged, and what contributes to those meanings?
- How do these meanings influence or regulate the kinds of activities that people engage in or perform?

Communication as meaning

- Meanings are in people, not in things
 - “Meanings are not just out there waiting to be identified or discovered, but are read into signs. This process...is not arbitrary, but is what we call an ideological process.”
Schirato and Yell (2000)
- Meanings are context-dependent – contexts vary for person to person and situation to situation
- The sender does not control the meaning of a communication.

semiotics

Signs and how they work

Origins

- Europe – late 19th century
- Disciplines
 - Linguistics and literary studies
 - cf. U.S. social sciences, marketing
- Major concerns:
 - How people make meaning through thinking & language
 - Cf. U.S. – changing people's behaviour

Why media?

- The only way we can understand the world is through how it is “represented” to us in language
- Therefore
 - A concern for study of verbal and visual language of media texts
 - How they work to convey and generate meaning
 - Within broader structures of society

Ferdinand de Saussure

(1857-1913)

- How does language work?
- Key: meaning is *relational* rather than *substantive*
- Words do not have innate meanings, but associations we give them
- Meaning is built by differences



e.g. man



Not woman



Not child



Strong, not weak



Stoic, not emotional



Structuralism

- We access and understand social realities only through the stock of language resources without our culture
- Language makes sense through these pre-existing structures of difference.
- When we learn language we participate in and reproduce the assumptions and views of our culture
- Language shapes not just how we explain the world, but also our perceptual practices, i.e. what we see

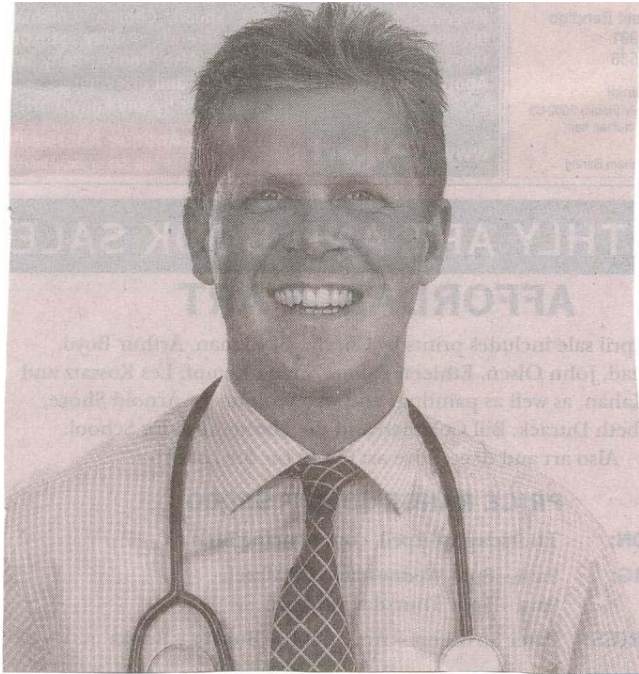
Structuralism

- An influential social theory beyond linguistics and media
- An emphasis on existing structures that have their own irresistible logic
 - “All human organization is determined by large social or psychological structures with their own irresistible logic, independent of human will or intention”
- E.g.
 - Marx’s economic theory
 - Freud’s psychoanalytic theory
 - Levi-Strauss anthropology
 - Piaget – human development

- How do we identify these underlying structures?
- For Saussure:
 - Through the science of signs
 - Studying signs and how signs work
 - To identify the underlying structures of meaning

Semiotics – the Science of Signs

- Sign – something that refers to something other than itself
 - Made up of “signifier” and “signified”
 - **Signifier**
 - The physical form of the sign
 - The written word, spoken sound, visual image, a haircut, a traffic light
 - **Signified**
 - The concept that is evoked (concept, not a thing)
- The connection between a signifier and its signified is totally arbitrary



- Signifier – the physical form of the sign
- Signified – the mental concept evoked
- The connection is totally arbitrary

Denotation and connotation

- Signs denote
 - signify different aspects of our physical experience
 - E.g. red a particular part of spectrum
- Signs connote
 - Evoke broader cultural concepts and values by linking associations
 - E.g. red as danger, power



C.S. Peirce (1834-1914)

Different kinds of signs

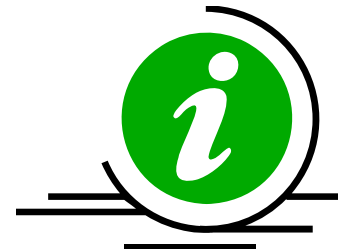
- **Iconic** signs – the signs resemble what they signify



- **Indexical signs** - Signifiers that establish a direct link between the sign and its object

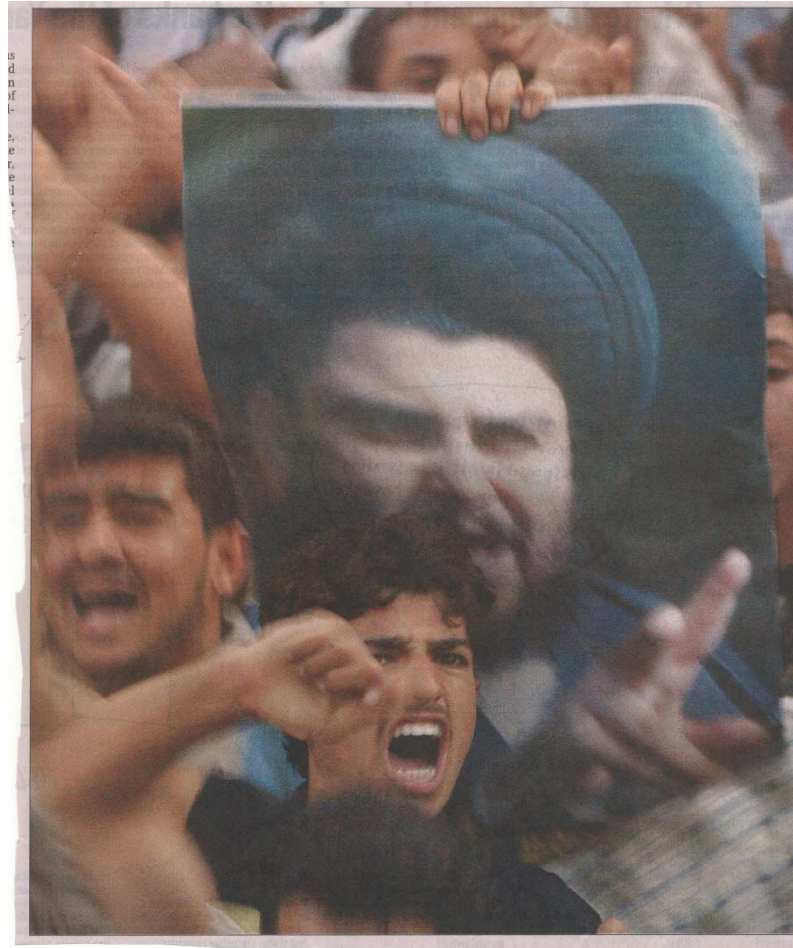


- Symbols – visual signs that are arbitrarily linked to referents



Codes

- Wider systems of meaning to which there is broad cultural or social agreement
- Codes can vary for people and groups
- Code systems are dynamic





Analysts expect the floats to attract interest because of both companies' relationships with well-known brands.

Saussure's contribution

- A range of questions about Saussure's theories
 - Signifieds become signifiers, etc.
 - Concept of differences became binary
- Created a revolution in linguistics
 - Instead of seeing language as containers into which natural meanings of the world were poured
 - Saw meaning as constructed and relational
 - Language is a system of relationships
 - Meaning is constructed by differences

- Structuralism
 - “existing structures that have their own irresistible logic”
- → political conservatism
- Challenged by
 - Disruptive events of early 20th century
 - social radicalism of 1960s
- → Poststructuralism

Semiotics as Political

- Against Saussure, Volosinov points out that language only exists in use (parole) and that it changes constantly

eg: TXT, hip hop, Australian slang ...

- Thus signs are adaptable and have a history of meanings
- Signs have as many meanings as they have contexts
- Meanings are produced through ideological struggles
- There are dominant values ascribed to signs

eg: “the family”; “woman”

(Schirato and Yell: 24-26; Dossier: 28-29)

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Ideologies

- An ideology (*ideo-logos*) is basically a way of seeing things
 - A simplified system of ideas and beliefs
 - Contained in discourses, narratives, conceptual frameworks and explanations that circulate in the culture.

Ideologies are political in nature...

- They arise from the activities of particular groups of people
- They reflect the experiences and interests of those groups
- They serve to produce, privilege and perpetuate the interests of one culture or part of a culture over others

The function of ideologies

- They are frameworks of meaning for integrating often contradictory information
 - the way the world is,
 - how things work,
 - the significance of events
- They provide the basis for structuring organizations and social processes
 - In relation to differences such as class, occupation, race, skin colour, gender, age, sexual preference, etc.

Ideology and communication theory

- Ideologies produce, regulate and manage what can and can't be thought or done.
- Questions to ask of texts therefore are:
 - In what ways are different group ideologies at work in the production and exchange of meaning?
 - What ideologies are buried in communication dynamics at work?
 - What sort of contests are taking place between competing ideologies?
 - In what ways are particular ideologies being normalised by erasing difference?

Myths

- An integrated narrative of meaning by which societies organise and interpret the reality with which they have to cope.



Myths

- Mythic themes
 - Myths of creation
 - Myths of destiny
 - Myths of good and evil
 - Myths of character
 - Myths of redemption

Myths

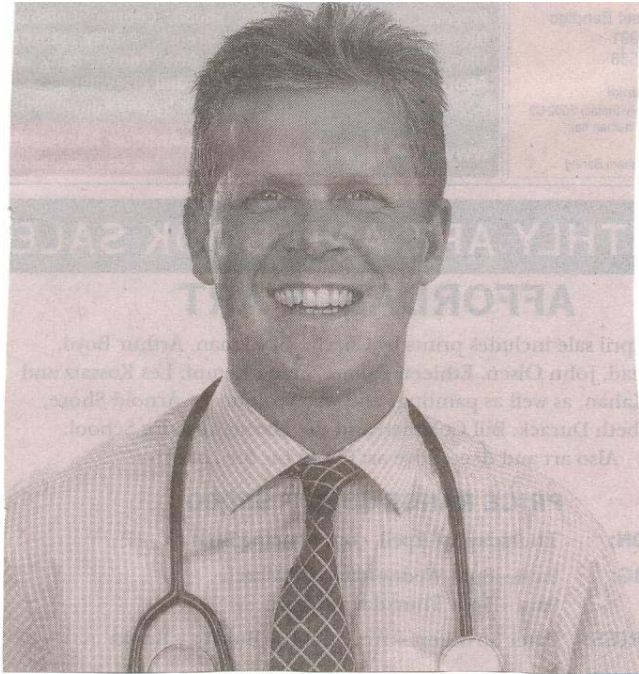
- Australian national myths
 - Fair go
 - Equality
 - Opportunity
 - Easy-going
 - Larrikin
 - Luck country

Roland Barthes' "Myth Today"

- Denotation: (first order meaning) soldier is saluting the tricolour
- Connotations: (second order meaning) French Imperialism, nationalism, pro-French in Algerian War of Independence
- Connotation draws on myth.
- Myth: Hidden rules and conventions through which meanings are made to appear universal or natural (Sturken and Cartright: 19; 44)
- Both connotation and denotation can refer to individual signs or to texts (many signs)



Rethinking the text...



- In what ways is this signifier creating meaning?
- What power interests are represented in this construction?
- What subordinate power interests are excluded?

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