

## **Semiotics – Some Notes**

### **The sign**

- A sign is anything which produces meanings
- Signs are things in the world - especially the social world
- Signs do not just convey meanings but produce them
- Signs may produce many meanings

### **Content**

- A sign then, refers to something
- They refer to things in the world and the relations among these things
- They represent, depict and stand for things
- The sign has a referential function
- Refers to something e.g. Leek for Wales

### **Codes**

- Signs suggest ways in which they may be read
- They cue in certain codes for interpreting them
- This sets up expectations about what will be said and how
- A text may work against these meanings

### **Mode of address**

- Who do the signs address
- Signs may be received by others than those for whom they were intended
- Do they say where they come from
- Is the sender the actual source of the sign?
- Is the receiver the actual destination
- One sender may produce a number of addressers e.g. newsreaders

### **Receiver**

- One receiver may be addressed as a number of different things e.g. student, parent, friend, son, daughter etc.
- Texts are set up and constructed in certain roles or positions within the text

### **Relationship**

- The sign establishes a relationship
- The social situation in which a sign is used may determine the content, type of sign, coding, and who is being addressed by whom

### **Signs and systems**

- Semiotics – developed by Saussure in relation to language and Peirce is another name you may come across when reading about semiotics
- Signs work like language with underlying codes and structures
- Semiotics is a model and is a useful way of picturing how something happens
- It is a starting point, rather than the truth about signs

### **Sign and referent**

- A sign denotes or refers to something out there in the real world
- The signifier is the sensory impression of the sign, the mental image of marks on a page or of sounds in the air, or the picture we see.
- The mental impression of the sound is called the signifier
- The general concept invoked is the signified
- So the signified could be Australia in relation to a Koala bear
- One aspect of the sign does the signifying and the other aspect is what is signified
- We don't have neat visual images which correspond to every word we say.
- Nor is there a guarantee that a concept which might come to mind is the same
- Your mental picture of a cat, for example, is likely to be different to mine.

### **Signifier and signified**

- There is no natural link between the signifier and the signified
- There is no reason that the sound image or word Koala should invoke a general concept of Koalanness

### **Difference**

- Hence there is no reason why a football should be called a football, anymore than a bear should be called a bear
- It is only because in this language group we have decided the Koala refers to the animal that we understand it to be or that a football should be called a football.
- We could agree to call it something else
- So long as we all share the same understanding

### **How the sign takes on meaning**

- The meaning of a sign may depend on a variety of factors e.g. the situations and conventions in which it is used
- The sign's meaning depends on what surrounds it.
- Hence a sign gets its meanings from other signs.
- Semiotics only looks at meaning from other signs.
- Through a system of difference e.g. what it is not.

### **Signs are not value-free**

- Values of our culture or sub culture are incorporated into the sign systems we use
- We live among and relate to systems of signs with meaning

- In our interaction with others, we don't use random gestures, we gesture our courtesy, our pleasure, our incomprehension
- The sign system we use are not given or natural
- They are a development of our culture and carry cultural meanings and values
- Everything in our social life has the potential to mean something
- What clothes we wear is a choice that signifies something and say something about us.

### **Codes and cultures**

- Hence codes are located within specific cultures
- These codes express and support the social organisation of those cultures
- Some researchers have looked at how codes express and maintain existing power relationships e.g. Bourdieu
- He suggests that the system of symbols are not just systems of understanding but are systems of domination

### **Commutation test**

- This determines three important aspects of the way a group of signs is working
- What the significant elements of a given array of signs might be
- What contribution they make to the overall significance
- What contribution they make to overall significance
- What effect does their particular arrangement have
- When one element is changed what is the effect or the relationship between any of these elements
- The extent to which this change might alter the overall meaning is the extent to which the original element is contributing to the area's meaning

### **Binary oppositions**

- Lévi-Strauss was a structuralist anthropologist who influenced semiotics
- Focused on structuring oppositions in myth systems and in language
- Called binary oppositions
- Saussure applied this to the ways that language produces meanings e.g. black/white, hot/cold etc.
- We learn to associate words and media products with each other, as well as to differentiate them
- Genre is important to understand how meanings are encountered in practice and its blend of repetition and difference
- Remember that post-structuralists challenge these stable binary oppositions.

### **Social texts and social meanings**

- In considering how advertisements work, there is a sequence of steps to follow
- Locate the key signifiers in the text
- Propose a range of possible signifieds for each of the signifiers
- Identify the connotations and social codes to which the signifieds are related
- Noted which of these connotations seem to become naturalised, true meanings in the text

- Whether these might reinforce familiar social structures of through – beliefs and attitudes that are prevalent in society
- When signs and connotations appear normal, this is because the text presents itself as obviously truthful
- This is myth – familiar and influential structures of meaning

### **Myth**

- Myth – the meaning identified seems to be the only natural meaning
- It hides the semiotic workings of a text's signs and codes
- The denotations appear so true that the signs seem to be the things themselves
- Myth turns social signs into facts e.g. Guinness becomes exciting and adventurous
- Texts should be seen as kinds of social activity

### **Naturalised**

- Hence, we are addressed as being on one side or other of the opposition
- The addressee is western
- The term western is naturalised and made obvious
- It positions you in a certain way