

Introducing Social Semiotics

Theo van Leeuwen



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Introducing Social Semiotics

Introducing Social Semiotics is a lively introduction to the ways in which different aspects of modern society combine to create meaning. These 'semiotic resources' surrounding us include obvious modes of communication such as language, gesture, images and music, but also less obvious ones such as food, dress and everyday objects, all of which carry cultural value and significance.

Introducing Social Semiotics uses a wide variety of texts including photographs, adverts, magazine pages and film stills to explain how meaning is created through complex semiotic interactions. Practical exercises and examples as wide ranging as furniture arrangements in public places, advertising jingles, photojournalism and the rhythm of a rapper's speech provide readers with the knowledge and skills they need to be able to analyse and also produce successful multimodal texts and designs.

The book traces the development of semiotic resources through particular channels such as the history of the press and advertising; and explores how and why these resources change over time, for reasons such as advancing technology.

Featuring a full glossary of terms, exercises, discussion points and suggestions for further reading, *Introducing Social Semiotics* makes concrete the complexities of meaning making and is essential reading for anyone interested in how communication works.

Theo van Leeuwen is Professor at the Centre for Language and Communication Research at Cardiff University, UK.

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Preface

This book is an attempt to write an accessible and, above all, *usable* introduction to social semiotics.

Although strongly inspired by Paris School semiotics, and especially by the work of Roland Barthes, which I first came across as a film school student in Amsterdam in the late 1960s, social semiotics has long since moved beyond an exclusive interest in structure and system.

- Just as in linguistics the focus changed from the 'sentence' to the 'text' and its 'context', and from 'grammar' to 'discourse', so in social semiotics the focus changed from the 'sign' to the way people use semiotic 'resources' both to produce communicative artefacts and events and to interpret them – which is also a form of semiotic production – in the context of specific social situations and practices.
- Rather than constructing separate accounts of the various semiotic modes – the 'semiotics of the image', the 'semiotics of music', and so on – social semiotics compares and contrasts semiotic modes, exploring what they have in common as well as how they differ, and investigating how they can be integrated in multimodal artefacts and events.
- Rather than describing semiotic modes as though they have intrinsic characteristics and inherent systematicities or 'laws', social semiotics focuses on how people regulate the use of semiotic resources – again, in the context of specific social practices and institutions, and in different ways and to different degrees.
- Finally, social semiotics is itself also a practice, oriented to observation and analysis, to opening our eyes and ears and other senses for the richness and complexity of semiotic production and interpretation, and to social intervention, to the discovery of new semiotic resources and new ways of using existing semiotic resources.

Although the approach to social semiotics presented here draws on a wide range of sources, the key impetus for its development was Halliday's social semiotic view of language (1978). In the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s, it was elaborated by the work of the Sydney Semiotics Circle, whose members included, among others, Jim Martin, Terry Threadgold, Paul Thibault, Radan Martinec, Anne Cranny-Francis, Jennifer Biddle and, above all, my long-time collaborator Gunther Kress – as well as, from a distance, Bob Hodge and Jay Lemke. In the 1990s I was influenced by my work with members of the critical discourse analysis group, especially Norman

Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, Teun van Dijk, Lilie Chouliaraki, Luisa Martin Rojo, Malcolm Coulthard and Carmen Caldas-Coulthard and, in different contexts, by my work on 'toys as communication' with Staffan Selander and on 'global media' with David Machin, and by discussions with Philip Bell, Adam Jaworski, Rick Iedema, Ron Scollon, Carey Jewitt, and Teal Triggs.

I must single out David Machin in particular. Our joint work over the past three years has not only produced several of the key examples I use in this book, it has also been a constant source of inspiration. The book would not have been the same without him.

Over the years I have taught the material presented in this book to students in linguistics, communication, interactive multimedia design, film studies, media studies and cultural studies, at Macquarie University, the London College of Printing and Cardiff University, as well as in short courses in a wide range of countries and institutions. This book is written for students, and it could not have existed without my own students' suggestions, comments, criticisms and extensions of the material. This includes present and past PhD students in London – especially Eleanor Margolies, Rob Flint, Cian Quayle and Maria Mencia – and Cardiff – especially Hanita Hassan, Lu Xing-Hua and Odysseas Constantinou. The book is also meant to be interdisciplinary and I hope that my many years of interdisciplinary teaching and research have helped me achieve at least something of this difficult aim.

Finally, I would like to thank Glen Stillar, Greg Myers, Per Ledin and Christabel Kirkpatrick for their useful comments on the manuscript, my editor, Louise Semlyen, for suggesting the book and waiting patiently for it, Julene Knox for all her work in chasing permissions for the illustrations, and Laura López-Bonilla for much appreciated moral support.

Theo van Leeuwen, March 2004

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PART I

Semiotic principles

In part I, I discuss some of the principles that make social semiotics a new and distinctive approach to the practice and theory of semiotics. Where necessary, social semiotic concepts and methods are contrasted and compared to concepts from structuralist semiotics.

Above all, I hope two things will become clear in this part of the book:

- 1 Social semiotics is not 'pure' theory, not a self-contained field. It only comes into its own when it is applied to specific instances and specific problems, and it always requires immersing oneself not just in semiotic concepts and methods as such but also in some other field. When, in chapter 1, I explore the semiotics of office space, for instance, I need not just social semiotic concepts and methods but also concepts and methods from the theory and practice of office design and management. The same applies to the 'social' in 'social semiotics'. It can only come into its own when social semiotics fully engages with social theory. This kind of interdisciplinarity is an absolutely essential feature of social semiotics.
- 2 Social semiotics is a form of enquiry. It does not offer ready-made answers. It offers ideas for formulating questions and ways of searching for answers. This is why I end my chapters with questions rather than conclusions. These questions are not intended to invite readers to 'revise' the content of the preceding chapter but to encourage them to question it, to test it, to think it through independently – and to arrive at their own conclusions.

1 Semiotic resources

Semiotic resources

Books about semiotics often start with the question 'What is semiotics?' I would like to ask the question differently: 'What kind of *activity* is semiotics?', 'What do semioticians *do*?' And my answer is that semioticians do three things:

- 1 collect, document and systematically catalogue semiotic resources – including their history
- 2 investigate how these resources are used in specific historical, cultural and institutional contexts, and how people talk about them in these contexts – plan them, teach them, justify them, critique them, etc.
- 3 contribute to the discovery and development of new semiotic resources and new uses of existing semiotic resources.

The first two of these activities will be discussed and exemplified in this chapter, the third in chapter 2, where I deal with semiotic innovation.

The term 'semiotic resource' is therefore a key term in social semiotics. It originated in the work of Halliday who argued that the grammar of a language is not a code, not a set of rules for producing correct sentences, but a 'resource for making meanings' (1978: 192). In this book I extend this idea to the 'grammar' of other semiotic modes, and define semiotic resources as the actions and artefacts we use to communicate, whether they are produced physiologically – with our vocal apparatus; with the muscles we use to create facial expressions and gestures, etc. – or by means of technologies – with pen, ink and paper; with computer hardware and software; with fabrics, scissors and sewing machines, etc. Traditionally they were called 'signs'. For instance, a frown would be a sign of disapproval, the colour red a sign of danger, and so on. Signs were said to be the union of a signifier – an observable form such as a certain facial expression, or a certain colour – and a signified – a meaning such as disapproval or danger. The sign was considered the fundamental concept of semiotics. One of the most famous definitions of semiotics is that of Ferdinand de Saussure (1974 [1916]: 16) 'A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable ... I shall call it semiology (from Greek *semeion*, "sign").' In social semiotics the term 'resource' is preferred, because it avoids the impression that 'what a sign stands for' is somehow pre-given, and not affected by its use. As Hodge and Kress (1988: 18) have put it, in a discussion of the work of Vološinov – an important precursor of social semiotics – 'signs may not be divorced from the concrete forms of social intercourse

... and cannot exist, as such, without it'. So in social semiotics resources are signifiers, observable actions and objects that have been drawn into the domain of social communication and that have a *theoretical* semiotic potential constituted by all their past uses and all their potential uses and an *actual* semiotic potential constituted by those past uses that are known to and considered relevant by the users of the resource, and by such potential uses as might be uncovered by the users on the basis of their specific needs and interests. Such uses take place in a social context, and this context may either have rules or best practices that regulate how specific semiotic resources can be used, or leave the users relatively free in their use of the resource.

Semiotic resources are not restricted to speech and writing and picture making. Almost everything we do or make can be done or made in different ways and therefore allows, at least in principle, the articulation of different social and cultural meanings. Walking could be an example. We may think of it as non-semiotic behaviour, basic locomotion, something we have in common with other species. But there are many different ways of walking. Men and women walk differently. People from different parts of the world walk differently. Social institutions – the army, the church, the fashion industry – have developed their own special, ceremonial ways of walking. Through the way we walk, we express who we are, what we are doing, how we want others to relate to us, and so on. Different ways of walking can seduce, threaten, impress and much more. For this reason actors often start working on their roles by establishing how their characters might walk.

As soon as we have established that a given type of physical activity or a given type of material artefact constitutes a semiotic resource, it becomes possible to describe its semiotic *potential*, its potential for making meaning – for example, 'what kinds of walking can we observe, and what kinds of meanings can be made with them?' This is the first of the three semiotic activities described above, and it is one of the key contributions semioticians can make to interdisciplinary projects: inventorizing the different material articulations and permutations a given semiotic resource allows, and describing its semiotic potential, describing the kinds of meanings it affords. Again, the plural 'meanings' is crucial here, because just as dictionaries cannot predict the meaning which a word will have in a specific context, so other kinds of semiotic inventories cannot predict the meaning which a given facial expression – for example, a frown – or colour – for example, red – or style of walking will have in a specific context. We can say, for instance, that swaying hips have a potential for meaning something like the 'loosening up' or 'letting go' of some kind of restraint, but whether that 'letting go' will be used to convey sensuality or slovenliness depends on who 'lets go' of what, where and when, and on the other signs – other aspects of physical behaviour, style of dress, etc. – that accompany the swaying of the hips.

Closely related to the term 'semiotic potential' is the term 'affordance', which stems from the work of the psychologist Gibson (1979). According to Gibson, affordances are the potential uses of a given object. These, he says, stem directly from their observable properties. However, different observers might notice different affordances, depending on their needs and interests and on the specifics of the

situation at hand. Perception is selective. And yet the other affordances are objectively there. Thus the meanings we find in the world, says Gibson, are both objective and subjective. This is evidently very similar to Halliday's concept of 'meaning potential', in which linguistic signifiers – words and sentences – have a signifying *potential* rather than specific meanings, and need to be studied in the social context. The difference is that the term 'meaning potential' focuses on meanings that have already been introduced into society, whether explicitly recognized or not, whereas 'affordance' also brings in meanings that have not yet been recognized, that lie, as it were, latent in the object, waiting to be discovered. No one can claim to know all the affordances of a given word or other semiotic 'object', yet as semioticians we do not need to restrict ourselves to what is, we can also set out to investigate what *could be*, as will be seen in the next chapter. The fact that resources have no objectively fixed meanings does not mean that meaning is a free-for-all. In social life people constantly try to fix and control the use of semiotic resources – and to justify the rules they make up – although more so in some domains than in others. The meaning of traffic signs, for instance, is fixed by precise rules, by a 'code'. It has to be, if we want to avoid accidents. In interpreting abstract art, on the other hand, we are usually given more freedom of interpretation.

Studying the semiotic potential of a given semiotic resource is studying how that resource has been, is, and can be used for purposes of communication, it is drawing up an inventory of past and present and maybe also future resources and their uses. By nature such inventories are never complete, because they tend to be made for specific purposes. Inventories of words, such as the dictionary or the thesaurus, may be made for the purposes of specialists, or of 'authors, translators, advertising copywriters and crossword-solvers' (sleeve notes of the *Roget's Thesaurus*), or of the 'general reader'. The same applies to other types of semiotic inventories. In chapter 4 I will describe an inventory of the ways in which children's toys can be designed to move or be moved. They can, for instance, be hard or soft – and therefore squeezable; they can be rigid or articulated – for example, the head and limbs of Barbie dolls and Action Men; they can be static or mobile – for example, toy cars; if they are mobile, they can be propelled in different ways – by hand, through a clockwork mechanism, through wind power – and so on. This inventory was drawn up in the context of a research project which looked at children's toys from the point of view of learning. The premise was that children – and adults – learn not only from looking and listening but also from manipulating objects. The inventory was therefore made from the point of view of a very specific relevance criterion. It had to be a systematic inventory of both the signifiers and the signifieds, both the physical properties of the objects and what could be learnt from them. For instance, from taking a toy apart children can learn what parts make up a given object, and from playing with a wind-powered toy – for example, a kite – children can learn about natural energy. It was a good example of the way new ideas – we called it the 'semiotics of kinetic design' – can come out of a very specific applied project, in which semioticians work together with others in an interdisciplinary context, in this case with educationalists and psychologists.