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From Perception to Meaning:

The Use of Communication Codes in Semiotics

Everywhere people look in the world, there are signs staring back at them. Each day a barrage of messages bombards the average American, and increasingly, this is becoming the normal way of living. The information we choose to organize, focus on, and derive meaning from speaks volumes about who we are and what we value—as individuals and as a society. This is the essence of semiotic theory. The ways in which we interpret, convey, and understand these signs deal with the socially-formed structures known as semiotic, or communication, codes. In this paper, I will be discussing the role of these codes in depth, demonstrating their centrality to semiotic theory and showing their relationship to the theory as a whole. This will be accomplished by giving a background on semiotics, explaining the various communication codes, and finally applying them to semiotic analysis of a visual text.

In order to thoroughly discuss the semiotic perspective, it is necessary to present a brief summary of this field. By doing so, we may be able to come to a consensus about the exact boundaries, concerns, and merits of semiotics as a communication perspective. It is important to keep be aware that “In semiotics, neither authors nor readers are perfect egos, free to construct meaning; both, in this view, are positioned within a network of codes that [...] bring a broad range of social material to bear on the interpretive process.

(Sculd 86). Many individuals are credited with forming the concepts of semiotics.

Perhaps, it is better to say that semiotics cannot be attributed to one individual as many communication theories can. Rather, its foundations have been shaped by a diverse group of minds throughout history.

According to John Fiske, a very active semiotic researcher and theorist, “Semiotics is usually traced back to Peirce and Saussure via the essential developments and mediation of Roland Barthes (e.g., 1968, 1973, and 1977)” (“Semiotics” 176). The contributions of C. S. Peirce are distinctly different from those of Ferdinand de Saussure. In his book *Introduction to Communication Studies*, Fiske points out that this is only natural, considering that their backgrounds were in philosophy/logic and linguistics, respectively (41). Their work was interpreted and molded into a somewhat unified model in the mind of the French literary critic and semiologist Roland Barthes (Griffin 355). Today Barthes’ work, including his book *Mythologies*, is highly regarded as a major donation to the field of semiotics. His version of semiotics is crucial to understanding the role of communication codes within the theory.

The basic system of semiotics, according to Barthes, is a sign that is composed of a signifier and a signified. In his paper “Stereotypes in the Media: So What?” Bradley W. Gorham applies Barthes’ theories of semiotic signs to media texts in order to identify ways in which individuals internalize stereotypes. Gorham’s summary of the components of Barthes’ signs will be of great help in explaining the effects of the codes in which these signs work:

Signs can be thought of as elemental units of conveying meaning, and all models of meaning basically share a similar form. A sign is the associative relation

between a signifier, which is the representation of a physical entity provided to us by our five senses, and its signified, which is the mental concept we think of when we encounter that representation. The relation of your concept [...] and the physical reality [...] is what de Saussure calls “signification,” and it is how we give meaning to the world. This is the function of language. (232-233)

Although Barthes focused on the myth brought about by the naturalization of historical contexts of signs, the basic concepts of signs will suffice to discuss the code systems in which they operate.

Saussure defined semiotics (or semiology as he termed it) as “the life of signs in society,” and Peirce identified it as the “doctrine of signs” (Sonesson “Semiotic” 1). Both of these definitions rely on external, environmental factors. Whether the question is, “What society?” or, “Whose doctrine?” both scholars recognized that the signs they studied were not contained in a vacuum. The very core of communication deals with the transmission of thoughts and ideas in a *social* setting. An environment, filled with histories, cultures and implicit meanings surrounds the very signs that semiotic theory hopes to analyze. Since semiotic analysis deals extensively with this social setting, it is necessary that these environmental factors be taken into consideration. Such study of these surroundings led to the classification of communication codes.

All members who communicate with each other through common means can be said to be a community, or society, that consents to utilizing a common communication channel. This can be applied narrowly, as is the case with the community of nuclear physicists that uses highly specialized and exclusive jargon, or broadly, as exemplified by the international community of English-speaking people. In the same way, all

communities (regardless of size) must consent to specific guidelines of that channel in order to make their communication efficient. These mutually-understood guidelines form the backbone of communication codes.

In his book *Introduction to Communication Studies*, John Fiske defines codes very similarly: “Codes are, in fact, the systems into which signs are organized. These systems are governed by rules which are consented to by all members of the community using that code. This means that the study of codes frequently emphasizes the *social* dimension of communication” (64). Likewise, Fry and Fry define codes as “abstract patterns of cultural knowledge” (225). Rather than focusing on the *process* of communication, the study of semiotic codes centers on the *rules* and *environments* that affect that process. Without signifying codes, semiotic analysis could not exist; it would have no structure for organizing, deciphering, or qualifying the significance of its conclusions. Truly, the codes that direct communication among members of a community provide the closest thing to a controlled, closed system that communication researchers can ever hope to achieve. Even the differences between codes established by diverse societies can be observed and examined in order to offer a greater understanding of widespread communication. Without doubt, codes are essential to the study of semiotics and assist in any application of its implications.

Since the significance of codes is obvious and because the chapter on semiotics contained in Em Griffin’s *A First Look at Communication Theory* does not give them the attention they deserve, a detailed explanation of the various types of signifying codes will now be presented. This elaboration of codes will include the following scales (or dialectics in many cases): analog – digital, representational – presentational, elaborated –

restricted, and broadcast – narrowcast. In addition, I will briefly discuss the semiotic use of ideology as a code. Then, the methods of establishing commonality will also be addressed; they are agreement via convention and use, arbitrary agreement, and aesthetic acceptance. After their explanation, the types of codes and means by which they are accepted will be applied to visual semiotics.

First, an examination of analog and digital codes will help to identify the characteristics that make up the basic structure of any code. According to Fiske, “A digital code is one whose units (both signifiers and signifieds) are clearly separated; an analogue code is one that works on a continuous scale” (“Introduction” 65). When attempting to analyze a text, digital codes can be used as systematic and precise ways of examination. By applying a digital screen to an analog reality, one can reconstruct (and communicate) that reality with little error, making it more convenient for specific analysis. For example, an artist may find it easier (and more advantageous) to place a grid between herself and the still life she is preparing to draw in order to organize a flowing, analog reality. Fiske draws on this very concept, claiming that human perception is based on digitizing, organizing, and creating meaning from the analog environment in which people are placed (“Introduction” 66). Every day, the human race reacts to its perceptions, creating and deconstructing fresh messages and signs. Analog and digital codes assist in this ordinary practice by providing channels to meaning.

A second set of code types that must be discussed is the duo of presentational and representational codes. Representational codes function just as their name suggests: they include the signs that *re-present* meaning. Signs classified into this group are generally lasting and utilize symbols or icons to establish the commonality of the culture. That is,

in order to *re-present* a specific meaning, the signs used to encode that meaning must be established in the culture so that decoding may come to a similar meaning. Since representational codes call for the sign's existence apart from the author, this concept is even more crucial. For instance, a book written with the English alphabet (representative symbols) must stand alone; its author is not available to explain its meaning to an individual attempting to decode it using the Spanish alphabet.

Presentational codes, which include such communication as gestures, kinesics, posture, and other temporary signs, are meant to be experienced in the shared environment as the author, speaker, or encoder. Elements of communication such as touch, eye movement, voice, and pitch make presentational signs very unique; for the very reason that they are temporary; they cannot be truly represented by symbolic means. While it may be argued that graphic depictions by means of visual semiotic analysis can exhibit some of these presentational aspects in a representational manner (as will be argued later), some elements simply cannot be represented properly. It is as if the presentational codes are too analog to be represented digitally. Only such digital encoding technologies as camcorders, voice recorders, and the like can come close to representing presentational codes. Yet, even each of these methods removes the encoder from the shared context of the encoder, even if just enough to corrupt the communication.

Moving in a slightly different direction, the next scale to consider is the one spanning between elaborated and restricted codes. Although controversy has surrounded socio-linguist Basil Bernstein's selection of these terms to identify the poles of this set of codes, they assist in associating each extreme's primary characteristics. Fiske reminds us that restricted codes utilize a simple vocabulary, based in presentational signs that focus

on social status; they are generally repetitive, and do not require formal training (“Introduction” 70-72). Elaborated codes are identified as basically the exact opposite of the restricted set. An elaborated code is marked by its extended vocabulary and organization as well as its ability to explain abstract concepts or themes. Generally, formal writing expresses a perspective that is unique to the author, is specific enough to be understood without a social construct or set of non-verbal signs, and does not include superfluous discussions of a topic—making it a good example of elaborated coding. In academia and the professional realm, these qualities cause elaborated codes to be valued above restricted ones. Yet both coding systems are important for the function of our way of life; each contributes a way of communicating with unique strengths and weaknesses.

Elaborated and restricted codes are based primarily on both the type and sender of the message. Alternately, broadcast and narrowcast codes set their focus on the message’s anticipated audience. By centering here, they actually imply that those who will receive the message will, at least in part, determine its content, channel, complexity, or all three. While this may seem impossible at first (after all, how can a receiver determine the sender’s message before the sender has sent it?), broadcast and narrowcast codes show how it is possible. The breadth, depth, and orientation of the audience influence the sender of the message to specialize that message so that it applies to that audience. The actions associated with the term *specialize* are the heart of broadcast and narrowcast codes.

Broadcast codes, as their name implies, deal with signs interpreted by a large range of individuals. It may be helpful to imagine a national news broadcast in order to tangibly perceive what kinds of communication are guided by broadcast codes. These

codes call for signs to be simple, easily interpreted, and applicable over a wide variety of experiences. They form signs that draw the listener in, reinforce a communal link, and are appealing to the listener. As Fiske notes, broadcast codes have great similarities to restricted codes, and conversely narrowcast share aspects with elaborated (“Introduction”, 73). This is only to be expected because a diverse audience (as seen in broadcast codes) requires an uncomplicated message that can be read by all its members and be of some concern to them.

Narrowcast codes steer those situations where a sign will only be examined by a small population of individuals who understand an elaborated code. The important issue to note here is the shared intellectual experience of the audience. They have consented to learn this specialized code, but their implied communal experience ends here. This type of communication does not assume that a shared perspective exists among its audience members, unlike broadcast codes. For this reason, the code acts as the binding force within the group and the exclusionary force outside of the group. Lawyers, doctors, and even college campuses benefit from the specialization of narrowcast codes.

The final code set that we will consider is unique in that its formation as dialectic is debatable. The concept of ideology as code could, theoretically, be structured into an ideology-objectivity scale, but since I tend to agree with Ferruccio Rossi-Landi’s view that “every discourse is of an ideological kind,” objectivity would not be an attainable portion of the scale (Nöth 18). Therefore, I will refer to this coding concept as simply “ideology.” While the term “ideology” is commonly associated with negatively-stereotyped combinations of worldview, politics, religion, and the like, the semiotic term of ideology is not as pejorative. Umberto Eco, a prominent Italian semiotician, defines

ideologies as “codes generating connotative messages” (Nöth 17). That is to say that ideologies tend to link certain signs with specific connotations by limiting the connotations signified with that sign and obscuring all other possible connotations. To put it another way, the *Tel Quel Group* defines “ideology” as:

a matter of ‘fixing’ the otherwise inexhaustible process of signification around certain dominant signifiers, with which the individual subject can then identify. Language itself is infinitely productive; but this incessant productivity can be artificially arrested into ‘closure’ – into a sealed world of ideological stability, [...] constricting the free play of the signifier to a spuriously determinate meaning which can then be received by the subject as natural and inevitable. (Nöth 18)

These definitions of ideology are so important to its use as a semiotic code. While the concept of ideological connotation relates to so many other communication topics (agenda-setting theory and semiotic myth, just to name a few), its effects on semiotic analysis are quite significant. The idea that a pervading mindset (the establishment of which will be discussed shortly) has the ability to limit the connotation of a signifier can be viewed from a positive or negative perspective. On the one hand, ideological connotations foster the establishment of intracultural ties and allow our semiotic analysis of signs to be efficient, since the connotations are limited. On the other hand, however, ideologies can be seen as a restricting force in communication, causing a limited response to set signifiers. No matter how it is viewed, it is certain that ideological aspects of communication contribute the guidelines and environments necessary to qualify as a code.

Since the days of Saussure and Peirce, semiologists have been analyzing, organizing, and evaluating signs. Consequently, they have simultaneously been examining the codes in which those signs operate. As Fiske writes, “All codes rely on commonality, that is an agreement amongst their users on their basics—the units they contain, the rules by which these units may be selected and combined, the meanings open to the receiver, and the social or communicative function they perform” (“Introduction” 77). This commonality is obviously essential, but what is not always as obvious is how it is established. In order to properly analyze a visual text, it is important to understand the ways in which the relevant codes became established. Generally, code commonality is created through widespread convention and use, arbitrary agreement, or aesthetically—all of which will be discussed.

The most important way of establishing commonality is through convention and use of the desired code by an increasing number of members within the targeted audience. Typically, codes brought about in this manner reach this quota of participating individuals by utilizing unwritten and unspoken expectations. Somewhat reminiscent of peer pressure, this method is rather effective when people are continually subjected to the code’s expectations, as seen in what is considered “normal” in a society. Ideologies are established in this manner, according to Rossi-Landi. He claims that expectations deemed the “ruling ideology” are “those whose redundancy is sufficiently great to suppress the noise or the interferences which may disturb their reception” (Nöth 17). He further believes that the “ruling class is the one which has the control over the emission and circulation of the constitutive verbal and nonverbal messages of a given community. The ruling class increases the redundancy of those messages which confirm their position”

(Nöth 17). In this way, ideologies are established via convention and use in a manner similar to the way foci are promoted by the media in McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory.

Arbitrary, or logical, codes stand in reaction to agreement by convention and use. These codes are defined and agreed upon by all intended users, with no exception. In order to understand the code, all one must do is learn it. The alphabet being used to compose this paper is made up of 26 letters. Nothing can be added or subtracted from this set, unless the members agree, because it is a permanent paradigm. The letters are strictly symbolic; they represent certain, arbitrary sounds. Fiske puts it this way, "Arbitrary codes have a defined, limited paradigm of signifiers with a precisely related paradigm of signifieds ("Introduction" 80). Therefore, without knowing the code, it is impossible to infer that the letter "a" represents the "ã" sound (or the "ā" sound, for that matter). In essence, arbitrary codes are the "it is so because I say it is so" approach to establishing code agreement, which is directly in opposition to commonality by convention and use. Somewhere in between these two types of agreement lie aesthetic codes.

Aesthetic codes are codes that reach a stage of agreement through mutual disagreement. Although that definition may seem paradoxical, it is nonetheless true. While it is correct to say that many aesthetic codes require a shared cultural experience, it is just as right to assert that aesthetic codes encourage aberrant decoding, or the process of decoding a message using different codes than the ones used to encode it. To think of highly valued works of art is a good start in understanding the application of aesthetic codes. Unconventional pieces may be popular, not because of their messages, but because

of their design and style. In aesthetic agreement, the clues to a message's meaning are contained within the sign itself, but an aberrant decoding is not always a problem.

Furthermore, irregular aesthetic codes have the ability to become regular codes through the process of conventionalization. This process involves a shift in the societal norm toward what was once outside the social standard. This process can be illustrated by imagining Baxter and Montgomery's relational dialectic theory. Conventionalization would result if enough people shifted toward a similar channel of individuality on the conventionality-uniqueness dialectic; the "poles" of the dialectic would essentially switch places. This phenomenon explains how the current trend of "gothic" clothing styles supposedly began as a statement against conventional society and its attire. What began as an anti-corporate, individualist movement has grown to become an accepted, popular, even corporate-driven image. Stores like Hot Topic® are proof of this conventionalization on a social level.

Thus far we have summarized the basic concepts of semiotics (sign, signifier, and signified), touched on its multifaceted inception, and thoroughly discussed the roles of classification and establishment of communication codes in the realm of semiotic theory. Now we turn our eyes to the realm of visual, or pictorial, semiotics. This field combines sign analysis with cognitive and perceptual psychology. Leading visual semiologist Göran Sonesson notes that "all kinds of gestures and bodily postures, objects, dummies, logotypes, clothing, and many other phenomena must be counted as visual signs and significations. In fact, even visual perception *per se* supposes a pick-up of meaning of sorts" ("Internet" 3). Basically, visual semiotics functions around the idea that everything

can be a sign of some kind or another. It relies heavily on the interaction of perception and communication codes to decode signs that are beyond a purely linguistic form.

Yet, the modality by which a sign is perceived makes a statement about the sign being portrayed (Sonesson “Internet” 2). This is comparable to an artist’s choice of medium—each channel of expression, even for the same subject matter, provides a unique set of perceptual information to the viewer. This is why Ole Frahm writes that, in comics, “Words and images are juxtaposed in their different materiality, side by side on the same surface of the paper of the page” (9). He claims that these two different stimuli, pictures and text, are interpreted through different codes of communication. I believe that he is correct in this assertion, but it is also important to examine the whole comic strip as a sign. He writes about this paradox:

We have to read the words but at the same time they are elements of the image.

We have to perceive the images but we can only understand them if we read them one after another, in the sequence of the panels that reminds one of writing.

Words and images may be separate as signs, but as panels they are at a certain point inseparable. [...] We have to decide between reading the words or the images, and yet we need to read both. (Frahm 2)

Although visual semiotics is a relatively new specialization of the theory, we shall find that our established communication codes can be used to conduct a brief semiotic analysis of a visual sign (see Fig. 1).

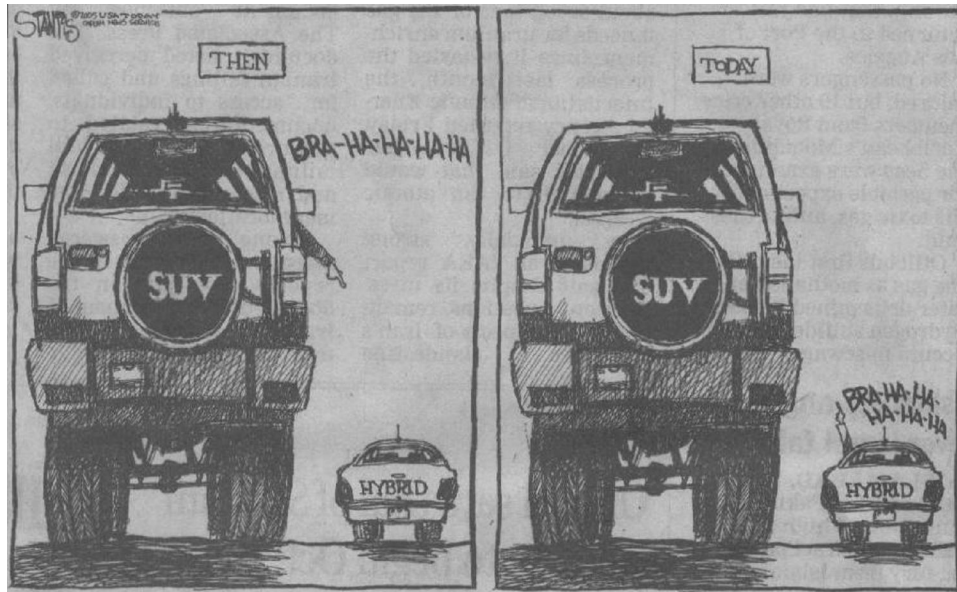


Fig. 1. Stantis, Scott. Cartoon, *The Register-Mail* 3 Sept. 2005: A4.

Looking first at the strip as a whole, we can note that this is a comical representation of a physical reality. As a sign, we can analyze the medium: it is a small, opinion page comic strip. Utilizing our knowledge of analog and digital codes, we can understand that, if this were indeed representing physical reality, the panes on this strip act as a digitally coded framework to organize an analog scene. Additionally, time plays a large role here. Although the measure of time is a human construct, its existence is not. Therefore, we can say that analog time is structured digitally with just the placement of one panel division and two caption plates.

This strip uses an interesting combination of representational and presentational codes. The text in the caption plates, as well as in the speech strings and on the trunks of the vehicles, can stand alone and represent their meanings. The likeness of the vehicles to their actual forms, other than their sizes, clearly represents them as recognizable. At the same time, the representations of the arms in the drawing show presentational cues in action. While the paper cannot really provide presentational cues to the reader in the true

sense of their definition, it can portray nonverbal cues between characters, hinting at underlying themes.

Furthermore, the vocabulary of the strip is rather restricted. Simple onomatopoeia does not lend itself to interpretation as an elaborated code. The words in the strip are arbitrary symbols, but Stantis chose to use onomatopoeia to imply that the language is a changing, conventionalized, verbal language. These conclusions are only proper, seeing as how *The Register-Mail* acquired this cartoon from *USA Today*. That is, these findings are appropriate for a broadcast code. Since it appears on a national level, it must be a rather restricted, broadcast message in order to be properly decoded by that type of audience.

The preferred reading of this sign deals with the ironic turn of events that has occurred with the astronomical gas price increase over the last few years. In this way, the humor is based on what happens between “Then” and “Today.” The fine line separating the panels represents not only a change in time, but also a change in gas prices and socioeconomic trends. Yet, we must always keep in mind that this is an analysis from within the culture in which this sign was created. Such nuances as the implied gas price increase have the ability to foster aberrant decoding in cultures outside of a dependence on oil. Also, culturally speaking, this strip only applies to areas that witnessed the sport utility vehicle (SUV) boom of the past decade. The ideological connotation behind an SUV in America is one of power, wealth, and prestige. Conversely, a hybrid car fuels just the opposite thought. While much of this is culturally specific, Stantis did include a universal construct in his strip: the vehicle sizes. The exaggeration gives the idea that the SUV is large and commanding while the hybrid is small and puny. The humor of this

comic strip directly relates to the flipping of this construct through the increase in gasoline prices—all of which are successfully communicated to the target audience via a shared knowledge of semiotic codes.

Whether reading the comics in the newspaper or analyzing a different text, semiotic codes are essential. Since the inception of their study, they have remained an active part of the semiotic theory. We have seen how the many classifications of codes have increased our understanding of the signs around us. We have looked at the ways in which these codes came to have commonality. Finally, we discussed the role of visual semiotics in decoding pictorial signs. Overall, we have elaborated on the subject of semiotic codes, which are left out of Em Griffin's text, and demonstrated its centrality and relationship to other components of the semiotic theory.

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