

Signs, Codes, and Texts: The Semiosis of Culture

Semioticians (scholars of semiotics, or of signs, signifying, signification) see culture as a collective and communal system of meanings that allows us (provides us with the resources) to manage our needs, urges, instincts, desires, and so forth, by translating them into representational and communicative systems. (Danesi and Perron 1999, 15).

What does that mean? Well, culture is a sophisticated system of interpretations (meanings) that allows us to make sense of many things. Those meanings are based on how we interpret our world, on values, on experience, etc. These meanings allow us to take our most basic understandings, such as urges, needs, beliefs, desires, etc. and give them shape, make them understandable to a group of others. The way we make them understandable to a group of others is by representing those desires, beliefs, needs, and urges in specific ways, and we tend to do so through some communicative structures (words, art, nonverbals). This is, of course, how culture is transmitted to other members of the collective, by making use of representational and communicative systems. Semioticians then, study the representational and communicative structures on which we rely, and which lie behind our forms of expression.

Semioticians tend to refer to culture as a "signifying order." Why? Because we can generally agree on two characteristics of culture: 1) culture is a way of life based on a system of shared meanings; and 2) culture is transmitted from generation to generation through that very system of shared meanings. Thus, culture as a system of meanings, allow us to "signify" to use signs (words, gestures, visual symbols), codes (language, art), and texts (conversations, compositions, films, and much more) in order to make and convey meaning, to make sense, interpret, understand. The totality of these signs, codes, and texts comprise a signifying order. Here comes another definition of culture from Danesi and Perron:

"[Human culture] is a way of life based on a signifying order developed originally in a tribal context that is passed along through the signifying order from one generation to the next (23)."

Forget the stuff about tribal context. That only means that culture originates very early on in human collectives.

I. Signs

A sign is something that stands for something other than itself (the referent). For instance, the word dog is a sign. The word dog does not stand for the letters d-o-g nor for the sound that those letters make when put together. The word dog stands for a specific type of animal (canis familiaris). Take the word "red." Red is a sign. It does not stand for itself. The word "red" stands for a specific band in the visible spectrum (of light). So, the referent for the word "red" is that portion of the visible spectrum we have come to recognize as "red." A system of referents that encompasses red, green, yellow, blue, etc. is a domain of reference that allows us to talk about and make sense of colors.

Now, we know what color, and colors are. That is, we know this domain of reference and we can understand each other when we talk about such colors (referents). But, here's the rub: *this kind of knowledge about domains of reference is culture-specific.* That knowledge is specific to a culture, it can be used differently, or vary. Other words could have been used. Perhaps two words. The sign could have pointed to a larger referent or category. We can use these signs to create new referents, as in "red light district," "red flag," and so forth.

In a very simple way this is the basic process that we are talking about:

Semiosis -----> Representation (using signs) -----> Signifying Order
*(innate capacity
to produce and
comprehend signs)*

In that diagram representation stands for our using of signs to refer to objects, or concepts, a being.

Signifying order is the "communal system providing the signs that influence and guide representation within a specific culture."

II. Denotation, Connotation

Of course, we know also that signs can be extended. Signs are very flexible and can encompass other referents (meanings). We call that connotation. Consider these usages:

She's so square (old fashioned)
He has a square disposition (forthright, honorable)
Put it squarely on the table (evenly, precisely)

Connotations are somewhat constrained by the original denotation, but they can take a life of their own, can change with time (and culture). So, again, take the word pig. For those involved in the counterculture movement of the 1960s, pigs were police officers. How about the word "cool?" The idea of connotation should tell you that not only do we use signs to "represent," but also to "construct" (more on this distinction later in class).

Please remember that we produce signs unintentionally as well. That is, we signal and are not always aware of such. What does that mean for human behavior, and its interpretation?

III. Codes

"A code is a structural system, i.e., a system in which signs reveal a specific paradigmatic, syntagmatic, and analogical architecture (92)." What this means is that a code is a system of usage of signs that has a particular structure, function, and features. The following are codes: language, music, gestures. If you know the code, you can construct specific and appropriate messages with that code. When we speak we use not only a language code, but also nonverbal codes, and gestural codes. As a result, the messages that we try to convey are a patchwork, a quilt, something "woven together" from various codes. Those weavings, that weaving together is called a *text*

IV. Texts

In a very technical sense a text is a combination of signs that make use or borrow from one or more codes in order to put together, "construct," a message. When you write a letter you compose a text. When you create a poem, write a musical composition, or put together a play for the stage, you are creating texts. Texts are context-specific. Their meaning may vary depending on context (situation, conditions of its dissemination that shape or influence the text's creation, meaning, etc.) In a larger sense, text refers to larger messages, not just to the physical object you produce. For instance, if you see a movie (2001 Space Odyssey), the text is not only the film script. That may be the least important part of it. The text becomes the interpretation/message such film can convey. When we watch the film, we don't follow a script, and read along to determine meaning. We can say a text is created through the images, the sounds, the words, the acting, etc. As the word implies, we can read texts. When we try to interpret that film, and perhaps explain it to a friend, we are "reading" that particular text. Texts are culture-specific.

Three questions of importance for us as we try to analyze culture are the following:

- 1) **What** does a particular cultural practice (sign, code, text) mean?
- 2) **Why** does it mean what it means?
- 3) **How** does it mean what it means

As good students of culture, and cultural texts, we want to keep those questions on our mind always.

V. Sapir-Whorf

What is the relation of language to thought? Does speaking one language allow us to think and see the world differently? Does our language (and its structure - grammar) influence the way we come to view our world? Do expressions like "get over it man," "get over yourself," and "don't have a cow," condition the way we in the United States (users of English) think in specific ways?

Well, according to Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941) language structures do predispose us to think differently in some ways. The whorfian hypothesis tells us that language structures allow native speakers of a language to take certain concepts as being necessary. He did not mean we could not innovate through language, but that our language allows us by its very nature to "see" (the view in worldview) our world in particular ways (Edward Sapir was a friend and collaborator of Whorf, we will talk about him later). There was resistance to the Whorfian hypothesis. For instance, people said that language was not so tyrannical as to dictate specific understandings of the world. For Whorf however, the function of language was to allow us to classify experience. When we organize experience we organize it. Hence, language for Whorf was an organizing grid/lens through which we come to **perceive** make sense, and understand our world. Note the word perceive. According to this account, the language we speak conditions our perception.

The classic example is the one about snow and Eskimos. Eskimos supposedly have many but many words to describe the concept "snow." We (not Eskimos) usually have only a few. The Whorfian hypothesis leads us to think that Eskimos are able to describe their world, their experience in ways that we cannot, and that their worldview is shaped by those different understandings.

When we use language we classify. Think of this in terms of the words you use in everyday conversation. Words like chairman, policeman, spokesman, and others. Aren't these examples of sexist terms in our language? Do they predispose us to think of certain behaviors in our world, certain jobs, social roles, etc. in terms of gender? We know that words, and language usage can **frame** the way we see and understand things. These words can create sexist attitudes... Thus we still say that a woman marries into a man's family, or that "I pronounce you man and wife." Of course, singling out also has negative consequences. What about the following constructions: "Woman doctor," "Lesbian doctor," "female police officer." Don't they imply that women do not typically have those roles? Or that police officers, and doctors are not typically female or lesbian? As we grow up in a particular culture we are socialized in various ways. Language plays a key part in our socialization.