**Semiotics for Beginners**

**Daniel Chandler**

**D.I.Y. Semiotic Analysis: Advice to My Own Students (Use this as a starting point if you wish to apply a semiotic analysis to your complex text)**

Semiotics can be applied to anything which can be seen as signifying something - in other words, to everything which has meaning within a culture. Even within the context of the mass media you can apply semiotic analysis to any media texts (including television and radio programmes, films, cartoons, newspaper and magazine articles, posters and other ads) and to the practices involved in producing and interpreting such texts. Within the Saussurean tradition, the task of the semiotician is to look beyond the specific texts or practices to the systems of functional distinctions operating within them. The primary goal is to establish the underlying conventions, identifying significant differences and oppositions in an attempt to model the system of categories, relations (syntagmatic and paradigmatic), connotations, distinctions and rules of combination employed. For instance, 'What differentiates a polite from an impolite greeting, a fashionable from an unfashionable garment?' (Culler 1985, 93); the investigation of such practices involves trying to make explicit what is usually only implicit.

A 'text' (such as a printed advertisement, an animated cartoon or a radio news bulletin) is in itself a complex sign containing other signs. Your initial analytical task is to identify the signs within the text and the codes within which these signs have meaning (e.g. 'textual codes' such as camerawork or 'social codes' such as body language). Within these codes you need to identify paradigm sets (such as *shot size*: long shot, mid shot, close up). You also need to identify the structural relationships between the various signifiers (syntagms). Finally you need to discuss the ideological functions of the signs in the text and of the text as a whole. **What sort of reality does the text construct and how does it do so? How does it seek to naturalize its own perspectives?** What assumptions does it make about its readers?

I strongly recommend detailed comparison and contrast of paired texts dealing with a similar topic: this is a lot easier than trying to analyse a single text. It may also help to use an example of semiotic analysis by an experienced practitioner as a model for your own analysis.

* + *Identifying the text*
    - Wherever possible, include a copy of the text with your analysis of it, noting any significant shortcomings of the copy. Where including a copy is not practicable, offer a clear description which would allow someone to recognize the text easily if they encountered it themselves.
    - Briefly describe the medium used, the genre to which the text belongs and the context in which it was found.
  + Consider your *purposes* in analysing the text. This will affect which questions seem important to you amongst those offered below.
    - Why did you choose this text?
    - Your purposes may reflect your values: how does the text relate to your own values?
  + How does the sign vehicle you are examining relate to the [type-token distinction](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html)?
    - Is it one among many copies (e.g. a poster) or virtually unique (e.g. an actual painting)?
    - How does this influence your interpretation?
  + What are the important [signifiers](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html) and what do they signify?
    - What is the system within which these signs make sense?
  + [Modality](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02a.html)
    - What reality claims are made by the text?
    - Does it allude to being fact or fiction?
    - What references are made to an everyday experiential world?
    - What modality markers are present?
    - How do you make use of such markers to make judgements about the relationship between the text and the world?
    - Does the text operate within a realist representational code?
    - To *whom* might it appear realistic?
    - 'What does transparency keep obscure?' [(Butler 1999, xix)](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem13.html#Butler_1999)
  + [Paradigmatic analysis](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem05.html)
    - To which class of paradigms (medium; genre; theme) does the whole text belong?
    - How might a change of medium affect the meanings generated?
    - What might the text have been like if it had formed part of a different genre?
    - What paradigm sets do each of the signifiers used belong to? For example, in photographic, televisual and filmic media, one paradigm might be shot size.
    - Why do you think each signifier was chosen from the possible alternatives within the same paradigm set? What values does the choice of each particular signifier connote?
    - What signifiers from the same paradigm set are noticeably absent?
    - What contrasted pairs seem to be involved (e.g. nature/culture)?
    - Which of those in each pairing seems to be the 'marked' category?
    - Is there a central opposition in the text?
    - Apply the [commutation test](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem05.html) in order to identify distinctive signifiers and to define their significance. This involves an imagined substitution of one signifier for another of your own, and assessing the effect.
  + What is the [syntagmatic structure](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem04.html) of the text?
    - Identify and describe syntagmatic structures in the text which take forms such as narrative, argument or montage.
    - How does one signifier relate to the others used (do some carry more weight than others)?
    - How does the sequential or spatial arrangement of the elements influence meaning?
    - Are there formulaic features that have shaped the text?
    - If you are comparing several texts within a genre look for a shared syntagm.
    - How far does [identifying the paradigms and syntagms](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem03.html) help you to understand the text?
  + [Rhetorical tropes](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem07.html)
    - · What tropes (e.g. metaphors and metonyms) are involved?
    - How are they used to influence the preferred reading?
  + [Intertextuality](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem09.html)
    - Does it allude to other [genres](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/intgenre.html)?
    - Does it allude to or compare with other *texts*within the genre?
    - How does it compare with treatments of similar *themes*within other genres?
    - Does one code within the text (such as a linguistic caption to an advertisement or news photograph) serve to 'anchor' another (such as an image)? If so, how?
  + What [semiotic codes](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem08.html) are used?
    - Do the codes have [double, single or no articulation](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem08a.html)?
    - Are the codes *analogue* or *digital*?
    - Which conventions of its [genre](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/intgenre.html) are most obvious in the text?
    - Which codes are *specific* to the medium?
    - Which codes are *shared*with other media?
    - How do the codes involved relate to each other (e.g. words and images)?
    - Are the codes *broadcast* or *narrowcast?*
    - Which codes are notable by their *absence*?
    - What relationships does the text seek to establish with its readers?
    - How direct is the [mode of address](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem08b.html) and what is the significance of this?
    - How else would you describe the mode of address?
    - What cultural assumptions are called upon?
    - To whom would these codes be most familiar?
    - What seems to be the *preferred reading?*
    - How far does this reflect or depart from dominant cultural values?
    - How 'open' to interpretation does the sign seem to be?
  + *Social semiotics*
    - [What does a purely structural analysis of the text downplay or ignore?](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem11.html)
    - Who created the sign? Try to consider *all of those involved* in the process.
    - Whose realities does it represent and whose does it exclude?
    - For whom was it intended? Look carefully at the clues and try to be as detailed as you can.
    - How do people differ in their interpretation of the sign? Clearly this needs direct investigation.
    - On what do their interpretations seem to depend?
    - Illustrate, where possible, [dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem08c.html).
    - How might a change of *context* influence interpretation?
  + [Benefits of semiotic analysis](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem10.html)
    - What other contributions have semioticians made that can be applied productively to the text?
    - What insights has a semiotic analysis of this text offered?
    - What other strategies might you need to employ to balance any shortcomings of your analysis?

See <http://web.pdx.edu/~singlem/coursesite/begsem.html> or generally search for Daniel Chandler’s excellent site on semiotics.