

SEMIOTICS, CULTURE AND COMMUNICATIONS— THE COMMON SENSE OF THE 21st CENTURY

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the contribution of semiotics to cultural and communications analysis in the context of marketing and market research.

There is currently a definite *frisson* in the industry around this subject but semiotics still has the image of being in some way 'difficult'—potentially arcane, hard to grasp. On the one hand there is the positive mystique around a methodology which purports to decode hidden meanings, delivering unexpected insights and a depth of vision into consumer culture. On the other there is a justifiable concern about mystification—impenetrable jargon and analysis that may look fine in an inward-looking academic context but can be more of a hindrance than a help to busy marketers looking for accessibility and practical solutions to real world problems.

My own experience in this field over the past ten years, with the pioneering UK agency Semiotic Solutions, as an independent consultant and, more recently, with the Added Value Group, has convinced me that semiotics will become a defining marketing and research methodology in the years ahead. This development will be based on an increasing recognition of how culture and communications shape consumer behaviour and perceptions of the world. It will also be driven by two major industry trends:

- the imperative in developed markets for brands to be innovative (and the need to understand the full context in which innovation is to take place—given that consumers can't tell us because, in this respect, they need brands to be leaders not followers)
- the movement towards global/cross-cultural brand positionings—and the sensitivity this calls for in terms of understanding the implications for local markets, cultures and executional strategies in communications

Beyond these specific trends is the larger issue of investment and understanding the relevant cultural and communications frameworks—the sheer cost of building a successful brand and the reassurance that you are doing this with the help of rational structures within which creativity and intuition may safely operate (rather than taking half-informed shots in the dark).

Structure of the paper

Section 2 opens up the spirit (rather than the letter) of semiotics—exploring what is, in effect, an inherently “out of the box” way of thinking. Readers who prefer to remain in their boxes may choose to shred this section, which can serve as a comfortable alternative to straw. Be warned, however, that subsection 2.4 is a seminal case study on the practical application of semiotics in finding a solution to a specific marketing problem.

Section 3 is a quick guide to theoretical semiotics — the discipline, its history and key concepts. It goes on to show how the semiotic mind set is, increasingly, converging with that of younger and leading-edge consumers — people who are media literate and sophisticated in the art of understanding and manipulating signs, images and codes of all kinds (via computer games, VR, sampling and turntabling in music, and a dizzying cross-referencing of styles, genres and imagery between advertising, mainstream TV, film, print media etc). Digital TV, where the viewer becomes responsible for the editing and montage, is only the latest development in this process in which the real and representations of the real are becoming increasingly interdependent.

Section 4 focuses on semiotics as applied in research and marketing to date—methods, clients and case studies. It is based on my own experience in the industry. Other commercial semiologists will have other takes on how it’s done. I acknowledge here the learning and inspiration derived from conversations and collaboration with Ginny Valentine and Monty Alexander at Semiotic Solutions and, more recently, Greg Rowland (of Greg Rowland Research) in London, Jake Pearce of Fast Forward in Auckland, New Zealand, and members of the Decoder™ team at the Added Value Company whose thinking has fed directly into this paper— Lucy Richardson, Caroline Flanagan and Fiona McNae.

Section 5 explains the relationship of semiotics to conventional market research techniques—and its particular appropriateness in addressing key issues facing marketers today.

Section 6 looks briefly to the future of semiotic (and post-semiotic) research.

2. SEMIOTIC CONTEXTS

2.1 Differences that make a difference

What first comes to mind when you think about animals?

Cats and dogs? Cat people and dog people. Raining cats and dogs. Kangaroos, koalas and platypuses. Totem animals—wallabies, springboks, lions. And so on. Then what kind of an animal is a human being? What’s the difference between us and the rest of them? The most common answer to this question nowadays is language (although that’s constantly under review). It used to be that animals didn’t have souls.

Animals you can't eat and animals you can eat. But we don't eat *cow*, we eat *beef*. Isn't it strange how we have specific eating words for the flesh of our four-legged friends? As if we don't fully want to acknowledge what we're doing when we eat them. "Show me the classification system", wrote the French semiologist Roland Barthes, "and I'll show you the man". Nowadays he would have probably written "show you the person": Language and classification systems too develop through time—and often become battle grounds for conflicting interests.

Think of your favourite animal. Or of tame animals as opposed to wild animals. Pets. No other language, as far as I know has an equivalent to the English word 'pet'. The word 'pet' marks a category that falls between the human and the animal—so we can pet animals and pet each other (what is "heavy petting"?). People who live in the North of England are famous for calling their human loved-ones 'pet'. Other languages just have 'house-animals'. The Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa has explained that the Anglo-Saxon peoples need pets (rather than plain 'house animals') because they are unable fully to lavish their emotions on and indulge their need for touch with other human beings. So a pet is a kind of intermediate thing, neither fully human nor fully animal—a toilet for unused emotions.

This is the kind of thing semiologists think about.

The prompt to think about animals should immediately get a whole set of culturally acquired software kicking in. The configuration of the software will vary between different cultures and subcultures, e.g. vegans, Hindus, Moslems, Jews, or culinary cultures for whom a nice cut of dog beats a McDonalds any day. Australians pop a prawn on the barbie while, in Old Testament Hebrew culinary law, shellfish are taboo—because they escape normal categorisation and cross boundaries of meaning, being creatures that walk or crawl and yet live in the sea.

Ludwig Wittgenstein described the structure of language as being based on "any difference that makes a difference" : e.g. the cross stroke that stops a 't' being an 'l' is a significant difference—while a piece of fly excrement on the page isn't, unless you're a fly. This definition applies equally well to the structure of classification systems (on which any culture is founded). Things that defy conventional boundaries and classifications tend to be regarded as powerful or dangerous; hence the significance of Jesus Christ (man and God) or the anthropologist Mary Douglas's definition of dirt as being nothing more than "matter out of place", taboo not so much because of what it is but where it is—on the wrong side of a significant dividing line.

2.2 Lesbian karaoke

Consider this.

J.L. Borges writes of “a certain Chinese encyclopaedia” in which all animals can be divided and understood only along the lines determined by the following categories:

- (a) belonging to the Emperor
- (b) embalmed
- (c) tame
- (d) sucking pigs
- (e) sirens
- (f) fabulous
- (g) stray dogs
- (h) included in the present classification
- (l) frenzied
- (j) innumerable
- (k) drawn with a very fine camel hair brush
- (l) et cetera
- (m) having just broken the water pitcher, and
- (n) that from a long way off look like flies.

The challenge is to imagine these people’s mental landscape—to extrapolate from the ‘animals’ corner of their semiotic universe and imagine how the rest of it might map out. Then there’s another game to be played—to imagine seeing our own mindscapes from a point of view as alien as theirs appears to be to us:

Flying saucer crews from Tralfamadore had identified on earth no fewer than seven sexes, each essential for reproduction. There could be no Earthling babies without male homosexuals. There could be babies without female homosexuals. There couldn’t be babies without women over sixty-five years old. There could be babies without men over sixty-five. There couldn’t be babies without babies who had lived an hour or less after birth. And so on.

(Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Slaughterhouse 5*)

Here are three final examples to help us make the familiar seem strange and hence get closer to the wonders at the heart of our own culture and communications:

1. The language of the Khosa people of Southern Africa, apparently, has no word for ‘stranger’. Again, imagine the ramifications of this for the rest of their meaning-making software, their behaviour, their lives:
 - no strangers is a great idea for a Khosa brand communicating emotional warmth, integration and bonding
 - on the other hand, wouldn’t it be only right to warn the Khosa about the rest of us before someone comes along and seriously rips them off, steals their land etc?

2. In the Lingala language of central Africa, the word 'lobi' means both 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow'. Someone needs to have a word with these people too. (Miles Davis once said: "Jazz has no direction and it never will".)
3. Only ten people in the Galaxy have the word 'Semiologist' on their passports designating their profession. One of these, Dr X, comes from the planet Thargon where the only expression conveying roughly what we call 'Feminism' (a literal or, in semiotic jargon, metonymic signifier) is what, in our terms, would be a vivid and contentious metaphor —'Lesbian karaoke'.

2.3 Nature doesn't grow on trees

The projective games we ask consumers to play in focus groups ("Imagine you're an anthropologist from another planet") amount to a kind of para-semiotics. This is what semiologists do all the time. Semiotics, ideally, is a methodology for analysing cultures and communications while avoiding contaminating the analysis with your own culturally induced preconceptions. To get in there among the signifiers (verbal, visual, musical cues etc.) spotting patterns with the intervention of no big givens of your own—no transcendental meanings that are outside the game, no God, no Mankind, no fetishised Individualism, no Nature even (itself very much a cultural construct: "nature doesn't grow on trees"). This type of immaculate perception is, of course, impossible—but it helps to try, to be conscious of your own cultural baggage and to be aware of the pitfalls.

Nature is a good place to start. Every culture has programmed into it a bedrock of apparently natural received wisdom—common sense, what goes without saying, notions implicitly prefaced with phrase "Everyone knows that..." In the 1870s Gustave Flaubert wrote a *Dictionary of Received Ideas* covering French culture at the time, which includes such entries as:

BLONDES. Hotter than brunettes (see BRUNETTES).

BRUNETTES. Hotter than blondes (see BLONDES).

FEET, SMELLY. A sign of good health in a man.

HAMMOCK. Characteristic of Creole women.

HORN, HUNTING. Best heard at night across water.

HYSTERIA. Confuse with nymphomania.

NEGRESSES. Hotter than white women (see BLONDES & BRUNETTES)

PROSTITUTES. A protection for our daughters and sisters, as long as we have bachelors. Should be harried without mercy.

REDHEADS. See BLONDES, BRUNETTES and NEGRESSES.

The irony here is clear and to fully extrapolate the cultural connotations of, for example, BLONDE beyond the piece of routine sexism in Flaubert's dictionary would take another full-length study in itself. Think about blondes for a minute and you'll see what I mean. List everything that comes to mind on a side of A4 if you like. Start connecting all the ideas up into a spider diagram. In his book *Mythologies* Roland Barthes updated and theorised this type of ideological lexicon for the last decades of our own century through a collection of essays on selected topics in French popular culture—a Paris Match cover showing a black soldier saluting the French flag, the representation of ancient Romans in films, the cultural meaning of wine, the Citroen DS, all-in wrestling.....

This kind of symbolic meaning, varying from time to time and place to place, is the bedrock of our cultural knowledge(s). Women are sensitive, men are strong, black people are naturally athletic and have a wonderful sense of rhythm. English-speaking cultures have pets while other cultures have house-animals. Beer, in Russia, is a soft drink good for curing hangovers after a night on the vodka; beer lubricates superficial social interaction while vodka facilitates deep bonding, good-natured male violence and significant suffering at which the Russians, in terms of their own self-image, excel above all other nations.

One of the great obstacles in the way of developing artificial intelligence and thinking machines has been the problem of capturing such common sense knowledge and popular mythology—which seems to precede thinking per se. Pure thinking, separate from all the cultural baggage is, in the words of Jacques Derrida, the patron saint of post-semiotic theorising, “what we always already know we have not yet started”.

Any depth of consumer insight (particularly where global or cross-cultural harmonisation of brands and communications is at stake) is wholly dependent on a full understanding of the meanings and mythology built into popular cultures and subcultures—meanings that are not always conscious but usually subconsciously encoded into language itself as well as other forms of representation, most notably visual imagery.

2.4 Not tonight, darling...

Take the case of migraine and its predominant cultural meanings.

In 1994 I published a conference paper with Dr Linda MacMillan, Principal Marketing Research Executive at Glaxo Pharmaceuticals, summarising a programme of semiotic and cultural research into migraine carried out in UK by Semiotic Solutions over the previous four years.

The research was based on a historical analysis of how migraine has been represented in UK medical and popular culture in the past followed by a thorough trawl of current specialist medical literature, popular magazines and newspapers, films, novels, TV soaps and sitcoms as well as category advertising, packaging and leaflets. The first of these audits, carried out in 1990, was followed by a second two years later—designed to see how, if at all, language and visual representations (the overall popular ‘discourse’) around migraine were evolving.

In 1990 we found that, by and large, migraine suffering was being overwhelmingly down-played at the cultural level:

- by being semiotically ‘lost’ within general headache-ness (i.e. popular representations of migraine as a bad type of headache rather than a separate, specific condition of which a debilitating headache is just one symptom)
- by association with jokey connotations of the headache, i.e. self-indulgence, malingering and particularly female avoidance of sexual ‘duties’
- and, extending this range of connotations, by being firmly located in the loose cultural category of women’s complaints or ‘female trouble’.

At that time we found that the verbal and visual codes (conventional forms of communication understood by creatives and the consumers of messages) used in migraine therapy advertising and leafleting were verbally complicit with this core cultural meaning of migraine as a trivial female complaint:

- through realistic (metonymic) visual imagery which stereotyped the sufferer as exclusively female, often attractive and faintly eroticised—when approximately 40% of migraine sufferers are in fact male
- and through imaginative (i.e. metaphorical) representations of the pain which kept harking back to a narrow repertoire of images connoting sensory distortion, madness, surrealism and hysteria.

Fine as all this may sound in theory, such a semiotic analysis would be only academic if it did not have actionable implications on the level of marketing and communications. The practical implications of the study for Glaxo’s revolutionary new migraine treatment IMIGRAN were straightforward, leading to clear-cut recommendations for creative development:

- break the dominant migraine communication codes by moving away from the stereotyped female sufferer and conventional images of pain—possibly using existing ‘migraine art’ to cue powerful new metaphors

- cut through the welter of migraine self-help lore (which fills the cultural vacuum left by the lack of a truly successful therapy) by positioning IMIGRAN as the first advanced scientific treatment to understand migraine specifically and to be effective in bringing relief to sufferers.

Glaxo took the advice, incorporated the semiotic findings and developed a launch campaign for IMIGRAN unlike anything seen previously in migraine therapy advertising. Gone was the stereotypical 'female in pain' syndrome—replaced by an androgynous head clearly suggesting that there is no gender boundary in migraine. Gone too was the hysterical pain imagery, replaced by a hell-on-earth metaphor of an earthquake-devastated town (which moves pain from the symbolic domain of the individual and the imaginary into that of public, rational discourse)—along with a resolved visual in which the damage has been reversed and normal life put back together again.

In 1993, revisiting the popular migraine discourse to monitor any changes that might have taken place, we found some positive developments, around the fringes of the media coverage, indicating that migraine was being taken more seriously in some quarters:

- stories confronting the 'not tonight darling' sexualised headache as an example of outdated attitudes—and a series of new sub-editors' jokey headlines deconstructing the old norm (e.g. about men's 'orgasm headaches' and women's 'orgasm cures' for migraine).
- increasing differentiation of migraine from ordinary headaches in the ethical and general press
- two new 'scientific' and 'masculine' styles of explanation applied to migraine (as opposed to a 'feminised' emphasis on pain and self-help):
 - the socio-political dimension of the disease (percentage of sufferers, statistical male/female split, the economic cost of not treating migraine effectively etc.)
 - the distinctive 'cause' of migraine (vasodilation, 5HT), implicitly breaking the vague cultural continuum which has positioned it, traditionally, as no more than a severe type of headache.

Meanwhile the conservative, trivialising discourse was still very much in place as were the mainstream migraine advertising codes, now moving into the realms of yet more gothic and sado-masochistic eroticised imagery—an angel dancing with a devil, a woman's head represented as a grenade waiting for the pin to be pulled.

Reflecting back on this work, five years on, two things come to mind.

The first is migraine as seen from the ‘anthropologist from another planet’ point of view: the whole nexus of pain, deserving sufferers versus malingerers, casual misogyny and the patriarchal view of women’s sexual duties. How strange the cultural lore and imagery that has been fabricated for us can appear once we begin to get below the surface of a deceptively ‘natural’ common sense, deconstruct the cultural and communication codes, then examine the values and assumptions on which they are based.

The second is around how hard it is to shake off these cultural codes, even when we understand them. You can only work within the flow that is already there, diverting codes, breaking them, learning from communications in other product and service categories or from other forms of representation (e.g. film, literary fiction, art). And how important the role of everyday language and representation is in perpetuating cultural codes. Migraine is still migraine (a word based on the older English term ‘megrim’, which signified a whim or a female extravagance). Perhaps ‘migraine’ is, after all, one of those verbal signifiers which, like ‘mongolism’ and ‘senility’ (now Downs Syndrome and Alzheimer’s Disease), will carry a semiotically contaminated cultural payload until the disease itself is renamed and completely rebranded.

3, SEMIOTICS—DEFINITION, HISTORY, KEY CONCEPTS

3.1 What is Semiotics?

The classic definition comes from Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), who founded the modern discipline of linguistics. Saussure hypothesised that the methodologies he developed to describe how language works could be applied, equally, to any other system of communication (visual, musical etc.) and postulated accordingly a discipline called semiology—broader than and including linguistics—which he defined as “the science of the life of signs in society”. To put this another way, semiology (or semiotics) is the study of how any kind of sign system functions.

Roughly contemporary with Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, in the United States, was formulating a comparably inclusive theory of signs called Semeiotic or Semiotics. The two terms Semiotics and Semiology are now used in a virtually interchangeable way. Both derive from the Greek root *seme* (‘sign’). Here I mix the two by referring to the methodology as Semiotics, which is the more familiar in a marketing and market research context, and to the practitioner as a Semiologist (because the alternative, Semiotician, sounds too fussy in English—more like a beautician or a hairdresser than a decoder of signs).

3.2 Key Concepts

Saussure handed down a number of key concepts which informed the subsequent development of semiotics and are now applied commercially in the analysis of cultural contexts, advertising, packaging, NPD opportunities and so on.

Synchronic and diachronic

Synchronic analysis freezes a culture or a communication system at a particular moment in time and analyses the structure of that system and the relationship between the parts (e.g. advertising for one migraine therapy brand now, seen in relation to competitive advertising—all in the larger context of cultural meanings and discourse around migraine today)

Diachronic analysis deals with development across time: e.g. evolving representations of migraine.

Langue and parole

Langue is the underlying structure or 'grammar' of a communication system (i.e. the abstract principles or rules determining what traffic lights communicate, or the unspoken codes or rules that allow us to distinguish a news program from a soap opera, a canned soft drinks commercial from a car commercial).

Parole is a specific real-time execution of the rules in action (i.e. particular traffic lights at a particular junction, showing red, with the glass cracked; a particular incident in Neighbours; a specific Coke commercial).

Signifier and signified

Signifiers are the material 'bits' of communication (a picture, a spoken or written word, an expressive noise)—a vehicle to be filled with meaning and which will remain meaning-less if you are not a member of the particular language community that knows how to link this signifier to a specific signified. For example, 'coeden' is a signifier for me because my first language is Welsh and I know its signified. But it may have no signified for you unless I tell you the equivalent English signifier, 'tree'. The signified is the conceptual content attached to the signifier—together they make up the totality of the **sign**.

Other binary oppositions

These key semiotic oppositions help us to cut up and analyse the terrain semiologists look at (specific cultures or communications) in a manageable way.

There are others:

- **denotation** (the literal meaning or dictionary definition of 'migraine', for example, or 'blonde') versus **connotation** (all the cultural accretions and baggage attached to these two signs)

- **syntagmatic** relations (the logic that allows us to connect a group of signs in a linear sequence—for example words in a sentence, courses in a meal, clothes that allow us to be fully dressed from top to toe; signifiers in an advertisement) versus **paradigmatic** relations (between all of the words that could have appeared in a particular slot in your sentence, for example, and the word you actually chose for that slot; between all the possible starters on the menu or all the entrees; between all the alternatives you considered before you opted for the particular shoes, socks, underwear etc. you are wearing today; all the possible strap lines that the creative left out of the ad when he selected the one he did)
- **metonymy** (literal, pinned-down language or imagery, the cultural norm in literate and science-based societies) versus **metaphor** (more ambiguous, poetic signifiers that generally invite an emotional and participative decoding from the receiver of the message). Metaphorical language is the norm in preliterate cultures via totemism and mythology—and is again increasingly so in culture today via brands, via youth cultures that perpetually outstrip or recycle the dominant forms of representation (e.g. words, visual signs, music) and via imagery generated around new technologies. The cultural norm of literal language was always itself charged up with hidden metaphors—of which ‘literal’ itself (‘pertaining to the letter’) is one.

This has been a quick tour around some of the key tools of semiotics. If you hear too much of the jargon in a debrief, you have possibly picked the wrong company to work with—the key challenge is to make process and findings accessible as well as actionable. The software in a semiologist’s head and body has, however, been reprogrammed to work along these conceptual lines. And that is a difference that makes a difference.

3.3 The allure of semiotics

More emotionally engaging is the smell and the feel of semiotics. There is a buzz around the word and the methodology. Semiotics is sexy.

There are two main reasons for this.

The first is that our common sense thinking about language and other forms of representation has been overtaken by the evolution of culture and technology. Semiotics helps us to catch up and regain control.

Received wisdom about language is still based on the seventeenth century Cartesian principle “I think therefore I am”. The unified individual and his internal thoughts are given—they come first. Language and other forms of representation follow: useful tools or envelopes for transferring thoughts/meanings from one individual to another.

This model, although we still live by it, is transparently nonsensical in today's multicultural world of all-pervasive communications. Twentieth century philosophy, anthropology and linguistics have also delivered a radically different point of view.

According to this more modern view language is not just an instrument for transferring our thoughts but actually shapes them. "The limits of my language", wrote Wittgenstein, "are the limits of my world". What I think is determined by my language and culture (the most famous example here is the Inuit languages that allow people to see and interact with 32 different things where we just see 'snow'). Even my sense of identity is shaped by the 'I' slot in language—the subject of the sentence. This, along with the cultural frameworks of family, gender and law, compels me to think of myself as a unity where experience keeps suggesting otherwise. We live a multiplicity of often uneasily co-existing roles (father, semiologist, Welshman, Country and Western singer, Liverpool supporter, shoplifter, secret wearer of partner's lingerie etc.) sitting on top of the uneasy interplay of the conscious and unconscious minds which, since the advent of psychoanalysis, lets us know that identity is a fluid process happening in at least two places at once. As the nineteenth century American poet, Walt Whitman, put it: "I contain multitudes".

This is the medium semiotics lives in—a fluid world of representations, a galaxy criss-crossed by codes, discourses and signs. Having evolved from linguistics through anthropology, literary and film criticism to the study of history and law, then on to modern media and cultural studies, semiotics has become the study of anything that communicates or can be used in communication.

Instead of being the unwitting captives of our systems of classification and representation (what Nietzsche called "the prison house of language"), semiotics grants us an awareness of how they function—an ability to map, decode and recode the universe of signs and messages that we inhabit.

The second reason for the buzz around semiotics is that younger people in the vanguard of global media culture have already been instinctive semiologists for a decade or more. Words, images and musical codes now refer as much to other words, images and music as they do to any 'raw' notion of reality, emotion or thinking. Ads that quote other ads, films, TV programmes and computer games. Rap reworkings of earlier songs. Sampling, scratching, turntabling. The incursion of the virtual into the real in computer games, graphics and VR. Everywhere an all-pervasive sense of processing, mediation, image-making—a blurring of boundaries between what exists out there and what is imagined or fabricated. Where do you want to go today? Who do you want to be today? Retro recycling of earlier fashions and styles. Parody, irony, surrealism, minimalism—all codes that function by bouncing off other codes or genres. Brands—new totems, new metaphors.

The signs that shape us, express us and, increasingly, constitute our reality (active signs, the signs of semiotics) are now very much here—having displaced the rather tame Cartesian sign as envelope or neutral instrument for transmitting the thinking of the unique and singular ‘I’. “How can I know what I think” says Alice, in *Through the Looking Glass*, “until I see what I say?” Language and other kinds of social ‘text’ or representation are increasingly coming to be seen as *speaking us*, as much as we speak language.

This is why semiotics, the common sense of the twenty first century, has been gathering momentum—to impact on marketing and research like a meteor.

4. APPLIED SEMIOTICS—RESEARCH & MARKETING

4.1 Commercial Semiotics

What then do we do with semiotics in the world of marketing and research?

Semiotics can be used to analyse any aspect (or all aspects) of the brand mix that communicate(s) the brand to the consumer: e.g. advertising, packaging, retail outlet design, POS, merchandising, customer service initiatives etc.

This analytical work is not carried out with consumers but via expert analysis directly applied to culture and communications—focusing on a specified body of ‘texts’, be these ads, packs, press, TV programmes etc.

Although semiotic analysis is not initially based on work with consumers, findings can be tested and refined in research (using specially designed stimulus material).

4.2 Clients

Semiotic analysis, in the 1990s, has been a compelling extension of the research repertoire for clients looking for depth of consumer insight (getting below the surface) coupled with a vision of how cultures and communications are evolving.

Clients commissioning semiotics-based work I have been directly involved with in recent years have included Guinness, Glaxo, Unilever, American Express, Thomson, Colgate Palmolive, General Motors, Campbell’s, British Telecom, South African Breweries, Barclays, Mars Pedigree, Safeway, Tesco, UDV, Woolwich, Guardian Insurance, OOCL and Freeserve. This is only a fraction of the corporate market for research that draws on the semiotic discipline.

Semiotics is coming to play an increasingly important role in marketers' understanding of consumer cultures and subcultures—no-go areas, opportunities, new markets and cross-cultural harmonisation. The methodology is also extensively used in decoding competitive communications (and evolving new communication strategies) in a rapidly changing cultural context, e.g. in advertising and packaging.

Whereas five or six years ago semiotics may have provided a different view of things for brands particularly concerned with innovation this is now a standard methodology to draw on. It is becoming increasingly risky **not** to use semiotics.

Why the buzz?

Semiotic analysis brings a number of important client benefits:

- Cultural awareness—making the most of your brand within specific cultural contexts.
- Deeper insight into the inner workings of category communications (which includes understanding your competitors better than they understand themselves).
- Understanding brand tone of voice and 'body language'—the unconscious meanings expressed by the *form* of communications.
- Evolutionary understanding: How are the unwritten rules (codes) of category communications changing over time and where are they heading? Which codes should a brand be harnessing or breaking?
- Learning what the consumer can't tell you—expert analysis of unconscious cultural patterns that are shaping consumer response.

4.3 Applied semiotics—techniques

While academic semiologists aim to understand various aspects of culture and communications for the end of pure research (or for critique—e.g. a feminist account of sexist images in advertising) commercial semiotics has the aim of making communications work for brands within their competitive and cultural contexts.

In terms of the characteristic semiotic jargon, applied semiotics tends to use only a focused subset of the discipline's full conceptual armoury—accessible analysis being the key imperative. What follows is some key semiotic ideas as translated for commercial application:

Brand as tip of the iceberg

Any brand is based on an evolving mass of hidden meanings and associations—a largely unconscious universe of language and assumptions shared by producers and consumers of messages that make up the brand mix.

Semiotic analysis brings these meanings and associations to the surface and assesses the direction and pace of cultural change across time.

The hidden part of the iceberg is a brand's 'cultural unconscious' (analogous to the unconscious mind in the individual) made up of associations, similarities and significant differences. So Nike-ness, for example, will take on its contextual significance not only via the tick, "Just Do It", Michael Jordan, the ethos of African American sporting prowess/street attitude and the Brazil football team (the more front of mind signifiers associated with the brand) but also via a whole system of cultural similarities and differences within which these operate.

This system will include: the competitive context and category codes (what differentiates Nike by constituting Adidas-ness, for example); national cultural differences (the meaning of American and African American within specific non-American markets); the historical dimensions of advertising and culture—e.g. the emergence in the US of black entrepreneurial and technological empowerment Vs. the traditional black success signifiers of sport and entertainment; emergent trends in youth culture and in overall consumer culture (for example expectations around how really smart and progressive corporations will treat their people Vs. media publicity concerning conditions and wages in Nike production facilities in SE Asia); how this reflects back, in turn, on Nike's use in advertising of selectively aspirational signifiers rooted in the culture of historically exploited and underprivileged ethnic groups.

This is just to point towards the beginnings of a deeper excavation into the Nike brand, unlocking its impacted signifiers and culture. The aim is to get below the surface and generate deep consumer insight at levels of which consumers themselves may not be fully aware. What will be done with the full analysis will, of course, be determined by who has commissioned the work and with what objectives—e.g. harnessing and updating positive semiotic equities for Nike (or uncovering Nike's fault-lines and exploiting weaknesses for a competitor).

Culture

Defined in the following terms:

- Culture structures our beliefs, attitudes and behaviour
- Marks continuities and boundaries between people
- Is in flux, constantly changing
e.g.—CKO in the context of new attitudes towards male/female or androgyny
—Marlboro/Levis using America to own values of freedom and independence

Codes

- Systems of shared rules, e.g. traffic lights, dress codes
- Ways in which we understand and communicate, both verbal and non-verbal
- Inherited models and patterns (genres)
e.g.—packaging codes (colours of flavour variants; typeface connotations)
—advertising (metaphorical fragrance; literal/metonymic hair care)

Semiotic Toolkit

Within the analysis of culture and codes there are a number of specific semiotic tools in use.

- Cultural Symbols

Deconstructing key words/images to reveal underlying cultural assumptions and resonances. (see Fig 1)

- Meaning Maps

Overview of conceptual spaces within culture—how meanings are linked up to form a bigger picture. (see Fig 2)

- Code Trajectories

Historical direction of the direction and pace of change in culture or in category communications—the current configuration of residual (dated), dominant (middle of the road) and emergent (dynamic, leading edge) codes. (see Fig 3)

- Brand Rhetoric

'Open'/interactive Vs. 'closed' communication styles; genre—official Vs. popular forms; metaphorical Vs literal (metonymic) language/images.

Fig. 1

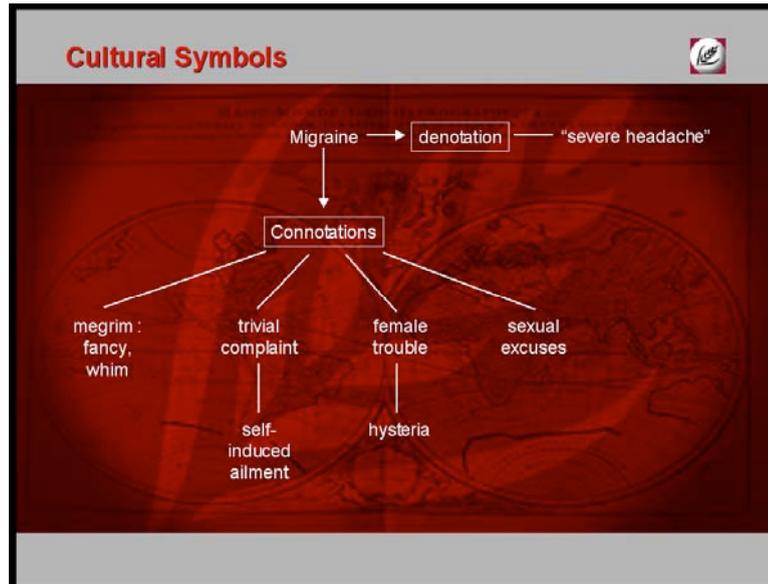


Fig. 2

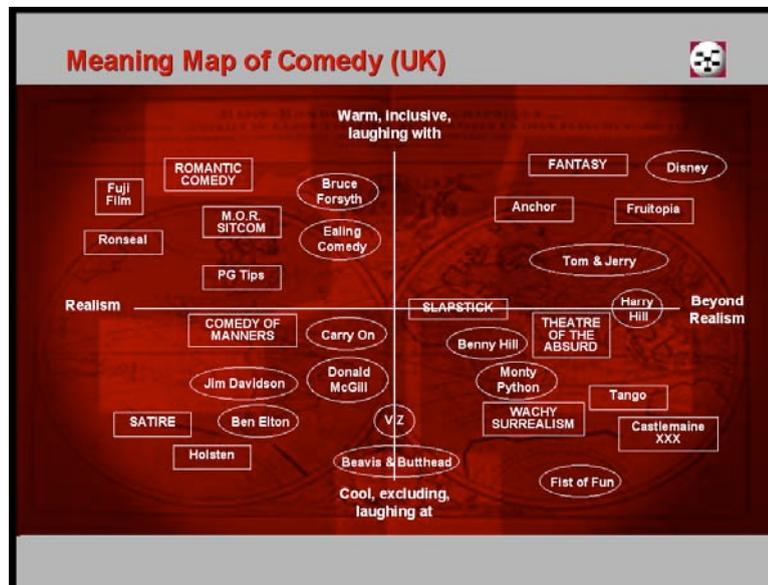


Fig. 3

Code Trajectories

	Residual	Dominant	Emergent
Music	Status Quo	Spice Girls	Dance Music
TV	Nine O'Clock News, Blue Peter	Oprah, Friends, MTV	Harry Hill, Jerry Springer
Holiday Destination	Majorca	US	Vietnam
Ads	Fairy Liquid	Tango	Coca Cola, CKOne, Nike

Past ← Present ← Future

4.4 Semiotic Analysis—overview of the process

Approaches will vary, depending on the problem being solved, but the outputs of a typical analysis of brand communications might be structured along the lines of the sequence that follows:

- Your communications world defined
 - relationship to the competition
 - current developments in specialist media coverage of category issues (e.g. ecology, GMO etc.—depending on category)
 - popular culture context (relevant material from soaps, sitcoms etc.)
- Map of that world
 - key dimensions
 - links and contrasts
- Category codes
 - detailed analysis of how rational and emotional meanings are constructed
- You are here
 - conclusions on client communications in context Vs. the competition
- How codes are changing
 - emergent codes in your category
- How the map is changing
 - relation to emergent codes in other categories and in the culture at large
 - Vs. the competition
- Where you could go
 - opportunities for creative development.

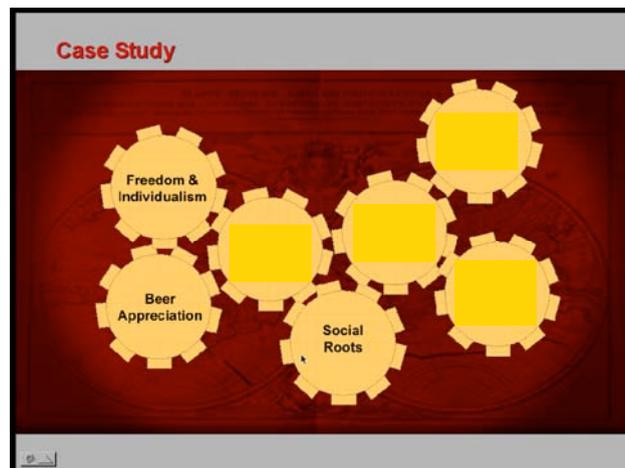
4.5 Some recent semiotics-based projects

Here are some examples of recent work using these analytical methodologies (client names withheld for reasons of confidentiality):

- Semiotic analysis of emergent care codes in popular culture and ads
 - how best to communicate care via innovative but culturally salient metaphors in washing detergent advertising
- Analysis of the verbal and visual signifiers of ‘taste’ in food advertising and packaging
- The cultural meanings of travel and tourism in Germany
 - mapping the codes of tour operators’ ads and brochures
 - opportunities and appropriate communication codes for a new market entrant

- Semiotic audit of historical and current communications in telecoms and IT
 - emergent codes
 - fit with youth codes in other categories
 - guidelines for future strategy
- Analysis of innovative communications in banking and financial services
 - do's and don'ts of communications for a new brand
 - ads, brochures, application forms, statements, letters
- Shipping sector advertising
 - analyse how rational and emotional meanings are constructed
 - map the dominant codes of the category
 - draw up guidelines for breaking the codes in ways that will be motivating for shipping buyers
 - create a semiotic blueprint for differentiating client brand advertising

4.6 Case Study—Advertising Proposition Decoding Kit (Guinness)



In 1998 Guinness briefed the Added Value Company's applied semiotics team (using their Decoder™ methodology) to produce an analysis of the international 'language' of beer advertising (verbal, visual, musical etc.)—mapping the full repertoire of cross-cultural codes for the category. The team was also asked to decode and map competitive advertising propositions in six major markets. The last objective of this project was to reflect back on the process used in the analysis and to design an advertising proposition decoding tool that Guinness executives in local markets could use subsequently to do their own semiotic analysis of competitor communications.

Six Added Value Decoder analysts mapped the codes and propositions across a spread of national markets (in Europe, North America, Africa and Asia) then merged their data to produce an map of 26 global codes grouped around 7 key themes (see Figure 4).

We then developed the decoding tool, offering a step-by-step guide to interpreting competitive beer advertisements, moving from spoken words, text, strap lines, images, editing style, people and situations used etc. through to an understanding of the probable core consumer take-out and the proposition behind each campaign.

As part of the kit we designed a pack of large Tarot-size cards capturing the 26 global beer codes—to help the analyst link signifiers that appear in ads with the themes and meanings normally attached to them. These cards, illustrated with typical communication cues (words and images) from beer ads include such codes as Refreshment, Heritage, Regular Guys, Reward, High Energy Sociability, Cosmopolitan Style etc.

At the time of writing this paper (August 1999) the complete kit is about to be distributed to Guinness local markets with the following preamble, signed by Michael Harvey, Consumer Planning Director, Guinness Global Support and Mark Sherrington, Managing Director of the Added Value Group:

“Welcome to the Guinness Competitive Advertising Decoding Kit. It has been developed by Guinness Consumer Planning and the Added Value Group as a valuable addition to our marketing armoury. It allows us to quickly understand what our competitors are communicating to consumers in their advertising campaigns.

To the best of our knowledge this kit is the first of its kind in the world. It is thus a further example of leading edge best practice to add to the Guinness Marketing Toolkit.”

4.7 Semiotic Analysis—Segmentation

From our experience with semiotics so far, at the Added Value Company and elsewhere, we have found that this methodology is particularly productive in four types of project: positioning, communication strategy, market entry and concept stretching or enrichment.

Positioning

- Analysis of the competitive and cultural context
- Assess pace and direction of change in culture and communications
- Identify gaps and opportunities
- Ideas for updating representation/execution of typical brand codes and equities
- Identify executional codes for communicating new positionings. in competitive context

Communication Strategy

- For ads, packs leaflets etc.
- Competitive and cultural context analysis
- Assess direction and pace of change (in category and cultural codes)
- Identify best codes to harness or break

Market Entry

- In depth analysis of local cultural context
- Positive features and no go areas
- Analysis of communication codes
- Emergent codes—in culture and category communications
- NPD gaps and opportunities

Concept Stretching/Enrichment.

- Cultural research to deconstruct a particular concept area then expand ideas and images associated with it
- Mining popular culture for new ideas and metaphors
- Generate recommendations for breaking out of the box of conventional positioning areas
- Develop stimulus material for research.

This is, however, only a rule of thumb segmentation based on experience. Semiotics is, in essence, an adaptable methodology offering flexible solutions to specific marketing problems. One of its key strengths is to help break the mould of formulaic marketing thinking and anticipate change and/or track developments in consumer culture as they occur.

5. RELATIONSHIP TO MAINSTREAM RESEARCH & MARKETING

5.1 Semiotics and qualitative research

Whereas qualitative research takes its bearings from psychology, semiotics adopts a complementary perspective starting with culture and communications—and instead of interrogating consumers directly, semiologists analyse the codes and ‘texts’ (any kind of message in any medium) that impact on the social construction of people’s identities/ self-image and the representation of the world they inhabit.

Qualitative researchers talk to what they hope is a representative sample of the target market and, by getting under the radar to people’s ‘deep responses’, hope to put together an accurate picture of market. Semiologists, in contrast, view people as decoders of messages and carriers of cultural meanings. They analyse directly the cultural and communications frameworks that structure the market and brands under scrutiny.

The advantage of semiotics in this context, with its unique perspective on assumptions beneath the surface of consumer awareness and how culture and communications are evolving, is to get above the parapet and present an informed view on the broader competitive and cultural context—along with the direction and pace of change. Consumers tend to play back the current norms in research (the dominant codes) and anyone concerned with future marketing today needs a more visionary point of view (via the emergent codes).

The hypotheses on change that semiologist’s generate, however, are very much enriched by a qualitative check with consumers for testing and fine-tuning, combined with a reality check on where, on the continuum of change, consumers actually perceive themselves to be at the present time.

5.2 Semiotics in marketing—Summary

At various points above, we have already touched on some of the key benefits of semiotics for marketers. This is a consolidated summary:

- Understanding the full context for brand innovation
 - where consumers can’t lead you
 - where you need an informed framework within which to exercise creativity and intuition
- Frameworks for harmonising global positionings with multi-local perspectives
 - cultural opportunities and constraints/taboo
 - communication codes that work in individual markets and cross-culturally (e.g., colours; gestures; representations of nature, femininity, aspiration)
 - highest common factors between markets (avoiding the global mass-market cliché)

- Minimising the risk in investing to build big brands
 - full prior understanding of the historical and evolving culture
 - knowing which communication codes to tap into
- Learning what the consumer can't tell you
 - expert analysis of unconscious cultural patterns that are shaping consumer response
 - knowledge to target communications effectively
 - knowledge that no one else has access to (even consumers themselves)
- Knowing what competitors are doing better than they know themselves
 - the big picture
 - grasping significant differences
 - gaining a sense of empowerment
 - knowing fundamentally what needs to be done

Finally marketing itself is an art not a science (“common sense made difficult”). There is a latent nervousness among marketers about the discipline—in comparison with, say, the identifiable skill set at work in quantitative statistical analysis or even in the business of recruiting and running focus groups.

In this respect semiotics can be highly reassuring—setting a framework, a discipline, a structured environment for discussion, negotiation and decision-making. This environment, moreover, is very much in touch with the way the world is heading—towards ever greater sophistication and discrimination in relation to communications and culture. In this respect, semiotics offers marketers a higher level of credibility for their discipline—the prospect of having their very own -ology.

5.3 Semiotics, advertising and design

Applied semiotics is concerned not only with decoding but with recoding communications—offering practical consultancy on re-tuning advertising, packaging and other components in the communications mix in order to remain competitive in a changing cultural environment. This input is expressed via advice on which codes to harness or break in implementing a communications strategy, via a mining of other categories and popular culture at large for motivating signifiers—and through creative briefing tools for creatives.

In this case semiotics becomes a language which helps close the gap between planning and creative execution—clarifying creative briefs and setting up structures that allow for more monitoring of and accountability in the creative process (see the IMIGRAN case study, above 2.4).

This, in itself, is an emergent code within the advertising industry. Agencies in the past have acted as the High Church of a defunct romantic myth of creativity by symbolically and literally secreting their creative people away from the world (like the languishing poet in the attic or the rampant hairy-arsed Id in the basement) and locating creativity itself in a mysterious sacred place beyond reason. Meanwhile creativity in popular culture has developed into something much more workmanlike and unassuming. So in terms of industry hype and self-image the people who produce junk mail get a higher rating on the old romantic scale of creativity than do top finger-on-the-cultural-pulse people like Prodigy or the BeeGees.

In design, semiotics gets creative people thinking more analytically about things that they already know and act on intuitively—e.g. in terms of working with, adapting or breaking category packaging codes. Here again there is a need for a language to bridge the gaps between briefing and creative execution. Semiotics can also feed into analytical methodologies (such as the Visual Equities Analysis offered by the UK-based Brown Inc) and add value to intuitive design consultancy skills by establishing a conceptual platform for translating these into principles and replicable process.

6. THE FUTURE

Applied semiotics is on a roll. Its time has come. The methodology faces two big opportunities:

- make the theory more accessible, bringing it closer to common sense language and metaphors
- apply to marketing issues more of the whole methodology's rich conceptual repertoire than is currently being used

Key areas under development at the moment are centred on what we call liminal or cusp research. This works in the gaps missed out by conventional formulaic approaches to marketing and focuses on:

- multidimensional and shifting consumer identities (as opposed to the patronising stereotyping that goes on around typologies, lifestyle etc.)
- the complexity and diversity involved in consumer decoding of brand communications—e.g. accepting, rejecting or negotiating with the meanings on offer (as opposed to a monolithic 'What is this ad really saying?' approach)
- understanding the dynamics of pleasure in people's decoding of brand communications—and the impact of this on consumer behaviour
- fragmented media spaces and new media (e.g. analysing website codes)

So far only a relatively tight subset of the full armoury of semiotics has been applied to practical marketing and research. There are big opportunities for applied marketing semiotics to grow and become more refined and differentiated in its repertoire of techniques. More and more students are leaving universities with high level skills in semiotic analysis, albeit not yet in practical applications to research and marketing issues. If this paper triggers anyone's interest in going away, rethinking and innovating in this direction then so much the better.

Let this be not the last word but the beginning of some intense and pleasurable interactivity.

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