4 Structuralism and semiotics

Introduction

This chapter focuses on structuralist theories of media and the method of **semiotics** that emerged from theoretical themes which underpin **structuralism**. The work of a linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, will begin our discussion. Central to Saussure's theory of language is the distinction between synchronic and diachronic forms of analysis. Synchronic analysis explores language as a system at a given moment in time. It is a 'snapshot' form of analysis. Diachronic analysis, on the other hand, explores a language system as it evolves over a period of time. Etymology is a type of diachronic analysis. By contrast:

> Structuralism as a whole is necessarily synchronic; it is concerned to study particular systems or structures under artificial and ahistorical conditions, neglecting the systems or structures out of which they have emerged in the hope of explaining their present functioning.
> (Sturrock 1979: 9)

Unlike theories of modernity, structuralism is oblivious to history in its search for what language means and represents here and now. Semiotics is the method that serves this purpose. Semiotics analyses language as a whole system that structures its individual parts into distinct units of meaning. These units of meaning are referred to as signs. Since the system is constantly changing – new signs emerge, old signs become obsolete – what semiotics does is freeze the moment in order to analyse the system at work. Structuralism is the theoretical framework that seeks to understand how systems work to structure their individual parts at any given moment in time.

Language is the system *par excellence*, but inextricably linked to language are social, cultural, political and economic systems. Societies, like languages, structure their individual parts (i.e. citizens) precisely through processes of differentiation. Our social lives are structured by powerful agents of the social system such as governments. Media institutions are also powerful agents of the social system, but at the same time these agents are structured by the system too. As we will discuss in relation to structuralist theories of myth, ideology and hegemony, it is possible to theorize media texts (especially news) and the institutions that produce them as meaning-makers. The ways in which we perceive our social and cultural lives are shaped to a great extent

by what we see on television or read in newspapers or hear on the radio. Media – among other meaning systems – structure our lives. Of course, we do not simply accept what we see on television or read in the newspapers or hear on the radio. As Hall (1980) notes, we 'decode' media texts in different ways – sometimes we agree, sometimes we disagree. Nonetheless, the power to decide what stories, ideas, tastes and values are offered to us via media communications is structured unequally in favour of some interests (the ruling ones) rather than others (the interests of the silent majority). Hebdige's subcultural theory reminds us that ideological and hegemonic power can be met with resistance, but for Foucault resistance is banal because we have internalized the power structures that oppress us.

Saussure and Barthes: language and myth

Before we can begin to understand structuralist theories of media, it is first necessary to probe in greater depth the theory of **language** outlined by Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (first published in 1916). Saussure dismissed the notion that language simply reflects reality and instead suggested that language operates within its own system. This system *constructs* meanings within a language – meanings do not evolve in any natural or unique way. He called this approach semiology, which means the study of signs, but we will use the more common term for this approach, known as semiotics. A sign (word) such as 'rat', for instance, has two properties: a sound and an idea. But there is no connection between the sound and the idea: 'the choice of a given slice of sound to name a given idea is completely arbitrary' (Saussure 1966: 113). Even a sign like 'sizzle' – which some would cite as an example of onomatopoeia – has no meaning in relation to its sound, according to Saussure's theory of language. Working as a system, the signs (i.e. words) that form a language are able to signify ideas precisely because they are different from other signs: 'Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others' (Saussure 1966: 114). So language is structured through difference, and different ideas depend on different sounds, or 'the phonic differences that make it possible to distinguish this word from all others, for differences carry signification' (Saussure 1966: 118).

For example, we can only understand the word 'rat' as a unit of meaning in the English language because its sound – as well as the idea or thing it signifies – differs from that of other words, such as 'mouse' or 'cat'. If 'rat' was the word used to signify all of these 'real' things (i.e. mouse and cat as well as rat), its meaning would be imprecise and the whole system of language would have effectively failed to signify. However, in Latin there is only one term – 'mus' – to refer to both a rat and a mouse. Latin speakers, historically, have

not distinguished between the two creatures because they are 'indifferent' to Latin cultures. Likewise, Eskimos have several different words to describe 'snow' whereas English speakers only use one. As Umberto Eco rightly demonstrates in support of Saussure, 'any cultural phenomenon is *also* a sign phenomenon' (Eco 1973: 61). Cultural meanings are therefore specific to language systems that operate within the rules of semiotics.

Saussure shows, therefore, that any single sign (or word) in a language system is inextricably linked with the system as a whole. A word's 'content is really fixed only by the concurrence of everything that exists around it' (Saussure 1966: 115). In order to illustrate this, he makes a distinction between the *langue* (the whole system or structure) and the *parole* (specific utterances within this system) of a given language. An utterance (*parole*) can only signify meaning effectively in its relation to the whole system of a language (*langue*). The analogy to a game of chess is a good one:

> Each individual move in chess is selected from the whole system of possible chess moves. So we could call the system of possible chess moves the *langue* of chess. Any individual move in a game of chess would be *parole*, the selection of a move from the whole set of possible moves in the *langue* of chess.
>
> (Bignell 2002: 8)

This distinction between *langue* and *parole* can be applied not only to the formal properties of a language (linguistics) but also to uses of language in social contexts. As Figure 4.1 shows, language usage is structured by a system that works along two axes: the *syntagmatic* (meanings which exist at a specific moment in time) and the *paradigmatic* (meanings which could be used to substitute existing ones). The examples in Figure 4.1 prove Saussure's point that changes in the paradigmatic features of a language system alter the whole structure of meaning as carried by the syntagmatic features, and vice versa.

Following Saussure, Roland Barthes's theory of **myth** is indebted to his predecessor's claim that a word's idea (its signified element) and its sound (its signifier element) are unconnected but together make up the total meaning of that word (its sign), which can only be understood in relation to all other signs – as in the relationship between *langue* and *parole*. However, Barthes extends Saussure's theory of language systems by applying it to the systems by which societies and cultures develop 'myths'. Societies and cultures, like languages, are considered to be structured by a 'whole' system that determines their individual parts. Of course, language as a system is also fundamental to how societies or cultures persist. But Barthes suggests that purely linguistic meanings are radically changed by social and cultural practices.

Barthes's most important work in this respect is *Mythologies* (first

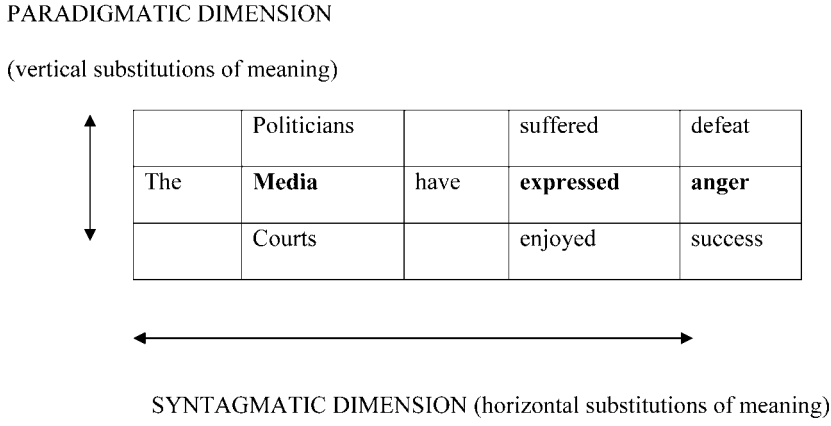

Figure 4.1 Syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions of semiotics

published in 1957). Here he develops Saussure's notion that meanings do not simply refer to real things. Furthermore, meanings can develop beyond their linguistic properties and take on the status of myths. Saussure suggested that the meaning of any term in a language system consists of a signifier plus a signified to give a sign (Figure 4.2).

SIGNIFIER (sound/phonetic quality) + SIGNIFIED (idea) = SIGN (total meaning)

Figure 4.2 Saussure's semiotic theory of language

Barthes, on the other hand, introduces an extra dimension to this equation (Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3 Barthes's semiotic theory of language and myth

Source: Barthes (1993: 115)

Language – the first order of signification in Barthes's model – is therefore capable of generating a second order of signification called myth. This is the basis for Barthes's approach to semiotics. In Figure 4.3 we can see how a sign (i.e. an idea plus a sound) such as 'rat', which operates in a first order of signification, becomes a signifier within a second-order 'myth' system of signification. In the case of rat, therefore, its sign in the 'language' order of

signification defines it as, say, 'a small rodent with a pointed snout'. However, its sign in the 'myth' order of signification would be extended to what rat means in particular social and cultural contexts. In English-speaking, Western countries such as Britain, rat as a myth signifies dirt, disease, the darkness of underground sewers and cellars. Most of the mythical meanings that we attach to 'rat' are negative, because most of us dislike or even fear the 'real' creature which the word signifies. The distinction between language and myth is sometimes equated to the distinction between denotation and connotation. Denotation is similar to a dictionary definition of a sign; connotation, by contrast, refers to the wider social and cultural meanings (myths) attached to a sign. Rat denotes rodent; it connotes much, much more (dirt, disease, and so on).

How does Barthes's semiotic – or structuralist – theory of myth apply to media? If we consider media to be an important – perhaps *the* most important – element within a social and cultural system of signs that are capable of generating myths, then clearly television, the internet and other mass communications can help to nurture some myths and not others. Barthes's best-known example of myth-making derives from a medium. He analyses the front cover of an issue of *Paris-Match*, a French magazine, which depicts a black boy in military outfit looking upwards and saluting what is assumed to be the French flag. Barthes reads this image (i.e. sign) as language and myth. On the level of language, the image denotes a black boy giving a French salute. Far more can be read into what this image *connotes* though. As a myth, Barthes suggests that the image signifies 'that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag' (Barthes 1993: 116). The image of the proud black soldier connotes a myth that France is a multicultural land of opportunity far from an oppressive colonizer of foreign peoples. Clearly, the meanings signified by this image as language and myth are only *made* possible in how they compare with the vast range of other meanings that an image like this might depict if it was configured differently. If the boy in the image is white and not black, the image's meaning is radically changed.

Barthes applies his theory of myth to several 'mythologies' associated with his native French culture, such as wine and Citroen cars. We can apply his theory to contemporary media mythologies, although we would need to stretch our imagination and thought processes in the same way that Barthes did. For instance, BBC News 24 occasionally broadcasts a pre-recorded trailer just before headlines appear 'on the hour'. In the order of a language system, the moving images shown denote foreign correspondents 'on location' in various parts of the world, reporting on different kinds of news stories (environmental, political, financial, and so on). A timer counts down the seconds from 30 to 0 in anticipation of the headlines that will immediately follow once the trailer has finished. But we can read this sequence of images

on the more sophisticated order of a myth system. From this reading we can appreciate how the BBC News 24 channel – and its journalists – takes on connotations of a professional organization dedicated to fast, concise, global news coverage. BBC foreign correspondents are eyewitnesses to international affairs in a not dissimilar way that Britain has its metaphorical eyes on the world. We seek out evil, we search out poverty and disease – 'we' the BBC, like the country we represent, are a force for good, and a picture of fine health compared to the tyranny and misfortune of others. The timer, moreover, connotes punctuality and recency (i.e. BBC news values). News does not occur on the hour – in reality, it can occur at any time – but news is always made fresh by headlines 'on the hour' to reinforce the myth that news is always 'new'. A timer that began counting down the seconds from 30 *minutes* to zero, rather than 30 seconds, would generate very different meanings (and myths) about BBC News 24. Instead of pandering to breaking news or the headline stories, we might read this news channel as dedicated to programming that deals with in-depth debate and dialogue.

The need to 'stretch one's imagination' when identifying media mythologies points to a weakness with semiotics as a method and the structuralist theory it informs. Far from a science, semiotics is a highly subjective method of reading social and cultural myths that depends entirely on 'the analytical brilliance of the semiotician' (Couldry 2000a: 75). Moreover, as well as being unable to account for historical changes in language and myth, given its focus on synchronicity, semiotics is only able to analyse one particular text in isolation. What Nick Couldry calls the 'total textual environment' (Couldry 2000a: 73) – the multitude of media texts and technologies that we interact with on a daily basis – cannot be penetrated by semiotic analysis. Moreover, semiotics as a method of textual analysis is easily abused to make claims about how media texts signify meanings in everyday use. Angela McRobbie acknowledges that while semiotics can 'read' ideologies in media texts, it cannot account for the views of readers/audiences and therefore cannot 'understand the complex and contested social processes which accompany the construction of new images [and texts]' (McRobbie 1994: 165). Similarly in relation to semiotic analysis of music texts, Tia DeNora rightly interprets 'an epistemologically naïve move' in 'a tacit shift in many semiotic ''readings'' of music . . . from description of musical material and its social allocation to the theorization of that material's ''wider'' significance and cultural impact' (DeNora 2000: 28). Semiotics, given that it can only ever be one person's interpretation of what they read, hear or see, is certainly not a substitute for empirical audience research.

Hall: Encoding/Decoding, ideology and hegemony

While he does not theorize **ideology** in any great depth, Barthes is nonetheless clear that myths contain ideological meanings. Myth and ideology in their structuralist senses are synonymous. For Barthes, the ideology of French colonialism is expounded in the proud salute of the black soldier. It is only by deconstructing a myth, or reading a myth's hidden meanings, that its ideology – the values and beliefs it upholds – can be exposed. The concept of 'ideology' has been theorized to a greater extent by structuralist Marxists who followed Barthes, such as Louis Althusser and Stuart Hall. Althusser (1971) argued that individuals in capitalist societies are governed by ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), including schools, legal systems, religious institutions, media communications, and so on. These ISAs espouse the ideologies of powerful political institutions, such as governments and armies, in implicit – not explicit – ways, and sometimes without knowing it. As such, individuals 'internalize' ruling capitalist ideologies, unaware that their lives are repressed by the very institutions that represent and serve them (and perhaps even employ them). As Hall notes, Althusser's approach was more sophisticated than the classical Marxist notion of top-down 'false consciousness' which suggests that ideology is imposed 'from above' by elite powers upon the unknowing masses (see discussion of Adorno in Chapter 7, for a version of classical Marxism). ISAs point to a 'more linguistic or ''discursive'' conception of ideology' (Hall 1996a: 30) that is reproduced by various institutional practices and structures. Ellis Cashmore (1994) applies Althusser's theory of ISAs to television by suggesting that viewers are given a partial view of the world that fits with state interests, even when television is not explicitly state-controlled.

Although Althusser's ideas can be applied to media, the ideas of Hall rework structuralist theories of ideology into a more systematic theory of media in their social and cultural functions. Hall also criticizes Althusser for assuming that ideology, although internalized, always functions to reproduce state capitalist values: 'how does one account for subversive ideas or for ideological struggle?' (Hall 1996a: 30). As such, Hall defines ideology in a discursive sense as 'ideas, meanings, conceptions, theories, beliefs, etc. and the form of consciousness which are appropriate to them' (Hall 1977: 320). Hall, along with other theorists associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) such as Dick Hebdige and David Morley, investigated the relationship between media and ideology through semiotic analysis of systems of signification in texts such as television news bulletins.

Like Saussure and Barthes, Hall states that meaning is a discursive process that operates within a language system (what he terms 'a set of codes') loaded with ideological signification.

Media institutions and the texts they generate are important ideological dimensions through which we make sense of the world. Hall deploys semiotics to understand the sense-making process by which media transmit messages to their audiences. Language is *encoded* (made to mean something) by those with 'the means of meaning production' (i.e. producers) and is then *decoded* (made to mean something) by audiences (Hall 1982: 68). Hall extends this semiotic theory of meaning construction to a model of media production and reception which is commonly known as the Encoding/Decoding model (see Figure 4.4). Unlike the behaviourist approach to communication, Hall's Encoding/Decoding approach does not assume a direct correspondence between the meaning intended by a sender and how that meaning is inter-preted by a recipient: 'The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical' (Hall 1980: 131). Hall is interested in how media represent – and misrepresent – what they mean rather than simply reflect those meanings on to their audiences. While encoding and decoding are separate processes, they are not arbitrary however. Encoding – at the phase of

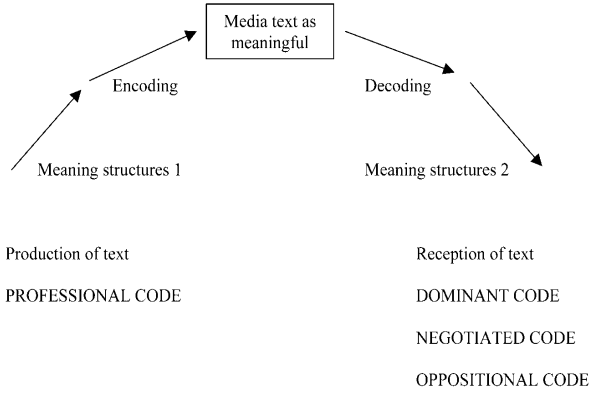

Figure 4.4 The Encoding/Decoding model
Source: Adapted from Hall (1980: 130)

production – operates within a set of professional codes such as technical competence and high-budget production values. These professional codes generate preferred meanings that 'have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized' (Hall 1980: 134). Television is the medium that Hall is most interested in. In Britain, for example, the BBC operates a professional code in line with their public service ethos. One characteristic of this code relates to political impartiality – the BBC is not allowed to take sides in party politics, otherwise it would be breaking its code and being unprofessional. The preferred meanings encoded by BBC news channels, therefore, include political impartiality. The assumption is that audiences will not decode partial poli-tical points of view if – as seems likely – they adopt the BBC's preferred meanings in their news broadcasts.

While Hall argues that preferred meanings have considerable weight in determining how messages are decoded, they are not determinate. This returns us to a basic – but crucial – theory of structuralism that informs the Encoding/Decoding model: 'In a "determinate" moment the structure employs a code and yields a "message"; at another determinate moment the "message", via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices' (Hall 1980: 130). It is precisely because encoding and decoding are distinct, determinate moments that explains why the meaning structures of media messages do not reflect reality in an objective sense. Rather, in the case of television, messages 'can

only be signified within the aural-visual forms of the televisual discourse' (Hall 1980: 129). A news event such as a state funeral, for instance, cannot represent the experience of actually being in attendance at the funeral – it can only signify what the experience is 'really' like through the meaning structures (rules and conventions) of the televisual message. Media – like language systems – are therefore structured through a set of rules, codes and values that make them highly prone to ideological constructions of meaning, or what Barthes refers to as myths. Television is a primary myth-maker – constructer of ideology – according to Hall. Processes of editing, selection, camera operation and arrangement are all important aspects of encoding, in the sense of determining preferred meanings (Hall 1975). BBC news bulletins – like those of all news institutions – are loaded with the ideology of professionalism. What news stories are selected, how each of them are edited, and how they are arranged in a particular order (of importance) are just some of the ways in which the ideology of media professionalism is constructed. Ideologies of newsworthiness do not correspond to an objective set of criteria. On the contrary, newsworthiness is highly subjective and differs from institution to institution, and from country to country. Nonetheless, wherever newsworthiness is practised (on the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, and so on), it exerts its preferred meanings upon its audience.

Encoded ideologies such as media professionalism and newsworthiness, however, do not determine meaning structures at the reception phase. Hall (1980) identifies three categories of decoding through which audiences make meaning of media messages. First and in keeping with the professional code, an audience member may adopt a *dominant code* which accepts the preferred meanings intended by the encoders (i.e. media producers). A second possibility is that an audience member adopts a *negotiated code* which accepts some preferred meanings of a media production but opposes others. On a general level, the encoded meanings may be understood and endorsed; but on a more specific, local level these meanings and the rules within which they operate may be discarded, as audience members consider their own positions to be exceptions to the general rule. For example, a parent may adopt a negotiated code when decoding a television show about how to care for babies. He may agree that, in general, the best advice is to lay a baby on its back when placing her in a cot, but disagree in the case of his own son who only ever goes to sleep on his front. Third and finally, an audience member may completely disagree with the preferred meanings of media producers (both on a general and local level), in which case they adopt an *oppositional code* and 'decode the message in a *globally* contrary way' (Hall 1980: 137–8). For example, a news story might be encoded with an ideological message about how 'yobbish' youths are becoming more troublesome and anti-social than previous generations of young people. An oppositional code is adopted at the moment of decoding, however, by someone with historical knowledge of how young

people have committed crimes and been stigmatized by societies (including mass media institutions) since time immemorial.

Hall's Encoding/Decoding model is an attempt to rediscover and rescue ideology from its conception as an omnipotent, oppressive force wielded by the ruling classes upon the masses in the classical Marxist tradition of political economy theory (as we will discuss in Chapter 7). However, in a later work (Hall 1996a), he refers to the 'problem of ideology' as a concept. Can it still withstand application in contemporary, democratic societies where media institutions appear free from the power of states and commercial forces? He acknowledges that Marxist theories of ideology tend to overemphasize 'negative and distorted features' of bourgeois capitalist ideas and values (Hall 1996a: 28). Nevertheless, he remains sympathetic to Marx's original formulation of ideology and particularly to the related concept of **hegemony** formulated by Antonio Gramsci. Unlike many Marxist conceptions of ideology (such as that of Adorno), Marx did not suggest that ideology amounts to mass deception but rather to a situation where individuals within capitalist social systems can only gain a limited impression of the consequences of such systems, given ideological constraints imposed by ruling power elites. The best revision of Marx's ideas, argues Hall, is by Gramsci who contends that 'in particular historical situations, ideas ''organize human masses, and create the terrain on which men [*sic*] move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.'' ' (Hall 1996a: 41, quoting Gramsci 1971). Social, economic and political ideas create struggle, and 'ideological struggle is a part of the general social struggle for mastery and leadership – in short, for hegemony' (Hall 1996a: 43).

Gramsci's theory of hegemony marks a fundamental shift from orthodox structuralism to a more discursive form of post-structuralism with which Hall, among others (see also discussion of Foucault in this chapter), has identified. Hegemony, unlike orthodox approaches to myth and ideology, is about a dialogue between those parts of a society with and without the power to signify their values and intentions:

> [H]egemony is understood as accomplished, not without the due measure of legal and legitimate compulsion, but principally by means of winning consent of those classes and groups who were subordinated within it ... This approach could also be used to demonstrate how media institutions could be articulated to the production and reproduction of the dominant ideologies, while at the same time being 'free' of direct compulsion, and 'independent' of any direct attempt by the powerful to nobble them.
>
> (Hall 1982: 85–6)

In other words, hegemony is a 'give and take' form of power. Hegemony works to permit dissenting voices and oppositional politics, but to suppress

the force of dissent and opposition by actively seeking out support from all parts of a society. Media are argued by Hall to encode their products in the interests of dominant hegemonic forces, such as governments: 'The professional code operates *within* the ''hegemony'' of the dominant code' (Hall 1980: 136). Even if media institutions do not intend to collude with the forces of hegemony that operate in their countries or regions, they are likely to do so unwittingly because hegemony – unlike more orthodox versions of ideology – is a function of existing social structures and practices; not an intention of individuals. Unlike behaviourists such as Katz and Lazarsfeld, who argued that media have no direct effects other than to reflect the consensus opinion among people, Gramsci and Hall would argue that media – in their propensity to serve a hegemonic function for the good of those in power – effectively manufacture consent (see discussion of Herman and Chomsky in Chapter 7 for a political economy approach to hegemony).