

basics

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Which codes do we take for granted?

What is a text?

How can semiotics be used in textual analysis?

Who are Saussure, Peirce, Barthes and Jakobson – and why are they important?

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CHALLENGING THE LITERAL

Semiotics represents a challenge to the 'literal' because it rejects the possibility that we can neutrally represent 'the way things are'. In this chapter we will explore the ways in which semioticians have problematized two key distinctions: that at the level of the signifier between the literal and the figurative and that at the level of the signified between denotation and connotation.

RHETORICAL TROPS

A sea-change in academic discourse, which has been visible in many disciplines, has been dubbed 'the rhetorical turn' or 'the discursive turn'. The central proposition of this contemporary trend is that rhetorical forms are deeply and unavoidably involved in the shaping of realities. Form and content are inseparable. Language is not a neutral medium and our choice of words matters. The North American literary theorist Stanley Fish insists that 'it is impossible to mean the same thing in two (or more) different ways' (Fish 1980,

32). To say that a glass is 'half empty' is not the same as saying that it is 'half full'. In common usage we refer dismissively to 'heated rhetoric', 'empty rhetoric' and 'mere rhetoric', but all discourse is unavoidably rhetorical.

Terence Hawkes tells us that '*figurative language* is language which doesn't mean what it says' – in contrast to *literal language* which is at least intended to be, or taken as, purely denotative (Hawkes 1972, 1). While this is a distinction which goes back to classical times, it has been problematized by poststructuralist theorists (a topic to which we will return shortly). Somewhat less problematically, tropes can be seen as offering us a variety of ways of saying '*this* is (or is *like*) *that*'. Tropes may be essential to understanding if we interpret this as a process of rendering the unfamiliar more familiar. Furthermore, however they are defined, the conventions of figurative language constitute a rhetorical code. Like other codes, figurative language is part of the reality maintenance system of a culture or sub-culture. It is a code which relates ostensibly to *how* things are represented rather than to *what* is represented. Yet such 'form' may have 'content' of its own. Occasionally in everyday life our attention is drawn to an unusual metaphor – such as the critical quip that someone is 'one voucher short of a pop-up toaster'. However, much of the time – outside of 'poetic' contexts – figures of speech retreat to 'transparency'. Such transparency tends to anaesthetize us to the way in which the culturally available stock of tropes acts as an anchor linking us to the dominant ways of thinking within our society (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Our repeated exposure to, and use of, such figures of speech subtly sustains our tacit agreement with the shared assumptions of our society.

Once we employ a trope, our utterance becomes part of a much larger system of associations which is beyond our control. For instance when we refer metaphorically to 'putting things into words' this involves a further implicit metaphor of language as a 'container' – a particular view of language which has specific implications (Reddy 1979). Yet the use of tropes is unavoidable. We may think of figurative language as most obviously a feature of poetry and more generally of 'literary' writing, but there is more metaphor on

the street corner than in Shakespeare. Roland Barthes declared that 'no sooner is a form seen than it *must* resemble something: humanity seems doomed to analogy' (Barthes 1977b, 44). The ubiquity of tropes in visual as well as verbal forms can be seen as reflecting our fundamentally *relational* understanding of reality. Reality is framed within systems of analogy. Figures of speech enable us to see one thing in terms of another. A trope such as metaphor can be regarded as a new sign formed from the signifier of one sign and the signified of another (Figure 4.1) (cf. Jakobson 1966, 417). The signifier thus stands for a different signified; the new signified replaces the usual one. As I will illustrate, the tropes differ in the nature of these substitutions.

In seventeenth-century England, the scientists of the Royal Society sought 'to separate knowledge of nature from the colours of rhetoric, the devices of the fancy, the delightful deceit of the fables' (Thomas Sprat, 1667: *The History of the Royal Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge*). They saw the 'trick of metaphors' as distorting reality. An attempt to avoid figurative language became closely allied to the realist ideology of objectivism. Language and reality, thought and language, and form and content are regarded by realists as separate, or at least as separable. Realists favour the use of the 'clearest', most 'transparent' language for the accurate and truthful description of facts. However, language isn't glass (as the metaphorical references to clarity and transparency suggest), and it is unavoidably implicated in the construction of the world as we know it. Banishing metaphor is an impossible task since it is central to language. Ironically, the writings of the seventeenth-century critics of rhetoric – such as Sprat, Hobbes and Locke – are themselves richly metaphorical. Those drawn towards philosophical

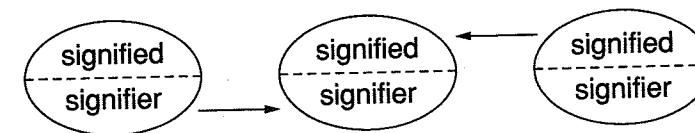


FIGURE 4.1 Substitution in tropes

idealism argue that all language is metaphor or even that reality is purely a product of metaphors. Such a stance clearly denies any referential distinction between 'literal' and 'metaphorical'.

Poststructuralists (whose own use of language is typically highly metaphorical) argue that there can be no text which 'means what it says' (which is how literal language is often defined). Constructionists might be content to insist that metaphors are pervasive and largely unrecognized within a culture or sub-culture and that highlighting them is a useful key to identifying whose realities such metaphors privilege. Identifying figurative tropes in texts and practices can help to highlight underlying thematic frameworks; semiotic textual analysis sometimes involves the identification of an 'overarching (or 'root') metaphor' or 'dominant trope'. For instance, Derrida shows how philosophers have traditionally referred to the mind and the intellect in terms of tropes based on the presence or absence of light (Derrida 1974); everyday language is rich in examples of the association of thinking with visual metaphors (bright, brilliant, dull, enlightening, illuminating, vision, clarity, reflection, etc.).

Michel Foucault adopts a stance of linguistic determinism, arguing that the dominant tropes within the discourse of a particular historical period determine what can be known – constituting the basic *episteme* of the age (Foucault 1970). 'Discursive practice' is reduced to 'a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined by the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function' (Foucault 1974, 117). Since certain metaphors have become naturalized and we do not tend to notice the ways in which they can channel our thinking about the signifieds to which they refer, deliberately using unconventional tropes can sometimes help to denaturalize taken-for-granted ways of looking at phenomena.

METAPHOR

Metaphor is so widespread that it is often used as an umbrella term (another metaphor!) to include other figures of speech (such as metonyms) which can be technically distinguished from it in its

narrower usage. Similes can be seen as a form of metaphor in which the figurative status of the comparison is made explicit through the use of the word 'as' or 'like'. Much of the time we hardly notice that we are using metaphors at all and yet one study found that English speakers produced an average of 3,000 novel metaphors per week (Pollio et al. 1977). Lakoff and Johnson argue that 'the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 5). In semiotic terms, a metaphor involves one signified acting as a signifier referring to a different signified. In literary terms, a metaphor consists of a 'literal' primary subject (or 'tenor') expressed in terms of a 'figurative' secondary subject (or 'vehicle') (Richards 1932, 96). For instance: 'Experience is a good school, but the fees are high' (Heinrich Heine). In this case, the primary subject of *experience* is expressed in terms of the secondary subject of *school*. Typically, metaphor expresses an abstraction in terms of a more well-defined model.

The linking of a particular tenor and vehicle is normally unfamiliar: we must make an imaginative leap to recognize the resemblance to which a fresh metaphor alludes. Metaphor is initially unconventional because it apparently disregards 'literal' or denotative resemblance (though some kind of resemblance must become apparent if the metaphor is to make any sense at all to its interpreters). The basis in *resemblance* suggests that metaphor involves the *iconic* mode. However, to the extent that such a resemblance is oblique, we may also think of metaphor as *symbolic*. More interpretive effort is required in making sense of metaphors than of more literal signifiers, but this interpretive effort may be experienced as pleasurable. While metaphors may require an imaginative leap in their initial use (such as in aesthetic uses in poetry or the visual arts) many metaphors become so habitually employed that they are no longer perceived as being metaphors at all.

Metaphors need not be verbal. In film, a pair of consecutive shots is metaphorical when there is an implied comparison of the two shots. For instance, a shot of an aeroplane followed by a shot of a bird flying would be metaphorical, implying that the aeroplane is (or is like) a bird. So too would a shot of a bird landing accompanied by

the sounds of an airport control tower and of a braking plane – as in an airline commercial cited by Charles Forceville (Forceville 1996, 203). In most cases the context would cue us as to which was the primary subject. An ad for an airline is more likely to suggest that an aeroplane is (like) a bird than that a bird is (like) an aeroplane. As with verbal metaphors, we are left to draw our own conclusions as to the points of comparison. Advertisers frequently use visual metaphors. Despite the frequently expressed notion that images cannot assert, metaphorical images often imply that which advertisers would not express in words.

Visual metaphor can also involve a function of ‘transference’, transferring certain qualities from one sign to another. In relation to advertising this has been explored by Judith Williamson in her book, *Decoding Advertisements* (Williamson 1978). It is of course the role of advertisers to differentiate similar products from each other, and they do this by associating a product with a specific set of social values – in semiotic terms, creating distinct signifieds for it. Indeed, it has been suggested that ads provide ‘a kind of dictionary constantly keeping us apprised of new consumer signifieds and signifiers’ (McCracken 1987, 122). One example instanced by Williamson takes the form of a photographic close-up of the head and shoulders of the glamorous French actress Catherine Deneuve (whose name appears in small type). Superimposed on the lower right-hand portion of the advertisement is the image of a bottle of perfume labelled Chanel No. 5. In this advertisement, two key signifiers are juxtaposed. The image of Catherine Deneuve richly signifies French chic, sophistication, elegance, beauty and glamour. The plain image of the bottle simply signifies Chanel No. 5 perfume. This is a rather ‘empty’ signifier when we cannot actually smell the perfume (though perfume ads in magazines have sometimes included a strip of paper impregnated with the scent). At the bottom of the ad, in large letters, the name of the perfume is repeated in its distinctive typographical style, making a link between the two key signifiers. The aim, of course, is for the viewer to transfer the qualities signified by the actress to the perfume, thus substituting one signified for another, and creating a new metaphorical sign which offers us the meaning that Chanel No. 5 is beauty and elegance (Williamson 1978, 25).

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson illustrate that underlying most of our fundamental concepts are several kinds of metaphor:

- **orientational** metaphors primarily relating to spatial organization (up/down, in/out, front/back, on/off, near/far, deep/shallow and central/peripheral);
- **ontological** metaphors which associate activities, emotions and ideas with entities and substances (most obviously, metaphors involving personification);
- **structural** metaphors: overarching metaphors (building on the other two types) which allow us to structure one concept in terms of another (e.g. rational argument is war or time is a resource).

Lakoff and Johnson note that metaphors may vary from culture to culture but argue that they are not arbitrary, being derived initially from our physical, social and cultural experience (cf. Vico 1744, 129). They argue that metaphors form systematic clusters such as that *ideas (or meanings) are objects, linguistic expressions are containers and communication is sending* – an example derived from Michael Reddy’s discussion of ‘the conduit metaphor’ (Reddy 1979). Metaphors not only cluster in this way but can cohere in the extended form of cultural myths. Lakoff and Johnson argue that dominant metaphors tend both to reflect and influence values in a culture or subculture: for instance, the pervasive Western metaphors that *knowledge is power* and *science subdues nature* are involved in the maintenance of the ideology of objectivism (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). This is consistent with the Whorfian perspective that different languages impose different systems of spatial and temporal relations on experience through their figures of speech (Whorf 1956).

METONYMY

While metaphor is based on apparent unrelatedness, metonymy is a function which involves using one signified to stand for another signified which is directly related to it or closely associated with it in some way. Metonyms are based on various indexical relationships between signifieds, notably the substitution of *effect* for *cause*. The

best definition I have found is that 'metonymy is *the evocation of the whole by a connection*. It consists in using for the name of a thing or a relationship, an attribute, a suggested sense, or something closely related, such as effect for cause . . . the imputed relationship being that of *contiguity*' (Walden 1987, 198; *my emphasis*). It can be seen as based on substitution by adjuncts (things that are found together) or on functional relationships. Many of these forms notably make an abstract referent more concrete, although some theorists also include substitution in the opposite direction (e.g. *cause* for *effect*). Part-whole relationships are sometimes distinguished as a special kind of metonymy or as a separate trope, as we will see shortly. Metonymy includes the substitution of:

- *effect for cause* ('Don't get hot under the collar!' for 'Don't get angry!');
- *object for user* (or associated *institution*) ('the Crown' for the monarchy, 'the stage' for the theatre and 'the press' for journalists);
- *substance for form* ('plastic' for 'credit card', 'lead' for 'bullet');
- *place for event*: ('Chernobyl changed attitudes to nuclear power');
- *place for person* ('No. 10' for the British prime minister);
- *place for institution* ('Whitehall isn't saying anything');
- *institution for people* ('The government is not backing down').

Lakoff and Johnson comment on several types of metonym, including:

- *producer for product* ('She owns a Picasso');
- *object for user* ('The ham sandwich wants his check [bill]');
- *controller for controlled* ('Nixon bombed Hanoi').

They argue that (as with metaphor) particular kinds of metonymic substitution may influence our thoughts, attitudes and actions by focusing on certain aspects of a concept and suppressing other aspects which are inconsistent with the metonym:

When we think of a *Picasso*, we are not just thinking of a work of art alone, in and of itself. We think of it in terms of its relation to the artist, this is, his conception of art, his technique, his role in art history, etc. We act with reverence towards a *Picasso*, even a sketch he made as a teenager, because of its relation to the artist. Similarly, when a waitress says, 'The ham sandwich wants his check,' she is not interested in the person as a person but only as a customer, which is why the use of such a sentence is dehumanizing. Nixon may not himself have dropped the bombs on Hanoi, but via the *controller for controlled* metonymy we not only say 'Nixon bombed Hanoi' but also think of him as doing the bombing and hold him responsible for it . . . This is possible because of the nature of the metonymic relationship.

(Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 39)

As with metaphors, metonyms may be visual as well as verbal. In film, which Jakobson regarded as a basically metonymic medium, a depicted object which represents a related but non-depicted object is a metonym. An ad for pensions in a women's magazine asked the reader to arrange four images in order of importance: each image was metonymic, standing for related activities (such as shopping bags for material goods). Metonymy is common in cigarette advertising in countries where legislation prohibits depictions of the cigarettes themselves or of people using them. The ads for Benson and Hedges and for Silk Cut cigarettes are good examples of this.

Jakobson argues that whereas a metaphorical term is connected with that for which it is substituted on the basis of similarity (and contrast), metonymy is based on contiguity or proximity (Jakobson 1953, 232; 1956, 91, 95; 1963c, 309). As we have seen, Peirce noted that contiguity is an indexical feature (Peirce 1931–58, 2.306). Metonymy can be seen as a textual (or – as in thoughts and dreams – quasi-textual) projection of Peirce's indexical mode. Metonyms lack the evidential potential of Peirce's mode unless the medium is indexical – as in photography and film. However, it is on the basis of perceived indexicality that metonyms may be treated as 'directly connected to' reality in contrast to the mere iconicity or symbolism

of metaphor. Metonyms seem to be more obviously 'grounded in our experience' than metaphors since they usually involve direct associations (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 39). Metonymy does not require transposition (an imaginative leap) from one domain to another as metaphor does. This difference can lead metonymy to seem more natural than metaphors – which when still 'fresh' are stylistically foregrounded. Metonymic signifiers foreground the signified while metaphoric signifiers foreground the signifier (Lodge 1977, xiv). Jakobson suggested that the metonymic mode tends to be foregrounded in prose whereas the metaphoric mode tends to be foregrounded in poetry (Jakobson 1956, 95–6). He regarded 'so-called realistic literature' as 'intimately tied with the metonymic principle' (Jakobson 1960, 375; cf. 1956, 92). Such literature represents actions as based on cause and effect and as contiguous in time and space. While metonymy is associated with realism, metaphor is associated with romanticism and surrealism (Jakobson 1956, 92).

SYNECDOCHE

The definition of synecdoche varies from theorist to theorist (sometimes markedly). The rhetorician Richard Lanham represents the most common tendency to describe synecdoche as 'the substitution of part for whole, genus for species or vice versa' (Lanham 1969, 97). Thus one term is more comprehensive than the other. Some theorists restrict the directionality of application (e.g. part for whole but *not* whole for part). Some limit synecdoche further to cases where one element is *physically* part of the other. Here are some examples:

- *part for whole* ('I'm off to the smoke [London]'; 'we need to hire some more hands [workers]'; 'two heads are better than one'; 'I've got a new set of wheels', the American expression 'get your butt over here!');
- *whole for part* (e.g. 'I was stopped by the law' – where the law stands for a police officer, 'Wales' for 'the Welsh national rugby team' or 'the market' for customers);

- *species for genus (hyponymy)* – the use of a *member of a class (hyponym)* for the *class (superordinate)* which includes it (e.g. a 'mother' for 'motherhood', 'bread' for 'food', 'Hoover' for 'vacuum-cleaner');
- *genus for species (hyponymy)* – the use of a *superordinate* for a *hyponym* (e.g. 'vehicle' for 'car', or 'machine' for 'computer').

In photographic and filmic media a close-up is a simple synecdoche – a part representing the whole (Jakobson 1956, 92). Indeed, the formal frame of any visual image (painting, drawing, photograph, film or television frame) functions as a synecdoche in that it suggests that what is being offered is a 'slice-of-life', and that the world outside the frame is carrying on in the same manner as the world depicted within it. This is perhaps particularly so when the frame cuts across some of the objects depicted within it rather than enclosing them as wholly discrete entities. Synecdoche invites or expects the viewer to 'fill in the gaps' and advertisers frequently employ this trope. The goods displayed in shop windows are synecdochic signifiers of what one may expect to find for sale within.

Any attempt to represent reality can be seen as involving synecdoche, since it can only involve selection (and yet such selections serve to guide us in envisaging larger frameworks). While indexical relations in general reflect the closest link which a signifier can be seen as having with a signified, the part–whole relations of synecdoche reflect the most direct link of all. That which is seen as forming part of a larger whole to which it refers is connected existentially to what is signified – as an integral part of its being. Jakobson noted the use of 'synecdochic details' by realist authors (*ibid.*). In 'factual' genres a danger lies in what has been called 'the metonymic fallacy' (more accurately the 'synecdochic fallacy') whereby the represented part is taken as an accurate reflection of the whole of that which it is taken as standing for – for instance, a white, middle-class woman standing for all women (Barthes 1974, 162; Alcoff and Potter 1993, 14). Framing is of course always highly and unavoidably selective. In fictional genres, realism seeks to encourage

us to treat that which is missing as 'going without saying' rather than as 'conspicuous by its absence'. In mainstream films and television dramas, for instance, we are not intended to be aware that the stage-set 'rooms' have only three walls.

Some theorists identify synecdoche as a separate trope, some see it as a special form of metonymy and others subsume its functions entirely within metonymy. Eco cites a classical distinction whereby metonymy involves 'a substitution within the framework of the conceptual content' while synecdoche involves a substitution 'with other aspects of reality with which a given thing is customarily connected' (Eco 1976, 280–1). Jakobson noted that both metonymy and synecdoche are based on *contiguity* (Jakobson 1956, 95). Synecdoche can similarly be seen as another textual form of indexicality (though once again lacking evidential potential unless the medium used is indexical). If the distinction is made as outlined above, metonymy in its narrower sense would then be confined to functional connections such as causality. Even if synecdoche is given a separate status, general usage would suggest that metonymy would remain an umbrella term for indexical links as well as having a narrower meaning of its own.

IRONY

Irony is the most radical of the four main tropes. As with metaphor, the signifier of the ironic sign seems to signify one thing but we know from another signifier that it actually signifies something very different. Where it means the *opposite* of what it says (as it usually does) it is based on binary opposition. Irony may thus reflect the opposite of the thoughts or feelings of the speaker or writer (as when you say 'I love it' when you hate it) or the opposite of the truth about external reality (as in 'There's a real crowd here' when it's deserted). It can also be seen as being based on substitution by *dissimilarity* or *disjunction*. While typically an ironic statement signifies the opposite of its literal signification, such variations as understatement and overstatement can also be regarded as ironic. At some point, exaggeration may slide into irony.

Unless the ironic sign is a spoken utterance (when a sarcastic intonation may mark the irony) the marker of its ironic status comes from beyond the literal sign. A 'knowing' smile is often offered as a cue. In Britain a fashion for 'air quotes' (gestural inverted commas) in the 1980s was followed in the 1990s by a fashion for some young people to mark spoken irony – after a pause – with the word 'Not!', as in 'he is a real hunk – not!'. However, irony is often more difficult to identify. All of the tropes involve the non-literal substitution of a new signified for the usual one, and comprehension requires a distinction between what is *said* and what is *meant*. Thus they are all, in a sense, *double signs*. Irony has indeed sometimes been referred to as a form of 'double-coding', though this formulation should not be allowed to obscure the role of *context* as well as code. Whereas the other tropes involve shifts in what is being referred to, irony involves a shift in modality. The evaluation of the ironic sign requires the retrospective assessment of its⁶ modality status. Re-evaluating an apparently literal sign for ironic cues requires reference to perceived intent and to truth status. An ironic statement is not, of course, the same as a *lie* since it is not intended to be taken as 'true'. Irony thus poses particular difficulties for the literalist stance of structuralists and formalists that meaning is immanent – that it lies *within* a text.

Irony is a marked form which foregrounds the signifier. Adolescents sometimes use it to suggest that they are sophisticated and not naïve. Limited use is usually intended as a form of humour. Frequent use may be associated with reflexivity, detachment or scepticism. It sometimes marks a cynical stance which assumes that people never mean or do what they say. Sustained use may even reflect nihilism or relativism (nothing – or everything – is true). While irony has a long pedigree, its use has become one of the most characteristic features of postmodern texts and aesthetic practices. Where irony is used in one-to-one communication it is of course essential that it is understood as being ironic rather than literal. However, with larger audiences it constitutes a form of 'narrow-casting', since not everyone will interpret it as irony. Dramatic irony is a form whereby the reader or viewer knows something that one or more of the depicted people do not know. A British ad for the

Nissan Micra published in a women's magazine made effective use of irony. The campaign slogan was 'ask before you borrow it'. In soft focus we see a man absorbed in eating his food at a table; in sharp focus close-up we see a woman facing him, hiding behind her back an open can. As we read the label we realize that she has fed him dog-food.

MASTER TROPS

Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) is usually credited with being the first to identify metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony as the four basic tropes (to which all others are reducible), although this distinction can be seen as having its roots in the *Rhetorica* of Peter Ramus (1515–72) (Vico 1744, 129–31). This reduction was popularized in the twentieth century by the American rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1897–1993), who referred to the four 'master tropes' (Burke 1969, 503–17). Figure 4.2 shows these tropes as a semiotic square (see Jameson in Greimas 1987, xix). Note that such frameworks depend on a distinction being made between metonymy and synecdoche, but that such terms are often either defined variously or not defined at all. In his book *Metahistory*, White saw the four 'master

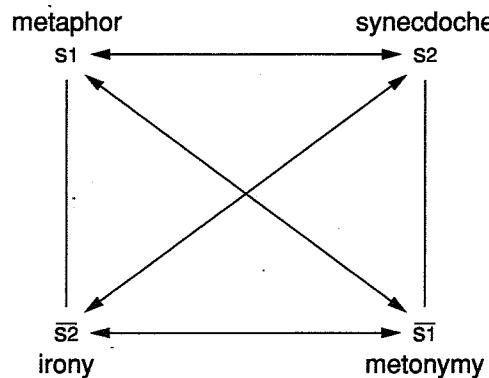


FIGURE 4.2 The four 'master tropes' as a semiotic square

Source: adapted from Jameson in Greimas 1987, xxi

tropes' as part of the 'deep structure' underlying different historiographical styles (White 1973, ix). Jonathan Culler (following Hans Kellner) even suggests that they may constitute 'a system, indeed the system, by which the mind comes to grasp the world conceptually in language' (Culler 1981, 65).

White argued that 'the fourfold analysis of figurative language has the added advantage of resisting the fall into an essentially *dualistic* conception of styles'. Roman Jakobson adopted two tropes rather than four as fundamental – metaphor and metonymy. White felt that Jakobson's approach, when applied to nineteenth century literature, produced the reductive dichotomy of 'a romantic-poetic-Metaphorical tradition' and 'a realistic-prosaic-Metonymical tradition' (White 1973, 33n.). However, Jakobson's notion of two basic axes has proved massively influential. Jakobson argued that metaphor is a paradigmatic dimension (vertical, based on selection, substitution and similarity) and metonymy a syntagmatic dimension (horizontal, based on combination, contexture and contiguity) (Jakobson 1956, 90–6). Many theorists have adopted and adapted Jakobson's framework, such as Lévi-Strauss and Lacan (Lévi-Strauss 1962; Lacan 1977, 160).

DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION

While the distinction between literal and figurative language operates at the level of the signifier, that between denotation and connotation operates at the level of the signified. We all know that beyond its 'literal' meaning (its denotation), a particular word may have connotations: for instance, sexual connotations. 'Is there any such thing as a *single entendre*?' quipped the comic actor Kenneth Williams. In semiotics, denotation and connotation are terms describing the relationship between the signifier and its signified, and an analytic distinction is made between two types of signified: a *denotative* signified and a *connotative* signified. Meaning includes both denotation and connotation.

'Denotation' tends to be described as the definitional, literal, obvious or common-sense meaning of a sign. In the case of linguistic signs, the denotative meaning is what the dictionary attempts to

provide. For the art historian Erwin Panofsky, the denotation of a representational visual image is what all viewers from any culture and at any time would recognize the image as depicting (Panofsky 1970, 51–3). Even such a definition raises issues – *all* viewers? One suspects that this excludes very young children and those regarded as insane, for instance. But if it really means ‘culturally well-adjusted’ then it is already culture specific, which takes us into the territory of connotation. The term ‘connotation’ is used to refer to the socio-cultural and ‘personal’ associations (ideological, emotional, etc.) of the sign. These are typically related to the interpreter’s class, age, gender, ethnicity and so on. Connotation is thus context-dependent. Signs are more ‘polysemic’ – more open to interpretation – in their connotations than their denotations. Denotation is sometimes regarded as a *digital* code and connotation as an *analogue* code (Walden 1987, 224).

As Roland Barthes noted, Saussure’s model of the sign focused on denotation at the expense of connotation and it was left to subsequent theorists (notably Barthes himself – drawing on Hjelmslev) to offer an account of this important dimension of meaning (Barthes 1967a, 89ff.). In ‘The photographic message’ (1961) and ‘The rhetoric of the image’ (1964), Barthes argued that in photography connotation can be (analytically) distinguished from denotation. As John Fiske puts it ‘denotation is *what* is photographed, connotation is *how* it is photographed’ (Fiske 1982, 91). However, in photography, denotation is foregrounded at the expense of connotation. The photographic signifier seems to be virtually identical with its signified, and the photograph appears to be a ‘natural sign’ produced without the intervention of a code (Hall 1973, 132). In analysing the realist literary text Barthes came to the conclusion that connotation produces the illusion of denotation, the illusion of the medium as transparent and of the signifier and the signified as being identical (Barthes 1974, 9). Thus denotation is just another connotation. From such a perspective, denotation can be seen as no more of a natural meaning than is connotation but rather as a process of *naturalization*. Such a process leads to the powerful illusion that denotation is a purely literal and universal meaning which is not at all ideological, and indeed that those connotations which seem most obvious

to individual interpreters are just as natural. According to an Althusserian reading, when we first learn denotations, we are also being positioned within ideology by learning dominant connotations at the same time (Silverman 1983, 30). Consequently, while theorists may find it analytically useful to distinguish connotation from denotation, in practice such meanings cannot be neatly separated. Most semioticians argue that no sign is purely denotative – lacking connotation. Valentin Voloshinov insisted that no strict division can be made between denotation and connotation because ‘referential meaning is moulded by evaluation . . . meaning is always permeated with value judgement’ (Voloshinov 1973, 105). There can be no neutral, literal description which is free of an evaluative element.

For most contemporary semioticians both denotation and connotation involve the use of codes. Structural semioticians who emphasize the relative arbitrariness of signifiers and social semioticians who emphasize diversity of interpretation and the importance of cultural and historical contexts are hardly likely to accept the notion of a literal meaning. Denotation simply involves a broader consensus. The denotational meaning of a sign would be broadly agreed upon by members of the same culture, whereas no inventory of the connotational meanings generated by any sign could ever be complete. However, there is a danger here of stressing the individual subjectivity of connotation: intersubjective responses are shared to some degree by members of a culture; with any individual example only a limited range of connotations would make any sense. Connotations are not purely personal meanings – they are determined by the codes to which the interpreter has access. Cultural codes provide a connotational framework since they are ‘organized around key oppositions and equations’, each term being ‘aligned with a cluster of symbolic attributes’ (Silverman 1983, 36). Certain connotations would be widely recognized within a culture. Most adults in Western cultures would know that a car can connote virility or freedom.

Connotation and denotation are often described in terms of levels of representation or levels of meaning. Roland Barthes adopted from Louis Hjelmslev the notion that there are different orders of signification (Barthes 1957, 124; 1961; 1967a, 89–94; 1967b, 27ff;

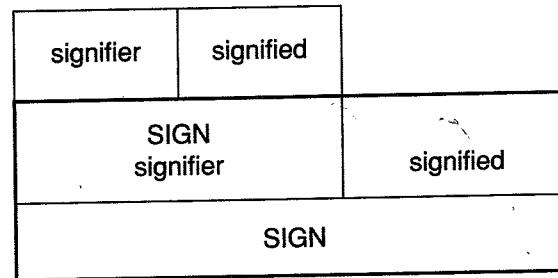


FIGURE 4.3 Orders of signification

Source: adapted from Barthes 1957, 124

Hjelmslev 1961, 114ff.). The *first order* of signification is that of denotation: at this level there is a sign consisting of a signifier and a signified. Connotation is a *second order* of signification which uses the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified (Figure 4.3). In this framework, connotation is a sign which derives from the signifier of a denotative sign (so denotation leads to a chain of connotations). A signified on one level can become a signifier on another level. This is the mechanism by which signs may seem to signify one thing but are loaded with multiple meanings. Indeed, this framing of the Saussurean model of the sign is analogous to the ‘infinite semiosis’ of the Peircean sign in which the interpretant can become the representamen of another sign. However, it can also tend to suggest that denotation is an underlying and primary meaning – a notion which many other commentators have challenged. As we have noted, Barthes himself later gave priority to connotation, noting in 1971 that it was no longer easy to separate the signifier from the signified, the ideological from the literal (Barthes 1977a, 166).

Changing the form of the signifier while keeping the same ‘literal’ signified can generate different connotations. The choice of words often involves connotations, as in references to ‘strikes’ vs. ‘disputes’, ‘union demands’ vs. ‘management offers’, and so on. Tropes such as metaphor generate connotations. Subtle changes of style or tone may involve different connotations, such as changing

from sharp focus to soft focus when taking a photograph or using different typefaces for exactly the same text. Indeed, the generation of connotations from typography alone demonstrates how important the material aspect of written language can be as a signifier in its own right. One study, for instance, has shown how various typefaces were rated by some computer users in the USA in terms of how ‘youthful and fun’ or how ‘business-like’ each was perceived as being (Bernard et al. 2001; see Figure 4.4).

Connotation is not a purely paradigmatic dimension, as Saussure’s characterization of the paradigmatic dimension as ‘associative’ might suggest. While absent signifiers with which a signifier may be associated are clearly a key factor in generating connotations, so too are syntagmatic associations. The connotations of a signifier relate in part to the other signifiers with which it occurs within a particular text. However, referring to connotation entirely in terms of paradigms and syntagms confines us to the language system, and yet connotation is very much a question of how language is used. The Saussurean inflection of structuralism limits us to a synchronic perspective and yet both connotations and denotations are subject not only to socio-cultural variability but also to historical factors: they change over time. Signs referring to disempowered groups (such as ‘woman’) can be seen as having had far more negative denotations as well as negative connotations than they do now

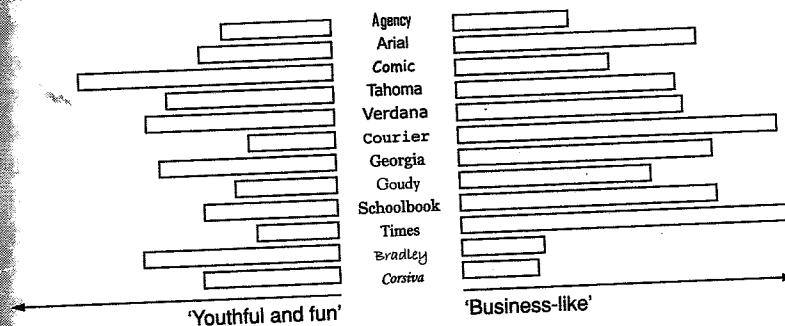


FIGURE 4.4 Some connotations of particular fonts

Source: adapted from diagrams ©2001 Software Usability Research Laboratory, Wichita State University

because of their framing within dominant and authoritative codes of their time – including even supposedly objective scientific codes. Fiske warns that ‘it is often easy to read connotative values as denotative facts’ (Fiske 1982, 92). Just as dangerously seductive, however, is the tendency to accept denotation as the literal, self-evident truth. Semiotic analysis can help us to counter such habits of mind.

While the dominant methodologies in semiotic analysis are *qualitative*, semiotics is not incompatible with the use of quantitative techniques. In 1957 the psychologist Charles Osgood, together with some of his colleagues, published a book entitled *The Measurement of Meaning* (Osgood et al. 1957). In it these communication researchers outlined a technique called the *semantic differential* for the systematic mapping of *connotations* (or ‘affective meanings’). The technique involves a pencil-and-paper test in which people are asked to give their impressionistic responses to a particular object, state or event by indicating specific positions in relation to at least nine pairs of bipolar adjectives on a scale of one to seven. The aim is to locate a concept in ‘semantic space’ in three dimensions: *evaluation* (e.g. good–bad); *potency* (e.g. strong–weak); and *activity* (e.g. active–passive). The method has proved useful in studying attitudes and emotional reactions. It has been used, for instance, to make comparisons between different cultural groups. While the technique has been used fairly widely in social science, it has not often been used by semioticians, although, as we have seen, binary oppositions have routinely provided theoretical building-blocks for structuralist semioticians. However, the semantic differential is not the only way in which quantitative methods can be used to study connotations: for instance, in a study of the kinds of personal meanings evoked by people’s favourite domestic objects, quantitative data (based on ranking, correlation and statistical differences between groups) helped to reveal patterns of signification which qualitative data helped to explain (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). The researchers found that among the families studied (in a major city in the USA in the mid-1970s), a range of objects found in the home signified for their users various aspects of personal and social identity. For instance, some objects served partly as life-cycle markers, as reflected in ‘the asymmetrical preference for stereos and photos

among the youngest and oldest respondents, the curvilinear relationship of preference for TV sets with age or the importance of visual art and sculpture for the middle generation’ (*ibid.*, 94). Two major axes appeared to articulate the relationship⁴ between people and objects: action–contemplation and differentiation–integration (*ibid.*, 112–13). While the meanings of the same kind of objects varied for individuals, television and stereos most often signified the self; photos, the immediate family; and paintings non-family (*ibid.*, 88). From the specific objects most frequently cited the researchers noted a (stereotypical) tendency for the males to value ‘objects of action’, and for the females to value ‘objects of contemplation’. Women also cited connotations relating to memories, associations and immediate family significantly more often than men did. Such differences reflected ‘at the level of household objects’, the reproduction of the traditional gender distinction between instrumental (male) and expressive (female) roles (*ibid.*, 106).

MYTH

Discourses of gender are among the ‘explanatory’ cultural frameworks which have been interpreted by some cultural semioticians as myths or mythologies. We usually associate myths with classical fables about the exploits of gods and heroes, and popular usage of the term ‘myth’ suggests that it refers to beliefs which are demonstrably false, but the semiotic use of the term does not necessarily suggest this. Like metaphors, cultural myths help us to make sense of our experiences within a culture: they express and serve to organize shared ways of conceptualizing something within a culture (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 185–6).

In the framework of Barthesian cultural studies, myth, like connotation, can be seen as a higher order of signification. Louis Hjelmslev had argued that above the connotative level there was ‘a metasemiotic’ to which belonged geographical, historical, political, sociological, psychological and religious issues relating to such concepts as ‘nation, . . . region, . . . the value forms of styles, personality . . . mood, etc.’ (Hjelmslev 1961, 125). For instance, an image may denote ‘a child’ in a context which generates the connotation

of innocence; this forms part of what Roland Barthes would call a higher level (historically modern and Romantic) 'myth' of childhood which functions ideologically to justify dominant assumptions about the status of children in society. Barthes did not see the myths of contemporary culture as simply a patterned agglomeration of connotations but as ideological narratives, and, following Hjelmslev, he saw mythical form as a metalanguage (Barthes 1957, 124–6), which he defined as 'a system whose plane of content is itself constituted by a signifying system' (1967a, 90). Whereas in the case of connotation, the denotative sign becomes the *signifier* of the connotative sign, in the case of myth, 'the language (or the modes of representation which are assimilated to it) . . . which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system' becomes the *signified* of the mythical metalanguage (1957, 124; cf. Hjelmslev 1961, 114, 119–20 and Lévi-Strauss 1969, 12).

The mythological or ideological order of signification can be seen as reflecting major (culturally variable) concepts underpinning particular worldviews. For Roland Barthes, myths were the dominant ideologies of our time. *Objectivism*, for instance, is a pervasive myth in Western culture. It allies itself with scientific truth, rationality, accuracy, fairness and impartiality and is reflected in the discourse of science, law, government, journalism, morality, business, economics and scholarship (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 188–9). Other myths or mythical discourses include those of masculinity and femininity, freedom, individualism, Englishness, success and so on. Barthes is probably most famous for his insightful analyses of some of the tacit myths of popular culture, notably in the essays represented in the anthology entitled *Mythologies* (1957). He addressed many types of contemporary cultural myths – most famously in his analysis of a cover photo in the magazine *Paris Match* depicting a young black soldier saluting the (unseen) French flag (Barthes 1957, 125–56) and of the 'Italianicity' of an advertisement for Panzani pasta (1977a). We do not have space to discuss these much-anthologized and explicated examples here but the general thrust of his analytical approach will be illustrated in the following chapter.

As we have seen, in the context of cultures other than our own Lévi-Strauss saw myths as systems of binary alignments mediating

between nature and culture. Semioticians in the Saussurean tradition treat this relationship as relatively arbitrary (Lévi-Strauss 1972, 90, 95). Barthes argued that mythical signification always emerges as 'in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy' (leading it to be experienced as natural) and only 'the worn-out state of a myth can be recognized by the arbitrariness of its signification' (Barthes 1957, 136). For him (as for Lévi-Strauss), myths serve the ideological function of *naturalization* (Barthes 1964, 45–6). Their function is to naturalize the cultural – in other words, to make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs seem entirely natural, normal, self-evident, timeless, obvious common sense – and thus objective and true reflections of 'the way things are'. Barthes saw myth as serving the ideological interests of the bourgeoisie. 'Bourgeois ideology . . . turns culture into nature,' he declares (Barthes 1974, 206). Myths can function to hide the ideological function of signs. The power of such myths is that they 'go without saying' and so appear not to need to be deciphered, interpreted or demystified. The similarity to Lévi-Strauss is clear here: 'I . . . claim to show, not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact' (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 12). Barthesian semiotics demonstrates that deconstructing tropes, connotations and myths can be revealing but that they cannot be reduced to the 'literal'. Barthes excelled at this kind of analysis but the task of 'denaturalizing' the cultural assumptions embodied in such forms is problematic when the semiotician is also a product of the same culture, since membership of a culture involves taking for granted many of its dominant ideas. Barthes is a hard act to follow, but those who do try to analyse their own cultures in this way must also seek to be explicitly reflexive about their 'own' values.

Rhetoric and connotation generate complex signs, and myths are complex sign-systems which generate further ideological signs. Rather than characterizing myths simply as a cluster of tropes and connotations, Barthes argued that they function in a more integrated fashion both in their content (ideology) and in their form – as metalinguistic semiotic systems or *codes*, of which specific cultural connotations and tropes can be seen as fragments (Barthes 1957, 119–20, 145–6). It is to codes that we now turn our attention.