Sage Research Methods

Social Research: A Practical Introduction

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: Semiotic Analysis – Studying Signs and Meanings

Key Words

> semiotic analysis
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> signs
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> Derrida
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> structuralism
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> post-structuralism
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> grammar
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> signifier
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> signified paring
>
> polysemy
>
> synonym
>
> discourse analysis

Summary

A discussion of the origins of semiotic analysis, linking anthropological and sociological research, and the use of grammar as the key mechanism by which variables are recognised from signs as well as the popularity of semiotics in contemporary society and the impact of new technological developments on the approach.

Researchers who engage in semiotic analysis – semioticians – are interested in the meanings people attribute to signs and how they might use them in constructing other signs and sets of meanings. These signs are the outputs of various forms of media. They include such obvious signs as traffic signals as well as more complex and subtle images. Our attention in this chapter is primarily on semiotic *analysis* rather than data *collection* as social semiotics doesn't have a unique way of collecting signs, instead relying on found material and using approaches that we discuss elsewhere in this textbook, such as ethnographic approaches (see [Chapter 4](#)). For non-interactive approaches to data collection the relevant sections of two chapters in this textbook are useful: unobtrusive research (see [Chapter 8](#)) and content analysis (see [Chapter 9](#)).

In this chapter we discuss the origins of the approach, which is linked to anthropological and sociological research. We then use the example of a magazine cover to demonstrate the use of grammar as the key mechanism by which variables are developed from signs and meanings become values. We also develop an argument that semiotic analysis is unable to support a standardised approach, drawing from Derrida to illustrate this apparent lack and its epistemological or philosophical justification.

We argue that the popularity of semiotics reflects developments in contemporary society, in particular the increasing media saturation of the social world. Researchers are enmeshed with new media, new technologies and new channels of communication in their everyday life and these are also mechanisms for accessing and constituting signs and sign systems for study.

Doing Data Collection and Analysis

Semiotics is the study of signs and their meaning. Umberto Eco famously claimed that 'semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign' (Eco, 1976: 138–41). Eco regarded things as diverse as a kiss or musical notation as signs (1976: 9–13). Our focus is the social sciences – a little narrower than what Eco was talking about – and Hodge's (2008) notion of 'social semiotics' is a very useful short-hand for the sorts of signs and meanings we might explore. Hodge defines social semiotics as:

> A broad, heterogeneous orientation within semiotics, straddling many other areas of inquiry concerned, in some way, with the social dimensions of meaning in any media of communication, its production, interpretation and circulation, and its implications in social processes, as cause or effect. (Hodge, 2008: 1)

The signs we are interested in are the outputs of various forms of media and inputs for further constructions. We are interested in the meanings people attribute to these signs and how they might use them in constructing other signs and sets of meanings. Our attention in this chapter is primarily on semiotic *analysis.* We don't talk much about data *collection* as we feel that social semiotics doesn't have a unique way of identifying and collecting signs, but uses approaches that we discuss elsewhere in this textbook (Manning and Cullum-Swan, 1994).

Origins of the Approach

One strand of social semiotics is drawn from anthropological and sociological traditions of ethnographic research or fieldwork. In this approach the data collection phase of semiotics is the same as that discussed in ethnographic approaches – studying groups in natural settings (see Chapter 4). A good example of ethnographic-based social semiotics is Barley's observation and interpretation of funeral work, in particular what undertakers do to make death seamless with the lives and routines of mourners (Barley, 1983a, 1983b). Barley undertook ethnographic fieldwork that was indistinguishable from other non-semiotic inspired work. Where he diverged from the more traditional ethnographic approach was in his analysis; he undertook semiotic analysis.

The most important strand of social semiotics is linked to media research. Discussions of media research also give a priority to data analysis rather than to data collection (for an exception, see Deacon et al., 2007). Semioticians often are not all that interested in how they collected their data/signs. The discussions of methods in media research typically regard signs as exemplars of things, artefacts or traces simply found in the public domain. The data for analysis – signs from a movie, a TV series, a website, an advert – are found, in fact they are broadcast into researchers' living rooms. As a result, many semioticians rely on forms of non-interactive or unobtrusive methods in data collection (Kellehear, 1993; Webb, 2000).

Our primary focus will be on semiotic analysis and readers of this chapter should imagine that they have collected their data in the form of a sign or a series of signs. We use the example of a magazine cover (see below) in our discussion of semiotic analysis (after Barthes (1972 [1957]). Overall, we consider the focus on semiotic analysis appropriate because of the eclectic nature of data collection in social semiotics and because of the workings of a social constructivist epistemology within the approach. Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge that informs how research is shaped in its broadest sense (see Chapter 1). Later in this chapter we will discuss some epistemological issues associated with the lack of methods *per se* in semiotics.

Practice Point 1

Semiotic analysis is the study of signs and their meaning relating to the social world and social processes.

Semiotic analysis is an example of a case-centric approach. Case-centric approaches start with a case. They are an approach to research in which there are few cases and very many variables. As with other case-centric, case-first approaches, such as life history research (see Chapter 3), ethnographic research (see Chapter 4) and autoethnographic research (see Chapter 12), the core of this type of research is finding different sets of values (or measurable states) for the variables under investigation across a single or limited number of cases. In semiotics, the case(s) are signs or systems of signs, and the process of finding variables and values is decoding or deconstruction of the sign.

There are always multiple variables and values of meaning a researcher can decode or deconstruct from any sign(s). For example, the photographs someone posts on a social networking website are signs: they present messages (meanings/values) to others about who that person is, or at least how they would like to be seen. As a result, semiotics is one of a large number of qualitative approaches that focus on generating a data-matrix that is 'thick' or rich in its descriptive properties (Geertz, 1973: 6–30). This can be thought of in terms of analytical induction (Becker, 1993), the primary way of developing theory in case-centric research. In Chapter 1, we suggested that the best way of visualising this analytical process is as a spiral, the starting point of which is the naïve researcher, the outward curvilinear path the moments of research, and the end point is the researcher with greater knowledge or a new theory.

Conceptual Concern 1

Semiotic analysis is a case-centric approach. There are few cases – in this instance signs or systems of signs. There are multiple variables and values, which are the meanings the researcher decodes or deconstructs from the sign.

Analysing Signs

Semiotic analysis is an approach that requires the researcher to have a sound grasp of some specific analytical tools before launching into study. Understanding and using this toolbox is probably the most challenging part of semiotic analysis. In this respect, semiotic analysis is similar to an otherwise very different approach,

the survey (see [Chapter 6](#)). A researcher contemplating a survey should have confidence in the basics of statistical analysis, whereas one considering semiotics needs a similar appreciation of the basics of grammar. In semiotic analysis the use of grammar is the key mechanism by which variables are developed from signs and a host of meanings become values (or measurable states). In other words, using the analytical tools of semiotics, in the form of grammar, allows the researcher to decode or deconstruct a sign.

Grammar is the study of the rules of language. The use of grammar and a multitude of related terms reflects the origins of semiotics in linguistics. While semiotics has diversified enormously beyond linguistics to encompass the study of almost anything as a 'system of signs' (Jameson, 1972), the approach retains the notion that signs are rule-bound and that they are understandable through grammar. Regardless of their epistemological starting point (discussed below), semioticians agree that signs are not the product of chaos or chance but have to be understood in an orderly way.

Clearly, discovering the particularities of a relevant grammar is an important part of semiotic analysis, but at the same time emergent researchers must start the process with a grasp of some grammatical principles in order to develop the variables and values necessary for analysis. If a researcher does not have a grasp of the relevant grammar, he/she will not produce a good semiotic analysis. There are many grammars on offer (indeed every piece of semiotic analysis throws up its own version), but there are also some bedrock elements.

Practice Point 2

It is crucial for the researcher to have a familiarity with grammar, the study of the rules of language, in semiotics.

One very famous and widely used discussion of grammar and of the logic of its analysis is provided by Roland Barthes (1915–80) in his discussion of myth. Barthes was arguably the most important semiotician of the last century, especially in terms of transforming a linguistic approach into a social semiotics. His discussion of 'Myth today' in *Mythologies* is a foundational methodological work (Barthes, 1972 [1957]: 109–59) and his discussion of myth as a semiological chain is everywhere in introductions to the approach (Chandler, 2007: 138–41; Deacon et al., 2007: 141–50; Silverman, 1983: 25–32).

It is useful to understand the make-up of signs before opening the analytical toolbox. Barthes highlighted how a sign is meaningful and how it carries and conveys meaning to its readers or audience. Thus a sign is always interpreted by its readers as standing in for something else. Semioticians assume a sign carries meaning because it combines two elements: the signifier and the signified. A sign is a comprehensible combination of signifier and signified. This combination is also of form and content. The signifier is the physical form of the sign. It exists in a material way as spoken or written language, an image, or indeed as any object. The signified content exists within the sign in a non-material, psychological form, as a process of recognition and extrapolation on the part of the reader. There are an infinite number of examples of signifier/signified pairings. For example, Figure 11.1 uses the model of the sign developed by Ferdinand de Saussure. In this case, the word 'cat' is the signifier. It has physical form as written text on the page. The word 'cat' triggers a psychological process of recognition and extrapolation in the reader, which points to the concept and examples of 'cat'. This combination of form and content, of signifier and signified, results in the sign.

Figure 11.1 Example I of a Signifier/Signified Pairing
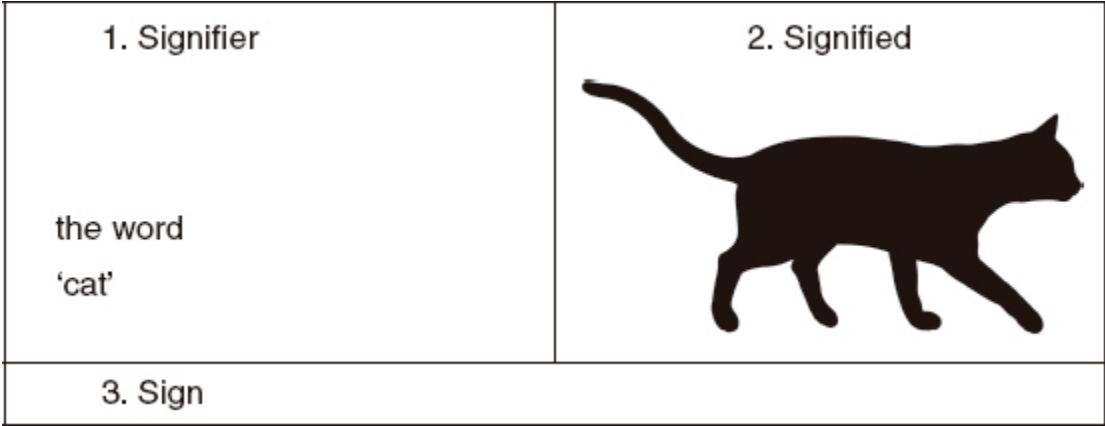
However, the same signifier can stand for different signifieds in different contexts. This diversity is called poly-semy. A signifier can stand for a range of different signifieds and can therefore be a number of different signs. For example, the signifier 'fast' can be associated with concepts of moving quickly, adhering to something, standing true, fixing dye, not eating or being sexually promiscuous.

Conversely, any number of different signifiers can stand for the same signified within a sign. This diversity is called synonym. For example, the words 'Caledonian' and 'Scottish' are signifiers of the same signified ([Figure 11.2](#)).

Polysemy and synonym are mirror images: a signifier can stand for a range of different signifieds and a range of signifiers can stand for the same signified. Sorting this out is an important building block of semiotic analysis. This is crucial not just for classificatory purposes but because polysemy and synonym (and all other grammatical conventions) make language slippery and capable of multiple, hidden or coded messages. The basics of sorting and classifying the elements of a sign are absolutely necessary steps for making analysis of meaning.

This sorting process highlights how semiotic analysis is a true example of an inductive logic of research, sometimes referred to as a bottom-up logic. We have noted in earlier chapters how Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiam (1981) (see [Chapter 3](#)) talk of saturation in life histories, while Becker (1998) calls the process analytical induction when talking of solving puzzles in fieldwork. These descriptions outline the inductive research process as a constant movement between what the researcher knows from the existing literature or personal experience, and what the researcher learns from engaging with the data. In the case of semiotic analysis, the data – the case – is a sign. We suggested (in [Chapter 1](#)) that the best way of visualising this learning process is as a spiral: research spirals up and out from an origin of knowing little to an end point of knowing a lot more. The most difficult component of inductive research in semiotic analysis is getting to know the grammar and its sometimes eye-watering terminology.

Figure 11.2 Example II of a Signifier/Signified Pairing

1. Signifier	2. Signified
the word 'Caledonian'	
3. Sign	

1. Signifier	2. Signified
the word 'Scottish'	
3. Sign	

Conceptual Concern 2

Like most case-centric, case-first approaches, semiotic analysis enjoys an inductive approach to research.

For example, polysemy allows the use of double coded messages. Consider the situation where a couple are attending a party. As the party progresses one half of the couple is enjoying the night's events considerably more than the other. The happy partner, surrounded by a circle of friends, is unaware either of the passing of time or of his significant other's dissatisfaction and mind-numbing boredom. At some time, well past midnight, the dissatisfied partner whispers in the happy partner's ear 'It's late'. This semiological chain is a coded message and can be read in a variety of ways. At one level it is a statement about the time. At another it is a statement declaring that it is time for the happy-go-lucky partner to leave for home immediately.

Conceptual Concern 3

A sign is a comprehensible combination of signifier and signified. The signifier is the physical form of the sign. The signified is the psychological form of the sign, requiring recognition and extrapolation of the sign on the part of the reader.

Polysemy and synonym are fairly basic grammatical concepts. Clifford Geertz (1926–2006), who was perhaps the greatest social anthropologist of the twentieth century, suggests a far more complete and comprehensive grammar. There is not room here to provide definitions of all the grammatical terms mentioned by him (though we will discuss the more fundamental ones below). However, any social scientist contemplating semiotic analysis should have a competency with them. Geertz starts with metaphor and goes on to list several other conventions:

> Metaphor is, of course, not the only stylistic resource upon which ideology draws. Metonymy ('All I have to offer is blood, sweat and tears'), hyperbole ('The thousand-year Reich'), meiosis ('I shall return'), synechdoche ('Wall Street'), oxymoron ('Iron curtain'), personification ('The hand that held the dagger has plunged it into the back of its neighbor'), and all the other figures the classical

rhetoricians so painstakingly collected and so carefully classified are utilized over and over again, as are such syntactical devices as antithesis, inversion, and repetition, such prosodic ones as rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration; such literary ones as irony, eulogy, and sarcasm … (Geertz, 1973: 213)

Barley (1983a, 1983b) posits three fundamentals of semiotic analysis: metaphor, metonymy and opposition. In metaphor and metonymy, the signifier and signified are associated in evocative ways, which could be thought of as particular examples of polysemy. (Remember, polysemy is when a signifier can stand for a range of different signifieds.) Metonymical signification occurs where the signifier and signified belong to similar semiotic domains or areas of speech. For example, the signifier 'the Crown' can substitute for signifieds including royalty, the state or government in Commonwealth countries. The signifier 'The White House' occupies a similar linguistic space in the USA.

Metaphor, in contrast, relies on the association of signifier and signified that are from otherwise different domains of language. For example, 'Love is a rose' (see Eco, 1976: 67–89, for an in-depth discussion of metaphor and metonymy). To further complicate things, metonymy is also associated with synecdoche – that is, the substitution of part of a thing for the whole. For example, 'Don't worry, the law will deal with him', in which case 'the law' stands as a substitute for the police and justice system. Both metaphor and metonymy are possible because sign systems are dynamic and the processes of signification allows for increasing complexity in meaning.

Barley suggests the opposition of signs as a third major tool of semiotic analysis. There are three dimensions to opposition:

1. **Antonym** (the opposite of synonym). This is where a signifier is associated with a logically opposite signified. An obvious example of this opposition is where the dead are dressed and made up by morticians, as if they were living people (Barley, 1983a). This (mis)representation of the dead as living can be understood as part of telling the story of the departed life – a core of all funerals. That is, it helps maintain the fiction for the bereaved that their dear departed are still with them.

2. **Comparison.** This is where signs can only be understood as elements in a ranking. For example, traffic lights as signs: green light = go, yellow light = get ready to stop, red light = stop.
3. **Absent signifier.** The most powerful form of opposition is the absent signifier (for example, a stop-sign encompasses the absent signifier 'go') in which missing signifiers shape the process of significa-tion or the increasing complexity in meaning.

Polysemy and synonym; metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche; opposition – antonym, comparison and ab-sent signifiers are introduced to make the point that a social researcher contemplating semiotic analysis needs an understanding of the relevant grammar (see the recommended readings at the end of this chapter). At the same time, the interconnectedness of all these terms – most can be understood as specific examples of each other – points to the interconnectedness of sign systems. Signs are always located within systems and semiological chains. The meaning of a sign is found not simply in and of itself, but in its relationships with other signs. Hence, the meaning of a sign – the meaning it conveys – must be explored by understanding the relationships between signs.

Barthes discusses the complexity of sign systems in terms of myth and the operation of denotation (the pri-mary/obvious meaning of a sign) and connotation (all the other meanings of a sign) (Figure 11.3).

Figure 11.3 Language and Myth (Source: Barthes, 1972 [1957]: 115)
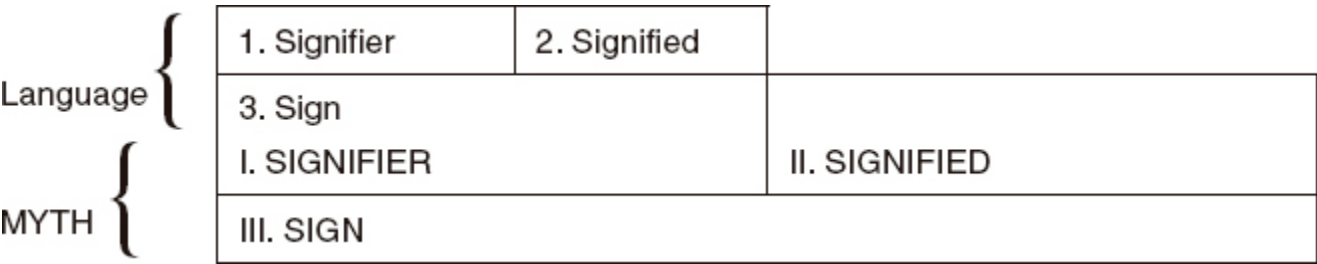
Barthes' diagram illustrates the emergence of myth from language as an overlapping, two-stage process in which the association of signifier and signified in the sign, operating in the realm of language, is repeated in

the realm of myth. The end point of denotative language (3. Sign) is the starting point of connotative myth (I. SIGNIFIER). This can be understood as a movement from a denotative semiological chain (1. Signifier, 2. Signified, 3. Sign) to a connotative chain (I. SIGNIFIER, II. SIGNIFIED, III. SIGN). One result is the growing complexity of communication. It is with these and other grammatical pointers that Barthes provides his wonderful semiotic analysis of a photograph on the cover of *Paris-Match*, a weekly glossy magazine. This is included as a sample or entrée to what semiotic analysis can achieve (Figure 11.4):

> I am at the barber's, and a copy of *Paris-Match* is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro[*sic*] in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the meaning of the picture. But, whether naïvely or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (a black soldier is giving the French salute); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier. … In myth (and this is the chief peculiarity of the latter), the signifier is already formed by the signs of the language. … Myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us … (Barthes, 1972 [1957]: 116)

Figure 11.4 Front Cover of Paris Match, No. 326, June 1955

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Practice Point 3

The grammatical elements used by researchers in semiotic analysis include: polysemy and synonym; metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche; opposition – antonym, comparison and absent signifiers.

Some Issues in Research

Unfortunately for textbook writers and their readers, Barthes, Eco and other important proponents of semiotics and semiotic analysis provide very little in the discussion of methods. Even Daniel Chandler's wonderful *Semiotics: The basics* (2007) doesn't read like a procedural methods textbook, and similarly Judith Williamson's influential primer *Decoding advertisements: Ideology and meaning in advertising* (1978) is far removed from any how-to-do book in the social sciences. Further, when the methods component of semiotic analysis is discussed, the emphasis is on aspects of linguistic techniques (e.g., on illuminating the material about grammar touched on above) rather than the logical and contextual sequencing of procedures. In the opening section of this chapter it was suggested that semiotics cross-cuts and overlaps the social sciences. This in part explains what to social scientists looks like deficiency in the approach. We might ask: 'Where is the method?' One answer is that semiotics, and even our narrower formulations of social semiotics and semiotic analysis, are unable to support a standardised approach. This apparent lack has an epistemological or philosophical justification.

Practice Point 4

The leading practitioners of semiotic analysis have little to say about methods. This reflects their greater interest in the unique properties of deconstruction.

Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), until his death the leading advocate of discourse analysis, provides the rationale for the absence of methods in discussions of semiotics.[3] He argued that semiotics suggests a methodology but cannot sustain a method. Methodology is understood as a logic of the processes shaping research, while methods refers to a repeatable set of procedures:

> Every discourse, even a poetic or oracular sentence, carries with it a system of rules for producing analogous things and thus an outline of methodology. That said, at the same time I have tried to mark the ways in which, for example, deconstructive questions cannot give rise to methods, that is to technical procedures that can be transposed by analogy – this is what is called a teaching, a knowledge, applications – but these rules are taken up in a text which is in each time a unique element

and which does not let itself be turned totally into a method. (Derrida, 1995: 200)

Derrida is highlighting an issue of epistemology. Let's break this down. By epistemology we mean the theory of knowledge that informs how research is shaped in its broadest sense (see Chapter 1). As we noted in Chapter 1, there are three main epistemological positions: positivist, social realist and social constructivist.

To recap: Positivists accept as true a social reality that exists independently of our perceptions of it. They emphasise the techniques of observation and measurement and the potential for scientists to form objective understandings. This assurance informs their practice and is the justification for doing science.

Social realists also accept an external and measurable social reality, but one that exists through the mediation of our perceptions and actions. Where positivists strive for objectivity, social realists insist on forms of sub-jectivity and the appreciation of factors like power, meaning and researcher reflexivity. For social realists, the scientific endeavour is still a legitimate goal but it is understood as a limited and somewhat contextual pro-ject. This social realism is the mainstream position within the social sciences today and is the one underlying this textbook – although it is probably not the epistemology underlying most semiotics (see Chandler, 2007: xiii–xvi).

Social constructivists have little faith in science as a project that generates anything resembling universal rules, laws or theorems. In this epistemology, it is impossible to differentiate truth-claims based in science, or folklore, or commonsense, or metaphysics because individuals or actors actively create the social world and all potential measures of that social world.

In the extract Derrida plays out a social constructivist logic in two ways. First, he argues that every text, every sign, is so exceptional that it has to be treated differently from every other text or sign. That is: 'rules are tak-en up in a text which is in each time a unique element and which does not let itself be turned totally into a method'. In other words, what works in understanding one sign will not work in understanding another. Sec-ond, by emphasising the exceptionality of signs Derrida is also asserting social constructivism. He assumes no commonality of interpretation (reading) and as a result no potential for science or the assessment of truth-

claims. Instead, every text can be deconstructed in multiple ways as there are no universal rules or truths that can be revealed through the appropriate application of a method. In effect, the concerns of social scientists regarding validity and reliability are left far behind (see Chapter 1).

Figure 11.5 Example of a Billboard Campaign

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Conceptual Concern 4

Semiotics, primarily deconstruction, provides a way for social constructivists to comment on society in general while eschewing (what they consider to be) the pitfall of social realism and positivism.

Scott (2006: 39) provides an encapsulation of the exceptionality of texts, and hence lack of method for social constructivists. He focuses in the 'internal' meaning or multiple potential meanings of any text:

> But this internal meaning cannot be known independently of its reception by an audience. As soon as a researcher approaches a text to interpret its meaning, he or she becomes a part of its audience. The most that can be achieved by a researcher is an analysis which shows how the inferred internal meaning of the text opens up some possibilities for interpretation by its audience and closes off others. (Scott, 2006: 39)

Providing a bullet point list of how to do a semiotic analysis flies in the face of the social constructivists who

have championed the approach. That said, here are some ideas an emergent researcher should think about when considering semiotics. It might be useful to think about these questions while considering the image in Figure 11.5. The image is from a billboard campaign by an organisation called Family First (http://www.fami-lyfirst.org.nz).

- What are the two elements that make up the sign? What is the signifier and what is signified? What is the physical form of the sign? What is its psychological form? For example, why a billboard campaign (facing traffic heading into the Central Business District)?
- What aspects of the grammar of semiotics captures your imagination?
- Does the sign use metaphor? Are the signifier and signified associated evocatively through the use of different domains of language (including imagery)? For example, what is the purpose of the big white bowl? Does this look like dinner, an evening meal?
- Does the sign use the more prosaic practices of metonymy, using similar domains of language to make an association? For example, what is the purpose of the kiss?
- Does the sign use opposition? Antonym, comparison, absent signifier? Often the absent signifier is a rewarding starting point for analysis. For example, why is there no mother in this particular image?
- How is the sign located within a sign system? How does the end point of denotative language become the starting point for connotative language or myth? For example, what myth or stereotypes are being supported or challenged in the sign?

An Aside on Rigour

In Chapter 6 we discussed survey research which in many respects is the antithesis of semiotic analysis. On the one hand, semiotics is case-centred and strongly social constructivist in its epistemology. Derrida argues that the one-off cases that are its focus are unique to the extent their investigation cannot support a method. On the other hand, survey research is variable-centred and its practitioners are often old school positivists. Further, semiotics is radical; survey research is intrinsically conservative or modest in its claims-making. But there are two strong similarities between the approaches. First, (as noted above) semiotic analysis and survey research both require the researcher to have a sound grasp of a specialist knowledge: grammar and statistics respectively. Second, semiotic analysis shares with survey research the need for rigour. Statistical analysis, which is the lodestone of survey research, depends on proper sampling strategies and precision in

developing variables. Similarly, the decoding or deconstruction of a sign through semiotic analysis requires as much rigour in the development and use of variables. Derrida's argument about the impossibility of a method in semiotic analysis must not be confused for 'any old application of grammatical concepts will do'. There are good and bad examples of semiotic analysis and the best adhere to the principles around independent, dependent and intervening variables and mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive values every bit as much as do survey researchers (see [Chapter 6](#)). These components of research operate at the level of logic and plausibility. The dilemma for emergent researchers in this respect is that semioticians never seem to discuss this in their publications.

Structuralism and Post-structuralism

Derrida's position exemplifies one far removed from the epistemology of the founders of semiotics. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and Charles Peirce (1839–1914) were positivists and structuralists. They saw semiotics as a science (positivism) that would enable the study of languages, meta-languages and other sign systems in ways that would transcend day-to-day contexts of human interaction. Semiotics was intended as the first truly comparative study of humanity as, they reasoned, all cultures had language and all languages were ordered by underlying rules (structures).

Structuralism can also be described as being 'decentred', meaning semioticians did not study what individuals or groups thought of the world but how their use of signs/language was structured by rules that they may well be unaware of. Much of early semiotics was linked to the growth of anthropology and its efforts at cross-cultural comparisons dating from the late nineteenth century. In contrast, in the late twentieth century, Derrida and, perhaps even more famously, Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) were social constructivists and post-structuralists. Where the founders of semiotics saw *commonality* in sign systems and an imperative for science, the more recent champions of the approach saw *exceptionality* and understood science as only one of many truth-claims.

The differences are between social constructivism and positivism and can be understood as a break, as a discontinuity. However, the differences between structuralism and post-structuralism are more about continuity. Structuralism was decentred in its theory and practice. Post-structuralism is a form of hyper-decentring (see Seidman, 1994: 194–233, for an interesting discussion of the 'French post-structuralists'). In both cases re-

search is not centred on individuals or actors or agents (as with almost all other approaches), but on the ways rules of language or discourses (Derrida, 1995) or simulacra (Baudrillard, 1995) play across different sites, of which humans are but one example. In essence, the difference between structuralism and post-structuralism is about truth-claims. For the founders of semiotics, decentring the focus of research provided the basis for science. However, for the post-structuralists the logic of decentring, of subordinating the individual, provides a further rationale for the abandonment of science as a privileged truth-claim.

The above discussion of epistemology borders on the esoteric or obscure. More practically, the decentred epistemological starting point of both structuralist and post-structuralist semiotics suggests one explanation for the overwhelming discussion on analysing data rather than on collecting it. At the same time, a more con- crete way of highlighting the differences within semiotics is to contrast decoding and deconstruction. Decoding can be thought of as a process, a repeatable set of procedures that can be applied to a sign in order to better reveal its character. We consider the long extract from Barthes (on p. 251) to be an example of decoding: a photograph is analysed to reveal its role in perpetuating certain myths and ultimately the dominant nationalis- tic ideology of France. When a researcher engages in decoding, the result of this analysis is intended to better reveal the workings of the social world. What is revealed by decoding are hidden meanings, sub-texts and linguistic subterfuges. The researcher is either explicitly or implicitly making a truth-claim. But post-structural- ists argue that signs cannot be straightforwardly decoded to reveal their meaning. Instead, signs or texts can be subjected to deconstruction. Deconstruction is technically similar to decoding in so far as it uses linguistic techniques – an appreciation of grammar – to reveal how signifiers and signifieds might relate. However, de- construction is epistemologically distinct from decoding. Most importantly, any deconstruction provides only one reading of the sign (of many possible readings) and can itself be further and endlessly deconstructed.

Conceptual Concern 5

Semiotic analysis has structural and post-structural variants. Structuralism 'decentres' research and empha- sises universalistic factors, including the rules of human language. Post-structuralism extends the decentred research focus of structuralism to produce a hyper-decentring that challenges the privileged position of sci- ence in making truth-claims.

Putting the Approach in Context

Semioticians enjoy a fluid framing of research (see [Chapter 1](#)) and this is apparent in the moment of research we have designated as semiotic analysis. The researcher using semiotics is able to engage with data and the tools of analysis in a highly iterative process, largely unfettered from the resource constraints, other than time and deadlines, that impact on more fixed and sequential approaches (see [Chapter 6](#) on survey research and [Chapter 9](#) on content research for a more focused discussion of fixed framings). This fluidity means that partial answers, suppositions and guesses can be firmed up by the researcher through the inclusion of more data either by conducting more fieldwork or, as is often the case with media research, selecting from the data broadcast to them. Fluidity in research practice no doubt makes the approach more attractive to emergent researchers. Similarly, the focus on signs, the ease with which these signs can be 'collected' and the authoritative voice of many practitioners are all likely attractors.

Conceptual Concern 6

Like most case-centric, case-first approaches, semiotic analysis enjoys a fluid framing of research. The researcher is free to conduct research as an iterative process, moving between data and analysis as she or he sees fit.

The popularity of semiotics reflects dynamics in contemporary society, in particular the increasing media saturation of the social world. The rise of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as Web 2.0 internet, wireless communication, digital technologies, narrowcasting and so on, has dramatically expanded what Eco (1976) called the semiotic field and the potential for what Hodge (2008) called social semiotics. The new ICTs have opened up new realms of research. For example, the practice of 'happy slapping', where young people use mobile phones and social networking sites to record their assaults on friends and strangers (Haddon, 2007), was unimagined ten years ago and is passé now. Researchers are enmeshed with new media, new technologies and new channels in their everyday life and these are also mechanisms for accessing and constituting signs and sign systems for study. The new technologies are important and engaging. Also, a significant part of the initial studies by social scientists on any 'new technology' is undertaken by researchers who are also enthusiastic users. The ICTs that provide the infrastructure for the increasing media saturation of the social world are no exception in this respect. Researchers who engage in semiotic analysis also tend

to be technologically savvy and fans of what they study (Jenkins, 2004).

Nevertheless, practitioners of semiotics and semiotic analysis seem resistant to new technologies as tools of analysis. Here we are referring not to the technologies such as the internet, social networks, user-generated content or wireless telephony that mediate the broadcasting (and narrowcasting) of semiotic 'data', but to the host of software packages that purport to help in data analysis. Specifically, the tendency in content research (see Chapter 9) and in in-depth interviewing (see Chapter 2) to use specialised software (see Bryman, 2008: 264–84 on NVivo; Lowe, n.d.) to collect and analyse data is not apparent in semiotics. The benefits of a fluid framing of research, in particular the flexibility in the ordering of research and resources, is most likely the telling factor. That, and the relatively small-scale nature of much semiotic analysis undertaken by emergent researchers, makes the set-up costs of most analytical software – including the time it takes to program pre-coded variables and values – somewhat unattractive.

Conclusion

As noted in the introduction (see Chapter 1), the social sciences are subjected to waves of criticism, and the integration of this critique. This process inevitably involves putting methodological orthodoxies that have been inherited from various founding fathers (for example, Durkheim, James, Levi-Strauss, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Weber, Wundt) under intense scrutiny. The collective results of these challenges can be in part captured by the diversity of research approaches sampled in this textbook. These waves of criticism tend to be played out in disciplinary contexts and with different results. Since the Second World War, sociology has proven most amenable to change and has fully integrated the critique of positivism, forms of qualitative research and social constructivism. The subdisciplines of cultural anthropology and social anthropology are in many respects the results of epistemological and methodological criticism of what, in the 1940s and 1950s, was a thoroughly positivistic anthropology and psychology.

Without a doubt the increased popularity and application of semiotics formed part of this ongoing and multi-pronged challenge to prevailing norms in the social sciences. Specifically, semiotics and post-structuralism constituted part of a 'linguistic turn' (Rorty, 1967) which pushed a critique of positivist and social realist epistemologies that underpinned the social sciences – the core of this challenge is covered in our discussion of

post-structuralism and decentring research, above.

At the same time, social scientists – anthropologists, social psychologists, sociologists – are highly critical of semiotics. For example, Jameson (1972) provided an early and sustained critique of structuralism and semiotics in terms of their formalism and detachment from the material world. This social realist critique of semiotics is an enduring one. Further, the criticism of semiotics tends to be most damning from researchers who are most interested in transforming aspects of the social world. For many such researchers, semiotics is not an appropriate approach because its focus on signs and sign systems makes it detached from the social world.

It is argued that the social constructivism that underpins semiotics prejudices it towards asocial agnosticism. 'Social agnosticism' refers to efforts to put aside issues of injustice and inequalities. This scepticism about all facets of society may have been ethically problematic for Derrida but straightforwardly informed the later Baudrillard. Baudrillard's approach was logical but socially agnostic, in that he argued that the social world is so saturated with signs, especially those generated by the media, that it is impossible to distinguish between real and unreal. In this context, social science is an outright impossibility because we are surrounded by the hyper-real, the verisimilitude of which cannot be proven. Deconstructed readings – themselves open to further endless deconstruction – is all that is on offer (see Baudrillard, 1995).

More concretely, Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1990) detail drawbacks that are worth quoting. Their focus is on advertising, but their comments can be generalised. They argue that semiotics:

> … suffers from a number of related weaknesses. First, it is heavily dependent upon the skill of the individual analyst. In the hands of someone like Roland Barthes or Judith Williamson, it is a creative tool that allows one to reach the deeper levels of meaning-construction in ads. A less skilful practitioner, however, can do little more than state the obvious in a complex and often pretentious manner. As a result, in these types of studies there is little chance to establish consistency or reliability – that is, a sufficient level of agreement among analysts on what is found in the message. … Second, because the semiological approach stresses individual readings of messages, it does not lend itself to the quantification of results; it is impossible to base an overall sense of constructed meanings on the examination of a large number of messages. What insights may be extracted from the approach must remain impressionistic. Third, … [the] procedure courts the danger of self-confirming results, the conclusions should, strictly speaking, be confined to those instances alone and not generalized to the entire range of advertising. (Leiss et al., 1990: 214)

Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1990) are perhaps too harsh in so far as their comments can really be applied to all research approaches and there is more than a whiff of old-fashioned positivism in what they say. More often than not, unskilful researchers produce poor results, research doesn't need to be validated through quantification to be plausible, all research can be self-confirming if poorly designed. Plainly, skilful researchers can produce plausible results from semiotic analysis of quite unexpected sets of social relations. For example, Anderson, Standen and Noon (2005) conducted a semiotic analysis of suicidal behaviour. Their focus was on nurses' and doctors' perceptions. After extensive interviewing and observation, Anderson, Standen and Noon conceptualised suicidal behaviour as a sign, comprising both signifier and signified. Suicidal behaviour was foregrounded as an example of an absent signifier, the absence being the inability of young people to verbally express negative emotions. The conclusions they drew from this were intentionally practical and focused on the training of health professionals to better read (we might say decode) suicidal behaviour and its precursors as a semiological chain.

Practice Point 5

While semiotic analysis has the promise of allowing the researcher to speculate on very significant issues at relatively low cost, emergent researchers are urged to be cautious with the approach and to ensure that they have a sound grasp of the grammatical requirements.

Nevertheless Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1990) rightly underline that semiotics or semiotic analysis – like all approaches – has its particular weaknesses. In this case emergent researchers are cautioned to be modest in their initial expectations and plans for research. Semiotic analysis has the promise of allowing the researcher to speculate on very significant issues. But while Barthes, Derrida and Baudrillard were public intellectuals of the highest order, their books and articles cannot be considered as models for emergent researchers. These writers, like most public intellectuals, were excused from 'showing their workings' or justifying their claims-making in ways that most academics and emergent researchers are not.

Further Readings

Daniel Chandler's (2007) *Semiotics: The basics* is the most comprehensive reader on semiotics. His ap-

proach is detailed and accessible. He has also maintained the best site on the internet dealing with semiotics. This is called 'Semiotics for Beginners' and is freely available on the Aberystwyth University webpage at: http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/semiotic.html.

Roland Barthes' (1972 [1957]) *Mythologies* remains the best formulation of semiotics for researchers interested in social semiotics. His chapter on 'Myth today' is an inspirational discussion about revealing the construction of meaning and its consequences.

Judith Williamson's (1978) *Decoding advertisements: Ideology and meaning in advertising* is somewhat dated in terms of its content (1970s TV advertisements) but is still an excellent example of sustained semiotic analysis. Williamson cites a number of structuralists in her select bibliography from both the semiotic tradition (Saussure, Barthes, Lacan, Lévi-Strauss) as well as Louis Althusser, the champion of structural Marxism. However, this selection is leavened with the inclusion of Benjamin, Brecht, Freud and Gramsci. As a result, her primer has none of the social agnosticism associated with Baudrillard et al., but represents a now sadly old-fashioned attempt at consciousness-raising.

The following are also highly recommended: Derrida (1976), Haddon (2007) and Lee and Poynton (2000).

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Notes

3 In the balance of this chapter, the term 'text' is used interchangeably for signs as semiological chains. This is, a text is considered to be a series of linked signs, a semiological chain, which is the basis for the movement of language beyond the denotative to the connotative. From this perspective, discourse analysis or deconstruction are understood as stands of a social semiotics. Many scholars would disagree with this formulation. For example, Lee and Poyton (2000) discuss discourse analysis with no mention of semiotics.

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