

illustrates some of my strategies in textual analysis but also their limitations

15 Double Talk in News Broadcasts: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Pictures and Texts in Television News

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Media research has a long and productive history in this country. Research has usually focused on one of three aspects: the producers or the production process, the responders/readers or viewers and their conditions of reception, and the texts, the actual media product. In terms of academic disciplines, media research involves sociologists, linguists, semioticians, to name but a few. But there is increasingly an interest in bringing together these three foci in a unified, dynamic, interactive model.

In the introduction to this paper I want to briefly analyze developments in discourse analysis especially in relation to the changing role which the readers/viewers are given in responding to texts. This will mean moving from purely text-internal readings, where readers are theorized as decoders of fixed meanings to more dynamic models, where meanings are negotiated by actively participating readers. In the main part of the paper I want to explore such a dynamic model of discourse comprehension in relation to one particular genre of discourse, television news broadcast, with examples from England and West Germany. In the conclusion I will sketch some of the pedagogic implications which arise from such an analysis of the comprehension process.

Changing Roles of Texts and Readers

In the first section I want to explore how text and news analysis have changed by moving from a notion of closed texts to one of open texts; and

how readers have changed from being text-based subjects to complex actively participating viewers.

Text-based/closed text models

Common to what I want to call 'closed text models' is their placing the meaning of the communication in the text itself. The text encodes meanings which readers decode. In a more ideological formulation: the text has the power to impose its reading upon viewers.

From the many different text-based models in text analysis I want to briefly mention three very influential ideological approaches, which are central to the debate within media studies and semiotics.

• *Content analysis* (cf. Glasgow University Media Group: 1976, 1980): Ideology is seen as encoded in the content of the text. Analysis concentrates on topics and themes, the representation of opinions, who is given a voice, who is excluded.

• *Early sociosemiotic analysis* (cf. Fowler, Kress, Hodge & Trew, 1979): Ideology is seen as encoded in the form of the text. Analysis concentrates on linguistic forms and transformations, such as the study of transitivity structures; active/passive transformations; modality and saxon.

• *Screen theory* (cf. McCabe, 1986; Heath, 1977): Comprises a critique of realism which, it is argued, dissolves the contradictions which viewers ought to feel. (For an excellent summary see Fiske, 1987: Chap. 3)

In these models, as in one of my own papers on press representations of subversive women (Meinhof, 1986), readers/viewers are either not specifically addressed or, as in Screen theory, seen as 'text-based' subjects; that is, as reading subjects constructed by the text.

Reader-based models

Reader-based models, in contrast to the above, tend to operate with a more open version of what the text means. Here the difference between a postulated 'inscribed' reader and the real reader becomes crucial. There is no difference from the point of view of analysis between an 'inscribed reader' (Volosinov, 1973) and textual strategies, which encode a preferred reading. These strategies are open to different forms of textual analysis. Real readers, in contrast, are living people; social beings with different backgrounds, different contexts in which they read or view the texts. The allowance for a discrepancy between inscribed readers and real readers shifts the analysis away from fixed meanings in closed texts which the readers extract or decode to a multiplicity of actual responses . . . Text-as-meaning is produced at the moment of reading, not at the moment of writing . . . (this) takes away from that text the status of being the originator of that meaning' (Fiske, 1987: 305).

Content

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How are such more open text models realized in news analysis?

- *Ethnography of viewing*: Studies observe and analyze viewers' actual responses (Morley, 1980, 1986; Palmer, 1986; Lewis, 1985), and in some instances show discrepancies between encoding and decoding processes.
- *Postulating a discrepancy* between 'preferred readings' (dominant ideology), the 'inscribed readers or addressees', and actual readers (social beings). This makes allowances for deviant and/or subversive readings (cf. Barthes, 1975; Hall *et al.*, 1980).

Reading the News

The larger context of this paper is how one might theorize and study the interrelation between textual strategies, or inscribed readers, and actual readers. The opening up of a text by incorporating viewer response requires a different theorizing of the relationship between all components in a communicative situation: viewers/readers — text — contextual features of text productions including the authors — contextual features of text reception: it requires a very active, dynamic model where texts become multi-accentuated or 'polysemic' (cf. Volosinov, 1973; Bakhtin, 1981).

Opening of text at level of production

News texts are the result of different processes of production, which are not usually transparent to the viewer. To give a few of the most obvious examples: there are basically three types of news formats: the studio announcements and readings by the newscaster, the film on the scene with the reporter present, and the news film taken on the scene of the event with a voice-over. From the viewer's point of view, there is a clear difference in style and presentation between the studio film, on the one hand, and the filming on the scene with or without a reporter present. But from the point of production techniques and exercise of control over the news broadcast, there is a highly significant difference between film produced on location by the news teams themselves where they exercise control over filming and text; and film which is bought in from one of the international news agencies, which is later on texted in the studio (cf. Burger, 1984 for a more detailed analysis). This difference is largely obscured to the viewer, but is, of course, important for the relationship between pictures and text, allowing for a whole range of interconnections between the various agents involved in the creation of the news item.

Opening the text at the level of reception

In responding to news texts we respond to different interrelations between different modes of representations: visual (pictorial, written), and oral.

Comprehension is influenced by inferences which readers make between modes to arrive at an interpretation of what is going on. We are not usually aware of the sources of our information, and whether it is in response to the pictures or the text.² Inferences depend on culture-specific knowledge, much of it highly conventionalized and activated by home viewers in a largely automatic and intuitive way. Viewers possess and apply different types of knowledge in responding, beginning with an understanding of what constitutes the genre of TV news in their culture. Whether we are watching a news broadcast, a party political broadcast, an advert, or something like Crimewatch, depends on generic knowledge which we build up from experience. (In Panama, for example, the news used to be accompanied by music which built up in drama depending on the item.)

To understand the sophisticated inferences which viewers make in order to comprehend any news item, we must find ways of describing the interplay between viewers and the news broadcast. Since each news item on TV is doubly encoded, i.e. through a visual and an oral channel, close attention has to be given to the relationship between these in any one news item. At this point in news analysis we are far from sure whether viewers respond to the visual and the oral channel in an equally balanced way, whether certain channels dominate, or how individual preferences and differences in the context of viewing might affect any such balance. It would, for example, be feasible to hypothesize that the referential function, or, in Hallidayan terms (Halliday, 1978) the *ideational* function of a news item is more fully realized in the verbal part of the news text, whereas the interpersonal function might dominate in the visual. This would provide us with a temptingly neat division:

- *news text*: field-dominated — emphasizes information about the event
- *news film*: tenor-dominated — appeals to attitudes and feelings about the event.

However, although one can find plenty of examples from the news which could back up such an analysis, this does not allow for the dynamic interplay between channels with which viewers in my experience arrive at single representations of a news item. There is considerable scope for empirical work.

Defining the object of study

So how can we approach the interplay between the different channels which viewers respond to simultaneously as they watch an item on TV news? From a sociosemiotic perspective we can begin by isolating the following three action components in a news item and see how they are realized in the pictures and in the text of the news item:



- *the actors*: originators, causes of actions, or events;
- *the activities or events*;
- *the affected, the effect, or outcome*.

By studying how text and picture relate to these components independently, we can first of all clarify the sophisticated inferences which viewers must make if they are to form a single representation of a news item. These relations may help to reveal preferred readings, i.e. textual strategies which invite the viewer to form a particular ideological response and possible contradictions between them. We may also be able to show the spaces for dispreferred readings, spaces for the viewers to disrupt.

Relating pictures and text

In my study of German and English news films I identified three types of interrelations between text and picture, which I want to describe under the headings of overlap, displacement, and dichotomy.

- *Overlap*: The film footage and the text share the same action component. Examples: Text and film both refer to the Prime Minister or to the victims of a disaster. The relationship between text and picture may be direct or metonymic, as in a flag or map representing a country. Overlap is typical for studio announcements, for the opening of the news story. Different conventions, such as the showing of pictures, graphs, or headlines next to the newsreader act as advance notifiers for viewers. But overlap also occurs in films. Pictures show the actors (for example in 1998 the East German citizens crossing the border of Hungary), the text describes who they are; why they are leaving for the West, etc.

- *Displacement*: Film footage and text represent different action components of the same event. Example: The text reports the causes, the film shows the effects of an event. There are obvious cases such as disasters, where the filming must, by definition, follow the event itself. The text will announce that an earthquake has happened, the pictures will show the effect of the disaster.

More interestingly for an ideological analysis are those, where displacement is not the inevitable result of having to film after the event has taken place. News reports about strikes are very interesting in this respect. In the English news report about the summer 1988 strike by the Spanish air traffic controllers, the text talked about the strikers and the strike (actors and activities), the pictures showed the suffering masses at Gatwick airport (the effect). In terms of balance between cause and effect, there was an over-representation of the effect, and an under-representation of actors, their grievances, their reasons for

striking. Not all strike items are represented with a technique of displacement. Contrast in the same year the reporting of the striking Polish steel workers, which produced an overlap between text and pictures. When strike and striking workers were referred to in the text, the film camera stayed right in the middle of the striking workers, leading up to interviews with them, and questions about their reasons for striking. In these representations, the effect of the strike on, for example, the Polish economy was under-represented.

- *Dichotomy*: Film footage and text represent action components of different events. Example: the text reports an event/the film shows unrelated images filmed on the location of the event. Dichotomy is very typical for news film bought in from a news agency, and later texted in the studio.

In news reports of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in January 1989, the text on the German satellite news programme *Blick* (Sat 1) described the situation in Kabul as under the threat of collapse adding comments about an acute food shortage there. The pictures, however, showed an unrelated street scene from Kabul.

Similarly, in a report of the Nicaraguan president Ortega visiting the FRG, the Sat 1 news film showed a state visit at the highest diplomatic level. The text talked about a begging tour, discussed Ortega's combat uniform as a sign of the desperate struggle for his survival. The follow-up explanation of why Nicaragua has such economic problems, which mentioned Reagan's support for the Contras as a key factor, was underlain by films of Nicaraguan street scenes, where women were buying vegetables and similar such scenes, and not, for example, by pictures of Contras in armed combat or training.

The viewers' response

How do viewers respond to such doubly-encoded presentations, where the action component of the text and the action component of the picture are divergent? Viewers must make inferences across the channels to combine the different action components to a single representation of the news item. By articulating these and raising them to the level of consciousness, we can see the influence which text and picture exercise on each other to invite a preferred reading of the particular time, and, at the same time, the gaps and contradictions which stop news texts from achieving a clear, monolithic message.

To return to the example of Afghanistan. One of my students had chosen this item about the Soviet troop withdrawal from Afghanistan from the German satellite programme Sat 1 (31/1/89) for a seminar the next day. On a computer program which I am developing for the purposes of news compre-

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hesitant and analysis, *Interactive News* I had prepared a transcription of the text on one half of the screen, and my own description of the film footage on the other.

Below is a translation of part of that transcript:

Afghanistan: the rapid withdrawal 31/1/89

Text

- (1) The Soviet troops in Afghanistan will presumably be leaving the country by the end of this week. This was announced by Western diplomats in I. According to the Geneva agreement, the Soviets have to withdraw their troops by the 15th of February.
 - (2) Blue skies and sunshine in Kabul. After heavy snowfalls, the airport was reopened today. Immediately, the Soviet transport planes resumed their flights. They took the troops back to the SU, and returned to Kabul carrying food supplies.
 - (3) The Afghan capital is about to collapse. The troops of the resistance fighters have closed in on the city even more tightly.
- Kabul can only be given food supplies via the air.

Picture

Studio report.

Film: Airplane ascending into blue-sky. Close-up of airplane.

Street scene of Kabul. Men & children in front of small shops.

A water carrier.

Man with a water canister on the back of his bike.

As you can see from the transcription, the film in the sequence 'Afghanistan 3' showed a street scene in Kabul, a picture of a water carrier, followed by a picture of a man on a bike with a water-canister on his back. Since the text spoke of food shortage, I thought that the image of the man with his water-canister added to the general sense of a deep crisis in Kabul. In the seminar the next day, the students reported that they had seen the same footage on the BBC news the previous evening, and that the canister on the bike contained petrol and not water. Of course, as we could easily check, the content of this canister was not mentioned in either news programme. But because of the spoken context in which the image of the man on the bike appeared, we made different inferences about its content. The German news spoke of a food shortage in Kabul, the English news of a petrol shortage. Of course, it is not particularly significant which it was, petrol or water, and we

will never know. In any case, an anthropologist told me later, that (a) the people of Kabul always move water about in canisters, even when there isn't a crisis, and (b) that it is quite possible that petrol would be transported in these water canisters at a time of shortage (Brian Street, personal communication). But what does matter, is that the source of the information, whether it was petrol or water that needed to be transported, and one's sense of the gravity of the crisis, was partly a result of our/the viewers' inferences across visual and oral channels.

Is it then not a contradiction to deny that this particular text carries its meaning? Clearly a preferred reading of this news item has to be Kabul in crisis. But there is a difference between an analysis which positions the meaning of the canister in the news text itself, as a signal of either water or petrol shortage, with the viewer as the passive recipient of that news message, and a more open analysis which emphasizes the various possible responses which viewers can have because of different inferences across channels. A 'dispreferred' reading would, for example, take the street scene of Kabul as no more than any ordinary street scene in Afghanistan, and possibly resist the interpretation of an extreme crisis, or at least question it on the basis of the visual information. How flexible the images themselves are can be appreciated if one compares more recent pictures of the same kind of street scene in Kabul which are now taken as indications of a Kabul which is resisting the rebels.

Thus similar footage on the BBC and German Sat 1 — a street scene in Kabul — can represent different accounts of the situation there: first a difference in urgency, from Kabul is under threat, to Kabul is about to fall; then a turn-around in interpretation: Kabul is successfully resisting the rebels.

Similarly, news about government reaction to the student demonstrations in China in Spring 1989 re-interpreted the same kind of visual information within the space of a few days: pictures of tanks continuing to roll into the city centre of Beijing was interpreted on a Tuesday on German Satellite news as a sign of an impending civil war. On Thursday, two days later, the almost identical footage was made to represent the end of the democracy movement, and the firm control of Deng Xiaoping over the army.

So what are the sources for the various readings and responses? I do not wish to deny textual strategies which can be seen to encourage preferred readings. The question one could ask is: do we see the pictures we are told to see, as in the Afghanistan example? Or, in contrast, do the pictures tell the real story by giving us the feeling of immediacy, influencing our attitudes, and adding those to a seemingly neutral text (as in the example of the striking air traffic controllers, where the viewer's attention was directed to the unfortunate air travellers stranded at Gatwick airport)?

I want to argue that it is neither of these, but a dynamic between these multiple representations and the viewers. Because the news item is not 'just

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there' but has to be activated by the viewers, a whole range of different responses is feasible. It is not possible to close off the text in either of the above mentioned directions. The possibilities for different and/or dispreferred responses arise from differences amongst the viewers themselves, and therefore depend on a multitude of factors, such as their discrepant knowledges and abilities, their willingness to make inferences across channels, and their level of involvement with the item. There are also differences in responses amongst viewers because of differences in what they are doing at the time, i.e. differences because of context of viewing. Viewers have many options (see also Hodge & Kress, 1988: 51) and many mixed ways of responding to and receiving texts. This includes the power to refuse and disrupt, have a conversation, make fun, comment, disagree, not to pay attention, and switch off.

A sociosemiotic study of text and pictures as separate action components allows us to analyse the preferred readings, such as those mentioned in the case of the two strikes. Overlap between text and pictures in the case of the Polish steel workers showed a clear empathy with the position of the striking workers, displacement in the case of the Spanish air-traffic controllers removed the empathy from the strikers and onto the affected. But we cannot restrict our analysis to text-internal features — the relationship between viewers and texts have also to be taken into account. This includes the contextual features of news productions and the authoring of these productions, as well as the contextual features of news reception. Thus, by incorporating the relationship between all the participants in a communicative situation, we are not identifying the preferred reading with the multiple meanings which texts have for viewers. The text becomes a 'meaning potential', to borrow Halliday's expression (Halliday, 1978), whose meaning is realized in a variety of (potentially conflictual) readings.

Summary of the news analysis

Openness at the level of production implies that there is not a singular monolithic text, but that meaning is affected by different interactions between the various producing agents of a news feature. The methodology for analysis is an investigation of this interaction and a refusal of realism as a criterion for why features are filmed and texted in the way they are. The text can thus never be closed, because there are too many constraints and contradictions in the construction of the text and the interplay between text and pictures. Although it is possible to read off a preferred reading by analysing textual strategies which favour a particular reception, the meaning cannot be singular.

Openness at the level of reception implies that there is not a single receptive audience manipulated by single monolithic texts, but socially situated people with their different knowledges. Therefore no text is more than a

meaning potential; a preferred reading is only one of many possible other readings, and no audience is just a receptacle for a given set of messages. Instead, due to the factors just described, there are multiple realizations of the meaning of a text, which in turn depend on the viewers' motivation and ability to rapidly and intuitively draw inferences across visual and oral channels. Viewers must actively create their own texts by responding to a sophisticated interplay of visual and oral stimuli, they must be willing and able to activate their previous knowledge and engage with the broadcast. This kind of response can be consciously refused by viewers, it can be not given unintentionally because of the context of viewing or a lack of knowledge; preferred readings can be consciously subverted or unintentionally not received. (For a discussion of why a large number of viewers do not recall news items see Lewis, 1987.)

Teaching With and About the News

What pedagogic questions does this analysis of the comprehension process raise for using television news either in mother tongue or in foreign language teaching?

Within one's own cultural context, an analysis like the one I just presented, should help to clarify the interplay between news production, channels of news texts, the news, and the viewers with their different presuppositions and habits, and create a metalanguage for analysing the news. This will improve the comprehensibility of a broadcast and allow a more efficient viewing; but at the same time by making the textual strategies more transparent, it will strengthen the viewers' resistance to possible preferred readings and thus empower them to reject and/or subvert these readings.

To viewers outside the cultural circle and in a foreign language, much more attention must be given to the knowledge types involved in comprehending such culture-bound texts as news broadcast. TV news conventions presuppose a vast amount of cultural knowledge in their readers, as anyone knows who has seen news abroad, or tried to use news films for foreign language teaching. TV news is specifically geared to a home audience. Viewers must know the conventions; they must be able to distinguish between what is an advert, what is news, what is a party political broadcast. They must know the length, the patterning of items. News schemata, such as disaster events, strikes, elections, etc. structure our comprehension and our expectations. Apart from structural and schematic knowledge, viewers must bring to the news knowledge about the content, i.e. culture-specific world knowledge. This is more than just recognizing the people shown on the screen, but implies a whole perspective of how we interpret the rest of the world. Together, these knowledge types enable us to anticipate the news texts

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themselves, to tune in to what is likely to come. By understanding the comprehension strategies which native speakers intuitively employ on the basis of their cultural presuppositions, and their world knowledge, including their ability to form single representations from simultaneously received pictures and texts; we can help to understand the sources for misunderstanding which arise for viewers outside the intended circle of addressees.

Helping the foreign learner to develop comprehension strategies includes a conscious building up of metalinguistic and contextual knowledge. As I have explained elsewhere, this is not only an effective way of teaching about a culture, it is also a highly efficient comprehension strategy for difficult texts in print or on TV (cf. Meinhof, 1987, 1990).

Helping viewers to come to terms with a difficult type of discourse such as the news does not imply that the burden is entirely on the viewers. As Lewis has cogently argued, the producers of TV news would be well advised to note the kinds of meanings which viewers do construct, and the discrepancies between the encoding and decoding processes (Lewis, 1985). More participation by the viewers can be encouraged not only by giving viewers insights into metalinguistic processes, but also by asking producers to take note of concrete comprehension problems which viewers do experience for some of the reasons I set out in this paper.

Notes

1. With the terms 'open' and 'closed' I am borrowing the terminology of Eco (1981). My own usage differs from Eco's in that I am restricting the terms to different ways of interpreting meanings in texts. Eco, on the other hand, characterizes particular narratives as open or closed, depending on the range of interpretative proposals which the text validates (Eco, 1981: 33). Crudely put, his aim is to interpret the texts, mine is to analyse the methods used for the interpretation and the analysis of texts.
2. See also Lewis (1985) reporting on the disparate responses of viewers to the question of who is the 'author' of an opinion in news reporting.
3. Interactive News is a new support facility which I am developing on the basis of Hypercard on an Apple Macintosh SE and a linear video-cassette-recorder. Aimed at first and second language learners at schools and universities, it integrates the teaching of a language with the teaching of cultural topics and of a metalanguage for analysing texts. It combines the facilities of a cognitive support tool for comprehending off-air TV news programmes with a system for annotating these programmes and for building up a resource bank of linguistic and cultural data. For a detailed description see Meinhof (1990). The project is supported by a research grant from the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL) and the educational division of Apple Macintosh, UK.

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is to be both completed and effective. If no 'meaning' is taken, there can be no 'consumption'. If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect. The value of this approach is that while each of the moments, in articulation, is necessary to the circuit as a whole, no one moment can fully guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated. Since each has its specific modality and conditions of existence, each can constitute its own break or interruption of the 'passage of forms' on whose continuity the flow of effective production (that is, 'reproduction') depends.

Thus while in no way wanting to limit research to 'following only those leads which emerge from content analysis' (Halloran, 1973), we must recognize that the discursive form of the message has a privileged position in the communicative exchange (from the viewpoint of circulation), and that the moments of 'encoding' and 'decoding', though only 'relatively autonomous' in relation to the communicative process as a whole, are *determinate* moments. A 'raw' historical event cannot, *in that form*, be transmitted by, say, a television newscast. Events can only be signified within the aural-visual forms of the televisual discourse. In the moment when a historical event passes under the sign of discourse, it is subject to all the complex formal 'rules' by which language signifies. To put it paradoxically, the event must become a 'story' before it can become a *communicative event*. In that moment the formal-subrules of discourse are 'in dominance', without, of course, subordinating out of existence the historical event so signified, the social relations in which the rules are set to work or the social and political consequences of the event having been signified in this way. The 'message form' is the necessary 'form of appearance' of the event in its passage from source to receiver. Thus the transposition into and out of the 'message form' (or the mode of symbolic exchange) is not a random 'moment', which we can take up or ignore at our convenience. The 'message form' is a determinate moment; though, at another level, it comprises the surface movements of the communications system only and requires, at another stage, to be integrated into the social relations of the communication process as a whole, of which it forms only a part.

From this general perspective, we may crudely characterize the television communicative process as follows. The institutional structures of broadcasting, with their practices and networks of production, their organized relations and technical infrastructures, are required to produce a programme. Using the analogy of *Capital*, this is the 'labour process' in the discursive mode. Production, here, constructs the message. In one sense, then, the circuit begins here. Of course, the production process is not without its 'discursive' aspect: it, too, is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure. Further,

14 Encoding/Decoding¹

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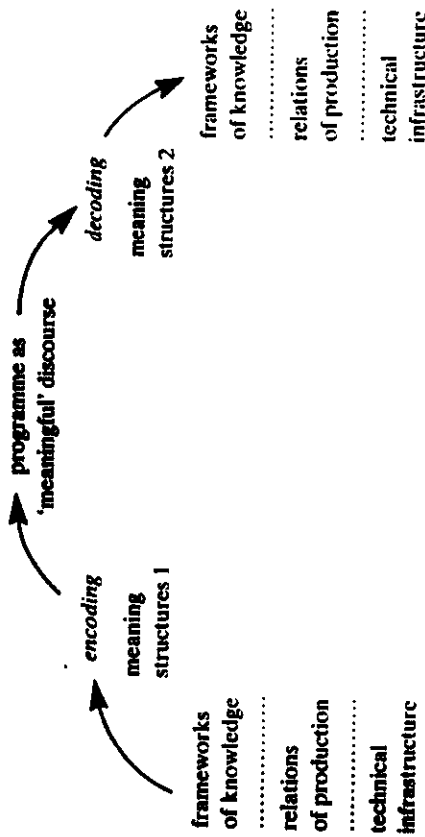
Traditionally, mass-communications research has conceptualized the process of communication in terms of a circulation circuit or loop. This model has been criticized for its linearity — sender/message/receiver — for its concentration on the level of message exchange and for the absence of a structured conception of the different moments as a complex structure of relations. But it is also possible (and useful) to think of this process in terms of a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments — production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction. This would be to think of the process as a 'complex structure in dominance', sustained through the articulation of connected practices, each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence. This second approach, homologous to that which forms the skeleton of commodity production offered in Marx's *Grundrisse* and in *Capital*, has the added advantage of bringing out more sharply how a continuous circuit — production—distribution—production — can be sustained through a 'passage of forms'. It also highlights the specificity of the forms in which the product of the process 'appears' in each moment, and thus what distinguishes discursive 'production' from other types of production in our society and in modern media systems.

The 'object' of these practices is meanings and messages in the form of sign-vehicles of a specific kind organized, like any form of communication or language, through the operation of codes within the syntagmatic chain of a discourse. The apparatuses, relations and practices of production thus issue, at a certain moment (the moment of 'production/circulation') in the form of symbolic vehicles constituted within the rules of 'language'. It is in this discursive form that the circulation of the 'product' takes place. The process thus requires, at the production end, its material instruments — its 'means' — as well as its own sets of social (production) relations — the organization and combination of practices within media apparatuses. But it is in the discursive form that the circulation of the product takes place, as well as its distribution to different audiences. Once accomplished, the discourse must then be translated — transformed, again — into social practices if the circuit

though the production structures of television originate the television discourse, they do not constitute a closed system. They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, 'definitions of the situation' from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part. Philip Elliott has expressed this point succinctly, within a more traditional framework, in his discussion of the way in which the audience is both the 'source' and the 'receiver' of the television message. Thus — to borrow Marx's terms — circulation and reception are, indeed, 'moments' of the production process in television and are reincorporated, via a number of skewed and structured 'feedbacks', into the production process itself. The consumption or reception of the television message is thus also itself a 'moment' of the production process in its larger sense, though the latter is 'predominant' because it is the 'point of departure for the realization' of the message. Production and reception of the television message are not, therefore, identical, but they are related: they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole.

At a certain point, however, the broadcasting structures must yield encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse. The institutional-societal relations of production must pass under the discursive rules of language for its product to be 'realized'. This initiates a further differentiated moment, in which the formal rules of discourse and language are in dominance. Before this message can have an 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect', influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences. In a 'determinate' moment the structure employs a code and yields a 'message': at another determinate moment the 'message', via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices. We are now fully aware that this re-entry into the practices of audience reception and 'use' cannot be understood in simple behavioural terms. The typical processes identified in positivistic research on isolated elements — effects, uses, 'gratifications' — are themselves framed by structures of understanding, as well as being produced by social and economic relations, which shape their 'realization' at the reception end of the chain and which permit the meanings signified in the discourse to be transposed into practice or consciousness (to acquire social use value or political effectivity).

Clearly, what we have labelled in the diagram 'meaning structures 1' and 'meaning structures 2' may not be the same. They do not constitute an 'immediate identity'. The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degrees of symmetry — that is, the degrees of 'under-



standing' and 'misunderstanding' in the communicative exchange — depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the 'personifications', encoder-producer and decoder-receiver. But this in turn depends on the degrees of identity/non-identity between the codes which perfectly or imperfectly transmit, interrupt or systematically distort what has been transmitted. The lack of fit between the codes has a great deal to do with the structural differences of relation and position between broadcasters and audiences, but it also has something to do with the asymmetry between the codes of 'source' and 'receiver' at the moment of transformation into and out of the discursive form. What are called 'distortions' or 'misunderstandings' arise precisely from the *lack of equivalence* between the two sides in the communicative exchange. Once again, this defines the 'relative autonomy', but 'determinateness', of the entry and exit of the message in its discursive moments.

The application of this rudimentary paradigm has already begun to transform our understanding of the older term, television 'content'. We are just beginning to see how it might also transform our understanding of audience reception, 'reading' and response as well. Beginnings and endings have been announced in communications research before, so we must be cautious. But there seems some ground for thinking that a new and exciting phase in so-called audience research, of a quite new kind, may be opening up. At either end of the communicative chain the use of the semiotic paradigm promises to dispel the lingering behaviourism which has dogged mass-media research for so long, especially in its approach to content. Though we know the television programme is not a behavioural input, like a tap on the knee cap, it seems to have been almost impossible for traditional researchers to conceptualize the communicative process without lapsing into one or other variant

of low-flying behaviourism. We know, as Gerbner has remarked, that representations of violence on the TV screen 'are not violence but messages about violence' (Gerbner *et al.*, 1970): but we have continued to research the question of violence, for example, as if we were unable to comprehend this epistemological distinction.

The televisual sign is a complex one. It is itself constituted by the combination of two types of discourse, visual and aural. Moreover, it is an iconic sign, in Pierce's terminology, because 'it possesses some of the properties of the thing represented' (Pierce, 1931). This is a point which has led to a great deal of confusion and has provided the site of intense controversy in the study of visual language. Since the visual discourse translates a three-dimensional world into two-dimensional planes, it cannot, of course, be the referent or concept it signifies. The dog in the film can bark but it cannot bite! Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse. Discursive 'knowledge' is the product not of the transparent representation of the 'real' in language but of the articulation of language on real relations and conditions. Thus there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code. Iconic signs are therefore coded signs too — even if the codes here work differently from those of other signs. There is no degree zero in language. Naturalism and 'realism' — the apparent fidelity of the representation to the thing or concept represented — is the result, the effect, of a certain specific articulation of language on the 'real'. It is the result of a discursive practice.

Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed — the effect of an articulation between sign and referent — but to be 'naturally' given. Simple visual signs appear to have achieved a 'near-universality' in this sense: though evidence remains that even apparently 'natural' visual codes are culture-specific. However, this does not mean that no codes have intervened; rather, that the codes have been profoundly *naturalized*. The operation of naturalized codes reveals not the transparency and 'naturalness' of language but the depth, the habituation and the near-universality of the codes in use. They produce apparently 'natural' recognitions. This has the (ideological) effect of concealing the practices of coding which are present. But we must not be fooled by appearances. Actually, what naturalized codes demonstrate is the degree of habituation produced when there is a fundamental alignment and reciprocity — an achieved equivalence — between the encoding and decoding sides of an exchange of meanings. The functioning of the codes on the decoding side will frequently assume the status of naturalized perceptions. This leads us to think that the visual sign for 'cow' actually *is* (rather than *represents*) the animal, cow. But if we think of the visual representation of a cow in a manual

on animal husbandry — and, even more, of the linguistic sign 'cow' — we can see that both, in different degrees, are *arbitrary* with respect to the concept of the animal they represent. The articulation of an arbitrary sign — whether visual or verbal — with the concept of a referent is the product not of nature but of convention, and the conventionalism of discourses requires the intervention, the support, of codes. Thus Eco has argued that iconic signs 'look like objects in the real world because they reproduce the conditions (that is, the codes) of perception in the viewer' (Eco, n.d.). These 'conditions of perception' are, however, the result of a highly coded, even if virtually unconscious, set of operations — decodings. This is as true of the photographic or televisual image as it is of any other sign. Iconic signs are, however, particularly vulnerable to being 'read' as natural because visual codes of perception are very widely distributed and because this type of sign is less arbitrary than a linguistic sign: the linguistic sign, 'cow' possess *none* of the properties of the thing represented, whereas the visual sign appears to possess *some* of those properties.

This may help us to clarify a confusion in current linguistic theory and to define precisely how some key terms are being used in this article. Linguistic theory frequently employs the distinction 'denotation' and 'connotation'. The term 'denotation' is widely equated with the literal meaning of a sign: because this literal meaning is almost universally recognized, especially when visual discourse is being employed, 'denotation' has often been confused with a literal transcription of 'reality' in language — and thus with a 'natural sign', one produced without the intervention of a code. 'Connotation', on the other hand, is employed simply to refer to less fixed and therefore more conventionalized and changeable, associative meanings, which clearly vary from instance to instance and therefore must depend on the intervention of codes.

We do *not* use the distinction — denotation/connotation — in this way. From our point of view, the distinction is an *analytic* one only. It is useful, in analysis, to be able to apply a rough rule of thumb which distinguishes those aspects of a sign which appear to be taken, in any language community at any point in time, as its 'literal' meaning (denotation) from the more associative meanings for the sign which it is possible to generate (connotation). But analytic distinctions must not be confused with distinctions in the real world. There will be very few instances in which signs organised in a discourse signify *only* their 'literal' (that is, near-universally consensualized) meaning. In actual discourse most signs will combine both the denotative and the connotative *aspects* (as redefined above). It may, then, be asked why we retain the distinction at all. It is largely a matter of analytic value. It is because signs appear to acquire their full ideological value — appear to be open to articulation with wider ideological discourses and meanings — at the level of their 'associative' meanings (that is, at the connotative level) — for



here 'meanings' are *not* apparently fixed in natural perception (that is, they are *not* fully naturalized), and their fluidity of meaning and association can be more fully exploited and transformed. So it is at the connotative level of the sign that situational ideologies alter and transform significations. At this level we can see more clearly the active intervention of ideologies in and on discourse: here, the sign is open to new accentuations and, in Volosinov's terms, enters fully into the struggle over meanings — the class struggle in language. This does not mean that the denotative or 'literal' meaning is outside ideology. Indeed, we could say that its ideological value is strongly fixed — because it has become so fully universal and 'natural'. The terms 'denotation' and 'connotation', then, are merely useful analytic tools for distinguishing, in particular contexts, between not the presence/absence of ideology in language but the different levels at which ideologies and discourses intersect.

The level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where *already coded* signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions. We might take an example from advertising discourse. Here, too, there is no 'purely denotative', and certainly no 'natural', representation. Every visual sign in advertising connotes a quality, situation, value or inference, which is present as an implication or implied meaning, depending on the connotational positioning. In Barthes's example, the sweater always signifies a 'warm garment' (denotation) and thus the activity/value of 'keeping warm' but it is also possible, at its more connotative levels, to signify 'the coming of winter' or 'a cold day'. And, in the specialized sub-codes of fashion, sweater may also connote a fashionable style of *haute couture* or, alternatively, an informal style of dress. But set against the right visual background and positioned by the romantic sub-code, it may connote 'long autumn walk in the woods' (Barthes, 1971). Codes of this order clearly contract relations for the sign with the wider universe of ideologies in a society. These codes are the means by which power and ideology are made to signify in particular discourses. They refer signs to the 'maps of meaning' into which any culture is classified; and those 'maps of social reality' have the whole range of social meanings, practices, and usages, power and interest 'written in' to them. The connotative levels of signifiers, Barthes remarked, 'have a close communication with culture, knowledge, history and it is through them, so to speak, that the environmental world invades the linguistic and semantic system. They are, if you like, the fragments of ideology' (Barthes, 1967).

The so-called denotative level of the televisual sign is fixed by certain, very complex (but limited or 'closed') codes. But its connotative level, though also bounded, is more open, subject to more active *transformations*, which exploit its polysemic values. Any such already constituted sign is

potentially transformable into more than one connotative configuration. Polysemy must not, however, be confused with pluralism. Connotative codes are *not* equal among themselves. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested. This question of the 'structure of discourses in dominance' is a crucial point. The different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into discursive domains, hierarchically organized into *dominant or preferred meanings*. New, problematic or troubling events, which breach our expectancies and run counter to our 'common-sense constructs', to our 'taken-for-granted' knowledge of social structures, must be assigned to their discursive domains before they can be said to 'make sense'. The most common way of 'mapping' them is to assign the new to some domain or other of the existing 'maps of problematic social reality'. We say *dominant*, not 'determined', because it is always possible to order, classify, assign and decode an event within more than one 'mapping'. But we say 'dominant' because there exists a pattern of 'preferred readings'; and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized. The domains of 'preferred meanings' have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures, of 'how things work for all practical purposes in this culture', the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions. Thus to clarify a 'misunderstanding' at the connotative level, we must refer, *through* the codes, to the orders of social life, of economic and political power and of ideology. Further, since these mappings are 'structured in dominance' but not closed, the communicative process consists not in the unproblematic assignment of every visual item to its given position within a set of prearranged codes, but of *performative rules* — rules of competence and use, of *logics-in-use* — which seek actively to *enforce* or *prefer* one semantic domain over another and rule items into and out of their appropriate meaning-sets. Formal semiology has too often neglected this practice of *interpretative work*, though this constitutes, in fact, the real relations of broadcast practices in television.

In speaking of *dominant meanings*, then, we are not talking about a one-sided process which governs how all events will be signified. It consists of the 'work' required to enforce, win plausibility for and command as legitimate a *decoding* of the event within the limit of dominant definitions in which it has been connotatively signified. Terni has remarked:

By the word *reading* we mean not only the capacity to identify and decode a certain number of signs, but also the subjective capacity to put them into a creative relation between themselves and with other signs: a capacity which is, by itself, the condition for a complete awareness of one's total environment. (Terni, 1973)



Our quarrel here is with the notion of 'subjective capacity', as if the referent of a television discourse were an objective fact but the interpretive level were an individualized and private matter. Quite the opposite seems to be the case. The television practice takes 'objective' (that is, systemic) responsibility precisely for the relations which disparate signs connect with one another in any discursive instance, and thus continually rearranges, delimits and prescribes into what 'awareness of one's total environment' these items are arranged.

This brings us to the question of misunderstandings. Television producers who find their message 'failing to get across' are frequently concerned to straighten out the kinks in the communication chain, thus facilitating the 'effectiveness' of their communication. Much research which claims the objectivity of 'policy-oriented analysis' reproduces this administrative goal by attempting to discover how much of a message the audience recalls and to improve the extent of understanding. No doubt misunderstandings of a literal kind do exist. The viewer does not know the terms employed, cannot follow the complex logic of argument or exposition, is unfamiliar with the language, finds the concepts too alien or difficult or is foxed by the expository narrative. But more often broadcasters are concerned that the audience has failed to take the meanings as they — the broadcasters — intended. What they really mean to say is that viewers are not operating within the 'dominant' or 'preferred' code. Their ideal is 'perfectly transparent communication'. Instead, what they have to confront is 'systematically distorted communication'.

In recent years discrepancies of this kind have usually been explained by reference to 'selective perception'. This is the door via which a residual pluralism evades the compulsions of a highly structured, asymmetrical and non-equivalent process. Of course, there will always be private, individual, variant readings. But 'selective perception' is almost never as selective, random or privatized as the concept suggests. The patterns exhibit, across individual variants, significant clusterings. Any new approach to audience studies will therefore have to begin with a critique of 'selective perception' theory.

It was argued earlier that since there is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding, the former can attempt to 'pre-fer' but cannot prescribe or guarantee the latter, which has its own conditions of existence. Unless they are wildly aberrant, encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate. If there were no limits, audiences could simply read whatever they liked into any message. No doubt some total misunderstandings of this kind do exist. But the vast range must contain some degree of reciprocity between encoding and decoding moments, otherwise we could not speak of an effect-

tive communicative exchange at all. Nevertheless, this 'correspondence' is not given but constructed. It is not 'natural' but the product of an articulation between two distinct moments. And the former cannot determine or guarantee, in a simple sense, which decoding codes will be employed. Otherwise communication would be a perfectly equivalent circuit, and every message would be an instance of 'perfectly transparent communication'. We must think, then, of the variant articulations in which encoding/decoding can be combined. To elaborate on this, we offer a hypothetical analysis of some possible decoding positions, in order to reinforce the point of 'no necessary correspondence'.

We identify three hypothetical positions from which decodings of a television discourse may be constructed. These need to be empirically tested and refined. But the argument that decodings do not follow inevitably from encodings, that they are not identical, reinforces the argument of 'no necessary correspondence'. It also helps to deconstruct the common-sense meaning of 'misunderstanding' in terms of a theory of 'systematically distorted communication'.

The first hypothetical position is that of the *dominant-hegemonic position*. When the viewer takes the connoted meaning from, say, a television newscast or current affairs programme full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we might say that the viewer is *operating inside the dominant code*. This is the ideal-typical case of 'perfectly transparent communication' — or as close as we are likely to come to it 'for all practical purposes'. Within this we can distinguish the positions produced by the *professional code*. This is the position (produced by what we perhaps ought to identify as the operation of a 'meta-code') which the professional broadcasters assume when encoding a message which has *already* been signified in a hegemonic manner. The professional code is 'relatively independent' of the dominant code, in that it applies criteria and transformational operations of its own, especially those of a technico-practical nature. The professional code, however, operates *within* the 'hegemony' of the dominant code. Indeed, it serves to reproduce the dominant definitions precisely by bracketing their hegemonic quality and operating instead with displaced professional codings which foreground such apparently neutral-technical questions as visual quality, news and presentational values, televisual quality, 'professionalism' and so on. The hegemonic interpretations of, say, the politics of Northern Ireland, or the Chilean coup or the Industrial Relations Bill are principally generated by political and military elites: the particular choice of presentational occasions and formats, the selection of personnel, the choice of images, the staging of debates are selected and combined through the operation of the professional code. How the broadcasting professionals are able *both* to operate with 'relatively autonomous' codes of their own *and* to act in such a way as to

reproduce (not without contradiction) the hegemonic signification of events in a complex matter which cannot be further spelled out here. It must suffice to say that the professionals are linked with the defining elites not only by the institutional position of broadcasting itself as an 'ideological apparatus' (see Altshuler, 1971), but also by the structure of access (that is, the systematic 'over-accessing' of selective elite personnel and their 'definition of the situation' in television). It may even be said that the professional codes serve to reproduce hegemonic definitions specifically by *not* overtly biasing their operations in a dominant direction: ideological reproduction therefore takes place here inadvertently, unconsciously, 'behind men's backs'. Of course, conflicts, contradictions and even misunderstandings regularly arise between the dominant and the professional significations and their signifying agencies.

The second position we would identify is that of the *negotiated code* or position. Majority audiences probably understand quite adequately what has been dominantly defined and professionally signified. The dominant definitions, however, are hegemonic precisely because they represent definitions of situations and events which are 'in dominance' (*global*). Dominant definitions connect events, implicitly or explicitly, to grand totalizations, to the great syntagmatic views-of-the-world: they take 'large views' of issues: they relate events to the 'national interest' or to the level of geo-politics, even if they make these connections in truncated, inverted or mystified ways. The definition of a hegemonic viewpoint is (a) that it defines within its terms the mental horizon, the universe, of possible meanings, of a whole sector of relations in a society or culture; and (b) that it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy — it appears coterminous with what is 'natural', 'inevitable', 'taken for granted' about the social order. Decoding within the *negotiated version* contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules — it operates with exceptions to the rule. It accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to 'local conditions', to its own more *corporate* positions. This negotiated version of the dominant ideology is thus shot through with contradictions, though these are only on certain occasions brought to full visibility. Negotiated codes operate through what we might call particular or situated logics: and these logics are sustained by their differential and unequal relation to the discourses and logics of power. The simplest example of a negotiated code is that which governs the response of a worker to the notion of an Industrial Relations Bill limiting the right to strike or to arguments for a wages freeze. At the level of the 'national interest' economic debate the decoder may adopt the hegemonic definition, agreeing that 'we must all pay ourselves less

in order to combat inflation'. This, however, may have little or no relation to his/her willingness to go on strike for better pay and conditions or to oppose the Industrial Relations Bill at the level of shop-floor or union organization. We suspect that the great majority of so-called 'misunderstandings' arise from the contradictions and disjunctions between hegemonic dominant encodings and negotiated-corporate decodings. It is just these mismatches in the levels which most provoke defining elites and professionals to identify a 'failure in communications'.

Finally, it is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a *globally* contrary way. Hefshe detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference. This is the case of the viewer who listens to a debate on the need to limit wages but 'reads' every mention of the 'national interest' as 'class interest'. Hefshe is operating with what we must call an *oppositional code*. One of the most significant political moments (they also coincide with crisis points within the broadcasting organizations themselves, for obvious reasons) is the point when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading. Here the 'politics of signification' — the struggle in discourse — is joined.

Notes

1. This article is an edited extract from 'Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse', CCCS Stencilled Paper No. 7.

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