UNIVERSITY OF LATVIA
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COMPARATIVE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MULTIMODAL TEXTS

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

Though texts have always had multimodal aspects such as content, layout, and typography, with the advent of information technologies and the era of the world wide web, multimodality has become an increasingly studied phenomenon in social semiotics and discourse analysis. Moreover, as Carey Jewitt indicates, 'image, sound, and movement enter school classrooms in "new" and significant ways [that] promote image over writing [affecting] literacy and how readers of school age interpret multimodal texts' (2005: 315). Consequently, the aim of this paper is to give a brief insight into the historical development of the framework of multimodal discourse analysis and provide a comparative analysis of three multimodal texts pertaining to different genres but treating the same theme in order to see how mediational means resemiotize the topic. In order to achieve this goal, relevant theory will be explored based on works by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen and empirical analysis of linguistic, visual, and auditory genre features will be provided.

1. Multimodal discourse analysis

According to Theo van Leeuwen and Gunther Kress, the roots of multimodal discourse analysis reach back to 'four twentieth-century schools of linguistics': 1) the Prague School that began to study linguistics in relation to 'visual […] and non-verbal aspects' in the 1930s and 1940s; 2) Paris School semiotics of the 1960s and 1970s, which applied 'methods from structuralist linguistics [to] analysis of popular culture and the mass media'; 3) American linguists, who noted the multimodal aspects of spoken discourse; and 4) 'the linguistics of M. A. K. Halliday', wherefrom the term 'multimodality' was derived and developed into methods for discourse analysis in the 1990s (2011: 107). At the core of multimodal discourse analysis is the notion that texts are multimodal. Theo van Leeuwen defines multimodal texts as texts that 'foreground visuality […] and […] are deliberately designed to allow multiple ways of reading, multiple uses' (2005: 74). Thus, as Gunther Kress points out, '*representation*, the making of meaning, happens at all levels and engages very many aspects of linguistic behavior […], blurring the boundaries between that which is linguistic, that which is social, and that which lies in other semiotic modes' (2001: 67). Moreover, signs which constitute the semiotic text 'are never arbitrary, and "motivation" should be formulated in relation to the sign-maker and the context in which the sign is produced' (G. Kress and T. van Leeuwen, 1996: 8). As 'multimodality' itself is 'a phenomenon rather than a theory or method', multimodal discourse analysis 'uses concepts and methods from linguistics, but also

takes inspiration from other relevant disciplines, such as art and design theory and musicology' (T. van Leeuwen and G. Kress, 2011: 107-8). Consequently, based on the theory of social semiotics, multimodal discourse analysis studies the selection, use and combination of semiotic resources in multimodal texts.

1.1. Analytical tools

Deriving analytical tools from systemic-functional linguistics and genre analysis, discourse semiotics applies Halliday's concept of three meta functions (the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual) to all modes of multimodal texts, emphasizes the importance of social and historical context, and analyzes communicative moves as stages that can be realized via mono or multimodal semiotic means (G. Kress and T. van Leeuwen, 1996: 41-2; 2011; T. van Leeuwen, 2005). So, the ideational meta function in multimodal texts is realized through 'different ways in which objects, and their relations to other objects and to processes, can be represented', the interpersonal meta function appears in the choice of a particular 'form of visual representation' that can depict the visual image as interacting with or disengaging from the audience, whereas the textual meta function is expressed not only through linguistic means but also visual grammar: 'different compositional arrangements to allow the realization of different contextual meanings' (G. Kress and T. van Leeuwen, 1996: 42-3). As a result, semiotic texts are viewed as 'complexes of signs which cohere both internally with each other and externally with the context in and for which they were produced' (ibid.: 43) so that 'there is no context as an *outside* [because] cohesive ties [link] signs across modes' and 'each choice has meaning' (G. Kress, 2001: 77; 81).

Likewise, 'genres bring with them meanings' (G. Kress, 2001: 72). According to Vijay K. Bhatia, 'genre analysis is the study of situated linguistic behavior in institutionalized academic or professional settings, whether defined in terms of *typification of rhetorical* action, […] *regularities of staged, goal-oriented social processes*, […] or *consistency of communicative purposes*' (2004: 22). But, as T. van Leeuwen observes, if in 'systemic-functional genre analysis […] genres are [viewed as] linear concatenations of communicative moves' (2005: 75), multimodal texts do not always have clear cut boundaries between stages and generic structures as different modes often fuse and reading paths of multimodal texts are dependent upon differential salience and readers' choices of sequential perusal of the text (ibid.: 79-80; 82). Thus, as Norman Fairclough indicates, new technologies generate new genres, especially in formats on the web where mixed genres are used and various semiotic modalities are involved, contributing to an increased though still constrained level of

interactivity between the text and a web-site visitor (2003: 77-8). Consequently, in multimodal discourse analysis genres are viewed as authorial resources to be studied not only in terms of register and disciplines but also in terms of multimodal semiotic resources used to construct the text.

1.2. Semiotic resources

T. van Leeuwen and G. Kress define semiotic resources as 'the actions, materials and artifacts [that] have a meaning potential […] based on their past documented or collectively remembered uses, and a set of affordances that is based on their possible uses' (2011: 123). Thus, creation and interpretation of multimodal texts depends both upon shared knowledge and the ability to perceive and realize a variety of latent potentials of object use. According to T. van Leeuwen and G. Kress, semiotic resources that constitute multimodality can be classified as pertaining to the layers of 1) discourse, 2) design, and 3) production (2011: 13). Being 'socially constructed knowledges about some aspect of reality', discourses are seen as 'resources for constructing and interpreting the *content* of texts and communicative events [, as] mental phenomena' governed by social conventions and manifested in different genres (ibid.: 13-4).

Designs are characterized as templates or schemata that determine relations between 'the elements of a composition both to each other and to the viewer' according to cultural conventions and are used 'for embedding discourses in specific social contexts' (ibid.: 114-6; 122). Relationships between signs that constitute the multimodal text are realized through visual and verbal design elements that are determined by 'integration codes: the mode of spatial composition […] and rhythm, the mode of temporal composition' (G. Kress and T. van Leeuwen, 1996: 177). So, according to G. Kress, visual composition 'is founded on the *logic of display in space*, on the *simultaneous presence of elements* [whereas] the written (and the spoken [mode]) is founded on the *logic of succession in time*, on the *sequential unfolding of events*' (2001: 71). But, as '*design* focuses on an individual's *realization* of their *interest* in their world', design is dependent upon the rhetorical purpose of the author in that a preference for a particular design is determined by the apt form and the context of the discourse (G. Kress, 2010: 6; 2001: 72; 78). Thus, design, like discourse, is inevitably linked with 'social factors […] including relations of power or solidarity' (G. Kress, 2001: 75), expressed also via compositional design where horizontal polarization (between the Given on the left and the New on the right) and vertical opposition (between the Ideal at the top and the Real at

the bottom) are brought together by the Centre that shapes the meaning and communication purpose (T. van Leeuwen and G. Kress, 2011: 15).

While different discourses and designs can be applied in the generation of a text, what finally shapes it is production, 'the way actual physical phenomena or materials are used to realize designs' (T. van Leeuwen and G. Kress, 2011: 123). Based upon the meaning potential of experiential metaphors and connotations, graphic and paralinguistic dimensions of multimodal texts appeal to concrete experiences, identities and values (ibid.: 120).

Finally, T. van Leeuwen and G. Kress make a distinction between semiotic resources functioning as modes 'that have been regulated by normative discourses [and] provide templates for semiotic production [such as language or visual composition but] are not closely tied to particular modes of expression' and media that can be regarded both as the technical channel of transmission of meaning and the particular materials or phenomena used to express the text.

2. Comparative analysis of multimodal texts

In order to see how the selection of different designs and semiotic media impact discourse interpretation, three web-based multimodal texts will further be analyzed, applying the framework of multimodal discourse analysis as developed by G. Kress and T. van Leeuwen on the basis of Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics and genre analysis. Though all three texts treat the subject of semiotics, introducing it to their varied audiences, due to differences in semiotic modes and media employed as stipulated by genre conventions, they represent gradations of multimodality. So, the comparative analysis will be begun with a text that most resembles a standard written printed text, moving on to a text that combines explicitly both visual and linguistic modes of expression, and finishing with an analysis of a multimodal discourse that incorporates both visual, written and spoken forms of semiotic resources. The texts are published on the web platforms of britannica.com (an online encyclopedia), signsalad.com (a company's webpage), and youtube.com (a video presentation) respectively.

2.1. Encyclopedia entry

The first text *Semiotics: study of signs* is an article written as an online encyclopedia entry with click-ability (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2014). The composition of this text comprises of a heading and subheading in larger fonts and bold at the top left corner of the screen, a picture on the right and a mass of written text aligned with the left margin. This order of design

elements constitutes the initial reading path which would presumably be continued with a sequential reading of the article, though alternative reading paths are also possible via the option to click any of the lemmas marked in blue color as hyperlinked text that would lead the reader immediately to their separate entries in Encyclopaedia Britannica. Following the logic of succession in time, the layout of the linguistic text is structured in spaced paragraphs, outlining the order of the historical development of semiotics and enumerating terms, key figures and related fields of study in academic lexis and grammatical patterns, e.g. the use of passive voice.

According to C. Jewitt, 'writing on screen functions to reference the values of specialist knowledge, authority, and authenticity associated with print' (2005: 323), which is the goal of the scientific genre used in encyclopedias both in the printed and online formats. Though series of clickable buttons frame the multimodal text on the margins and a photography of the father of semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure, is located on the right side of the horizontal axis and provides an option to view also the picture of the other founder of the study of signs, Ch. S. Peirce, emphasizing the subtle modernization of the traditional concept of an encyclopedia exemplified by the linguistic text on the left, the classic design of the photography contributes to the establishment of authority and academic values indicated as the Ideal by the location of the photography at the top of the vertical axis.

2.2. Advertorial

The second text comes from a webpage advertising 'a semiotics and cultural insight agency' (Sign Salad, 2013) and differs from the previous text in a predominant use of images and graphical design that immediately capture the attention of the website visitor. As a screen text, *Semiotics Explained* does not fit all at once the dimensions of the screen and scrolling down is required to get to the bottom of the text. So, the image with a green traffic light on, which would be central on a printed page, happens to be glimpsed at the bottom of the first frame that the visitor sees, the break occurring immediately after the italicized text in bold proceeding the image, thus serving as the caption for it: '***Everyone is a semiotician*** […]', linguistically elaborating the message of the visual medium. The domination of the extensive image in bright colors all bearing positive connotations (blue sky for the expanse of dreams, white, floating clouds as signifieds to be matched with the green light of the apt signifier), nevertheless becomes the central focus of attention. The repetition of the inclusive pronoun 'everyone' builds an instant link with the addressee of the text, implicitly stating the

importance of the issue in the Real, the world of the visitor of the webpage and potential client of the agency.

The next possible stop on the reading path is the Ideal Given at the top left corner of the screen on the background of a bright, eye-catching pink oblong that frames another multimodal image where lexical items are used as a semiotic medium to create a complex sign that stands for a smoking Sherlock Holmes evoked by the experiential metaphor of the visual image of a pipe so that 'signsalad' – the brand name of the agency becomes the detective on the track of success signified by the 'smoke' emitted by the pipe in the form of a white linguistic text: 'making brands meaningful'.

The image of the pipe also tops the frame of the screen visually amplifying the metaphor used and directing the reading path back to the beginning of the article where, under the apt headline, semiotics is indeed briefly explained, using linguistic means rendered in bold italic that complement the emphasis of the text on 'meaning' embedded in 'signs' and 'symbols' rather than highlighting academic terms and prominent figures named in the previous article under analysis. Moreover, the use of personal pronouns 'our', 'we' and 'us' is, again inclusive and implicitly addresses the reader, stating the problem: 'Our actions and thoughts […] are governed by a complex set of cultural messages and conventions'. Thus, the multimodal semiotic resources are here implicitly designed to serve the purpose of a promotional genre (to which the text belongs) and, in fact, not only explicitly explain semiotic issues in an attractive, exemplified way, but implicitly also perform the marketing function to sell the brand of the agency, observing the pattern of moves characteristic to advertorials.

Consequently, having targeted the market and justified the need for the service, the text induces the visitor of the webpage to scroll down and goes on to detail the benefits of the semiotic approach by illustrating the varied nature and wide spread of signs present in everyday world that semiotics can help interpret, first, by linguistic and, second, by visual means, once more employing images with positive connotations as examples. Next, the text follows the move structure by establishing credentials: 'Semiotics is a key tool to ensure that intended meanings […] are unambiguously understood by the person on the receiving end' (Sign Salad, 2013). By enumerating various academic study fields impacted by semiotic analysis, the agency implicitly applies the strategy of celebrity/typical user endorsement before eventually presenting itself as the Real solution to the potential customer's problem so that all that remains for the visitor to do now is to scroll back to the top for contact and other additional information on the Given left-hand side of the screen.

2.3. Video presentation

The third semiotic text is a video presentation created by undergraduate students as a school project and uploaded on youtube.com. It is the most complex multimodal text of the three sample texts analyzed because here written and visual design elements are used to illustrate spoken discourse that, though being the backbone of the structure of the multimodal text, would not always fully convey the intended meaning without the moving images (both linguistic and visual) that accompany the spoken mode of expression. The structure of the verbal discourse, clearly written to be read, is organized according to the academic genre, developing ideas in a similar linear fashion as presented in the encyclopedic article, starting with the historical development of the study and continuing with the introduction and explanation of the terms. However, as any interactivity for a youtube.com video can be achieved only via comments in the respective section and no alternative reading paths can be provided, unlike an encyclopedia entry or an advertorial, the presentation offers simultaneous visual examples of semiotic notions. Interestingly, links between terms and their visual representations are not only indicated by the voiced text but also depicted through compositional design as arrows joining the two elements, as if visualizing reading/thinking path the authors of the presentation wish the readers to follow. Moreover, often the verbal and visual signifiers for the same signified are co-present or the video material provides supplementary examples to those mentioned via audial means, illustrating the arbitrariness of signs. As a result, by combining both academic and promotional genre characteristics, this video presentation manages to give both important introductory academic insights in the study of signs and to promote semiotics as a fascinating science worth mastering.

CONCLUSIONS

As the theoretical background of the framework of multimodal discourse analysis indicates, genres realized through compositional designs impact the selection and combination of semiotic resources to be used for embedding a certain discourse in a particular context. Each genre has a prior communicative purpose which, though treated with creativity, yet impose normative restrictions. Thus, an encycplopedia entry on semiotics will be more formal and use fewer multimodal resources in order to preserve the authority and values associated with its earlier print version whereas promotional genres can afford greater freedom in constructing reading paths and selecting a variety of mono and multimodal signs to meet the purpose of the design. Finally, school presentations can be regarded as a mixture of genres in that they must

be both educational and attract the attention of the audience. Consequently, combined use of multimodal semiotic resources might be beneficial in classroom environments.

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APPENDIX

Text 1: Encyclopedia entry

ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA
HELP | SCHOOL & LIBRARY PRODUCTS | SHOP

POPULAR TOPICS | QUIZZES | GALLERIES | LISTS | PROJECTS | Search Britannic

Semiotics

Study of signs

Written by: The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica | 0 | Last Updated 12-11-2014

Alternate title: *semiology*

Semiotics, also called **Semiology**, the study of signs and sign-using behaviour. It was defined by one of its founders, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, as the study of "the life of signs within society." Although the word was used in this sense in the 17th century by the English philosopher John Locke, the idea of semiotics as an interdisciplinary mode for examining phenomena in different fields emerged only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the independent work of Saussure and of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce.

View All (2)

Peirce's seminal work in the field was anchored in pragmatism and logic. He defined a sign as "something which stands to somebody for something," and one of his major contributions to semiotics was the categorization of signs into three main types: (1) an icon, which resembles its referent (such as a road sign for falling rocks); (2) an index, which is associated with its referent (as smoke is a sign of fire); and (3) a symbol, which is related to its referent only by convention (as with words or traffic signals). Peirce also demonstrated that a sign can never have a definite meaning, for the meaning must be continuously qualified.

Saussure treated language as a sign-system, and his work in linguistics has supplied the concepts and methods that semioticians apply to sign-systems other than language. One such basic semiotic concept is Saussure's distinction between the two inseparable components of a sign: the signifier, which in language is a set of speech sounds or marks on a page, and the signified, which is the concept or idea behind the sign. Saussure also distinguished *parole*, or actual individual utterances, from *langue*, the underlying system of conventions that makes such utterances understandable; it is this underlying *langue* that most interests semioticians.

This interest in the structure behind the use of particular signs links semiotics with the methods of structuralism, which seeks to analyze these relations. Saussure's theories are thus also considered fundamental to structuralism (especially structural linguistics) and to poststructuralism.

Modern semioticians have applied Peirce and Saussure's principles to a variety of fields, including aesthetics, anthropology, psychoanalysis, communications, and semantics. Among the most influential of these thinkers are the French scholars Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Julia Kristeva.

Read More:

science
social science
anthropology
pedagogy
humanities
political science
jurisprudence
behavioral science

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2.4. *Text 2: Advertorial*

making brands meaningful. signsalad

- home
- what we do
- semiotics explained
  - why semiotics
  - case studies
  - bookshelf
- who we are
- contact us
- thought store
- in the press

Semiotics explained

Semiotics is an investigation into how meaning is created and how meaning is communicated. Its origins lie in the academic study of how signs and symbols (visual and linguistic) create meaning.

It is a way of seeing the world, and of understanding how the landscape and culture in which we live has a massive impact on all of us unconsciously.

Our actions and thoughts – what we do automatically – are often governed by a complex set of cultural messages and conventions, and dependent upon our ability to interpret them instinctively and instantly.

For instance, when we see the different colours of a traffic light, we automatically know how to react to them. We know this without even thinking about it. But this is a sign which has been established by cultural convention over a long period of time and which we learn as children, and requires a deal of unconscious cultural knowledge to understand its meaning.

Viewing and interpreting (or decoding) this sign enables us to navigate the landscape of our streets and society.

Everyone is a semiotician, because everyone is constantly unconsciously interpreting the meaning of signs around them – from traffic lights to colours of flags, the shapes of cars, the architecture of buildings, and the design of cereal packaging.

And signs don't only need to be visual – they can be aural or sonic signs too, such as the sound of a police siren, usually heard before the vehicle is seen.

We know for instance that the following sign in the West means everything is OK. This can be dated back to its alleged use by Roman emperors to signal whether a gladiator would live (hence be OK). Its reverse – thumbs down – signified death.

But in scuba diving this sign means go up to the surface, and by the side of the road it means you want to hitch a ride.

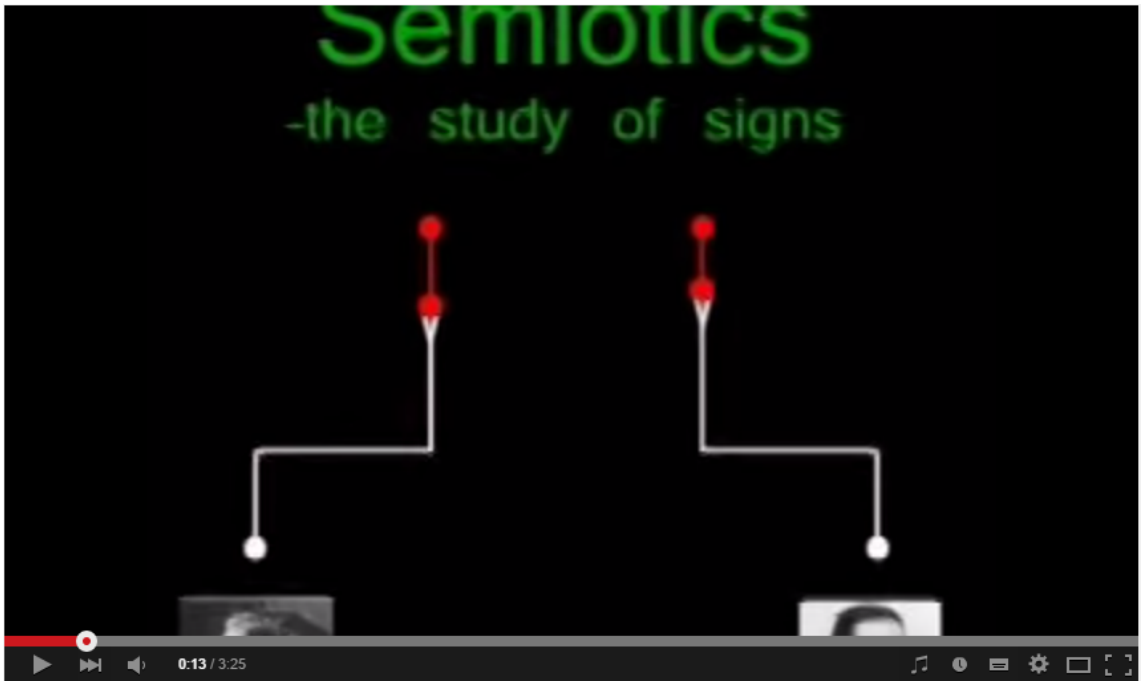
In other words, we need to understand the context in which a sign is communicated in order to comprehend its real meaning, and hence act appropriately. What is going on around the sign is usually as important for us to know as the sign itself in order to interpret its meaning.

Semiotics is a key tool to ensure that intended meanings (of for instance a piece of communication or a new product) are unambiguously understood by the person on the receiving end. Usually there are good reasons if someone doesn't understand the real intention of a message and semiotics can help unravel that confusion, ensuring clarity of meaning.

Semiotics started out as an academic investigation of the meaning of words (linguistics), it moved into examining people's behaviour (anthropology and psychology), then evolved to become an enquiry into culture and society (sociology and philosophy), following that it moved onto assisting with analyses of cultural products (films, literature, art – critical theory), and finally and more recently became a methodology for researching and analysing consumer behaviour and brand communications.

It is from this social science background that Sign Salad emerged. We apply the high-level thinking of semiotics to enable clients to understand the commercial implications of the culture around their brands and its impact upon consumers. Ultimately, we assist with the development of culturally relevant brand strategies and meaningful communication (packaging, comms and point of sale).

Text 3: Video presentation



Transcript of the spoken discourse

Semiotics: a study of signs.

The science was proposed in the early 1900s by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce. Saussure argued that there was no inherent or necessary relationship between that which cures the meaning – the signifier, usually a word resemble and the actual meaning which is carried – the signified. For example, the word car is not actually a car. The meaning of car could be carried by any random string of letters. It just so happens that in English, that the meaning is carried by the letter C-A-R. Peirce's ideas about semiotics distinguish between three types of signs: icon, index and symbol. Whether a sign belongs in one category or another is dependent upon the nature of its relationship between the sign itself, which he called the referent, and the actual meaning. An icon is a sign that stands for an object by resembling it. Included in this category of signs are obvious examples like pictures, maps and diagrams, and some not so obvious ones like algebraic expressions and metaphors. This sensual aspect of the relation of an icon to its object is one of similarity. Indexes refer to their objects not by virtue of any similarity relation but rather via an actual causal link between the sign and its object. Smoke is an index of fire, a mark on fever thermometer is an index of body temperature and so forth. The relation between a sign and its object is actual in that the sign and object have something in common, that is, the object really affects the sign. Finally, symbols refer to their objects by virtue of law, rule or convention. Words 'proposition' and 'texts' are obvious examples in that no similarity or causal link is suggested in the relation between, for example, the word horse and the object it refers to. The symbols need bear no similarity or causal link to their object and signs can be considered by the sign user in unlimited ways independent of any physical relationship to the sign user. This point is of crucial importance and, in fact, lays the foundation for a semiotic view of cognition in humans.

The fact that humans can utilize signs which are arbitrary and need have no existence in their immediate experience is what makes thought possible and distinctly human. Ideas can be brought to mind and manipulated without being directly experienced. Meanings can be expressed in various ways through a variety of sign systems: language, music, gestures, and so forth. In essence, humans can create via signs a world entirely separate from one of direct experience. We find it hard to imagine a world without traffic regulations, social conventions, basketball games, and so forth. These are as real to us as trees and rocks. Yet, they, as well as our understanding of trees and rocks, have come about by an interaction that humans, individually and collectively, through the sign structures, that we call culture.