



INTRODUCING
SOCIAL
SEMIOTICS

THEO VAN LEEUWEN

**Also available as a printed book
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Introducing Social Semiotics

Introducing Social Semiotics is a lively introduction to the ways in which different aspects of modern society combine to create meaning. These 'semiotic resources' surrounding us include obvious modes of communication such as language, gesture, images and music, but also less obvious ones such as food, dress and everyday objects, all of which carry cultural value and significance.

Introducing Social Semiotics uses a wide variety of texts including photographs, adverts, magazine pages and film stills to explain how meaning is created through complex semiotic interactions. Practical exercises and examples as wide ranging as furniture arrangements in public places, advertising jingles, photojournalism and the rhythm of a rapper's speech provide readers with the knowledge and skills they need to be able to analyse and also produce successful multimodal texts and designs.

The book traces the development of semiotic resources through particular channels such as the history of the press and advertising; and explores how and why these resources change over time, for reasons such as advancing technology.

Featuring a full glossary of terms, exercises, discussion points and suggestions for further reading, *Introducing Social Semiotics* makes concrete the complexities of meaning making and is essential reading for anyone interested in how communication works.

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First published 2005
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005

"To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk."

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data Van Leeuwen, Theo, 1947–

Introducing social semiotics / Theo van Leeuwen. p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Semiotics—Social aspects. I. Title.

P99.4.S62V36 2005

302.2-dc22

2004013007

ISBN 0-203-64702-5 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-67342-5 (Adobe eReader Format)

ISBN 0-415-24943-0 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-24944-9 (pbk)

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Preface

This book is an attempt to write an accessible and, above all, *usable* introduction to social semiotics.

Although strongly inspired by Paris School semiotics, and especially by the work of Roland Barthes, which I first came across as a film school student in Amsterdam in the late 1960s, social semiotics has long since moved beyond an exclusive interest in structure and system.

- Just as in linguistics the focus changed from the 'sentence' to the 'text' and its 'context', and from 'grammar' to 'discourse', so in social semiotics the focus changed from the 'sign' to the way people use semiotic 'resources' both to produce communicative artefacts and events and to interpret them – which is also a form of semiotic production – in the context of specific social situations and practices.
- Rather than constructing separate accounts of the various semiotic modes – the 'semiotics of the image', the 'semiotics of music', and so on – social semiotics compares and contrasts semiotic modes, exploring what they have in common as well as how they differ, and investigating how they can be integrated in multimodal artefacts and events.
- Rather than describing semiotic modes as though they have intrinsic characteristics and inherent systematicities or 'laws', social semiotics focuses on how people regulate the use of semiotic resources – again, in the context of specific social practices and institutions, and in different ways and to different degrees.
- Finally, social semiotics is itself also a practice, oriented to observation and analysis, to opening our eyes and ears and other senses for the richness and complexity of semiotic production and interpretation, and to social intervention, to the discovery of new semiotic resources and new ways of using existing semiotic resources.

Although the approach to social semiotics presented here draws on a wide range of sources, the key impetus for its development was Halliday's social semiotic view of language (1978). In the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s, it was elaborated by the work of the Sydney Semiotics Circle, whose members included, among others, Jim Martin, Terry Threadgold, Paul Thibault, Radan Martinec, Anne Cranny-Francis, Jennifer Biddle and, above all, my long-time collaborator Gunther Kress – as well as, from a distance, Bob Hodge and Jay Lemke. In the 1990s I was influenced by my work with members of the critical discourse analysis group, especially Norman

Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, Teun van Dijk, Lilie Chouliaraki, Luisa Martin Rojo, Malcolm Coulthard and Carmen Caldas-Coulthard and, in different contexts, by my work on 'toys as communication' with Staffan Selander and on 'global media' with David Machin, and by discussions with Philip Bell, Adam Jaworski, Rick Iedema, Ron Scollon, Carey Jewitt, and Teal Triggs.

I must single out David Machin in particular. Our joint work over the past three years has not only produced several of the key examples I use in this book, it has also been a constant source of inspiration. The book would not have been the same without him.

Over the years I have taught the material presented in this book to students in linguistics, communication, interactive multimedia design, film studies, media studies and cultural studies, at Macquarie University, the London College of Printing and Cardiff University, as well as in short courses in a wide range of countries and institutions. This book is written for students, and it could not have existed without my own students' suggestions, comments, criticisms and extensions of the material. This includes present and past PhD students in London – especially Eleanor Margolies, Rob Flint, Cian Quayle and Maria Mencia – and Cardiff – especially Hanita Hassan, Lu Xing-Hua and Odysseas Constantinou. The book is also meant to be interdisciplinary and I hope that my many years of interdisciplinary teaching and research have helped me achieve at least something of this difficult aim.

Finally, I would like to thank Glen Stillar, Greg Myers, Per Ledin and Christabel Kirkpatrick for their useful comments on the manuscript, my editor, Louise Semlyen, for suggesting the book and waiting patiently for it, Julene Knox for all her work in chasing permissions for the illustrations, and Laura López-Bonilla for much appreciated moral support.

Theo van Leeuwen, March 2004

PART I

Semiotic principles

In part I, I discuss some of the principles that make social semiotics a new and distinctive approach to the practice and theory of semiotics. Where necessary, social semiotic concepts and methods are contrasted and compared to concepts from structuralist semiotics.

Above all, I hope two things will become clear in this part of the book:

- 1 Social semiotics is not 'pure' theory, not a self-contained field. It only comes into its own when it is applied to specific instances and specific problems, and it always requires immersing oneself not just in semiotic concepts and methods as such but also in some other field. When, in chapter 1, I explore the semiotics of office space, for instance, I need not just social semiotic concepts and methods but also concepts and methods from the theory and practice of office design and management. The same applies to the 'social' in 'social semiotics'. It can only come into its own when social semiotics fully engages with social theory. This kind of interdisciplinarity is an absolutely essential feature of social semiotics.
- 2 Social semiotics is a form of enquiry. It does not offer ready-made answers. It offers ideas for formulating questions and ways of searching for answers. This is why I end my chapters with questions rather than conclusions. These questions are not intended to invite readers to 'revise' the content of the preceding chapter but to encourage them to question it, to test it, to think it through independently – and to arrive at their own conclusions.

1 Semiotic resources

Semiotic resources

Books about semiotics often start with the question 'What is semiotics?' I would like to ask the question differently: 'What kind of *activity* is semiotics?', 'What do semioticians *do*?' And my answer is that semioticians do three things:

- 1 collect, document and systematically catalogue semiotic resources – including their history
- 2 investigate how these resources are used in specific historical, cultural and institutional contexts, and how people talk about them in these contexts – plan them, teach them, justify them, critique them, etc.
- 3 contribute to the discovery and development of new semiotic resources and new uses of existing semiotic resources.

The first two of these activities will be discussed and exemplified in this chapter, the third in chapter 2, where I deal with semiotic innovation.

The term 'semiotic resource' is therefore a key term in social semiotics. It originated in the work of Halliday who argued that the grammar of a language is not a code, not a set of rules for producing correct sentences, but a 'resource for making meanings' (1978: 192). In this book I extend this idea to the 'grammar' of other semiotic modes, and define semiotic resources as the actions and artefacts we use to communicate, whether they are produced physiologically – with our vocal apparatus; with the muscles we use to create facial expressions and gestures, etc. – or by means of technologies – with pen, ink and paper; with computer hardware and software; with fabrics, scissors and sewing machines, etc. Traditionally they were called 'signs'. For instance, a frown would be a sign of disapproval, the colour red a sign of danger, and so on. Signs were said to be the union of a signifier – an observable form such as a certain facial expression, or a certain colour – and a signified – a meaning such as disapproval or danger. The sign was considered the fundamental concept of semiotics. One of the most famous definitions of semiotics is that of Ferdinand de Saussure (1974 [1916]: 16) 'A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable ... I shall call it semiology (from Greek *semeion*, "sign").' In social semiotics the term 'resource' is preferred, because it avoids the impression that 'what a sign stands for' is somehow pre-given, and not affected by its use. As Hodge and Kress (1988: 18) have put it, in a discussion of the work of Vološinov – an important precursor of social semiotics – 'signs may not be divorced from the concrete forms of social intercourse

... and cannot exist, as such, without it'. So in social semiotics resources are signifiers, observable actions and objects that have been drawn into the domain of social communication and that have a *theoretical* semiotic potential constituted by all their past uses and all their potential uses and an *actual* semiotic potential constituted by those past uses that are known to and considered relevant by the users of the resource, and by such potential uses as might be uncovered by the users on the basis of their specific needs and interests. Such uses take place in a social context, and this context may either have rules or best practices that regulate how specific semiotic resources can be used, or leave the users relatively free in their use of the resource.

Semiotic resources are not restricted to speech and writing and picture making. Almost everything we do or make can be done or made in different ways and therefore allows, at least in principle, the articulation of different social and cultural meanings. Walking could be an example. We may think of it as non-semiotic behaviour, basic locomotion, something we have in common with other species. But there are many different ways of walking. Men and women walk differently. People from different parts of the world walk differently. Social institutions – the army, the church, the fashion industry – have developed their own special, ceremonial ways of walking. Through the way we walk, we express who we are, what we are doing, how we want others to relate to us, and so on. Different ways of walking can seduce, threaten, impress and much more. For this reason actors often start working on their roles by establishing how their characters might walk.

As soon as we have established that a given type of physical activity or a given type of material artefact constitutes a semiotic resource, it becomes possible to describe its semiotic *potential*, its potential for making meaning – for example, 'what kinds of walking can we observe, and what kinds of meanings can be made with them?' This is the first of the three semiotic activities described above, and it is one of the key contributions semioticians can make to interdisciplinary projects: inventorizing the different material articulations and permutations a given semiotic resource allows, and describing its semiotic potential, describing the kinds of meanings it affords. Again, the plural 'meanings' is crucial here, because just as dictionaries cannot predict the meaning which a word will have in a specific context, so other kinds of semiotic inventories cannot predict the meaning which a given facial expression – for example, a frown – or colour – for example, red – or style of walking will have in a specific context. We can say, for instance, that swaying hips have a potential for meaning something like the 'loosening up' or 'letting go' of some kind of restraint, but whether that 'letting go' will be used to convey sensuality or slovenliness depends on who 'lets go' of what, where and when, and on the other signs – other aspects of physical behaviour, style of dress, etc. – that accompany the swaying of the hips.

Closely related to the term 'semiotic potential' is the term 'affordance', which stems from the work of the psychologist Gibson (1979). According to Gibson, affordances are the potential uses of a given object. These, he says, stem directly from their observable properties. However, different observers might notice different affordances, depending on their needs and interests and on the specifics of the

situation at hand. Perception is selective. And yet the other affordances are objectively there. Thus the meanings we find in the world, says Gibson, are both objective and subjective. This is evidently very similar to Halliday's concept of 'meaning potential', in which linguistic signifiers – words and sentences – have a signifying *potential* rather than specific meanings, and need to be studied in the social context. The difference is that the term 'meaning potential' focuses on meanings that have already been introduced into society, whether explicitly recognized or not, whereas 'affordance' also brings in meanings that have not yet been recognized, that lie, as it were, latent in the object, waiting to be discovered. No one can claim to know all the affordances of a given word or other semiotic 'object', yet as semioticians we do not need to restrict ourselves to what is, we can also set out to investigate what *could be*, as will be seen in the next chapter. The fact that resources have no objectively fixed meanings does not mean that meaning is a free-for-all. In social life people constantly try to fix and control the use of semiotic resources – and to justify the rules they make up – although more so in some domains than in others. The meaning of traffic signs, for instance, is fixed by precise rules, by a 'code'. It has to be, if we want to avoid accidents. In interpreting abstract art, on the other hand, we are usually given more freedom of interpretation.

Studying the semiotic potential of a given semiotic resource is studying how that resource has been, is, and can be used for purposes of communication, it is drawing up an inventory of past and present and maybe also future resources and their uses. By nature such inventories are never complete, because they tend to be made for specific purposes. Inventories of words, such as the dictionary or the thesaurus, may be made for the purposes of specialists, or of 'authors, translators, advertising copywriters and crossword-solvers' (sleeve notes of the *Roget's Thesaurus*), or of the 'general reader'. The same applies to other types of semiotic inventories. In chapter 4 I will describe an inventory of the ways in which children's toys can be designed to move or be moved. They can, for instance, be hard or soft – and therefore squeezable; they can be rigid or articulated – for example, the head and limbs of Barbie dolls and Action Men; they can be static or mobile – for example, toy cars; if they are mobile, they can be propelled in different ways – by hand, through a clockwork mechanism, through wind power – and so on. This inventory was drawn up in the context of a research project which looked at children's toys from the point of view of learning. The premise was that children – and adults – learn not only from looking and listening but also from manipulating objects. The inventory was therefore made from the point of view of a very specific relevance criterion. It had to be a systematic inventory of both the signifiers and the signifieds, both the physical properties of the objects and what could be learnt from them. For instance, from taking a toy apart children can learn what parts make up a given object, and from playing with a wind-powered toy – for example, a kite – children can learn about natural energy. It was a good example of the way new ideas – we called it the 'semiotics of kinetic design' – can come out of a very specific applied project, in which semioticians work together with others in an interdisciplinary context, in this case with educationalists and psychologists.

At the same time, we cannot always know beforehand what resources we will need, and we therefore also need inventories that are not made with an immediate, urgent purpose in mind. Today the patient work of the scholars who documented and decoded ancient hieroglyphic scripts, such as those of the Maya and Aztec civilizations, has suddenly found a new use in the design of icons for computer interfaces (Honeywill, 1999). What seemed 'pure research', the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, has suddenly turned out to be a valuable resource for solving eminently practical problems of global computer-mediated communication. More generally, the collectors' culture of the past few centuries is now a very useful resource for artists, designers and other innovators. When such collections are no longer kept, our semiotic storehouses will be much less well-stocked, and our capacity for innovation will diminish. In the rest of this chapter I will use a specific example to illustrate how social semioticians might go about the first two activities described above, inventorizing a semiotic resource, and describing its use in a specific context.

Semiotic inventories: framing in magazine advertisements

To make an inventory we first need a collection. Collections for social semiotic research projects could be put together in several ways. In the case of walking we could make a collection of videotapes of people walking, whether secretly filmed for the purpose of the research, or taken from feature films and documentaries. One such collection, produced by a team of psychologists, consisted of a hundred 15-second scenes from CCTV footage, showing people walking just seconds before committing a crime (*Observer*, 22 July 2001: 11). But it could also be a collection of *descriptions* of walking, for instance from historical sources such as the 1766 Army drill regulations from which Foucault quotes in his discussion of disciplining 'docile bodies':

The length of the short step will be a foot, that of the ordinary step, the double step and the marching step will be two feet, the whole measured from one heel to the next; as for the duration, that of the small step and the ordinary step will last one second, during which two double steps would be performed. The duration of the marching step will be a little longer than one second. The oblique step will take one second; it will be at most eighteen inches from one heel to the next ... The ordinary step will be executed forwards, holding the head up high and the body erect, holding oneself in balance successively on a single leg, and bringing the other forwards, the ham taut, the point of the foot a little turned outwards and low, so that one may without affectation brush the ground on which one must walk and place one's foot in such a way that each part may come to rest there at the same time without striking the ground.

(Foucault, 1979: 15)

Just what kind of collection will be most appropriate clearly depends on the purpose of the inventory. Is it for the use of actors playing in historical dramas? Or for the purpose of police investigations? Or should it be a broader, multi-purpose inventory?

In our book *Reading Images* (1996) Gunther Kress and I introduced the notion of 'framing' in the context of visual communication. By 'framing' we meant the disconnection of the elements of a visual composition, for instance by frame-lines, pictorial framing devices – boundaries formed by the edge of a building, a tree, etc. – empty space between elements, discontinuities of colour, and so on. The concept also included the opposite, the ways in which elements of a composition may be visually connected to each other, through the absence of disconnection devices, through vectors, through similarities of colour, visual shape, and so on. The significance of this, its semiotic potential, we argued, is that disconnected elements will be read as in some sense separate and independent, perhaps even contrasting units of meaning, whereas connected elements will be read as belonging together in one way or another, as continuous or complementary, for instance. The photograph by Abigail Heyman (1974) in figure 1.1 uses the frame of the mirror to show two things as 'separate and disconnected' in this way, the woman's face in the mirror – her 'real self', perhaps – and the paraphernalia she uses to make herself presentable to the world – her 'mask', perhaps. It is a very heavy frame, and that constructs the divide between her two 'selves' as a very deep one. But framing can of course also be used for other purposes and in other ways, to separate pictures from text – or text boxes from the main text – in the layout of a magazine, for instance.

In *Reading Images* we did not describe framing in a great deal of detail. More specifically, we did not discuss the semiotic potential of different *types* of framing. We lumped a whole set of framing resources together – frame-lines, empty space, various



Figure 1.1 *Growing Up Female* (Abigail Heyman, 1974)



Figure 1.2 Shower advertisement (*House Beautiful*, September 1998: 34)

kinds of discontinuity— without asking whether their semiotic potential is the same or different. So let us see whether we can refine the theory a bit and make this into a demonstration of semiotic work, of the process of making a collection and an inventory – and hence a snippet of semiotic theory.

It is always a good idea to begin with a small and quite specific pilot study, and then gradually to enlarge the collection by adding other kinds of examples. Magazine advertisements are often a good starting point for studying aspects of visual communication, because they are obtained easily and tend to use a wide range of semiotic resources. Thirty to 40 examples will be plenty for a first exploration, so long as they include a range of different forms of framing, and several examples of each – to avoid misunderstandings, I should say at the outset that one advertisement may combine several types of framing.

In figure 1.2 text and image occupy distinct territories. The page is clearly divided into two kinds of space – picture space and text space. There are no words in the picture space and no pictures in the text space. The two spaces look quite distinct and although there are no frame-lines, the edges of the picture space form distinct boundaries, distinct and abrupt transitions between the two spaces. Other examples in the collection may have actual frame-lines of different thickness, and some of these may

be 'iconic', made to resemble the gilded frame of a painting, or the perforated edges of photographic negative, for example.

The advertisement in figure 1.3 illustrates three different types of framing. First, the picture is almost monochrome, restricted to different tints of blue, except for the child's face on the label and the flowers, which are a bluish pink. The lettering immediately below the picture is also blue, as is the lettering on the banner bottom right. There is therefore a kind of colour 'rhyme' between the picture and (some of) the text, and this colour rhyme creates a degree of connection.

Second, there is empty space between the text immediately below the picture – 'Prevents premature ageing' – and the rest of the text. This, together with the typography and the colour, separates that part of the text from the other parts, signifies it as different in some way – just as is the case with the text above and the text below the picture in figure 1.2. Framing can thus make some parts of the text more connected to the picture than other parts. A very common example of this is the caption underneath (or to the side of) photographic illustrations, which is also separated from the main text by empty space – as well as, sometimes by other devices, for example, font.

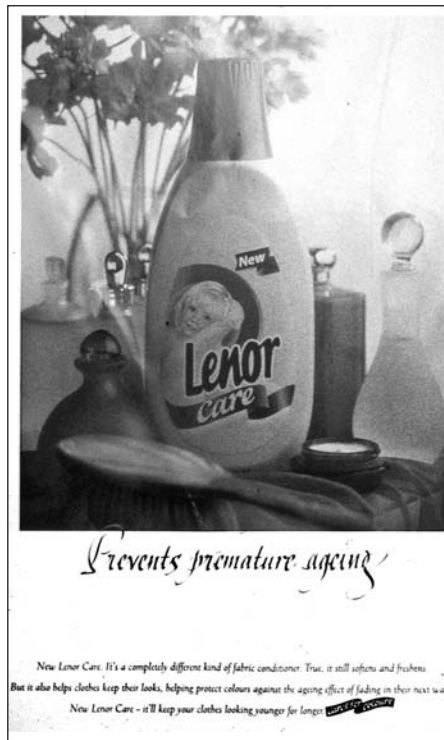


Figure 1.3 Lenor Care advertisement (*House Beautiful*, September 1998: 15)

Third, there is a slight overlap between that text and the picture: the 'p' of 'Prevents premature ageing' intrudes into the picture. In other words, text can partially overlap with the picture space, forming a kind of link between the two. It is also possible for pictures to 'break out of their frame' to different degrees. In many advertisements a small superimposed picture of the product overlaps the picture space and the text space.

In figure 1.4 the words are inside the picture space. Here text and image do not occupy distinct territories. All of the space is picture space and the text is positioned inside it.

The same applies to figure 1.5 but in the opposite way. Here pictorial elements are taken out of their pictorial world, de-contextualized, so to speak, and entered into the textual space, the white page – small drop shadows still hint at three dimensions, but then, lettering may also have drop shadows. Many advertisements include two pictures – one presenting the fantasy attached to the product, the other the product itself. Frequently, the former is usually large and framed, and the latter smaller and unframed, integrated in the text space.

So far we have put together a more or less unordered collection of different types of framing. For the sake of space I have included only one example of each, but all are

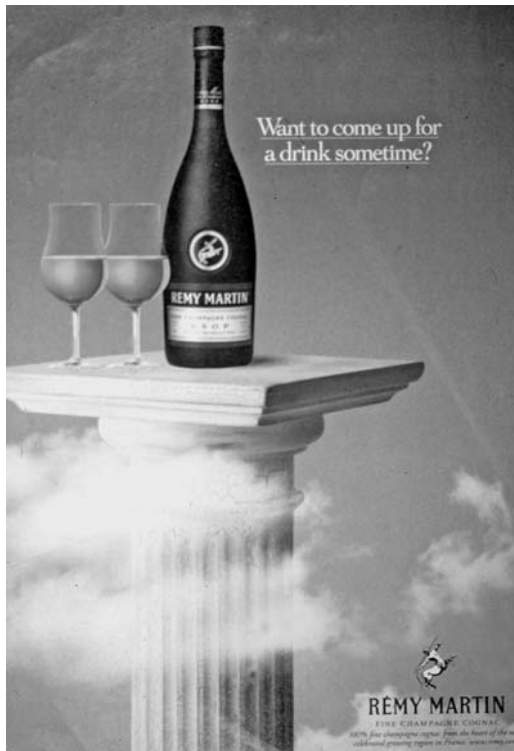


Figure 1.4 Rémy Martin advertisement (*Wired*, November 1997: 47) by courtesy of E. Rémy Martin & Co.

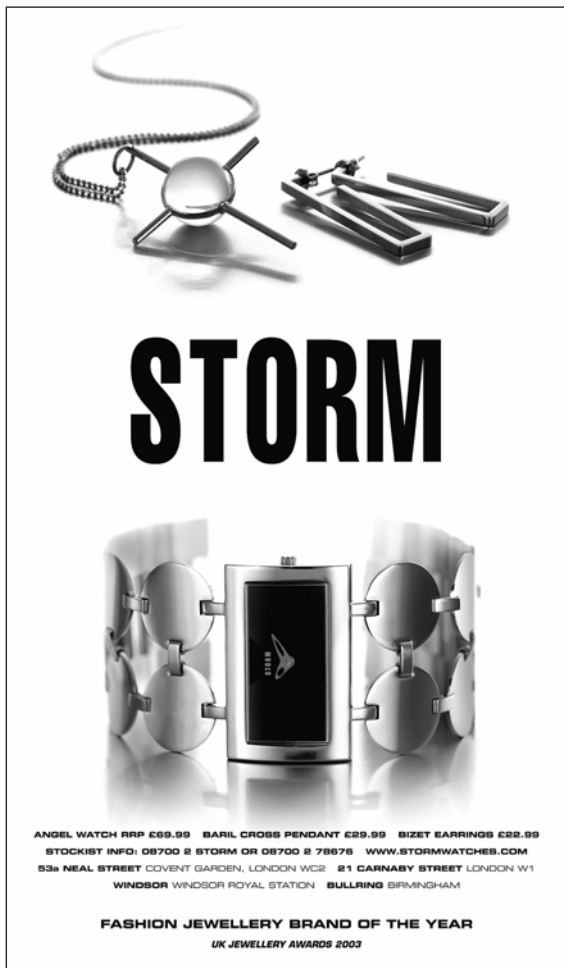


Figure 1.5 Storm advertisement (*Marie Claire*, May 2004: 174)

recognizable types that recur in many different advertisements. They also allow for modulation. There are not only kinds but also *degrees* of framing. Sometimes the picture space *gradually* changes into the text space. There are then still two distinct spaces but with a much less abrupt and clear-cut boundary between them. Finally, the few types of visual framing presented here do not exhaust all possible types. There is for instance also a difference between frames which are part of the represented world – ‘diegetic’, to use a term from film theory – as in the case of figure 1.1, and frames which are not, frames which have clearly been introduced by the image makers. The same is true for text. Text can be ‘non-diegetic’, superimposed on the image, or ‘diegetic’, part

of the represented world, as with the label on the bottle in figure 1.4. My aim has not been to present a final product but to demonstrate how semiotic work is done. There is room for you to add further categories. However, given this set of observations, how can we now move towards a more systematic inventory? How can we encapsulate the semiotic potential opened up by the differences between these types of framing?

Let us try to order our observations. We have seen, first of all, how picture and text can be disconnected entirely, so that each lives in a quite separate and different world. We now need to give this a name. Names are important. They allow us to hold on to the generalized essence of an observation, and to compare it to that of other observations. Let us call it 'segregation'. Next we have to try and describe its semiotic potential. Let us assume that segregation, whatever the precise context, is always likely to suggest that the segregated elements belong to two different orders. The context will then specify what these orders are. In the case of advertisements it is often the difference between fantasy – the dream world shown in the picture – and reality – the text that describes the actual product. Such an assumption is based on what segregation *is*. All we are assuming is that the actual *visual* segregation of two semiotic spaces can also *mean* the segregation, the keeping apart, of what is represented in these spaces.

Another way of disconnecting text and picture is by leaving empty space between them, by creating a kind of buffer zone or 'no-man's land' between them. Let us call this 'separation'. Let us then assume that, whatever the context, separation will always signify that the separated elements are the same or similar in some respects, and different in others. In the case of advertisements like figure 1.3, the separated parts may be different in terms of their communicative function, or in terms of their relation to the image. But they are all part of the verbal text, and in that sense they all belong to the same order of things.

It is also possible for picture and text to occupy the same space, to be 'integrated'. It can then either be that the text is integrated into the pictorial space – 'pictorial integration' – or that the picture is integrated into the textual space – 'textual integration'. In the case of advertising, pictorial integration absorbs text into the dream, the fantasy – 'reality text' is usually kept to a minimum and in very small print. Textual integration absorbs the picture into the real world – it is likely to show the actual advertised product or products only, rather than a whole scene.

We have also seen that frames may be porous. Part of the picture may break through the frame and spill out into the text space, or part of the text – or a superimposed picture of the product – may overlap with the picture and so link picture space and text space. We will call this 'overlap'. In the case of advertising, the overlap is likely to occur between the fantasy envisaged in the picture and the reality given by the text and the picture(s) of the product.

Finally it is possible for picture and text to 'rhyme', for instance through colour similarity. This signals that, although separate, they nevertheless have some quality in common. What that quality is then depends on the colour and its significance in the context. In figure 1.3 the colour is blue, and the connotation of this is glossed in the text as 'softness' and 'freshness'. The opposite is also possible. *Contrasts* can be

enhanced by using opposite colours, opposite visual styles – for example, photography vs drawing – and so on.

Let us summarize this inventory in the kind of 'system network' diagram (figure 1.6) that is often used in social semiotics to represent meaning potentials. The square brackets indicating 'either-or' choices and curly brackets 'both-and' choices.

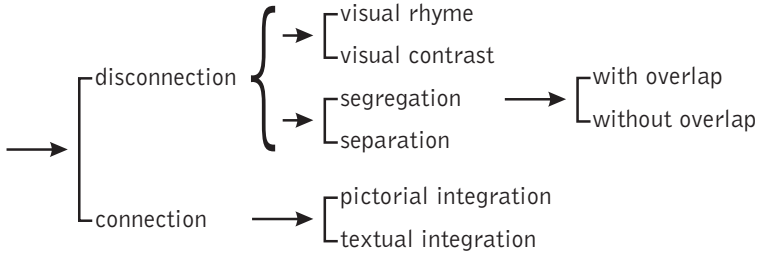


Figure 1.6 System network diagram: the framing of text and illustration in magazine advertisements

We can also summarize the definitions of the terms we have introduced here:

<i>Segregation</i>	two or more elements occupy entirely different territories, and this indicates that they should be seen as belonging to different orders
<i>Separation</i>	two or more elements are separated by empty space, and this suggests that they should be seen as similar in some respects and different in others
<i>Integration</i>	text and picture occupy the same space – either the text is integrated in (for example, superimposed on) the pictorial space, or the picture in the textual space
<i>Overlap</i>	frames may be porous – for example, part of the picture may break through the frame or letters may be half in the pictorial space and half in the textual space
<i>Rhyme</i>	two elements, although separate, have a quality in common – what that quality is depends on the common feature (for example, a colour, a feature of form such as angularity or roundness, etc.)
<i>Contrast</i>	two elements differ in terms of a quality (as realized by a colour, or by formal features, etc.)

Note that there are *degrees* of framing, for example, a picture may gradually change into text space (fuzzy boundaries) – a frame may be thick or thin, etc.

Two further points. First of all, the terms I have chosen for these types of framing are very general. They have to be, because they have to be applicable to a wide range of different contexts. They have to indicate a meaning potential, not a specific meaning, and their use will be different in different contexts. In advertising, framing

will play a key role in playing with the boundaries between fantasy and reality. In other contexts different kinds of things will be disconnected or connected. In books and magazines, the text boxes might provide factual details or case stories, while the main text might give the broad outline, the general picture. Or the boxes might provide historical context, while the main text describes the present situation. In each case framing presents two things as belonging to different orders, as 'to be kept apart', whether it is the general and the detail, or history and the present. In traditional linear text such elements might be integrated.

Second, having completed a pilot study of the kind sketched here, the collection can now be extended, for instance by also including framing *within* the picture and *within* the text, and by including framing in other genres besides magazine advertising. It is my experience that this never yields a totally different set of categories. A few more categories may well have to be added, but on the whole it seems as if the same set of devices is used across a wide range of different types of text. There *is* something like a 'language' of visual communication, at least within the same broad cultural formation, but, and this is very important, it is drawn upon differently in different contexts. In different contexts people make different choices from the same overall semiotic potential and make different meanings with these choices. The set of semiotic choices that typify a given context is called a semiotic *register* (again, following Halliday, 1978).

This leads us to the second thing semioticians do. Semioticians not only inventorize semiotic resources, they also study registers. They also study how semiotic resources are used in the context of different social practices, and how people regulate their use in these contexts.

Semiotic inventories: framing in school and office buildings

In *Reading Images* (1996), Gunther Kress and I discussed framing as something specific to visual communication. Since then it has become clear to us that framing is a multimodal principle. There can be framing not only between the elements of a visual composition, or between the elements of a newspaper or magazine layout, but also between the people in an office, the seats in a train or restaurant (for example, private compartments vs sharing tables), the dwellings in a suburb, etc., and such instances of framing will be realized by similar kinds of semiotic resources – by 'frame-lines' (fences, partitions, etc.), empty space, discontinuities of all kinds, and so on. In time-based modes of communication 'framing' becomes 'phrasing' and is realized by semiotic resources such as the pauses and discontinuities of various kinds – rhythmic, dynamic, etc. – which separate the phrases of speech, of music, of actors' movements, etc. (see chapter 9). In other words, framing is a common semiotic principle, realized by different semiotic resources in different semiotic modes.

In this section I will therefore extend my inventory of types of framing into a new domain, the framing of interior space in offices and school buildings. This time my 'collection' comes from secondary sources – floor plans, descriptions and photographs of offices and schools in specialist literature (for offices: Browne, 1970; Boje, 1971; Eley

and Marmot, 1995; Hartkopf et al., 1993; for schools: Bennett, 1978; McNicholas, 1978; Midwinter, 1978; Bennett et al., 1980). But it would of course also have been possible to collect such material first hand, by visiting offices and schools and documenting their design by means of floorplans, photographs and written notes.

Segregation

Partitions, ranging from curtains and flimsy screens to solid walls, can segregate spaces, and hence the people, groups and/or activities in them. Figure 1.7 shows the (somewhat simplified) layout of a unit designed for three teachers. Each teacher has a classroom-sized space ('home base') available. One of these spaces doubles as a (shared) practical ('wet') area. All can be segregated by curtains. Only the cloakroom and toilets have doors. There is also a shared 'quiet room' which can be segregated by means of sliding doors.

This example shows that the boundaries between segregated spaces can be of different 'thickness': walls, sliding doors, screens, or even 'thinner' partitions: the German designers who, in the 1950s, introduced the idea of the 'Bürolandschaft' ('office landscape') propagated the use of plants as dividers – outside, plants are of course often used for segregation, for example, hedges. This example therefore yields a new variable, something which we did not come across in considering magazine advertisements: the permanence or impermanence of frames.

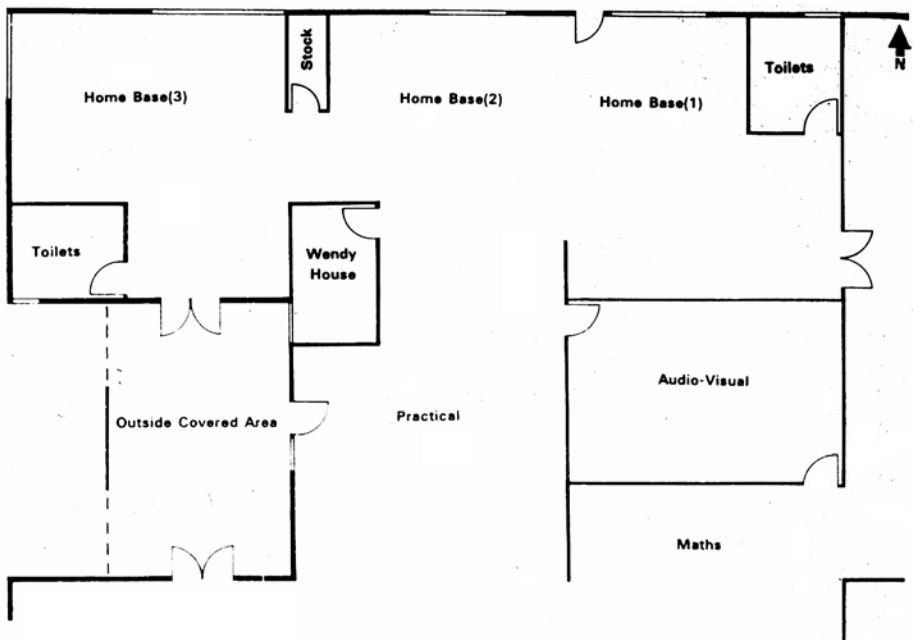


Figure 1.7 Semi-open teaching spaces (from Bennett et al., 1980: 53)

Permanence

Curtains and sliding doors can be opened or closed, and, when closed, locked or unlocked. This means that framing can be flexible and dynamic, and that a given framing device can be designed to allow several types of framing, segregation *and* separation, for instance, although never both at the same time. The free-standing partitions in open-plan offices can even be moved to a different position and many managers favour this because it affords flexibility, and allows 'any desired arrangement of work positions and sub-divisions with as frequent changes as required' (Boje, 1971: 8). On the other hand, partitions and furniture arrangements may also be permanent and bolted to the floor. Of course such arrangements can be undone. Even walls can be demolished. Nothing is entirely permanent. There are degrees of permanence. Nevertheless, some types of framing are designed to allow flexibility, while others are designed to fix social arrangements, to 'cast them in stone'. And that, clearly, is the semiotic potential of permanence and impermanence.

Permeability

Incarceration, being totally sealed off – or sealed in – is the limit case of segregation. But usually rooms have doors, and that allows some permeability, especially when the 'segregated' people can themselves decide whether or not to keep the doors open, as in the case of the offices of academics in universities. Even when doors remain locked or barred, or when partitions have no doors, some minimal interaction may be possible between spaces, as with the hatch in the door of the prison cell, or the gaps between the screens in this office, described by John Mole in his book *Brits at Work*:

Monica, who worked in Personnel, took me from the plastic mahogany and subdued lighting of the executive floor to the metal desks and neon lights of Settlements, two floors below. About 30 people sat at metal desks, shuffling and ticking and passing and sorting piles of paper. Some of them gazed into computer screens as if they were crystal balls. No one seemed to be speaking but it was noisy and confusing ... We went through a pair of fire doors into another large office (Accounts). This one was divided up by free-standing partitions into a complicated maze ... The partitions were covered in a fuzzy brown material, repulsive to the touch, to deaden sound. I speculated that the work flow in Settlements was conducive to a completely open office layout while Accounts required small isolated units. Then why did disembodied hands rise above the furry walls with files and papers, why did disembodied heads peep round the sides?

(Mole, 1992: 16–17)

Gaps of this kind allow interactions, such as the passing across of files and papers, or of food, in the case of prison cells. But permeability may be restricted to perception, either aural, or visual, or both. The so-called 'Prussian' school design, popular

from 1873 onwards – both within and outside Germany – and still around today, has the top half of classroom walls glazed, to allow the headmaster to keep an eye on things. The partitions in open-plan offices, despite their sound-deadening fabrics, block vision, at least when the workers are sitting (their height tends to be around 1.60 m), but not sound – and complaints about noise are common in open-plan offices.

The semiotic potential of permeability lies in its capacity to limit interaction, to create obstacles to open interaction which can only be removed by those who hold the key. The semiotic potential of partial permeability – only vision, or only sound – lies in the differences between sound and vision. Vision creates a sharp division between its subject and object. The object of vision is precisely that, a ‘thing’, isolated, to be scrutinized with detachment, like a goldfish in a bowl. The subject of vision possesses and controls this object, while remaining at a distance: ‘to see is to gather knowledge and to be in power’ (Parret, 1995: 335). Sound, on the other hand, connects, and requires surrender to and immersion in participatory experience: ‘it is above all through hearing that we live in communion with others’ (De Buffon, 1971: 199).

Separation

Not only the parts of a text on a page but also the people in a space can be separated by empty space. Figure 1.8 shows an early (1935) landscaped office. Separation is achieved not only by empty space but also by the way the desks are angled. The roman numerals designate (I) Directors and secretaries, (II) Assistant sales manager and sales order clerks, (III) Buyers and stock controllers, (IV) Outside representatives, (V) Accounts, (VI) Typing and statistics, (VII) Reception, (VIII) Showroom salesmen.

Rhyme

Like the elements of magazine advertisements, segregated people or groups can be connected in terms of common visual qualities such as colour – or contrasted in similar ways. In the case of space this goes beyond the visual and extends to other physical qualities, for instance the material of which furniture is made, for example, the plastic mahogany and metal desks in the John Mole quote above, or lighting, as in the case of the subdued lighting and the neon lighting in the same quote. The semiotic potential of such physical differences is that they can indicate status (management vs workers), functions within the organization (Settlements vs Accounts), etc., in short, a range of common or contrasting aspects of identity.

Summarizing all this in a ‘system network’ diagram (figure 1.9):

<i>Segregation</i>	the segregation of interior spaces is, again, a matter of degree, ranging from curtains and flimsy screens to solid walls
<i>Permanence</i>	curtains and sliding doors can be opened or closed, and, when closed, locked or unlocked

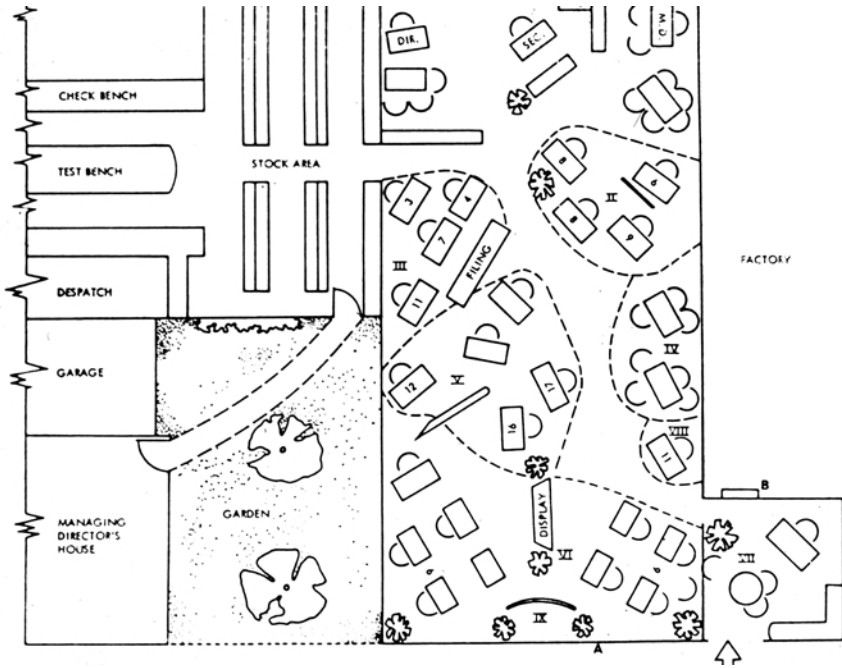


Figure 1.8 A landscaped office (Browne, 1970: 44)

- Permeability* although total incarceration is possible, most walls have doors, which allows permeability (= 'overlap'). In offices people may be able to look over partitions when standing up, or hear what is going on in adjoining spaces
- Separation* realized by empty space, furniture arrangement, etc.
- Rhyme/contrast* realized by similarities and difference in colours and materials

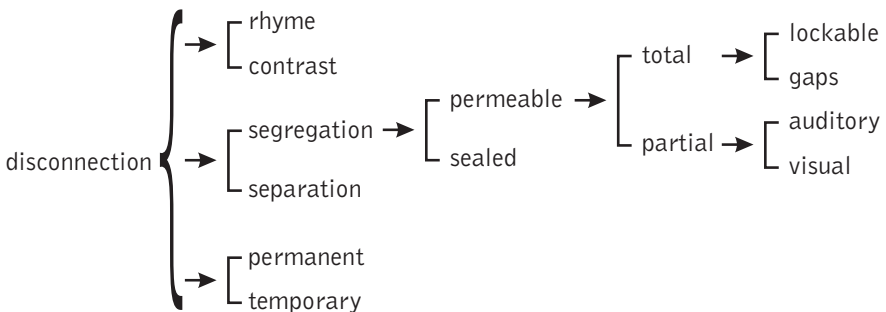


Figure 1.9 System network diagram: the framing of space in offices and schools

Comparing this diagram to the one in the preceding section shows that rhyme and contrast, as well as segregation and separation are *multimodal* semiotic principles. There are differences in terms of the elements involved – people and their activities as opposed to verbal and visual representations – and in terms of physical realization – partitions, fences etc. as opposed to frames, boxes etc. – but the semiotic work is the same: to connect or disconnect, to segregate or separate, to create similarity or contrast.

Both diagrams also include a distinction between clear-cut unambiguous boundaries and fuzzy boundaries. But the terms I have used differ – ‘overlap’ in the one case, and ‘permeability’ in the other. Clearly another, slightly more general term is needed, a term which can encompass the many ways – some specific to magazine layout, some to interior design – in which boundaries can blur and categories overlap. A more detailed study of the semiotic strategies for creating such fuzzy boundaries could well make a significant contribution to semiotic and social life.

I also distinguished forms of ‘partial permeability’ – visual only, or auditory only – a distinction which, in the case of magazine advertisements was not necessary but might well be helpful, for instance, in thinking about audio-visual texts such as films and television programmes.

The use of semiotic resources: open-plan schools and offices

The same or similar framing resources were and are used in different social contexts and in different periods. The historical aspect is important here. It brings out more clearly than anything else how people use – and adapt, and transform – semiotic resources according to the interests and needs of the time and the setting.

In the nineteenth century, primary schools, although still voluntary, increased in number and began to receive government grants:

Faced for the first time with the task of providing for mass education, administrators turned initially to a type of school which had been common in England since the Middle Ages. This consisted of one very large schoolroom in which a number of forms were taught at the same time, usually by one master and several assistants known as ushers.

(Bennett et al., 1980: 13)

The most common design was the ‘Lancaster model’ introduced in the late eighteenth century and consisting of a schoolroom accommodating 320 children: ‘rows of desks were arranged to face the master’s platform, spaced so as to allow the monitors [another term for ‘ushers’] to move freely between the rows’ (Bennett et al., 1980: 14). It was a ‘factory system’, ‘a piece of social machinery that was both simple and economical’ (Lawson and Silver, 1973: 241). An alternative system was devised by Andrew Bell, an early nineteenth century clergyman. It involved curtaining off areas where the monitors could help groups of 10 to 20 pupils prepare for the recitations they had to give to the master.

When compulsory primary education was introduced in 1870, it was no longer possible to have only one certified teacher per school. This led to the idea of the 'class' as the main unit of organization and to the segregation of school buildings into classrooms and corridors – or verandas or quadrangles. By the 1930s, influenced by the pioneering work of educators like Maria Montessori, the classroom system had already begun to be criticized. According to the Hadow Report on Primary Education (1931) teachers began to 'question the efficacy of class instruction and to look for something better' (quoted in Bennett et al., 1980: 17). The ideal infant school would be 'not a classroom but a playground, that is to say, not a limited space enclosed by four walls but an open area' (ibid.). In a 1959 Handbook for Primary Teachers, published by the Ministry of Education, teachers were encouraged to 'arrange the environment in the classroom and school so that children can learn for themselves, either individually or in small groups' (quoted in Bennett et al., 1980: 19). From this period on most new schools were built according to the open-plan model.

A similar development took place in the design of offices. Prior to the 1950s, rank determined how many people were to occupy one office and how much space each person would have. The UK civil service used eleven main standards, expressed as ranges to allow for the differences between buildings. A single department, the Property Services Agency presided over the allocation of space to 600,000 civil servants. In the 1950s the open-plan office broke through, largely through the work of the German Quickborner team of designers. Even in the civil service hierarchies were now flattened, and space allocations made, for instance, by individual ministries, rather than centrally. In other words, the same new pattern of framing, the same move from segregation towards separation and increased permeability and impermanence, was introduced in several separate settings at the same time.

Not all users of open spaces will be aware of these histories, however much they have shaped their everyday experience. So what do framing practices mean today, in a given context, for the people who have to live with them? How do *they* describe and evaluate the meanings of framing? How do they enforce or proscribe forms of framing, recommend or condemn them, justify or critique them? This can be studied through interviews with participants, but also through documents, such as government handbooks for teachers, office management textbooks, company documents, etc. My discussion in the remainder of this section relies on secondary materials, for the most part dating from the 1970s, the heyday of open-plan school and office design.

De-segregation

The de-segregation of office space is 'read' differently by different participants. For many office workers it means losing their own office, or losing an office in which they had been able to work together with a small group in a relatively independent way, left alone to do their work, able to make private calls or chat without being overheard by supervisors. To them segregation means privacy, security, a sense of identity or small group solidarity, and the ability to get on with concentrated work. De-segregation

means being constantly watched, supervised, controlled. Here are some of the questionnaire and interview responses quoted in Eley and Marmot:

'A total open plan system is not conducive to concentration. This needs urgent action. The noise at times is appalling. Interruptions are frequent and unnecessary.'

'The open plan concept has failed. People feel cramped for space, and the noise levels cause constant distractions.'

'Open plan is like trying to have a pee in an open field. There's nowhere to hide.'

'I think it is necessary for staff to have space that is their own ... I think that having one's own little reasonably secure space that can be personalised to a degree is psychologically very important to most people.'

(Eley and Marmot, 1995: 19, 85, 86)

To the managers, on the other hand, de-segregation is a way of influencing behaviour, a way of creating 'team spirit', of making employees identify with the company as a whole. And they also see it as a way of decreasing conflict, and increasing control, flexibility, and productivity. According to a German management consultant, de-segregation creates 'a new type of office user', who 'speaks more softly, is more considerate, dresses correctly and carefully, and conducts arguments at a calmer pitch' (Boje, 1971: 64). Segregation, on the other hand, is seen as incompatible with company interests. According to one recent British management textbook, it is the 'bullies, the self-important and the truly antisocial' who 'create enclosures and empires quite irrelevant to the smooth working of the whole organisation' (Eley and Marmot, 1995: 89). Small groups in separate offices, likewise, 'have a particularly rigidifying effect, making it hard to create new groups, dissolve them and bring them together in different forms' (*ibid.*, 78). Managers know that workers see this differently. But they have to press on regardless. When introducing the open-plan office, advises a management consultant, 'all stories should be listened to patiently, but without attributing dramatic significance to them. After three to six months these phenomena will have disappeared and output will settle down to a normal level or above' (Boje, 1971: 62).

What does open-plan framing mean in the case of schools? Again it depends on who you are listening to. Head teachers are likely to see open-plan framing as 'fostering socialisation and good attitudes to work' (Bennett, 1978: 47): 'It is good for children to see what others are doing'. 'In open plan children learn to respect other people and pool ideas' (Bennett et al, 1980: 194). In teachers it will foster co-operation, team work, flexibility and versatility. In a large survey (*ibid.*, 1980) the majority of head teachers favoured open-plan framing – but only one third of teachers did. Teachers found the need for constant co-operation and negotiation demanding and

exhausting, and saw it as eroding their autonomy. They also complained about noise and visual distraction, and the lack of any form of personal space: 'There are no nooks and crannies. Children can't get away from us and we can't get away from them' (Bennett et al., 1980: 194). Many teachers use blackboards and storage units to re-introduce some segregation between different groups; 'As privacy and security are lost alternative cover is arranged – thus the prevalence of the so-called regressive classroom' (Bennett et al., 1980: 33).

As for the children, their opinion is not often asked. Perhaps it should be. Surveys report that children, especially boys, do better in traditional schools, even in creative work. They also make more friends in traditional schools. Open-plan framing is said to work well for middle-class, 'high ability' and 'independent' children, but for others, including especially timid and insecure children, it is less beneficial (Bennett et al., 1980: 42–9).

Separation

From the point of view of managers, separation in offices promotes efficiency, because it makes it possible to 'place close together groups with a frequent need to contact each other' (as seen in figure 1.8). It allows subdivision without partitions, so that the sense of an overall team spirit can be preserved. According to Eley and Marmot (1995: 76–7):

For a team to work together its members must be in communication. One way to achieve this is for all the members of the team to share a work room or space that helps to foster communication. ... High levels of interaction are encouraged in locations where lines of sight and access routes on the office floor link many workplaces.

Another management text speaks of 'optimum information flow, unhindered by doors' (Boje, 1971: 8). Needless to say, this does not necessarily accord with the views of office users, who, as we have seen, complain of distraction, noise and loss of individuality and privacy.

In schools separation is used to group children around different activities ('activity tables'). 'Open space between clusters of desks is used as a boundary-defining mechanism, and the effect is often reinforced by varying the orientation and arrangement of desks and tables' (Bennett et al., 1980: 29). Thus children can form separate groups while still 'seeing what the others are doing'.

Impermanence

Key features of the open-plan office are flexibility and cost efficiency:

Internal flexibility over the largest possible floor area permits any desired arrangement of work positions and sub-divisions with as frequent changes as

required. When it is merely necessary to shift movable screens, storage units and the like, heavy conversion costs are avoided.

(Boje, 1971: 8)

Recent management ideas push the elimination or reduction of private and individual spaces in offices even further. This includes 'desk sharing', where office space is booked in the way one books a hotel room, work stations on wheels where permanent possessions are housed within mobile units to be wheeled to the most appropriate location, and so on. All this is meant to increase the efficient use of space, to make space more productive. No room, no desk must ever be unused. But it is unpopular with most workers:

We was robbed! Why are we the ones lumbered with this poor system? It wastes time, decreases feelings of personal involvement (I'm just a cog, I fit anywhere), reduces feelings of team involvement.

(quoted in Eley and Marmot, 1995: 19)

Open-plan schools also use flexible framing – curtains, sliding screens and so on (see figure 1.8). Fixed furniture arrangements have given way to lightweight loose furniture, and versatile screens and storage units. This 'offers teachers increased possibilities to adapt the space to their particular style of working' (Bennett et al., 1980: 179). Even a form of desk sharing exists, as some education authorities have a policy of providing 70 per cent seating, on the grounds that not all children will have to sit at the same time (ibid.: 180).

Conclusion

Detailed studies of the use of a given semiotic resource are interesting in their own right, but they also demonstrate a theoretical point. They show how the semiotic potential of framing is inflected on the basis of the interests and needs of a historical period, a given type of social institution, or a specific kind of participant in a social institution. On the one hand, my original gloss of the meaning of framing applies to all the instances I have discussed above: 'disconnected elements are read as in some sense separate and independent, perhaps even contrasting units, whereas connected elements are read as belonging together in some way, as continuous or complementary, for instance'. On the other hand, this basic meaning is inflected differently in different contexts. In early nineteenth century schools, connection means 'homogeneity', factory-style drill; in contemporary offices it means 'identifying with the company as a whole' – which does not exclude being involved in different activities. Again, one of the meanings of open-plan framing in contemporary offices is cost-efficiency and increased productivity; in schools this is less so, at least in the way the immediate participants talk about it – for education authorities cost efficiency and space saving have become important factors from the late 1940s onwards, hence in the same

period that developed open-plan school buildings. And again, while for office workers segregation means security and privacy, for managers it means lack of control and company spirit. To this we can add cultural differences. The open-plan office, for instance, is reported to be much more widely accepted in the USA and Japan than in Europe, despite the work of the German *Bürolandschaft* designers. This clearly indicates different cultural attitudes towards individuality and team spirit, or, in the terms of the American sociologist Riesman, towards 'inner-directedness' and 'outer-directedness'.

Different inflections of the meaning of framing stem from different sources. Broad cultural and historical differences stem from what, in chapter 5, I will refer to as 'discursive formations', from the key 'themes' of a culture and period. Such themes will be used to model, and to evaluate and legitimate (or critique) a wide range of salient practices in the given culture or period. In the early days of the industrial society, the 'factory model', the discourse of discipline (in the sense of Foucault, 1979) was such a theme. In prisons, factories, schools, hospitals, even in orchestras, people's behaviour was regulated in similar ways, and these new practices were discussed and justified in similar terms. Today, in the 'information society', the 'corporate model' plays this role, and has spawned new ways of regulating people's behaviour, and a new discourse to justify this, the discourse of productivity and flexibility and teamwork which gradually erodes the 'inner-directed' spirit of autonomous, individual activity – for example, in many of the professions – to make place for more 'outer-directed', team-spirited and manager-led forms of activity.

Contextual differences, on the other hand, stem, at least in part, from the actual, more specific differences in the activities involved, the difference between office work and teaching and learning for instance – although it could be argued that, today, these two have come to resemble each other more.

Differences between different participants of the same practice, finally, between managers and workers, for instance, stem from the different interests of these participants, from who they are and what their role is in the given context – or sometimes, on who they identify with, on who they *want* to be – and they focus especially on evaluations and legitimations. What to the one is a gain, is a loss to the other. What the one values positively, the other values negatively.

Despite all these differences there is a common element – a common understanding of the basic meaning potential of the semiotic resource of framing, of what is at stake when we make or break frames. It is easy to overstate either commonality or difference. Social semiotics seeks to do justice to both.

Exercises

- 1 In *Reading Images* (1996: 183) Gunther Kress and I defined visual *salience* as the way in which the elements in a visual composition are made to attract the viewer's attention to different degrees because of the way they may be placed in

the foreground or background, and/or because of relative size, contrasts in tonal value or colour, differences in sharpness, and so on. Make a collection of a certain type of text – for example, magazine advertisements – and identify three different types of salience. Describe these types both in terms of their physical realization and their semiotic potential.

- 2 Would it be possible to apply the concept of salience to the exteriors of buildings? Give examples of the kinds of things that can be made salient, and of how they are made salient.
- 3 Find a discourse about salience, that is a text in which someone describes what is or should be made to attract the viewer's attention in a given context. It could be a director of photography talking about the lighting of a scene, a garden designer talking about where to plant certain flowers, a writer talking about what points to emphasize, or one of countless other possible examples. What reasons do they give for their use of the semiotic resource of salience?
- 4 Compare the framing of office space in an American and a European television police series.
- 5 Would it be possible to apply an idea from this chapter's account of the framing of interior spaces to the framing of advertisements, and develop 'permanent' or 'temporary' frames in advertisements – for example, on the web? How might this work? What advantages could it have?