



HigherMedia

The Key Aspects:

Language

Studying Media

- ■ When we look at media texts, we need to ask the following questions:

How are texts shaped to meet needs, influence behaviour and achieve a	The Role of the Media
What type of text is it?	Categories
How do we know what it means?	Language
What type of story does it tell?	Narrative
How does it present its subject?	Representation
Who has produced it, and what constraints did they face?	Institutions
Who receives it, and what sense do they make of it?	Audience
When are texts received?	Society

Language: A Brief Note

- ■ Language is a detailed and confusing concept at first
- ■ Essentially, **Language** looks at the techniques used in a **medium** (*print, television, film, radio, internet,...*) to create **meaning**
- ■ However, we need to look at the background theory first...

Language: An overview

- ■ **sign**: the smallest unit of communication which conveys meaning — *eg word, image, sound*
- ■ **denotation**: the description of a **sign** — *eg dictionary definition of a word*
- ■ **connotation**: the *meanings* associated with a **sign**
— *eg. visions of white beaches, blue seas, surf, hot sunshine evoked by the word 'palm'*

Language: An overview

- ■ codes: systems of signs which can be analysed. These may be technically and/or culturally produced. For example, a *high angle camera shot* of a human figure suggests the vulnerability of that person; in some cultures, a *red rose* symbolises love
- ■ motivation: the reason for the use of a specific **code**, so as to, for example, aid understanding or tell a story

Language: An overview

- polysemy: the idea that a text may have several meanings at one time. For example, the meaning of a photograph in a newspaper may be ambiguous (*unclear or hazy*)
- anchorage: the narrowing down of the *polysemy* of a text by combining its **signs** with others to create a **preferred reading**
 - *for example, the caption under a newspaper photograph fixes the meaning and clears possible ambiguity*

Language: An overview

- conventions: established ways of treating *genre, codes, narrative* or *representations*, etc
- ideology: a set of beliefs and values shared by a cultural group which produces a partial and selective view of the world out there; for example, capitalism (*free-market system motivated by profit*) and communism (*ownership and control of wealth and property lies with the state*)

Language: An overview

- ■ myth: a story which a culture tells about itself which appears to be ‘commonsense’; for example, the **values** of the nuclear family (i.e. the traditional family model)
- ■ discourses: the articulation in a media text of *ideology/myth*



The Treachery Of Images - René Magritte (1928-29)

SEMIOTICS



Roland Barthes & Ferdinand de Saussure

They were French and Swiss... in case you hadn't guessed

The Sign...

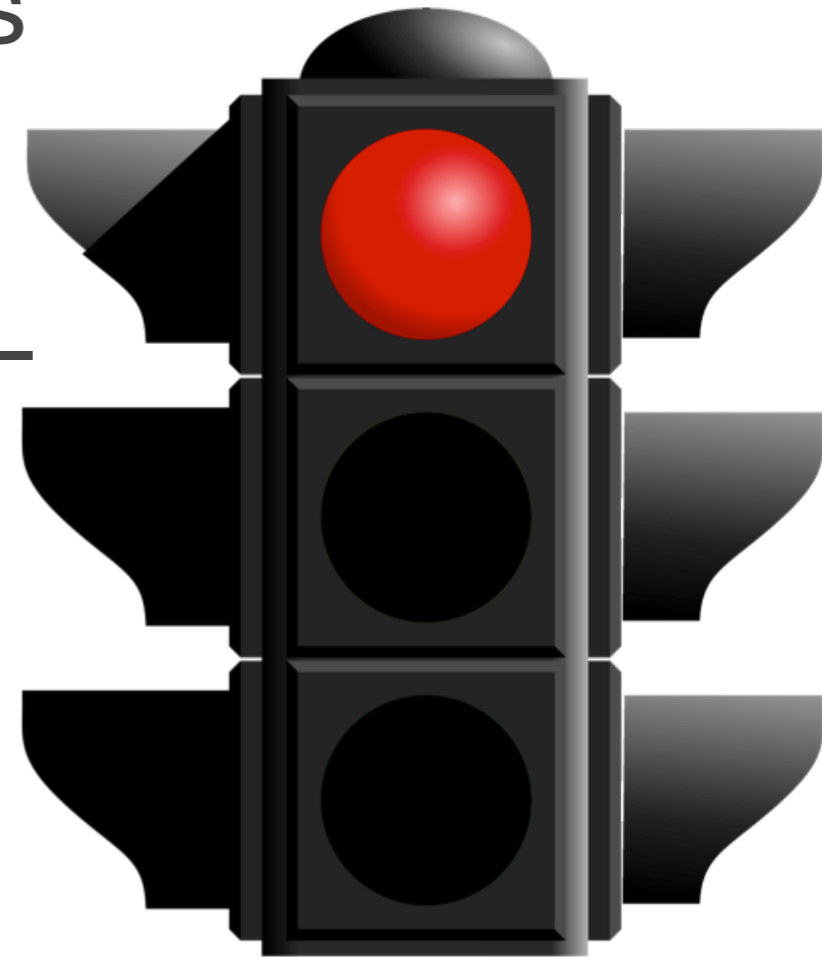
- ■ Semiotics – the study of signs
- ■ Key theorists:
Roland Barthes / Ferdinand De Saussure
- ■ A sign is something that can stand for something else.
- ■ In Media, a **sign** can be an *image*, a *piece of text* or a *sound*

The Sign...

- ■ According to ***Saussure***, a sign is made up of:
 - ■ The **signifier** – the literal thing that we see, hear, the actual image, sound etc.
 - ■ The **signified** – the idea(s) to which the sign refers
- ■ Sometimes, we are expected to have prior knowledge to understand what the sign is signifying. This prior knowledge is called a **referential code**.

Understanding the sign - examples

- The image of a red traffic light is a “sign”
- It is made up of the “signifier” – the red light
- And the “signified” – what the red light represents (stop, wait, pause for go)



Understanding the sign - examples

- ■ The image of a red rose is a “sign”
- ■ It is made up of the “signifier” – the red rose
- ■ And the “signified” – what a red rose represents (*love, emotion, romance, etc*)



Denotation Connotation

- ■ Saussure's description of the **signifier** and **signified** is what we call *denotation* and *connotation*
- ■ Denotation – the literal description of a sign (e.g. a rose)
- ■ Connotation – what we associate with the sign (e.g. for a rose, it could be love, romance, etc)

Denotation Connotation

- Working out the ***denotation*** and then ***connotation*** of a sign is what we call **deconstructing** or **decoding** the meaning of a sign
- *This is what you may have already encountered in your study of media texts in English*

Denotation Connotation

■ ■ **denotation** — the obvious meaning.

For example:

■ ■ a rose is a pretty-looking flower with a strong scent...

■ ■ jeans are a pair of denim trousers

Denotation Connotation

■ ■ **connotation** — the associations created in the minds of those interacting with the sign.

For example:

■ ■ a red rose **connotes** romance and the presentation of a red rose to someone **connotes** romantic affection

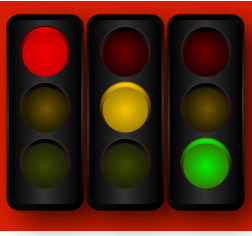
■ ■ jeans **connote** comfort and informality

Denotation Connotation

- The **context** can alter the meaning, though:
 - a red rose may also now **connote** a **political party**, or **sporting team...**

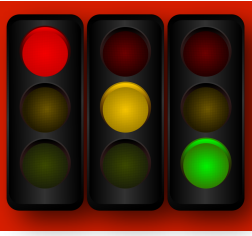


Denotation Connotation



- Connotations can often be specific to a culture. Some have become almost universal — largely as a result of the global nature of today's media.
- Traffic lights can be used to explain **semiotics** and to demonstrate that human interaction makes *fixed meaning* impossible to define.

Denotation Connotation



■ A Red sign means stop

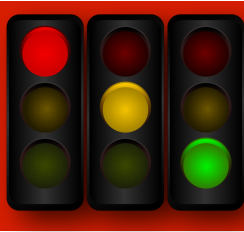
■ An Amber sign means get ready to stop/go

■ A Green sign means go

■ However, it is **not** as simple as this. Consider the following again:

■ Amber is a sign that is interpreted by many to mean *'speed up before the lights change to red'*. These people understand the 'official' intention of the sign but choose to '**read**' it in a different way.

Denotation Connotation



- If you have visited Paris you will know that a green light on a pedestrian crossing does not mean go; it means you **may** be able to cross ...but only if the cars will stop for you!

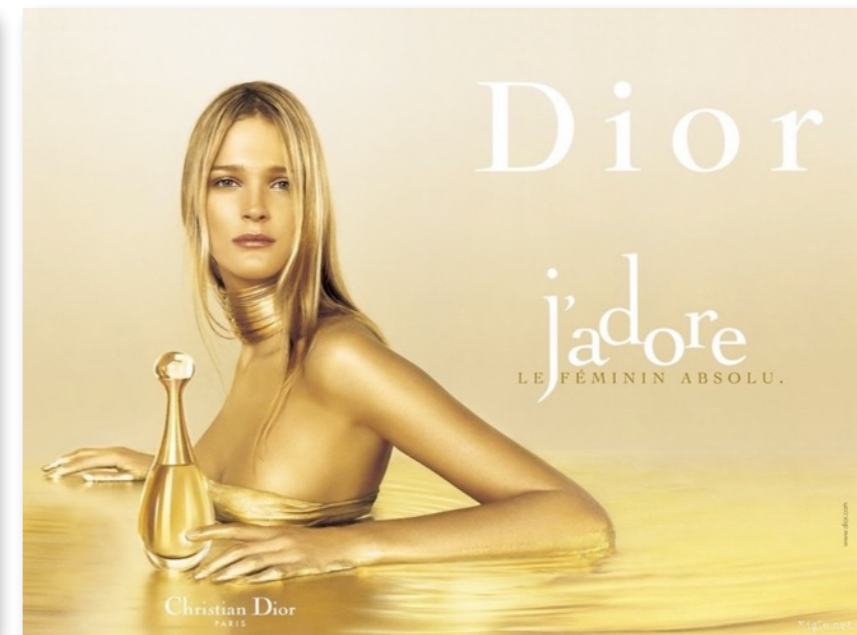
These two examples demonstrate that interpreting signs is never straight-forward and can depend on human interaction and interpretation, this is also known as


polysemy.

Advertising Analysis

Look at the press adverts for Davidoff Blue Water and Dior's j'adore.

For each, identify at least **four signifiers** and indicate what you think they *signify*.



A photograph of a man's muscular torso in blue water, with a blue perfume bottle in the foreground. The bottle has a black cap and the brand name 'Davidoff' and 'Cool Water' written in a cursive font. The bottle is covered in water droplets. The background shows the man's torso and head in the water, with his eyes closed and a serene expression.

SIGNIFIER:
Water/Ocean Wave
SIGNIFIES:
Wild, Stormy, Natural,
Earthy

SIGNIFIER:
**Facial Expression/
Body Language**
SIGNIFIES:
Ecstatic, pleasure lost
in ecstasy, laid back,
inviting

SIGNIFIER:
Mans Naked Torso
SIGNIFIES:
Natural, angelic, pure,
toned, ideal,
masculine, adonis

SIGNIFIER:
Words 'Cool Water'
SIGNIFIES:
Refreshing, different,
pure, clean

SIGNIFIER:
Droplets on Bottle
SIGNIFIES:
Cool, chilled
appearance, almost
drinkable

SIGNIFIER:
Calligraphy Style Font
SIGNIFIES:
Classic, timeless,
expensive tastes

SIGNIFIER:
Blonde Hair
SIGNIFIES:
Ideal Woman,
Innocence,
Looks 'gold'

SIGNIFIER:
Jewellery
SIGNIFIES:
Extravagance,
Excess, Glamour,
Decadence

Dior

SIGNIFIER:
Font (Serifs)
SIGNIFIES:
Dior Logo, Brand
Name, Designer

SIGNIFIER:
Perfume Bottle
SIGNIFIES:
Looks Jewel-like,
Buried Treasure

j'adore
LE FÉMININ ABSOLU.

SIGNIFIER:
Word
'Love' (French)
SIGNIFIES:
Passion,
Excitement, Lust

SIGNIFIER:
Colour Gold
SIGNIFIES:
Luxury, Riches,
Expense, Success,
Shimmering

Christian Dior
PARIS

SignHomework

Select a print (or TV) advert and identify at least **five** signs used in it.

For each, you must identify:

- the **signifier**
- what it **signifies**

Finally, you should attempt to summarise **the overall message** being transmitted by the artefact.

Taking Stock

Signifier: what we see (*denotation*)

Signified: what the sign means (*connotation*)

Anchorage: something added to prompt a preferred reading

Preferred reading: the interpretation intended by the producer of the media text

Polysemic: the sign is open to different interpretations

InPractice

Advertising Standards Authority

Institutional Constraints
(We'll be talking about these later in the course)



Legal, decent, honest and truthful



InPractice

What is being
advertised?



Legal, decent, honest and truthful





- Should advertisers be able to use whatever images they want?
- Should they be able to attach any image they want to any product or service?
- As long as it attracts attention, is it OK?
- Is this ad OK?



Legal, decent, honest and truthful



Banned

...tips.
...what do you
look for in a car?

UlsterTrader.com 
Northern Ireland's Fastest Growing Car Website



Legal, decent, honest and truthful



The **ASA** said:

“This was a poster ad. 44 complainants challenged whether the poster was offensive, because it objectified women, degraded them and was sexist. Some complainants also considered that the poster implied that women, like cars, were commodities to be bought and sold.

“We agreed with the complainants that the image of the woman’s cleavage coupled with the strapline ‘Nice Headlamps. What do you look for in a car?’ was likely to be seen to objectify and degrade women by linking attributes of a woman, her cleavage, to attributes of a car, the headlamps, in a way that would be seen to imply a woman, like a car, was to be ‘selected’ for those attributes.

“We concluded that the poster had caused serious offence to some readers and was likely to cause widespread offence.”



Legal, decent, honest and truthful

