

A heuristic suggestion for an associational model of semiotic analysis

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The relationship comes first: it precedes.

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This paper focusses on problematizing the Peircean distinction between index and symbol (and icon) and aims to introduce a heuristic modeling of social space. Basing on the underpinnings from contemporary linguistic models, psychology and visual communication studies (e.g. Neuman 2003; Kress-Van Leeuwen 1992; Machin – Jaworski 2006), I elaborate the proposal of a paradigm which tries to parameterize and formalize the dynamics of social space. The model is functional: the division into ‘icon’, ‘symbol’ and ‘index’ ensues from the internal structuring of associations, grounded by the function of a particular sign. The Peircean division is seen as derived, as a variable structuring of the semiotic primes that I propose should be established first. In this way the model is alternative to Peircean semiotics.

The framework assumes that social criteria always play a role in the ways we interpret visual images – but of course so do psychological and biological factors. I submit that all semiotic choices might be plotted in terms of spreading/ delinking of particular mental bonds. The advantage of this perspective is the possibility to interpret uniformly the psychological phenomena, to account for the therapeutic effects and to study the language/sign interrelations. In other words, socio-cultural conditioning creates some bonds in mental structuring of imagoic mode, and delinks others. “The reality” is based on ontological choices which are however made not from the level of the impulse but from the ideological level. In this way, semiotic relations help to constitute, and also reflect social dynamics.

The source for the analysis are photos taken by the author in 2006-2007 in Poland, Austria and Italy. The exemplary visual texts are interpreted along the heuristic set of semiotic primes as coordinates, such as External stimulus ES, Reality extension RE, Conceptual binding CB, Veracity claims VC. For example, I show how directionality (an arrow – a visual reflection of directionality – is in traditional Peircean model an index) is in fact culturally grounded and can be manipulated to achieve a commercial impact, which would give it the status of a symbol in fact. In Fig. 1. the conceptual unfolding is based on the culturally ingrained directionality of left-to-right reading. According to an Iranian person’s interpretation (a right-to-left reader, with no experience of left-to-right reading), the visual message was that a new and fresh screw got rusty after being used for some time (Robabeh Kavyani, p.c.). To analyze the visual text in Fig. 2 we can engage in the definitional quagmire which in my opinion is epiphenomenal (is it an index, a symbol, or an icon?). Alternatively, I offer an analysis in terms of relations and vectors (Kress – Van Leeuwen 1996) , i.e. a locative and transactional relation. The refilling rope is an epitome case of a vector: the transactional relation between a car and the refinery. Finally, I present and discuss the results of a visual literacy test administered to 40 respondents, elaborated on the basis of the data source of visuals.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

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