Signs & Meaning

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> Meaning is [...] intrinsic to our definition of culture. Meanings help us to interpret the world, to classify it in meaningful ways, to make sense of things and events, including those which we have never seen or experienced in real life but which occur in films and novels, dreams and fantasies, as well as objects in the real world. [...] Meanings bridge the gap between the material world and the 'world' in which language, thinking and communication take place – the 'symbolic' world. [1]

What, then, is a 'symbol'? The word derives from Greek and literally means 'thrown together'. The question is: *what* is thrown together to form a symbol? If, for example, a statue of a woman in the harbor of New York becomes a symbol for 'liberty', something abstract and difficult to grasp (like the concept of 'liberty') is attached to something that we can see and touch. As humans, we need physical entities to communicate, we need to attach our immaterial thoughts to something our senses can perceive – we're no telepaths, for better or worse. So, if you are trying to communicate to every immigrant arriving to the United States of America on a ship that they are entering the 'land of liberty', putting up a 300-feet high monument seems an effective way – at least before you could welcome everyone with a tweet (or, in fact, tell them they're not welcome...).

But would someone who never heard of Lady Liberty understand what she stands for? Would a girl from Mars understand that the drawing of a cross sometimes stands for Christianity and that the drawing of a star and crescent sometimes for Islam? Would someone understand that the spoken word F-R-E-E-D-O-M stands for the concept of 'freedom', if they didn't speak English? Probably not. To understand what the statue, the image or the word stands for, we need to know the *code* (a set of rules) by which a thing, image or sound is connected to a concept; this code is what we call a *language*: "In language, we use signs and symbols – whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects – to stand for or represent to other people our concepts,

ideas and feelings". [2]

The most important of these languages, for us humans, is verbal language, communication through words. Here, to be precise, we call the combination of something to be experienced through the senses (sound, graph) that is linked to something other (concepts, ideas, feelings), a *sign*. In semiotics, the academic discipline of the study of signs, the two elements of a sign are called 'signifier' and 'signified'. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, first coined these terms at the beginning of the 20th century:

> Noises count as language only when they serve to express or communicate ideas; otherwise they are just noise. And to communicate ideas they must be part of a system of conventions, part of a system of signs. The sign is the union of a form which signifies, which Saussure calls the *signifiant* or signifier, and an idea signified, the *signifié* or signified. Though we may speak of signifier and signified as if they were separate entities, they exist only as components of the sign. [3]

We now know *what* is thrown together to form a sign, a signifier and a signified – but *how* do the parts come to stick together? While a cross has at least some kind of relation to what it stands for (and if you know the history of Christianity we can understand why the cross was chosen to stand for that religion), such a connection is difficult to find in *words* like 'liberty', or 'tree':

> They bear no obvious relationship at all to the things to which they refer. The letters T-R-E-E do not look anything like trees in nature, nor does the word 'tree' in English sound like 'real' trees (if indeed they make any sound at all!). The relationship in these systems of representation [...] is entirely *arbitrary*. By 'arbitrary' we mean that in principle any collection of letters or any sound in any order would do the trick equally well. [4]

If there is no innate, no natural connection between signifier and signified, if the relation is what we call 'arbitrary', then the question about how the meaning gets stuck to the material is getting even more urgent. How do we know that the word T-R-E-E means 'tree' when nothing motivates the one to stand for the other? The answer is that something (material) stands for something else (a concept) *only for someone* (a

reader, a listener). T-R-E-E does not mean 'tree' per se, it only means 'tree' if someone interprets it that way. As Stuart Hall explains:

> It is the result of a set of social conventions. It is fixed socially, fixed in culture. English or French or Hindi speakers have, over time, and without conscious decision or choice, come to an unwritten agreement [...] that, in their various languages, certain signs will stand for [...] certain concepts. This is what children learn, and how they become, not simply biological individuals but cultural subjects [...] – i.e. members of their culture. [5]

However, something remarkable happens when we learn and internalize the concepts which make us 'members of a culture', and with the help of which we can think and talk meaningfully about the world that surrounds us. What did the word T-R-E-E mean when you first heard it? As it is most likely that we first pay attention to the sound of the word T-R-E-E in the context of someone pointing towards a real tree (or at least a tree in a book), we might, at the beginning, attach the sound to that specific tree we see at that very moment. We probably take the word as some kind of name tag, like 'mama' being the name of that kind person giving us food (and love, hopefully).

But while M-A-M-A refers to the same special individual each time we use it, we quickly learn that the word T-R-E-E refers to many different entities in the real world: the tree in our garden and the tree in the neighbor's allotment, a white birch tree and an apple tree with fruit on it. (And we also learn, importantly, what it does not mean: a bush or a bamboo, despite the fact that they are also plants with leaves.) At some stage we learn that the word T-R-E-E does not refer to any specific *thing*, but that it denotes a *concept* that covers a whole range of things we (and others) have seen and will see in the future: red pines, conifers, kapoks (but not shrubs). We do not just memorize the name of a thing, but learn a whole system of classification: we learn that trees belong to a certain group of things that are similar to some things, but different from others.

Now, what happens to the real tree the more we learn to use the word? When we talk to others about photosynthetic leaves we talk about trees in general, and usually not about one specific tree. When we say that trees should be protected, we speak in general terms and not about specific entities. Thus, to communicate via signs enables us to detach ourselves

from our immediate surroundings. We can speak about trees when there are no trees around, we can speak about Shakespeare although we never met him. We can even speak about concepts that do not have such a clear-cut real-world referent in the first place: feelings like 'love', for example, or abstract concepts like 'progress'. To communicate via signs enables us to speak about conditions, possibilities, potentials, the future; it "opens up an amazing range of mental and symbolic operations". [6]

As the actual trees recede to the background, signs enable us to detach ourselves from our *immediate* surroundings; they establish a *mediated* relation to the world: "Signs separate and mediate: they create a gulf between language and the world, but at the same time they provide a bridge between the two". [7] For that reason, humans are sometimes understood to be a *homo symbolicum*, a symbol-making being, defining "a universal condition of human existence: the necessity of mediation, of something – generally called meaning – that stands 'between' consciousness and reality". [8]

What is important, however, is that such mediation is not just a neutral process, but a real gamechanger. Cultural Studies argues that meanings do not exist outside of language, but that the language we produce and use "is constitutive of those very meanings". [9] If signifiers do not refer directly to entities in the real world, the signified becomes a language-specific lens through which we perceive the world: "language gives meaning to material objects and social practices that are brought into view by language and made intelligible to us in terms that language delimits". [10]

One "might be tempted to think of language as a nomenclature: a series of names arbitrarily selected and attached to a set of objects or concepts", the semiotician Jonathan Culler suggests. [11] But that would be wrong. Words are *not* name tags for objects in the real world, as we saw above, and neither are they name tags for pre-existing concepts. Instead, "languages do not simply name existing categories, they articulate their own". [12] This is why language, like culture, is creative, productive; it does not simply make it possible to communicate meanings, but endows the world with meaning – meaning that is constantly changing and evolving:

> Language is not a nomenclature and therefore its signifieds are not preexisting concepts but changeable and contingent concepts which vary from one state of a language to another. And since the relation between signifier and signified is

> arbitrary, since there is no necessary reason for one concept rather than another to be attached to a given signifier, there is therefore no defining property which the concept must retain in order to count as the signified of that signifier. [13]

This is of central importance to Cultural Studies, where 'maps of meaning' guide people's actions. Our concept of being 'British', for example, influences how we perceive the world, and how we act upon it. If we identify someone or something as 'British', we have certain expectations, make certain assumptions. However: these expectations and assumptions change due to our experiences with how the word 'British' is used (in family, school, media, etc.). Who can decide where the concept of being British begins and where it ends? Concepts are defined in use, but, as we will see, some users are more powerful than others in defining or redefining a concept. Meaning is "the result of a real process of social development, in the actual activities of speech and in the continuing development of a language". [14]

For example, on October 6, 2016, *The Washington Post* reported: "A top spokesman for Donald Trump said Wednesday night that Hillary Clinton can't relate to people because she and her husband don't understand 'what it means to be an American'." If Clinton and Trump both speak English and carry an American passport, how can it be that one of them apparently does not understand the meaning of the word 'American'? Quite obviously, the signifier A-M-E-R-I-C-A-N does not simply refer to a given real-life entity; if A-M-E-R-I-C-A-N simply referred to every human being that holds a US passport or that lives in the US, there would be little debate about what it means to be an American.

Instead, A-M-E-R-I-C-A-N refers to a concept in people's mind, and there is no way of determining whether such a concept is 'right' or 'wrong' by simply comparing the concept to a real-life entity as the real-life entity does not exist independently of the concept. It does not follow from this, however, that all meanings are equally valid. But rather than distinguishing between 'true' and 'false', meaning becomes a question of finding common ground: "It is easier to speak of those meanings which are widely shared and agreed upon within a culture, which carry a high degree of consensus at a particular time, compared with those which are held by only a few people". [15]

Concepts, though not referring to a pre-existing reality, have nonetheless

real-life consequences. The concept of who is an American can determine whose jobs will be subsidized, and whose will be laid off, whose roads will be repaired and whose not, it determines who will have a clinic nearby and who doesn't, whose children will be taken away and whose not. Therefore, one of the central questions in Cultural Studies is: *who has the power* to define words like 'British' or 'American', 'boy' or 'girl', 'mother' or 'father', 'fair' or 'foul'?

As discussed, 'maps of meaning' provide "the frameworks of understanding through which [humans] interpret, make sense of, experience and 'live' the material conditions in which they find themselves". [16] But what if someone else has drawn up those maps you live by, someone whose material conditions of living are markedly different from yours? Such maps might be called 'ideologies': "images, representations, categories through which [humans] 'live', in an imaginary way, their real relation to their conditions of existence". [17]

Following the French semiotician Roland Barthes, those images and stories which make particular ideologies seem 'natural' (rather than being deliberately created) can be called 'myths'. Those that produce such 'myths' might hope that if ideas seem natural, "they will not be resisted or fought against":

> The function of the criticism and analysis of myth must then be to remove the impression of naturalness by showing how the myth is constructed, and showing that it promotes one way of thinking while seeking to eliminate all the alternative ways of thinking. [18]

Within Cultural Studies, such ideologies and myths are not seen as a 'false consciousness' forced on the poor by the rich and powerful. Ordinary people ain't that stupid, hapless, and helpless. Instead, Cultural Studies thinks of "societies as complex formations, necessarily contradictory, always historically specific". [19] Within such complex formations, different groups, in alliance with other groups, grapple over the right to determine what things mean; they struggle over *hegemonic*, i.e. dominant and dominating meanings. In this context, Cultural Studies asks:

> Which meanings are shared within society, and by which groups? What other, counter meanings are circulating? What meanings are contested? How does the struggle between

different sets of meanings reflect the play of power and the resistance to power in society? [20]

Importantly, such struggles in the 'symbolic world' take place because they have real-life consequences, because they define our relations to our conditions of existence and the possibilities of changing these conditions.

While such struggles over meaning might make you wonder how we can communicate at all, and whether we even belong to the same culture if we can't agree on such basic terms, most of the time we actually *do* understand each other quite well. This is so because we usually communicate in everyday, real-life situations, and not in philosophical terms. "Can you pass me the ball?" makes perfect sense when we understand the context of an utterance, when we know who speaks and in what situation, when we understand language as a *practice*.

The easiest way to pass over the concept, or maybe even circumvent it in order to get to the real thing, is probably by pointing towards the thing: can you pass me *that* ball? The finger that we usually use for pointing is called the *index* finger. It is signaling something, too, but obviously has a different relation to that which it refers to than the word B-A-L-L. In fact, it has been argued by the semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce that *symbols*, the kind of signs we have been talking about so far, are in fact only one kind of signs, next to *index* and *icon*. [21] While *symbols* indeed relate to what they stand for only by convention, the relation of the *icon* to what it stands for is more direct. This relation is one of resemblance or similarity; a good example would be a stickman on a toilet door, or the word C-U-C-K-O-O, which (unlike T-R-E-E) actually sounds like the thing it stands for. Because of this similarity, a picture does not require the same amount of cultural knowledge as a symbolic word to be deciphered; therefore, "iconic signs or pictures are generally more accessible". [22] The *index* is related to what it stands for in even more existential ways, the relation being one of causality or contiguity; it is not at all arbitrary that we take red spots as a sign for the measles, and most people will understand that smoke is a sign for fire.

However, it is not only the nature of the link between the sign and what it stands for that is different. A typical index, for example, is a footprint that points to the fact that someone has walked through the snow. While we can hardly deny that we are trying to communicate something, however successfully, when we speak, it is not so obvious that we left the footprint

deliberately as a sign. Notwithstanding the fact that footprints are usually *not produced for someone*, we can nonetheless read them, like a detective or a tracker.

In fact, it results from Cultural Studies' conviction that "culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior", that we should not look at deliberate expressions only. According to Williams, the "analysis of culture [...] is the clarification of the meanings and values *implicit* and *explicit* in a particular way of life". [23] Consequently, the way the housework is shared (or not), the way we bring up children, the way we organize the workspace and the way we eat, tell us as much about the values of a culture as its books and tweets.

> What matters for *culture* is that these practices, too, are meaningful. They are organized, guided and framed by meaning. [...] We are able to make sense of what the other person is doing by *decoding* the meaning behind the action, by locating it within some interpretative framework which we and the person doing it share. It is shared meaning which makes the physical action 'cultural'. It is meaning that translates mere *behaviour* into a cultural – a *signifying* – practice. [24]

Indeed, as humans we find it difficult to stop making sense of the world around us. However, while the world is full of signs that were meant for telling us something (street signs, salutes, monuments, etc.), we also look for meaning where it might not be intended: between the lines, in the twinkle of an eye, in the grain of a voice, in the color of skin, the shape of a body. Here, it is never so clear, for example, whether something is a symbol or an index: worn-out jeans can be a deliberate fashion statement, but they can also be the simple result of a lack of money. Cultural Studies is interested in both explicit expressions of meanings and values and those meanings and values that are implicit in our actions and institutions. Cultural Studies is interested in those meanings that we make and in those that make us. "Cultural Studies describes how people's everyday lives are articulated by and with culture". [25]

1. Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Anders Koed Madsen, Hugh Mackay & Keith Negus, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, 2nd ed., Milton Keynes: 2013, p. 4.
2. Stuart Hall, "Introduction", in: *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, Milton Keynes: 1997, 1-11, here p. 1.
3. Jonathan Culler, *Saussure*, Glasgow: 1976, p. 19.
4. Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation", in: *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, London: 1997, 13-64, here p. 21.
5. Ibid., p. 22.
6. Aleida Assmann, *Introduction to Cultural Studies: Topics, Concepts, Issues*, Berlin: 2012, p. 30.
7. Ibid., p. 32.
8. Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, Durham, NC: 2010, p. 184.
9. Chris Barker, Cultural Studies: *Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed., London: 2008, p. 7.
10. Ibid.
11. Culler, *Saussure*, p. 21.
12. Ibid., p. 22.
13. Ibid., p. 22-23.
14. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, London: 1977, p. 37.
15. Gay et al., *Doing Cultural Studies*, p. 4.
16. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and the Centre: Some Problematics and Problems", in: *Culture, Media, Language*, eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe & Paul Willis, London: 1980, 15-47, here p. 32.
17. Ibid., p. 33.
18. Jonathan Bignell, *Media Semiotics: an Introduction*, 2nd ed., Manchester: 2002, p. 23.
19. Hall, "Cultural Studies and the Centre", p. 36.
20. Gay et al., *Doing Cultural Studies*, p. 6.
21. Cf. Culler, *Saussure*, p. 96.
22. Assmann, *Introduction to Cultural Studies*, p. 45.
23. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, London: 1961, p. 57; my emphasis.
24. Gay et al., *Doing Cultural Studies*, p. 12.
25. Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, p. 8.

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