

4.7 GUNTHER KRESS and THEO VAN LEEUWEN

The Semiotic Landscape*



Introduction to Reading 4.7

Semiotics is defined (Chandler 2002: 1) as 'the study of signs'. Language is one of many different kinds of sign and, like other sign systems (Reading 2.3), it has been studied widely. In *Reading Images*, Kress and van Leeuwen focus on the interpretation of the currently available visual means of communication. In this excerpt, they discuss the (metaphorical – cf. Reading 2.6, Goatly) *landscape* of semiotics and show how closely interwoven are the different modes of communication used by human beings. After a discussion of the value of their chosen metaphor, they analyse data from a five-year-old who is clearly using different modes of communication, his choice of mode being dependent on who he is communicating with. Implicit in this excerpt and explicit in *Reading Images* is a recognition that the relative importance of different modes of communication is changing – and changing fast.

The place of visual communication in a given society can only be understood in the context of, on the one hand, the range of forms or modes of public communication available in that society and, on the other hand, their uses and valuations. We refer to this as 'the semiotic landscape'. The metaphor [see Reading 2.6] is worth exploring a little, as is its etymology. The features of a landscape (a field, a wood, a clump of trees, a house, a group of buildings) only make sense in the context of their whole environment and of the history of its development ('waste land' has meaning only in that context, as has 'field' or 'track'; 'village' has meaning only as a group of buildings that is part of a history of ways of working the land). In the same way, particular features and modes of communication should be seen in the history of their development, and in the environment of all the other modes of communication which surround them. The use of the visual mode is not the same now as it was even fifty years ago in Western societies; it is not the same from one society to another; and it is not the same from one social group or institution to another.

Each feature of a landscape has its history, as does the landscape as a whole, and each is subject to constant remaking. It is here that the etymology of the word *landscape* is revealing. To the casual beholder a landscape simply is, and may even have a timeless appearance ('the timeless beauty of the English, or Spanish, countryside'). Yet it is in fact a product of social action and of a social history, of human work on the land, on nature: *-scape*, with its relation to *shape* in English and *schaffen* (both 'to work' and 'to create') in German, indicates this. And this applies also to the 'semiotic landscape'. Metaphoric

excursions of this kind can be stretched too far; however, we will allow ourselves one other point of comparison. Landscapes are the result, not just of human social work, but also of the characteristics of the land itself. The flat land by the river is most suitable for the grazing of cattle or the growing of wheat; the hillsides for vineyards or forestry. At the same time, the characteristic values of a culture may determine which of the potential uses of the land are realized, whether the hillsides are used for vineyards or forestry, for example. And cultural values may even induce people to go against the grain of the land, to use the steep hillside for growing rice, for example, which opposes the 'natural potential' of the land almost to the limit.

Semiotic modes, similarly, are shaped both by the intrinsic characteristics and potentialities of the medium and by the requirements, histories and values of societies and their cultures. The characteristics of the medium of air are not the same as those of the medium of stone, and the potentialities of the speech organs are not the same as those of the human hand. Nevertheless, cultural and social valuations and structures strongly affect the uses of these potentialities. It is not an accident that in Western societies written language has had the place which it has had for the last three or four millennia, and that the visual mode has in effect become subservient to language, as its mode of expression in writing. Western linguistic theories have more or less naturalized the view that the use of air and the vocal organs is the natural, inevitable semiotic means of expression. But even speech is, in the end, cultural. We are not biologically predisposed to use speech as our major mode of communication. The parts of the body that we call the 'speech organs' are an adaptation of physical organs initially developed to prevent humans from choking while breathing and eating. When the need arises, we can and do use other means of expression, as in the highly articulated development of gesture [see our Introduction to Reading 2.4, Sutton-Spence and Woll] in sign languages, and also in theatrical mime and certain Eastern forms of ballet. And, while these are at present restricted to relatively marginal domains, who is to say that this will always remain so in the future development of humankind? It is salutary to consider how other cultures 'rank' modes of communication, and to bring that knowledge into the mainstream of 'Western' thinking (see, for instance, Finnegan, 2002).

The new realities of the semiotic landscape are brought about by social, cultural and economic factors: by the intensification of linguistic and cultural diversity within the boundaries of nation states; by the weakening of these boundaries within societies, due to multiculturalism, electronic media of communication, technologies of transport and global economic developments. Global flows of capital and information of all kinds, of commodities, and of people, dissolve not only cultural and political boundaries but also semiotic boundaries. This is already beginning to have the most far-reaching effects on the characteristics of English (and Englishes [see Reading 3.3]) globally, and even within national boundaries.

The place, use, function and valuation of language in public communication is changing. It is moving from its former, unchallenged role as *the* mode of communication, to a role as one mode among others, to the function, for instance, of being a mode for comment, for ratification, or for labelling, albeit more so in some domains than in others, and more rapidly in some areas than in others. Although this is a relatively new phenomenon in public communication, children do it quite 'naturally' in their [spoken or written] text-making.

New ways of thinking are needed in this field. Here we use, once more, children's

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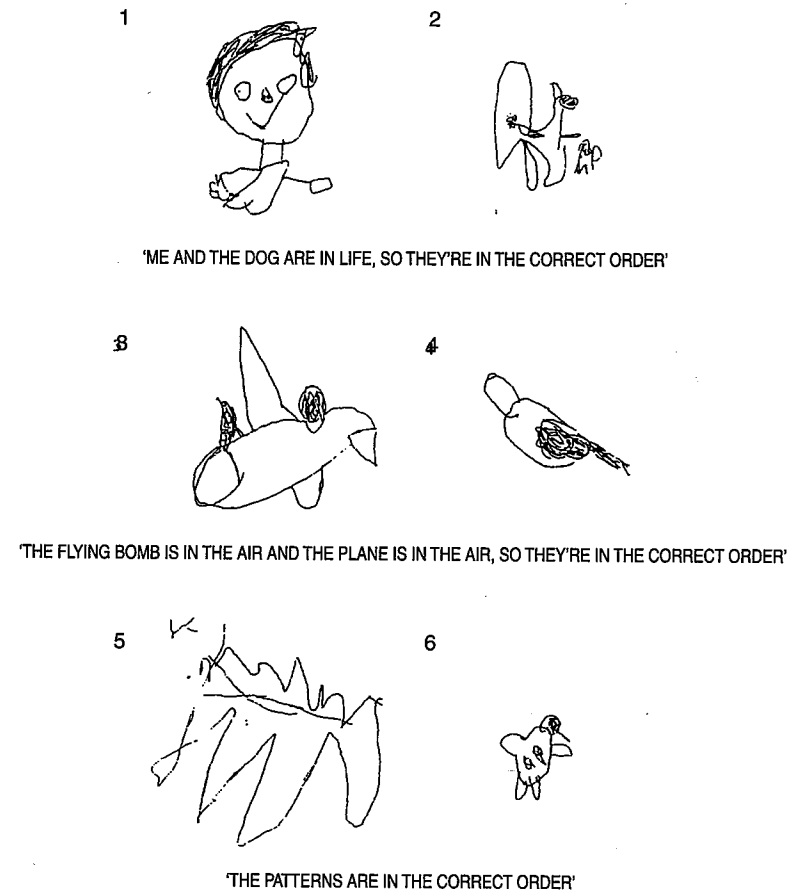


Figure 4.7.1 Six drawings by a five-year-old boy

representation as a metaphor to suggest some directions. The drawings reproduced in Figure 4.7.1 were made by a five-year-old boy. On a summer Sunday afternoon, while his parents were entertaining friends, the child took a small, square notepad from near the telephone and drew a picture on each of six pages. His father had not noticed this until he came across him in the hall of their house, where the child was putting the cards 'in order', as shown in Figure 4.7.1. Asked what he was doing, the child's account was as follows: for pictures 1 and 2 together 'Me and the dog are in life, so they're in the correct order'; on pictures 3 and 4 'The flying bomb is in the air and the plane is in the air, so they're in the correct order'; and on 5 and 6 'The patterns are in the correct order'.

The whole process, involving sign-making, representation and classification, had proceeded through the visual medium. It was only when the parent came along with his question that the child was forced to use words. The metaphoric processes of sign-making, the acts of representation and classification, each involving quite complex analogies, took place in the visual mode. Language, as speech, entered when communication with the parent became necessary. Speech was the mode used for 'ratifying' and for describing what had taken place without it.

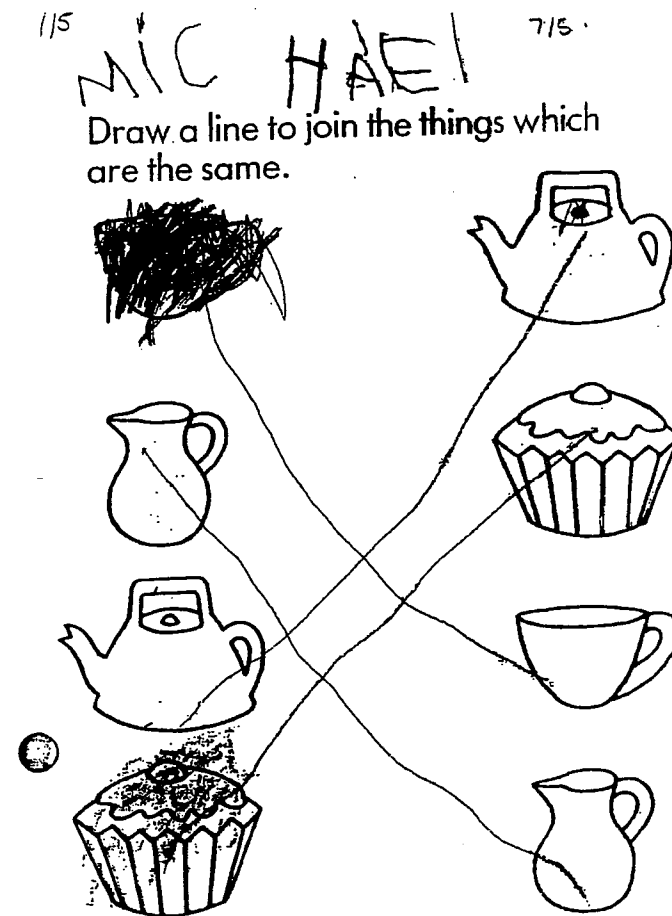


Figure 4.7.2 School exercise book of a five-year-old boy

Some two weeks later, at the end of the summer term of his primary school, the child brought home some of his exercise books. Among these was the page shown in figure 4.7.2. Clearly, here the task was one of classification, and it had been undertaken at school, prior to the making and ordering of the drawings in figure 4.7.1, at home. A whole sequence of semiotic activities is thus involved, a sequence of production, transformation and development, moving from the initial task of joining images of the same objects – a classificatory, cognitive, conceptual, semiotic and manual task – to that of producing complex and dissimilar images, and finding likeness in them (or imposing likeness on them) through an intermediary task of abstraction and generalization. If we think about this period of two weeks, the child's production of signs involved a series of distinct semiotic modes, and of translations between such modes. First the teacher spoke with the children about the task (mode: language as speech); then she introduced the book and showed them what was at issue (mode: 3D physical object, and visual mode); then the children used their pencils to draw the connecting lines (mode: manual action and visual

mode of drawing); then the teacher engaged the children in *spoken* discussion, and made evaluative comments on their work. This was followed by a long period of 'silence', a fortnight or so when nothing was seen or heard, but when, we assume, the series of transformative acts of the child continued 'internally', 'mentally'. Finally the internal activity became visible, literally, through the child's unprompted production of the drawings, his unprompted classificatory activity (spatially shown) and his spoken commentary in response to his father's question.

Of course, while all this took place the child, as do all of us, would no doubt have experienced constantly shifting affective, emotional states. He might have been enthused by the task in the class and praised by the teacher for his success; he might have had a difficult time with his friends in the playground, or at home, and so on, and all of this would have influenced how he 'read' the activity and how it was 'taken up' by him. If we see it like this, it makes it impossible to think of affect and cognition as distinct, as separable. In other words, here – as always – the affective aspects are always one with, and act continuously as a 'modality' on, cognitive semiotic processes.

In part in response to the representational, semiotic and cognitive resources made available by the teacher, and her demands made in the class, though afterwards prompted by his own interests, the child used a series of different representational modes (including, of course, 'internal representations') in a constantly productive sequence of semiotic activities. Some happened within the same mode (linking the images of the object by a line, for instance), some took place by a shift across modes (the shift from the spatially performed classification to the spoken commentary on it). Such processes are constantly transformative (the name we use for such processes within one mode) and transductive (our name for such processes across modes). All these, we assume, have effects on 'inner resources', which constantly reshape (transform) the subjectivity of the child.

As we have indicated, the visual, actional and spatial modes, rather than speech, seemed to be the central representational and cognitive resources. Speech was used for communication with adults, as a means for translation, for comment and for ratification. It may well be that the complexities realized in the six images and their classification were initially beyond the child's capacity of spoken expression, conception and formulation, but that the visual mode offered him semiotic and cognitive resources which were not available to him in the verbal mode. However, once expressed in the visual mode, once classified *through* the visual/spatial mode, the meanings which the child had produced became available as externalized, objective expression; this in turn may have made them differently available for verbal expression, for the verbal ratification of semiotic, affective/cognitive processes that had already taken place.

This incessant process of 'translation', or 'transcoding' – *transduction* – between a range of semiotic modes represents, we suggest, a better, a more adequate understanding of representation and communication. In the example we have discussed here, language is not at the centre. In many areas of public communication the same is either the case already, or rapidly coming to be the case. And clearly it matters which semiotic modes of representation and communication are dominant, most frequent, most valued in the public domains in which we act.

NOW, THINK, DO!

- 4.7.1 Reread the last paragraph of this excerpt. Now consider the last 24 hours and list, in detail, as many as possible of the communicative events in which you have been involved. Now choose, for example, six of those communicative events (try to choose events that are as unlike each other as possible, such as attending a lecture, doing your e-mails, buying a coffee etc., rather than events that are very similar to each other) and specify for each the different semiotic modalities that were employed by you or by your co-communicators. Based on this evidence, which mode of communication is dominant in this short list of events from a short period in your life?
- 4.7.2 How many modes of communication (for example, electronic, paper based, face to face) does your tutor require you to use? Are you equally happy with each? Why or why not? Offer some feedback to your tutor to explain how your learning might be enhanced if the particular modes of communication you are happy with were chosen rather than others.

FURTHER READING

Bauer *et al.* (2006, Ch. 5) consider how human language and animal communication (or is it language?) are both similar to and different from each other. Crystal (1997, Ch. 64) maps human communication systems with one another as well as considering animal communication in relation to human language and communication. Marsen (2006) adopts an eclectic approach to the wider areas of communication and aims to provide students with core knowledge as a basis for their studies of communication, but the book is also valuable as a contextualised discussion of these issues for students not studying communication. Chandler (2002) provides an overview of semiotics.

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