Language of media

Semiotics, semantics, pragmatics, and syntactics

1) Semiotics

"The study of signs and sign-using behaviour. It was defined by one of its founders, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, as the study of "the life of signs within society."[1]

American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce also dealt with this field. His *"seminal work in the field was anchored in pragmatism and logic. He defined a sign as "something which stands to somebody for something," and one of his major contributions to semiotics was the categorization of signs into three main types: (1) an **icon**, which resembles its referent (such as a road sign for falling rocks); (2) an **index**, which is associated with its referent (as smoke is a sign of fire); and (3) a **symbol**, which is related to its referent only by convention (as with words or traffic signals). Peirce also demonstrated that a sign can never have a definite meaning, for the meaning must be continuously qualified"*[2].

Special category of sign is ***trope,*** which is defined as *"a figure of speech through which speakers or writers intend to express meanings of words differently than their literal meanings. In other words, it is a metaphorical or figurative use of words in which writers shift from the literal meanings of words to their non-literal meanings"*[3].

Important terms related to semiotics are ***signifier*** (physical representation of concept or meaning, it can be icon, index, or symbol) and ***signified*** (what appears in mind, it is*"a concept or meaning as distinguished from the sign through which it is communicated"*[4]).

2) Semantics

Part of semiotics, which deals with questions of how the meaning in signs is created, communicated, and decoded.

Important terms and concepts from the field of semantics and semiotics[5]**:**

- ***text*** is a term referring to written or spoken words or any other forms of expression, such as photography or video.

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[1] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (2021), Semiotics, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., Retrieved from: https://www.britannica.com/science/semiotics

[2] Ibidem.

[3] LiteraryDevices Editors (2021), "Trope", LiteraryDevices.net, Retrieved from: https://literarydevices.net/trope/

[4] Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2015), Signified, Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, Retrieved from: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/signified

[5] LiteraryDevices Editors (2021), "Literary Devices and Terms", LiteraryDevices.net, Retrieved from: https://literarydevices.net/

- *context* is *"the background, environment, setting, framework, or surroundings of events or occurrences. Simply, context means circumstances forming a background of an event, idea or statement, in such a way as to enable readers to understand the narrative or a literary piece"*[6].

- Each author creates a text with an intention to inform, entertain, provide aesthetic or emotional experience, promote a viewpoint, etc. (internal influences). *Authorial intent* is *"a position that argues that the creator of a text possesses a privileged understanding of its meaning and that consequently any interpretation that contradicts this understanding must defer to the author's intentions"*[7].

- *sign* is anything that is communicating a meaning, e.g. letter, word, shape, or sound.

- *denotation* is the literal or dictionary meaning of the word.

- *connotation* is a term referring to additional meanings, e.g. personal, emotional, cultural, etc.

- *simile* refers to a method in which dissimilar objects are compared through the use of words such as „like" or „as" (e.g. innocent as an angel).

- when a *metaphor* is used, then dissimilar objects are compared without use of words such as „like" / object is referred to by mentioning another one (e.g. you are an angel; the Big Bang).

- in the case of *metonymy*, an object represents another one that is closely associated (e.g. White House – U.S. President or administration).

- *synecdoche* is a form of metonymy and means that part of something represents the whole, or vice-versa (e.g. crown – kingdom).

In the following text you will explore concrete film-making and photographic techniques that can develop and convey the meaning. Knowledge from the field of film literacy can help everyone critically think about the journalistic content as well. Many of these techniques should not be used in production of informative media, as they should not encode any meanings. In other pieces, such as articles or feature stories, they shall be used carefully (e.g. lighting).

Length of a shot: how much time is dedicated to a certain topic or person.

Angle of a shot: lower or higher angle suggest how the audience should perceive the person in front of the camera.

Colour: use of special filters to represent the situation and mood.

Lighting: the intensity and quality of lighting influences perception of the situation.

Special effects: they are used to make the media piece more attractive, but can be counterproductive if they have a bad quality or are inappropriate.

3) Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a study of how context (social, economic, historical, environmental, cultural, etc.) contributes to meaning. *"It is a subfield of linguistics and semiotics that studies how context*

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[6] LiteraryDevices Editors (2021), "Context", LiteraryDevices.net, Retrieved from: https://literarydevices.net/context/
[7] Oxford Reference, Authorial intention, Oxford University Press, Retrieved from:
https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095435694

contributes to meaning''[8]. It's possible to divide context into three categories: wide (or general), group/personal, given, and manipulated (other categorizations are also possible).

Wide context

This context is quite natural, as for example social or economic circumstances cannot be chosen by anyone. In the current world it's less complicated for journalists and other media professionals to reach people from many countries and cultures. As the potential and real audience is growing, the risk of misinterpretation of media messages is increasing as well. Each author has different experiences and comes from a certain background. Intentionally or unintentionally, these factors that are forming the personality have an impact on the shape of the story that is told. Power of the current situation and sentiment in the society also cannot be underrated. It needs to be a virtue of professional journalists to be free of these influences, but it's not always possible. Therefore it's said that objectively, absolutely neutral journalism does not and cannot exist. It's only possible to get as close to the ideal as possible. It also means that the risk of being misunderstood is real even if the author and recipient of the message are from the same community or country. The rule for media makers to remember is: think about how certain phrases, sentences, or pictures can be interpreted by others, even if they don't have any implicit or explicit (hidden or obvious) connotations.

Group or personal context

When it comes to this category of context, it's important to remember:

- Existence of various genres: distinguishing comedy from actual news is the basics, but it should not be forgotten that there are also opinionative journalistic pieces, where facts can be interpreted.
- Occasion at which the problematic message was uttered or published. What some communities consider harmless can be considered by others as disrespectful or aggressive.

That means **harmfulness of information or media content** depends on the context in which it's made as well. While hate-speech is unacceptable (and can be unlawful as well) under all circumstances, for example defamation is discutable. **The most common examples of this type of information/content are:**

Hate speech: words, phrases, or sentences that can harm someone or encourage hatred towards someone. It's intentional, but sometimes people spread hate speech without knowing about the consequences it may have.

Extreme opinions can be also harmful and considered as hate speech, depending on where and when they are expressed. Generally, they are opinions, beliefs, or statements which are disapproved of by most people, because they are different from what is considered as reasonable, common, or ethical.

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[8] Wikipedia (April 3, 2021), Pragmatics, Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pragmatics

Divisive speech: statements written or said to cause disagreement between people and their separation into different groups. It can even divide (polarise) the entire society. It's mostly intentional and supports latent hostilities and dissatisfaction.

Defamation: false statement that is published or communicated to damage a person's reputation.
- ***Libel:*** written defamation (today mostly in letters, blog posts, comments, chats).
- ***Slander:*** spoken defamation.

Given context

In journalism, everything should be presented in neutral way, but for example advertisement can present the same information in three different ways, depending on the context (in terms of what should be achieved) it gives them:
- Positive advertising: portraying the product in a way that shows its advantages.
- Comparative advertising (also referred to as advertising war): shows the competitor and why it's less good than advertised product.
- Negative advertising: showing competitors in a bad light, mentioning it's negative sides.

The latter case can be already considered a manipulative practice. Building on the context of a negative message (campaign) it's possible to turn it over and create a positive message. The "Polish plumber" ad can serve as a good example (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4115164.stm): widely disseminated negative message with stereotype of Polish workers going to France and working there for lower salaries was creatively used for successful promotion campaign of one of the Polish regions.

Manipulation with the context

Knowing that media and information pieces are influenced by context also opens eyes and supports thinking about what might have influenced the text and whether it altered the reality (on purpose or not). If there can be influence, the space for manipulation is broader - information can be presented out of the context, the background or additional important information is not mentioned at all, or unrelated topics or data are put together. Method of framing is famous in the field of visual media making - parts of the picture are cut out to promote only part of the reality or change it completely. Therefore, the rule for recipients of information and media content to remember is: think about the context (including who is the author and publisher, what they created before) and don't forget there may be additional facts.

4) Syntactics

In linguistics, syntax is *"the arrangement of words in sentences, clauses, and phrases, and the study of the formation of sentences and the relationship of their component parts"*[9]. It refers to the way how the text is constructed: words, phrases, and sentences or their parts.

Syntactics is then *"a branch of semiotic that deals with the formal relations between signs or expressions in abstraction from their signification and their interpreters"*[10]. It means that it studies relations between parts of the text (words, phrases, sentences), signs or expressions regardless of their meanings or interpretations.

Syntactic structure of media pieces is usually visible, or at least identifiable, with an exception of one type of subliminal advertising which has been used in audio-visual content and is the most controversial: the 25th frame method (https://www.ijcr.eu/articole/330_07 Maria FLOREA.pdf).

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[9] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (2021), Syntax, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., Retrieved from: https://www.britannica.com/topic/syntax
[10] Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2015), Syntactics, Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, Retrieved from: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syntactics

Resources

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