

Language of media

SEMIOTICS, SEMANTICS, PRAGMATICS, AND SYNTACTICS

Topic 1



Semiotics

The study of signs.

American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce:

Three types of signs:

- **an icon**, which resembles its referent (such as a road sign for falling rocks)
- **an index**, which is associated with its referent (as smoke is a sign of fire)
- **a symbol**, which is related to its referent only by convention (as with words or traffic signals)



Semiotics

Special category of sign is **trope**: figure of speech through which speakers or writers intend to express meanings of words differently than their literal meanings.

Important terms related to semiotics are also:

- **signifier** (physical representation of concept or meaning, it can be icon, index, or symbol)
- **signified** (what appears in mind)



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

Text - written or spoken words or any other forms of expression, such as photography or video.

Context - the background, environment, setting, framework, or surroundings of events or occurrences (external influences).

Authorial intent - each author creates a text with an intention to inform, entertain, provide aesthetic or emotional experience, promote a viewpoint, etc. (internal influences).



Important terms and concepts from the field of semantics and semiotics

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

Denotation - literal or dictionary meaning of the word

Connotation - additional meanings, e.g. personal, emotional, cultural, etc.



Important terms and concepts from the field of semantics and semiotics

Simile - dissimilar objects are compared through the use of words such as „like“ or „as“

Metaphor - dissimilar objects are compared without use of words such as „like“

Metonymy - an object represents another one that is closely associated (e.g. White House – U.S. President or administration)

Synecdoche - a form of metonymy, part of something represents the whole, or vice-versa (e.g. crown – kingdom)



Important terms and concepts from the field of semantics and semiotics

What can convey meaning in film, TV, or photography?

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.



Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a study of how **context** (social, economic, historical, environmental, cultural, etc.) contributes to meaning.

Wide context - it is quite natural, as for example social or economic circumstances cannot be chosen by anyone.

Group or personal context - genre (remember author's intention and how it's decoded by audience), occasion at which the message was uttered or published.

Given context - how the topic (object) is presented: in neutral, positive, or negative light.



Pragmatics

Group or personal context

Harmfulness of information or media content depends on the context in which it's made as well. 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.
- **Extreme opinions:** can be also harmful and considered as hate speech, depending on where and when they are expressed.
- **Divisive speech:** statements written or said to cause disagreement between people and their separation into different groups.



Pragmatics

Group or personal context

Defamation is a 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.



Pragmatics

Given context

- **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



Pragmatics

Manipulation with the context

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.



Syntactics

A branch of semiotics.

Syntax is the way how the text is constructed: words, phrases, and sentences or their parts.

Syntactics 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**.