

Language of media

Syntax

How the text is constructed. In journalism and media, syntax refers to the arrangement of components of the text in one piece (words, sentences, etc.). It is also the study of the formation of text and relationships of its component parts. Rules of syntax are also behind the inverted pyramid structure and relations between parts of the journalistic text: headline, main text, sub-headlines, pictures, graphics, multimedia components. In this case it's also very important to ask whether and how they correspond with each other?

In audiovisual media, syntax is the arrangement of various components of the picture (title, graphics) or motion picture (order of pictures or scenes, relation between sound and picture). Since there are quite a few tools and methods to **encode meanings in the audio-visual media**, knowledge from the field of film literacy can help critically think about the journalistic content as well.

Each film - and video to some extent - is created three times. First, during pre-production, when the concept, storyline, and screenplay, among other documents, are written.

Second stage is a production. Angle of the shot is a tool that can help convey additional meaning. If persons are filmed from a low angle, they appear higher and even arrogant. If persons are filmed from a high angle, they appear smaller, humble, or even humiliated.

The last stage is editing. Order of pictures, scenes, and sequences can change perception of the whole story. Music can be used just as a background, but it can also provoke emotions, especially when it's well placed. It's also important to pay attention to sound: whether the person speaks loudly or quietly and presence of background noises can influence perception of the whole video. Special effects can be used to make the video more attractive, but can be counterproductive, if they have a bad quality or are inappropriate.

Syntax is not dealing with the meaning. However, the techniques used to create audio-visual media, which are described in this lesson, can be used to encode various messages. Hence syntax and semantics are closely related.

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. music, lighting).

Static techniques

Scene setting – mise-en-scène

Arrangement of everything that appears in front of the camera. It can convey additional, even hidden, meanings. Key aspects are: set design, lighting, representation of space, composition, costumes, makeup and hair styles, acting, film-stock, and even the aspect ratio.

180-degree rule

Breaking the 180-degree rule may cause a spatial disorientation: *“The rule states that the camera should stay on one side of an imaginary line between two characters so that each character always appears to be facing the same direction, regardless of where the camera is positioned. When you keep your camera on one side of this imaginary line, you preserve the left/right relationship of your characters and help the audience maintain a sense of visual consistency.”*¹ Also, when a character is leaving the frame for example on the left side, s/he should enter the following frame from the right side.

30-degree rule

This rule helps avoid distraction of the audience. It says that the camera should move at least 30 degrees relative to the subject between two consecutive shots that are focusing on the same subject. If the camera moves less than 30 degrees, then the transition can look like a jump cut. This rule guarantees the two shots will look different enough to not look like a jump cut.

Double exposition (or Double - Multiple - Exposure) *“is the superimposition² of two images, one over the other, which results from exposing the same film twice. This technique, which is not used as much today as in the past, is employed to create a ghost or a dissolve, or to make one character appear to be two.”*³

Length of a shot: how much time is dedicated to a certain topic or person. Shot can be long from one second to hours (in experimental movies, but also Alfred Hitchcock’s film the Rope appears to be composed of only one shot - however, there are several invisible cuts).

Sizes of shot: it means how much of the environment or the subject is visible, figure is also used to describe the scale.

- Establishing shot: it introduces the audience to the scene or whole movie. It clearly shows the location and sets the tone of other shots.

¹MasterClass (Nov 8, 2020), Understanding the 180-Degree Rule in Cinematography, Retrieved from: <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/understanding-the-180-degree-rule-in-cinematography#what-is-the-180degree-rule>

² Superimposition - images are placed over each other in one frame.

³ The Columbia Film Language Glossary (2015), Double (Multiple) Exposure, The Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York, Retrieved from: <https://filmglossary.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/term/double-multiple-exposure/>

- Extreme close up: for example an eye or chin.
- Close up: head and shoulder line. It's used to show emotions and reactions.
- Medium close up: person is framed only to the chest.
- Medium shot: person is framed from head to roughly the waist. It is one of the most common camera shots.
- American shot: approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of the figure is shown.
- Medium full shot: person is framed from head to knees.
- Full shot: the whole body of a person fills the frame.
- Extreme wide shot / extreme long shot: whole environment with the subject that appears smaller (for example it is somewhere in the distance).
- Wide shot / long shot: whole environment, but the main subject, e.g. character, is clearly visible.
- Two shot: two persons are in the pictures.

Angle of a shot: it refers to the camera placement (angle of the camera). Lower or higher angle basically suggests how the audience should perceive the person in front of the camera.

- Low-angle shot: camera is placed low on the vertical axis and is looking up.
- High-angle shot: camera is placed high on the vertical axis and is looking down. It should not be confused with aerial shot, which is shot from above (for example from birds' perspective).

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

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

Dynamic techniques

Editing

Cuts and transitions: order of scenes can change perception of the whole story. Editing is a powerful tool for manipulation and deception. Information can be easily taken out of context. Transitions are used to achieve artistic impression, or convey jumps in time or space.

- Time cut: it refers to simple passage of time.
- Jump cut: one continuous scene (but also shot) is divided into three parts, with the middle one being removed to create the effect of jumping forward in time. It also happens that jump cuts are created unintentionally.

- Axial cut: it is a type of jump cut. The camera suddenly zooms in on or out from its subject. It is rarely used nowadays.
- Quick cut: it indicates that the shots are very short and is used in the technique called Fast cutting.
- Smash cut: it is used at a crucial moment in a scene where it is not expected. The next scene often has a very different nature, for example when the character wakes up from a nightmare and everything is alright.
- Match cut: in this technique, two shots on either side of the cut are connected by a subject, action, or subject matter (for example bone in the first shot and a spaceship in the second in Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey).

The main transitions used are:

- Dissolve to, which indicates that a longer period of time has passed between two scenes. In contrast to “Time cut”, which doesn’t require any special post-production work, it’s shown as a gradual transition from one picture to another.
- Fade to means that one shot is fading into the black (fades out) and the following shot starts with black frames and gradually becomes brighter (fades in).
- Wipe to is a film transition, where one shot replaces another by moving from one point of the shot to another, often with a special shape. Examples of the wipe are: star wipe, clock wipe (indicates that a time has passed), or wipe from left to right. They are used very often in Star Wars films.

Combination of sound and picture: whether the person speaks loudly or quietly and presence of background noises can influence perception of the person or story.

Music: usually used to provoke emotions.

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.

Montage

It is an editing technique, in which a series of shots, often accompanied by music, represents a long period of time, at least one day, condensed into one to a few minutes to provide relevant and important information about space, time, and/or events.

Another editing technique is called **Fast cutting**, which means a combination of several consecutive shots of a very short duration (just a few seconds). It can be used to share a lot of information very quickly, but also to imply radical changes, energy, or chaos. It is “*also frequently used when shooting dialogue between two or more characters, changing the viewer's perspective to*

either focus on the reaction of another character's dialog, or to bring to attention the non-verbal actions of the speaking character.”⁴

Continuity editing is a technique in which more-or-less related shots are combined into a sequence to convey temporal or spatial continuity. It can be contrasted with montage, which combines shots that are of completely different or at least less closely related subjects.

Part of continuity editing is use of **continuous diegetic sound** which helps to smooth cuts by overlapping the shots. It's close to the rule that says picture and sound cannot be cut at the same time.

Cross-cutting, on the other hand, conveys spatial discontinuity by cutting back and forth between two locations at which two actions are happening parallel to each other. Therefore the audience will not be distracted or disoriented. Cross-cutting is also used to cut between two actions that are taking place at the same location and time.

⁴ Videocide.com (May 9, 2020), Fast cutting, Codecide, Retrieved from: <https://videocide.com/glossary/fast-cutting/>

Resources

MasterClass (Nov 8, 2020), Understanding the 180-Degree Rule in Cinematography, Retrieved from:
<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/understanding-the-180-degree-rule-in-cinematography#what-is-the-180-degree-rule>

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