Language of media

Introduction into the topic

Like the language that is used for communication between people, the media also have their system of signs and methods to communicate meaning to us. Based on human language and techniques used in literature, photography, or movie making, it's not very specific. However, people tend to neglect or disregard it.

When reading a book, watching a movie, or observing a painting, we usually think about what was the author's intention, why the characters say what they say, and sometimes also why the author uses certain words, angles of shots, or colours. Many people approach documentary movies in the same way. But only a very few do this when it comes to journalistic pieces of work or information that is published all around. Why is it so? The main reasons can be that people either don't pay much attention to those pieces and simply accept what is communicated to them, or they believe what the media and other publishers say, especially when they confirm their viewpoints and opinions. That can be dangerous, as those who spread misinformation and distorted or manipulated content are counting on this behaviour a lot. Techniques – such as metaphors, lighting, or angles of shots – that help artists to encode additional information into their works and provide the audience with aesthetic and emotional experience are also used to manipulate the information, spread hate, and create negative perceptions of certain topics, social groups, or concrete persons.

At the same time, it's important for professional journalists and others who are producing informative content to think critically about or even renounce usage of techniques that are giving their works additional meanings, even if their intention was only to draw attention of the audience, because effects can be different from those expected and impact on portrayed people or an audience can be negative. Informative content can be appealing also without messages containing emotions, excessive use of music, and expressions borrowed from the art.

In this course, you are introduced into the world of symbols, meanings embodied in various messages, how to structure various forms of the text (written, visual, auditory), and how easily the text can be misinterpreted or have opposite, undesired, effect. The knowledge and skills embedded in this course help you to create better and professional media pieces, encode and decode meanings of messages, even if they are intentionally hidden to influence the audience's opinion, and - as they say - to see between the lines.

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.

- **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].

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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/

[6] LiteraryDevices Editors (2021), "Context", LiteraryDevices.net, Retrieved from: https://literarydevices.net/context/

- 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 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).

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[7] Oxford Reference, Authorial intention, Oxford University Press, Retrieved from:
https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095435694
[8] Wikipedia (April 3, 2021), Pragmatics, Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pragmatics

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.

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.

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[9] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (2021), Syntax, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., Retrieved from:
https://www.britannica.com/topic/syntax

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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[10] Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2015), Syntactics, Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, Retrieved from:
https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syntactics

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."*[11] 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 superimposition[12] 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."*[13]

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.

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[11]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-180degree-rule

[12] Superimposition - images are placed over each other in one frame.

[13] 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 ¾ 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.''[14]

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.

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[14] Videocide.com (May 9, 2020), Fast cutting, Codecide, Retrieved from: https://videocide.com/glossary/fast-cutting/

Summary

Knowledge from the fields presented in this chapter also makes it much easier to respond to misinformation. They say the fire should not be fought with fire, but being inspired by opponents and using the same tools and similar methods while following ethical and professional principles can lead to a higher effectiveness: e.g. video with negative content can be best tackled by video, short messages can be best contradicted by short messages. Also consistency is important – there is no need to always respond to repeated misinformation in different ways.

This topic is so wide that it could very easily fill several courses. Therefore the list of other useful resources is included at the end of this course to help you gain more insights and learn about additional techniques.

Presentations, quizzes, tasks, exercises, background text, and additional resources have been designed to provide you with knowledge and skills that will help you create and understand media pieces. You can go through them as many times as you need and do not hesitate to ask us any questions related to the topics.

Resources

List of used resources

Topic 1: Semiotics, semantics, pragmatics, and syntactics

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

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

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

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

LiteraryDevices Editors (2021), "Context", LiteraryDevices.net, Retrieved from: https://literarydevices.net/context/

Oxford Reference, Authorial intention, Oxford University Press, Retrieved from: https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095435694

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

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (2021), Syntax, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., Retrieved from: https://www.britannica.com/topic/syntax

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2015), Syntactics, Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, Retrieved from: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syntactics

Topic 2: Syntax

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-180degree-rule

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/

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

List of other useful resources

https://www.oscars.org/education-grants/teachers-guide-series

https://www.bafta.org/supporting-talent

https://www.filmstudies.cz/prague/filmmaking-resources/

https://www.filmsourcing.com/

https://industrialscripts.com/filmmaking-resources/

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce-semiotics/