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Codes and Contexts

!! practical semiotics for the qualitative researcher

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This paper suggests that, on appropriate occasions, researchers might wish to broaden the scope of their qualitative findings by incorporating a semiotic perspective into their interpretation. It goes on to offer some practical ways of doing this.

The first and obvious question raised is *why semiotics?* What would be gained from the extra work involved?

In fact, the benefits are considerable. Most of them are gifts of the semiotic perspective itself, with its liberating introduction to a world outside the box of 'consumocentrism' that has constrained much market research thinking over the years.

I have focused on just three of these benefits in this paper; any or all of which can be gained by judicious use of the simplified DIY semiotics it outlines:

1. a new perspective that helps position the client's direct requirements (research objective, respondent feedback, etc) within the larger – but equally relevant and sometimes even more important – socio-cultural frame
2. identification and tracking of shifts in that wider cultural framework – and clues from which to detect trends and possible future effects upon the marketplace under study
3. comparison between these changing codes of wider culture and the codes of the client company's own discourse; and (most important of all) whether or not the latter is keeping pace with the former

The search for pattern

A prime task for all researchers, quallies, quanties and semios alike, is to find out, as accurately and holistically as possible, *what's going on*, in and around any given market situation. Only when thus armed are we in a position to offer our clients coherently focused, relevant information and meaningful strategic and tactical advice.

Whatever the scale of the research project – whether investigating a simple change in pack design or a marketplace revolution of global dimensions – some overall ‘shape’ to the information that has been acquired helps both the researcher in communicating her/his findings and the client in comprehending them.

The process of shaping this information generally comes after the research findings have been gathered; as the moderator moves on to the question *now we’ve got the information, what does it all mean?*

To construct a meaningful shape out of any collection of raw material, it becomes necessary to look first for any patterns that can be perceived within the material to hand.

Collins Dictionary defines pattern as

an arrangement of repeated or corresponding parts, decorative motifs, etc

and as an example of everyday usage it offers:

although the notes seemed random, a careful listener could detect a pattern

Pattern provides the order, structure, or rhythm, that we (carefully listening researchers) can recognise; and thus perhaps outline a unifying ‘shape’ underlying what might otherwise appear to be a collection of random, unrelated phenomena.

Patterns point up molecular links, which can reveal important sub-structures. And using these connections and sub-structures the researcher can go on to discern larger, more complex, more holistic concepts about what’s going on in the widest sense: in the minds and cultures of target audiences, in the client’s market sector, and in the culture as a whole.

Like all other forms of market research, semiotics concerns itself with finding patterns in seemingly disparate bits of information. The key difference from qual (and quant) is that, by and large, semiotic information isn’t primarily gathered from ‘respondents’; either individually or in groups.

Outflanking the consumer

Most (non-semiotic) market research starts from an *a priori* assumption: that consumers are in charge of their own belief systems. That they understand and can explain their own social behaviour; and can thus answer key questions about the driving forces behind their choices in the marketplace, their attitudes to products, services, brands, advertising,

packaging, retail environments - and more or less anything else that crops up during discussions and interviews.

Qualitative research (more than quantitative) at least understands that these 'answers' may not fit within a totally rational framework. Indeed, anecdotal narrative and personal opinion are often supplemented by the use of psychologically-based projective techniques and mind games, to find out more about unconscious motivations.

However, whatever the individual moderator's approach, qualitative research *by and large* makes two giant assumptions about its task:

- !! that the consumer somehow holds the answer - or the key to the answer
- !! that 'the consumer' is a free, self-determining agent

Given these two assumptions, it follows that the best way of getting inside consumers' heads is by some form of discussion and/or interrogation. And it is this conclusion that ultimately evolved into the focus groups and depth interviews of qualitative research.

Semiotics not only questions these two assumptions; it looks elsewhere to find the underlying 'shape' that structures its information inputs. Semiotic theory proposes that we, people, are not as independent-minded and self-determined as we like to think we are. Rather that we are all creatures of our *cultures*; and we perceive the world, draw up our value-systems and make (and share) our group meanings in accordance with the perceptions, values and meanings of the particular culture we belong to.

'People like us'

Members of any one culture see themselves as a set of '*people like us*' when they compare themselves with members of other cultures and/or sub-cultures; mostly the others comprise '*people not like us*'.

Given the basic axiom that 'culture rules', it would hardly make for effective information-gathering to ask respondents to explain the processes and ramifications of their own cultures; in other words how they have been 'constructed' into consumers. Apart from the difficulties such a task would present, the results would at best amount to no more than hearsay evidence.

Semiotics starts from the other end. Instead of interrogating respondents (the 'constructs' of their culture) semiotic analysis begins by directly interrogating the culture for itself, in order to relate consumer responses to the cultural foundation on which they rest.

But where do we look to interrogate culture? Where and how does it show itself? And how will we recognise it when we see it?

The first major problem for the semiotic investigator is that culture *hides*. It lurks in the nooks and crannies of the cultural ‘group-mind’; built from all the assumptions and taken-for-granted meanings shared by any group of ‘people like us’.

However, these assumptions do show up once they can be seen as just that – assumptions – when they are placed within the context of the communication system (or *discourse*) in which they are buried. Here are three simplified but typical examples of such group-meanings, and the area of cultural discourse one might expect to find them:

Something’s got to be done about the traffic on our roads
(parent-of-young-children-type discourse)

Don’t the Spanish eat late!
(first-time-British-tourist-type discourse)

Advertising has no influence over what I buy
(middle-aged-British-C2-male-type discourse)

Every culture or sub-culture expresses itself through the overall ‘package’ of communications that form its *discourse*. Discourse is the expression of that culture’s own particular worldview: made up of an overall mix of relevant TV, radio, films, books, music, advertising, jokes, folklore, personal conversation (even focus groups!) – all embodying similar cultural assumptions and taken-for-granted meanings.

There are, of course, fewer true mass cultures than there are sub-cultures. In UK, we each belong to a gender culture, an age cohort culture, an ethnic culture, probably a ‘class’ culture, possibly a regional culture, and maybe a religious culture. And that’s about all on this mass scale.

But within these broad groupings we participate, at different times, in a great number of sub-cultures, each with a distinctive discourse of its own: *eg* the fashion sub-culture discourse, the food discourse, the political discourse, the financial discourse, the pop music discourse, the New Age discourse, the market research discourse, etc., etc.

Most of us participate in several of these sub-cultural discourses, according to our need-states at the time and place. And during that time, and in that place, we also put on the appropriate sub-cultural ‘hat’, under which we share the assumptions, attitudes and taken-for-granted meanings of the ‘people like us’ we have (albeit temporarily) joined.

Every discourse is thus the ‘voice’ of the culture and/or sub-culture that created it; and as such, discourse becomes a rich and rewarding universe – a happy hunting ground – for semiotic analysis.

Analysing discourse (1): Communication codes

In order to analyse any discourse, the semiotician looks first for the pattern of communication codes that structure it. Communication codes, with their understood and shared assumptions, are a form of cultural shorthand; and whether visual, verbal, aural or in any combination they are typical expressions of the discourse (and the culture that discourse represents) at any particular moment in its history.

(The familiar influence, for example, of Microsoft PowerPoint on the presentational styles at current MRS Conferences is an example of the power of a communication code.)

Styles of discourse change over time, as a consequence of technology, fashion, economics, politics, etc. The 1990s motoring discourse is in a great many ways different from the motoring discourse of the 1960s. Car culture has moved in a number of new directions. For example:

Technologically towards higher car speeds over longer distances, with improved (and sometimes too taken-for-granted) safety measures: disc brakes, safety straps, air-bags, etc

Politically towards much more awareness of and concern for the environment, threatened by pollution from the internal combustion engine

Socially towards wider car usage, with growing awareness of worsening traffic congestion, parking problems, traffic calming schemes, etc

Economically towards greater car ownership, multi-car families, etc

Demographically towards a higher proportion of women drivers, with consequent spin-off effects on car size, type and design

Culturally towards increased security and personal protection fears: accompanying children to school; installing car alarms, carrying mobile phones, etc; awareness of road rage

To help track such developments, it is necessary to classify movement-codes in some way. And because we are looking at these code-changes over real historical time, we recommend using three simple classifications: *residual, dominant and emergent*.

Residual codes are leftovers from an earlier set of cultural values and usages. Looked at from today, although still in existence, residual codes are steadily weakening as they become increasingly outdated and either disappear altogether or get replaced by newer codes.

An example of a residual code in the motoring discourse could be, for example: the AA man on his motorbike, with a box of tricks designed for roadside assistance with what were the more mechanically-repairable cars of the time.

Dominant codes are the codes of the present day, and often difficult to spot as codes because they are all around us (*‘That’s not a code, that’s what is’*). In the motoring discourse, one good culturally-rich example is the rapid growth in the 4WD sector (even among urban-only car owners).

Emergent codes are of particular interest to the analyst (and to the client!) Because they are not yet fully formed, so to speak, they are signposts to the future as it is now appearing over the cultural horizon. As such, emergent codes tend – at this point in time – to be a more mixed bunch than the other two classifications. All candidates for the future; they are today still experimental, often tentative, sometimes outrageous when seen through ‘dominant eyes’. But each of them is currently jockeying for a pole position – and one of them at least is set to achieve dominance tomorrow.

In the car discourse we could point, as emergent examples, to the many attempts at an acceptable, practical, alternative-powered urban car; to road pricing and car-tagging, and to the outcome of the present debate about the future mix between car and public transport usage

These three code classifications are never fixed at any one time. The whole process is one of continuing movement: *emergent to dominant, dominant to residual, residual into oblivion*. While apparent reverse movements sometimes occur (eg a 70s-style revival) these are never true reversals, much more a backwards (postmodern) glance: the 1970s through the eyes of 2000.

These three code-areas, and the examples, also show the way codes tend to simplify, and assume more of a ‘shape’ (clustered around what we now see as the dominant codes of the time) as they move back in time towards residuality; gradually becoming hindsight (with which we all have 20/20 vision!).

It’s easy to conjure up a clear (albeit over-simplified) picture of Edwardian England, or the Paris of the Impressionists, or swinging 1960s London. But when one tries forecasting the dominant codes of London in, say, 2005 the task becomes more difficult.

Every discourse, at *any* time, can be classified into to its three-part balance between residual, dominant and emergent codes; because all three codes are always present in all discourses, albeit at different strengths.

Using the same system of groupings (and a sufficiently representative universe) we could, for example, classify cereal packs, cosmetic ads, pop music styles, TV commercial genres, bank architecture, holiday destinations, kitchen design, eating habits, political movements, etc., etc.

Analysing discourse (2): Contexts

Using the simple 3-part code-classification system outlined above, the researcher should be able to broadly analyse the code changes in any discourse; and this way get to grips with the cultural changes and paradigm shifts taking place in that discourse.

Armed with this theoretical system, we should now be ready to try it out on some real-life discourses.

But *which* discourses? The answer to this question depends of course upon the subject area under examination.

Think of discourses as *contexts*. We (human beings) recognise and understand any object we encounter by putting our immediate sense impressions of it into some kind of (pre-existing) contextual framework. This way we give objects meaning for us; and can position new objects (or ideas, or concepts, or situations, or opinions) within our overall worldview.

Contexts provide us with this meaning-frame. (When publicly criticised, for example, a politician often complains his comments were taken ‘out of context’).

We all contextualise most objects instantaneously. We recognise a Rolex within the context of all watches; an iMac within the context of all personal computers; a Jack Russell within the context of all dogs; and a dog within the context of all animals.

But very few objects exist within a single context. Certainly, in the commercial world, brands and products exist within – or are connected to – a number of contexts.

Our perceptions of any brand or product are thus focused or modified by all the contexts that include it or impinge on it in any way – and for most brands in today’s marketplaces these contexts can be both numerous and interactive, as I shall try to illustrate.

Every context is, at bedrock, a sub-culture of its own. And although hidden (like all culture, as pointed out earlier) it can be analysed via the (visible) *discourse*. through which it expresses itself.

However, because they are so varied and numerous, discourses can't be classified in accordance with a simple, all-embracing 3-part formula, like codes. For practical purposes (and for the 'part-time' semiotician this stage involves using your own judgment, experience and commonsense) all possible candidate discourses influencing any brand need to be filtered down to a manageable number.

Here are two suggested criteria for prioritising contextualising discourses:

degree of (overall) cultural importance
degree of (direct/brand) relevance.

Let's suppose we were analysing, for example, a bottle of Famous Grouse whisky. Which discourses would we identify as providing its main contextualising influences?

A few moments of thought reveal no shortage of candidates.

First there is Famous Grouse's own discourse. This is expressed via its own ads, its packs, its point of sale; its whole tone of voice.

Next there are the discourses of its main whisky competitors: Bells, Teachers, Grants, etc.

One might certainly also include the discourse of the growing malt whisky sector: Glenfiddich, Glenlivet, etc. Which in turn introduces a further discourse of 'gifts' and 'luxury', etc.

However, as previously stated, the aim of this paper is to provide a practical semiotic 'add-on' for qualitative researchers. And this calls for necessary simplification of the full analytic methodology.

Next to identify is what we call the 'sector discourse' (in this instance the discourse of the spirits sector: whisky, gin, vodka, brandy, etc) Every industry sector has its own distinctive styles of language and communication conventions (which is one reason why, for example, most pharmaceutical advertising looks more like other pharmaceutical advertising than, say, like fashion advertising).

This listing of discourses could be (and in full analysis should be) widened to include the whole alcoholic drinks sector discourse (wine, beer, etc in addition to spirits); and even the total beverages discourse (soft drinks, mineral water, tea and coffee, etc)

Finally, there is the discourse of popular culture in its view of whisky and spirit-drinking in general.

To reduce this universe of discourses to more manageable proportions, we would suggest concentrating on the two priorities listed earlier. The most

directly relevant discourses to the brand would seem to be its own, plus those of its key competitors; and the most important discourses in terms of wider cultural implications are popular culture itself, plus the spirits sector discourse in general.

Our universe for analysis is thus

Famous Grouse's own discourse

To analyse this means collecting as much as possible of Famous Grouse advertising and packaging, across as wide a time-frame as reasonably possible (in order to observe and identify code-changes)

Key competitors

Advertising/packageing of those key competitors (again over time; about ten years or more if possible)

Spirits sector

Samples of relevant articles from the drinks trade press, special industry features/commentators from the national press, etc

Popular culture

Sample relevant extracts from TV soaps, documentaries, tabloid press; observation in pubs, off-licences, supermarkets, etc

When sufficient material has been gathered exemplifying each of these four discourses, each discourse should then be 'mapped', using the 3-code system (remember the search is for movement 'patterns', similarities, groupings and clusters in the material – as well as for hypothetical reasons behind those movements. What are the driving forces: economic, social, political, etc?)

Where are the dominant codes? Which are the residual codes they have developed from? Why?

Which new codes seem to be emerging? And again, why?

Which codes are being overtaken, moving into the past, becoming residual? And once more, why?

When that mapping has been done, comes the all-important question of comparison between discourses.

Which, for example, are the emergent codes within the spirits sector; and how do these relate to the emergent spirit drinking codes within popular culture?

Who are the spirit discourse pace-setters: men or women, old or young?

Which kind of drink-codes appear to be on the verge of residuality within popular culture – and how is this reflected in the industry sector discourse?

Where does the whisky discourse stand within the codes of the spirits sector? Is it a leading edge discourse or is it trailing behind?

Where does the Famous Grouse discourse stand within all these contexts? Is it ahead of the game? Level with it? Or falling back?

We invariably find (in keeping with semiotic theory and our own practical experience) that the key ‘driving force discourse’ in this whole inter-discourse analysis is, without doubt, popular culture. If popular culture is moving in a certain way, there is little chance for a brand (or even a whole industry sector) to reverse that movement.

The objective is to precisely identify the way(s) the culture is moving; and to ensure that the brand is – if not leading the mainstream – at least keeping pace with the flow

Analysing discourse (3): The preferred reading

What further semiotic information, over and above code-movements, can analysis of discourse reveal about the culture it represents? Although beyond the scope of this paper, it may perhaps whet the appetite of any prospective semiotician to indicate something of these wider horizons.

To recap:

discourse is the ‘voice’ of a culture or sub-culture (or context) made up from the total ‘package’ of communication it contains

as such, discourse is also the vehicle for communicating the assumptions, taken-for-granted meanings, values and worldview that distinguish the ‘people like us’ of that culture from other cultures

If we combine these two points with our original semiotic axiom that we are all products of culture (*ie* created by our culture) this could therefore equally be expressed as: *the ‘reader’ is created by the discourse.*

And this in turn could be re-expressed as: *discourse creates its own readers.* In other words, every communication within that discourse addresses itself – and relates itself – to the (imaginary) group of ‘people like us’ it believes (assumes) shares its cultural worldview. In semiotic terminology it expects ‘a preferred reading’.

If the would-be analyst, even for a moment, can culturally ‘step outside’ the preferred reading of almost any communication in any discourse, many of the assumptions, taken-for-granted meanings and values of its discourse stand out like beacons (you can test this theory for yourself on any ad!).

However, without going deeper into semiotic analysis, the basic *practical* argument of this paper still stands:

Qualitative researchers can add value to their work by concentrating simply on the three communication codes (*residual, dominant, emergent*) applied to the most important/relevant discourses bearing on their research subject.

One final note. Although this DIY form of semiotic analysis can be carried out at any stage during the research process, we would also argue that its greatest benefit comes from using it at the beginning.

This way, its broadbrush structural hypotheses can be of most help in focusing the qualitative agenda with greater precision.