

**Multimodality in Literary Text**  
**Lecture 2**  
**Social Semiotics: Text-Image Relations**  
**By: Lerissa Daniela, S.S. M.Pd.**

**Learning objective**

At the end of this meeting, you are expected to understand:

1. The basic concept of social semiotics
2. Semiotic resources in social semiotics
3. The researchers of social semiotics and their approaches
4. Text-image relations in media framing
5. The examples of social semiotic analysis in literary works

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**A. Basic Concept of Social Semiotics**

In the previous lecture, we have discussed about the basic semiotics, the three researchers discuss it, their concepts of semiotics, the connection between this study with English major and lastly, we did try to analyze the contents in three literary works by utilizing the semiotic concept. In this lecture, we will continue with the discussion about Social Semiotics. Different from its basic concept, social semiotics is the study of how signs and symbols are used in society to create meaning. It looks at how language, image, and other communication modes are used to convey messages and ideas. Furthermore, social semiotics studies how the modes of communication are developed to represent people's understanding about the world and how the power relations are shaped with others (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2009). Social semiotics has been influenced not only by the formal rules or regulation, but social interaction also becomes the significant factor. This study views a person as a connected package of social relations where he or she communicates, makes signs through semiotic resources. This connection is built when we interact with different kinds of people (Kress, 2010).

Social semiotics is interested in multimodal objects of study and in multimodal or interdisciplinary theories and methods. There are two main principles of social semiotics (van Leeuwen, 2005):

1. **Social semiotics is not a 'pure' theory or independent field.** It can be utilized on its own when it is applied to specific issues. In some cases, it requires to be integrated with the other social theories or concepts to get a whole meaning of something. Such interdisciplinary is an essential aspect in social semiotics.
2. **Social semiotics is a structure of 'investigation'** in which it cannot give direct answer to certain cases. Rather, it formulates the questions and ways to find the answers. Therefore, the answer itself depend on us as the interpreter. Different interpreters with different backgrounds would possibly have different representation toward something.

Especially when the social semiotic is implemented in the field of communication, it is needed to apply theories of communication to see how communication does and should function in the forms of social interaction. Kress (2010) elaborated three objectives of a social-semiotic theory of communication:

1. That the community **participants have the same entry to the semiotic resources** as well as the other **cultural resources** that could affect their social world for their own advantage.
2. That as a participant of a whole community, they could **contribute to the common purposes**. The contribution could be in the form of productively and constantly dealing with cultural, semiotic, and social problems in which they could design, represent, and communicate their offering solutions.
3. That in the social semiotics actions of these participants, they are **aware of the sense of how the semiotic actions they do would affect the others** and they act so they will not bother the potentials for actions of others.

Therefore, the meaning-making and its assumptions are constructed by social, cultural, economic, and political factors. The assumption argues that representation, production and dissemination, and the understanding offered by society are used within the frame of what is socially possible at any one time (Kress, 2010). This condition will lead to the social forms, structures, and processes. They could shape the effects on forms, processes, and possibilities of communication, on meaning-making, on environments for learning and hence on the formation of identity, subjectivity, and power relations.

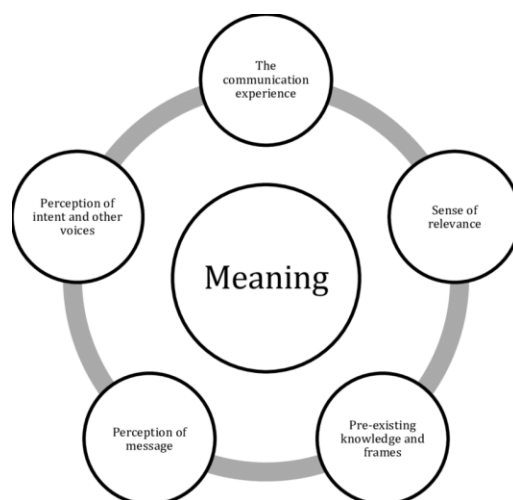


Figure 1 (Ballantyne, 2018)

Based on the theoretical framework of social semiotics, Ballantyne (2018) elaborated the five aspects of meaning which are:

1. The process of meaning-making is **influenced by the participants' background knowledge** about communication as a whole and how it is used in a certain situation together with the other modes of visual representation.

2. Participants' perceptions of the message, how they understand or frame it, makes a significant impact in the meaning-making. It **defines the difference of interpretation**, as described by Barthes' (1977) about the idea of denotation and connotation, and sees the respond of interpreting the sign that appears in visual representation.
3. The understanding of a message is closely tied to how the participants **perceive its relevance within the social context** of the communication event. It is questioning whether the identified audience considers themselves as relevant participants with a need for certain information. This determination is influenced by the social setting, the framing of the visual representations, and the social aspects of conveying meaning (Rose in Ballantyne, 2018).
4. The social and cultural aspects of meaning and communication **highlighted the significance of audiences' preexisting frames of reference and knowledge** in the process of creating meaning. As previously mentioned, communication always unfolds within a social context, and interpretations are thus shaped by the audience's interpretive resources.
5. The concept of communication acknowledges that **the way audiences perceive the sender's intentions and other voices is also part of the meaning making process**. This extends beyond simply understanding the sender's intended message, it also encompasses the exchange and negotiation of viewpoints, as interpretation occurs in relation to other voices and perspectives within the social context.

Social interaction via semiotic means produces new meanings. The work of semiotics in the social interaction produces and predicts the new social semiotic forms, entities, and process by extending and transforming the previous interaction (Kress, 2010).

To sum up, social semiotics does not focus on what a sign stands for. Social semiotics focuses on the process of sign construction made by the producers in society and suggests that meaning-making is a social process. Sign and communication depend on who produces the sign, how and why the sign is produced, and to be interpreted in what way (Perdana, 2020).

## B. Semiotic Resources as Key Aspects in Social Semiotics

When talking about social semiotics, we talk about semiotic resources. Semiotic resources is a key term in social semiotics. It refers to all signs used to communicate. This includes: actions, facial expressions, gestures, speech, and other signs appear. As if semiotic resources can be in in any kind of forms, van Leeuwen elaborated it as follow:

*"I extend this idea to the 'grammar' of other semiotic modes, and define semiotic resources as the actions and artefacts we use to communicate, whether they are produced physiologically – with our vocal apparatus; with the muscles we use to create facial expressions and gestures, etc. – or by means of technologies – with pen, ink and paper; with computer hardware and software; with fabrics, scissors and sewing machines, etc."* (van Leeuwen, 2005)

Therefore, semiotic resources are not only about speech or writing or picture making. It could be everything that we do or make in different ways that construct different social and cultural meaning. Simple example is “walking”, yes, a simple activity of walking. Walking can be a simple example of semiotic resources because there are many ways of walking. People walk differently. It could be because of their body and legs gesture that makes their walks different from the others. Males and females walk differently. Male’s walk tends to be masculine while woman’s walk tends to be more feminine. Different background defines different walk style as well. Regular people’s walk would be different from models and soldiers. From this simple activity of walking, people express who they are, what they do, how they perceive themselves, etc. For this reason, social image and structure is naturally constructed and meant to be something.

Semiotic resources are socially created and so they bring certain social sustainable patterns in the social occasions. These resources have never been fixed; they were naturally rigidly fixed (Kress, 2010). In the process of meaning-making, human cultures creating and framing the world in which they wish it should be. A culture will offer its unique semiotic resources to frame the signs, including to determine the subject to be framed, how it is framed, and types of the available framing. These sign framing could be variative from one culture to another. Therefore, there is no meaning without framing.

Semiotic resources also appear in communication structure. The semiotic resources in communication is multimodal by its speech, gaze, actions and touch. A gaze can produce spoken statement that leads to an action. A look may also lead to a touch, for when you are looking at your spouse’s eyes while you give your hand as if you give a sign to hold his hand. Communication has happened when a participant pays attention to the aspect of the communication in which he or she frame and interpret it as a message for himself or herself. These attention, framing, and interpretation become semiotic sequence that involves all the participants (Kress, 2010). Therefore, communication happens only when there is interpretation, that is the main criteria.

## **C. Social Semiotics Researchers and Their Approaches**

### **1. Michael Halliday**

He wrote a book entitled “Language as Social Semiotic” in 1978 in which his Systemic Functional Language (SFL) approach is still accepted until now. According to Halliday, semiotic resources of language are molded by their utilization in conveying meaning and the social functions they serve. He argues that each sign fulfills three functions in concert:

- a. Ideational metafunction: They convey information about the world.
- b. Interpersonal metafunction: They establish the interpersonal relations between individuals.
- c. Textual metafunction: They bring the connections with other signs to build a cohesive text.

### **2. Theo van Leeuwen**

His book entitled “Introducing Social Semiotics” in 2005, van Leeuwen elaborated on the concept that social semiotics represents a novel and distinctive approach to both the theory and practice of semiotics. Unlike the earlier structuralist emphasis on understanding the internal relationships within self-contained systems, social semiotics delves into the utilization of symbols within specific social context.

Within the scope of social semiotics, the focal point shifts from merely studying the ‘sign’ to examining how people employ semiotic ‘resources.’ These resources serve a dual purpose: first, in the creation of communicative artefacts and events, and second, in the interpretation of these artifacts and events within the framework of particular social setting and practices.

Social semiotics is geared towards several key objectives: it encourages observation and analysis, fostering a deeper understanding of the richness and complexity of semiotic production and interpretation. Furthermore, it promotes social intervention by facilitating the discovery of new semiotic resources for certain communication purposes.

### **3. Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress**

As well as van Leeuwen, a shift from the emphasis on language to other semiotic systems was pioneered by Hodge and Kress in their book entitled “Social Semiotics” in 1998. They mentioned that social semiotics is a field of study that focuses on how meaning is created and communicated through social and cultural practices. It examines the ways in which signs, symbols, and language are used to convey messages and construct social identities. Social semiotics is interdisciplinary, drawing on theories and methodologies from linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and other fields. It is a useful tool for analyzing a wide range of cultural artifacts, from advertising and media to art and literature.

## **D. Text-Image Relations**

Images are powerful tools for communication. They can convey complex ideas quickly and effectively, and can evoke strong emotions in the viewer. By analyzing the visual grammar of images, we can better understand how they work and what they mean. Even though, there are no words in an image but there is a depiction which consists of semiotic relations from its vectors or lines which connect all the participants in the image itself. As viewers, especially the ones who learn semiotics, we often can see that images could speak even louder than words and sentences. We can interpret an image in such a way we have the background knowledge related to that. It means that each person can have different perception an image.

I give two examples of controversial photos taken from boredpanda.com

## The dangers of a one sided story



Figure 2. (Caunt, J., 2018)



Figure 3. (Caunt, J., 2018)

Both pictures encourage us as viewers to be aware of media literacy because media is a powerful tool in creating certain framing of the society. Both pictures can be seen from different angles and point of views depends which can be utilized by the media company to deliver their agenda in framing a story. Different media companies can present different representations even from the same pictures. Photo of Prince William in Figure 2 is taken when Kate Middleton and him presented their third royal baby publicly. Meanwhile Figure 3 shows two US marines and an Iraqi soldier in one frame. Figure 2 shows Prince William from two different angles. The top is from the side angle while the below is from the front angle. The top photo of the side angle shows as if he is raising his middle finger which is controversial to public because he is part of Royal family. However, the front angle shows that it is not a middle finger but he is showing three fingers at the same time. The real and complete version of the situation of figure 3 is shown in the middle picture. However, media can manipulate it by taking only the half part of the picture. If the media is pro to the Iraqi soldier, then they will take the left angle where the US marine is represented as if he is going to kill the Iraqi soldier with his rifle. On the other side, if the media is pro to the US marines, then they will take the right angle where the US marine is represented as if he helps the Iraqi soldier by giving him some water to drink. The power of image is also related to the media literacy and media framing. This is about text-image relations in the social semiotics.

When text and images are used together, they create a unique relationship that can enhance or change meaning of each element. By analyzing the inter-semiotic relations between text and image, we can better understand the messages being conveyed or the hidden agenda they try to conceal. The example of text-image relation is taken from [tirto.id](#) Instagram account. Tirto.id' Instagram is one of digital media company in Indonesia who posts news related to the current issues in the society. One of its posts that attracts my attention is the following.



Figure 4. (tirdoid, 2023)



Figure 5. (mixueindonesia)

This post is dedicated to parents on how they can prevent their children from diabetes. What makes this post interesting is because the text and image are contradictory one to another but somehow implicitly frame a certain representation and message to the viewers. The big white snow ball doll in the middle looks like a Mixue mascot/ logo (Figure 5) which is a currently popular ice cream brand in Indonesia. The two smaller dolls at the bottom left and right are called ondel-ondel, a doll from Betawi, one of Indonesian culture. There is a small statement above the right ondel-ondel “di-xun xing xue” which is similar with the Mixue name.

The main point of this post is that it explains three tips to avoid the children from diabetes, which are (1) manage the diet from the early age, (2) educate about sweet foods, and (3) encourage the children to actively exercise. These three steps are contradictory with the Mixue logo look-a-like in which this ice cream and tea brand can be one of the diabetes triggers. So, implicitly, this post encourages the readers not to consume too much Mixue products.

### E. Social Semiotics Analysis

In this part we will see the examples of the text-image relations in several contents and we will analyze them from the perspective of social semiotics. Contents related to social semiotics can be found in the political and social areas.



Figure 6 (ABC/wires, 2020)

The first example (figure 6) is taken from ABC news website. This picture shows two different newspaper covers from two different media companies. The left one is from Daily Mail, while the right side is from The Guardian. The same cover pictures of Megan Markle and Harry are shown in both covers. However, the headlines states differently. Daily Mail puts three headlines covering the whole page together with the picture. Meanwhile The Guardian writes simpler headline. This figure can be a very interesting example to be discussed from the perspective of Social Semiotics, especially related to the text-image relations.

Daily Mail:

The word “Bombshell”, “dramatically”, and the capital “WITHOUT” in Daily Mail give negative emphasize toward Megan and Harry. Additionally, the headline is divided into three sections with different fonts, sizes, and colors which lead the readers unconsciously to a certain framing. The cover picture portrays the same framing as the headlines. Event though its cover picture is the same with the The Guardian but the angle and color contrast of Daily Mail is different. Megan and Harry’s picture is taken from a little more to the side and low angle with a full shot of their body. According to interactional metafunction, low angle indicates power. In line with the headlines, the picture tries to show that Megan and Harry can be independent even without their royal title or background. Their smiles turn from more than just being happy or confidence but the side low angle tends to highlight their arrogance about their quit from the Buckingham Palace. It is like they can finally get their freedom and not being tied by all the royal’s protocols.

The Guardian:

In contrast with Daily Mail, The Guardian gives more positive portrayal toward Megan and Harry from its headline and cover picture. The headline uses neutral choice of word, not intimidating certain party. It is just written with a single quotation mark ‘step back as senior royal’ without any additional

dramatical information given as Daily Mail does. The headline consists of only nine words with the same font, size, and color. It does not try to emphasize to certain point. This Megan and Harry issue does not cover the who page because on the below part there is still other news provided. If Daily Mail mentions “Queen” in its headline, The Guardian focuses to Meghan and Harry only without including other Buckingham Palace members. It gives perception that the step back is done based on their own decision and it is done peacefully without any conflict with any of the Royal members. The cover picture also supports the positive portrayal. The angle of the picture is taken from the front side with an eye level shot. The warm color tone is very much in contrast with the Daily Mail as they use stronger color contrast. As we read the headline of The Guardian, the Meghan and Harry’s smiles looks sincere as if their step back is not supposed to be exaggerated.



Figure 7 (Pasaribu, Saputra, 2015)

The second example (figure 7) is taken from an Indonesian digital media named Antara News. This figure shows a female beggar who sits on the side of street, exposed to the sunlight, expecting money or alms from people who pass the street. She brings her children with her which becomes a common practice of beggars in Indonesia. The intention of beggars bringing their children, or even babies, is to increase the sense of empathy of the society. This issue becomes an interesting case study of social semiotics. Their expectation is that people would have more pity on them when they bring their children or babies. Then these beggars take advantage from the society’s empathy to get more money from them. Sometimes the children or baby that they carry are not even their own children but they rent it. Which means, what is even worse is that there are parents out there who rent out their children to get money. It is indeed a sad social practice in Indonesia. The practice of begging will become very widespread during the fasting month (*bulan puasa*). Those who are not a beggar can become a beggar in fasting month. They consider it as an “seasonal work” to earn twice or three times higher income. It is because fasting month is believed to be a month full of blessings where the muslims will give more to the ones in need. However, this kindness faith is exploited by the “seasonal beggars” to get money for their own benefit.

## **Summary and Conclusion:**

Social semiotics does not focus on what a sign stands for. Social semiotics focuses on the process of sign construction made by the producers in society and suggests that meaning-making is a social process. Sign and communication depend on who produces the sign, how and why the sign is produced, and to be interpreted in what way (Perdana, 2020). When talking about social semiotics, we talk about semiotic resources. It refers to all signs used to communicate. This includes: actions, facial expressions, gestures, speech, and other signs appear. There were 3 social semiotic researchers mentioned previously: Michael Halliday, Theo van Leeuwen, and Roberth Hodge and Gunther Kress. Social Semiotics is closely related to text-image relations. Images are powerful tools for communication. They can convey complex ideas quickly and effectively, and can evoke strong emotions in the viewer. When text and images are used together, they create a unique relationship that can enhance or change meaning of each element. By analyzing the inter-semiotic relations between text and image, we can better understand the messages being conveyed or the hidden agenda they try to conceal.

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Figure 1

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Figure 2 and 3

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Figure 4

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Figure 5

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Figure 6

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Figure 7

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