Book Review

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Hodge, B. (2016). *Social Semiotics for a Complex World: Analysing Language and Social Meaning*. Cambridge: Polity Press. xvii + 258 pages; ISBN: 9780745696218; £16.99 (pbk), £55 (hbk).

The intersection and synergy of language, meaning and society have long been the focus of research in social semiotics, a field in which Bob Hodge is one of the seminal scholars. In this book, the author follows and expands upon concepts and frameworks previously developed in *Language as Ideology* (Kress and Hodge 1979) and *Social Semiotics* (Hodge and Kress 1988), integrating novel theories adopted from different areas of research into a comprehensive model for understanding the three-way, dialogic relationship between language, meaning and society.

The aim of the book is laid out in the preface, in which Hodge repositions social semiotics research within the historical background from which it first emerged by incorporating it into a fuzzier, more dynamic framework that can account for the scale of complexity in language and meaning (p. xv). The purpose of the work is to use a 'whole-of-linguistics' approach to bridge the Chomskyan and Hallidayan schools of thought, which in Hodge's view are complementary rather than competing.

Key and novel points throughout the book are italicised to highlight and emphasise the concepts introduced as well as to generate debate; a useful summary of the areas covered and their benefit for practice is provided at the end of each chapter. The new model for social semiotics is developed gradually - from theory to practice, with examples throughout - across the three parts of the book: (i) Principles and Practices (chapters 1-2), (ii) From Linguistics to Semiotics (chapters 3-5) and (iii) Meaning and Society (chapters 6-9).

The first chapter introduces the reader to key concepts in linguistics and semiotics which are central to the framework and which will recur throughout the book; the chapter focuses in particular on the interconnected items that sit at the centre of social semiotics: language, meaning and society, which are together defined as a 'complex system formed from intersections and relationships between these three systems' (p. 3). Since those relationships

and intersections always take place in context, the book makes a case for an approach that is multimodal, multidimensional, multiscalar and fuzzy.

In chapter 2, while the author reviews most of the linguistic and social theories that form the basis of social semiotics, he proceeds to reframe them in a way that coherently accommodates this new model. In this dynamic paradigm, according to Hodge, competing approaches such as structuralism and poststructuralism can coherently coexist as cooperative forces. An innovative aspect of this approach is in the way it embraces subjects that are generally deemed distant from semiotics such as chaos and complexity theory (Urry 2005), fractal theory (Mandelbrot 1977) and cybernetics (Wiener 1948). Grounded in sound empirical research and in such novel and interdisciplinary approaches, social semiotics can therefore better explain the shifting forces of reality and the transformations that the three-body system of language, meaning and society is constantly subject to, especially in the digital age, where information flows fast in a constantly-shifting context.

After reviewing and repositioning the body of literature that constitutes social semiotics, the book proceeds to analyse language and meaning in context by reinterpreting words (chapter 3), grammar (chapter 4) and meaning (chapter 5) as elements of the social semiotics model, since they 'function and have meaning only in context' (p. 68). The framework is built gradually but, as Hodge points out, it does not require the researcher to start from smaller language units in order to investigate large multiscalar constructs such as religion and ideology, constructs he calls 'big meanings.' Informed by fractal theory, his practice-based analysis acknowledges that social meanings are made and reproduced on different levels – from big meanings to the language units that constitute them. Complex analysis can therefore cover all levels in-between, moving 'between wholes at different levels, decomposing them into lower constituents, recombining them in new wholes' (p. 121).

While the first part introduces the tools needed in the framework and the second part bridges the disciplines of linguistics and semiotics, the third part of the book builds upon the framework laid out in previous chapters and positions social semiotics as a model that can 'transform purely linguistic theories, which can then contribute better to general semiotics' (p. 152). This section is therefore especially relevant to those interested in Critical Discourse Analysis, as it aims to reconnect linguistics and social semiotics with the semiotics of reality (chapter 6) and ideology (chapter 7) in a multiscalar model (chapter 8). Hodge's understanding of semiotic reality and ideology is grounded in Marxist theory and borrows from Wittgenstein, Foucault, Gramsci and Orwell, and he thoroughly illustrates everyday examples of shifting, contested and negotiated meanings in action: from Breivik's controversial manifesto justifying his mass killings to a racist reframing of a television advertisement portraying a Muslim woman, from the cultural legacy of Orientalism to the reappropriation of the word 'slut' by the Slutwalk campaign, this book makes a strong case for a social semiotics that not only is grounded in empirical research but also investigates the strong reciprocal, non-linear links between language and society, and how these links create meaning.

Acknowledging that reality is a place of struggle, Hodge provides a thorough account of the ongoing transformations and the effects of power and solidarity

on meaning in current neo-liberal contexts. Central to Hodge's work is his interest in the contradictory nature of meaning, power and signs. 'Dysfunctional' instances of meaning – causal discontinuities in semiotic reality – are not dismissed as limitations but recognised as part of the paradigm; their shifting relationship with what he considers 'functional,' predictable meanings both reflects the complexity and conflicts intrinsic in social relationships and justifies the need for a fuzzier, multiscalar analysis that can account for social forces across all fractal scales of society. An example of such conflictual complexity involves the contradictory context surrounding the popular Charlie Hebdo comic strip published after the terrorist attack – which generated contradictory meanings when it juxtaposed an image of Muhammad (whose depiction is considered blasphemy) holding a sign that reads "Je suis Charlie." Hodge claims that instances of extreme social and political impact, such as the Charlie Hebdo one, have stronger effects on meaning than instances that occur in non-critical conditions, as the former arise in extreme, 'far-from equilibrium' conditions (Prigogine and Stengers 1984), and therefore are more likely to affect big meanings.

In Hodge's framework, every atom of meaning is significant both as the product and the producer of social practices, never separate from its context and constantly active in the dialogic chain of reality. With such an interdisciplinary and inclusive approach, *Social Semiotics for a Complex World* synthesises decades of work in linguistics and semiotics in an impactful and comprehensive work, essential for both its theoretical and practical underpinnings. The book is intended for students and researchers in linguistics; however, given the scope of the themes treated and the practical purposes it aims to satisfy, it has the potential to inform and extend its sphere of influence to fields such as psychology, media and cultural studies. As Hodge points out, his framework aims to support and complement – rather than replace – more traditional approaches in linguistics.

References

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