

Demystifying semiotics: some key questions answered

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Introduction

This paper is entitled 'demystifying semiotics', so let me begin by talking briefly about why semiotics needs demystifying and explaining why I would want to try to do that.

On the one hand, semiotics seems to be everywhere one looks. It has been around for a long time, it gets at least a cursory mention in the standard textbooks on researching consumer behaviour and there probably isn't a single market research supplier or client who doesn't know of its existence. On the other hand, in practice, semiotics is hardly used. Not many agencies offer it and I find that while clients are often quite excited about semiotics once it has been properly explained, few people request it as a service up front. When they do, it is rarely the only thing or the main thing they are interested in – it is treated more often as a supplement to another form of research such as qualitative groups. Things are changing – there is more interest in semiotics now than there used to be – but generally people remain cautious about dipping their toe in the water. I think that is a great pity because as someone who has been involved with semiotics and its wider family of research methods for a long time I am tremendously enthusiastic about what it can do for clients that more traditional forms of market research cannot offer. I will share some of those benefits with you in this paper. Ultimately I hope to help spread semiotics around. I would like to see it become much more mainstream so that it is more widely available through more agencies, and so that more clients come to see how easy semiotics can be both to understand and use.

This is quite a long-ranging task, so let me narrow it down a little and explain what I will be doing within the confines of this paper. In my experience, when the conversation turns to semiotics the same questions come up again and again. First, there is the question: What is semiotics

and what can it do for me? Generally, people either feel vague about what semiotics is, or else they have an idea of *what* it is but not *why* anyone would want to do it! Second, I will turn to the question of method: *How* is semiotics done? At the heart of this question is the problem of the black box. People can see that some data or analytic material goes in at one end and some conclusions come out at the other end but what goes on in the middle is a black box; it's a mystery. That is a problem because it does not help clients to feel confident about semiotic research and in particular it makes life difficult when you are trying to pass on the findings to other people and to explain why you spent the research budget on this particular methodology. The third question asks: How does one evaluate semiotic findings? Because semiotics often focuses on material that the clients have produced themselves, people sometimes feel that the results of their semiotic research will not really amount to news or else they suspect that the agency cannot offer anything more than opinion on material that they already know well. Thus in talking about how to evaluate semiotic findings I will be discussing different kinds of opinion and what it can add to clients' own knowledge and expertise. Finally, I will discuss whether it is necessary to supplement semiotics with another methodology such as groups. If you are going to spend money on semiotics you will want to know ahead of time: 'Is it usable on its own or is it only a way of adding value to ordinary qualitative research?' As we go along I will illustrate my points with examples from actual semiotic projects and I will also use some examples from everyday life.

What is semiotics and what can it do for me?

Semiotics is different from traditional qualitative research, which normally takes an *inside-out* perspective. Interviews and groups are geared to getting psychological phenomena such as perceptions, attitudes and beliefs out of people's heads. Semiotics takes an *outside-in* approach. It asks how these things get into people's heads in the first place. Where do they come from? The answer is that they come from the surrounding culture in which respondents (and semioticians!) participate. Here is a quick and easy example. Suppose your product is a packet of chocolate biscuits with a lot of gold on the packaging. When you show it to groups of consumers and ask 'What kind of biscuits are these?' you discover that people perceive them as 'luxury'. Now, there may be psychological factors at work here but usually when lots of people produce the same interpretation, it is reasonable to assume that at least part of the reason is because they are

drawing on shared cultural resources. In other words, when consumers agree that the biscuits seem ‘luxury’, it is reasonable to look to the culture they (and we) share in which, for example, gold is a very well-used shorthand for riches and wealth. The connection between gold and luxury is a *cultural* connection. Perhaps the defining feature of semiotics is that it takes the culture and not the consumer as the object of study.

Let me explain briefly what I mean by culture. To some people culture means history or anthropology or appreciating art – which does not have much to do with market research! In semiotics, culture is more about studying the ways that people *communicate* with each other, consciously and unconsciously, through things such as language, visual images and music. This is incredibly relevant to market research: what you have in semiotics is a methodology that is tailor-made for understanding packaging, advertising, all kinds of marketing literature and even 3D spaces such as retail environments. If you understand the unspoken cultural rules or *codes* that underpin contemporary communications and determine how people make sense of what everyone else is on about, that is useful in two ways. First, it is useful *strategically* in the sense of developing new communications strategies, for instance in NPD. Second, it is useful *tactically*, for instance to understand and replicate the secrets of successful communications, or to bring advertising or packaging in line with an established brand proposition.

OK, so semiotics can tell you things about culture and communication, for instance that gold may be interpreted as a *sign* for things like ‘luxury’. So far so good, but you may be feeling that that is rather obvious, so let me explain why there is a need for ongoing semiotic research. The answer is two-pronged, and it has to do with signs being flexible and sometimes elusive.

First, gold is not the reliable sign for luxury that it once was. It is gradually becoming *lapsed*. Take biscuits again. In the world of biscuits gold communicates luxury in a quite downmarket way. Mass-market ‘luxury’ products use very bright, shiny gold on their packaging and the biscuits themselves are likely to be covered in very thick chocolate, or have extra jam inside or whatever. There is a theme going on here to do with excess and abundance. Bright, shiny gold is just one element of that. If you look at biscuits that are very upmarket there is a contrasting theme of understatement and restraint. Really upmarket biscuits are much more likely to be half-dipped in chocolate than thickly coated, and they are currently being packaged in quite unexpected materials such as corrugated cardboard in subdued, natural colours. There are lots of reasons for these

different themes that I won't go into here but they have to do with issues of social class, increasing British interest in organic products and modern ideas about what it means to be a 'foodie'. So one reason why there is a need for ongoing semiotic research is because signs change over time and it is good to know what the language of a particular category or sector currently is so that you can avoid using *lapsed* or outdated signs in your communications and make good use of the most up-to-date or *emergent* ones. Semiotics keeps you up to date on these types of issues, helping you to keep your communications fresh and culturally authentic.

Second, signs change their meaning depending on what other signs you put them with. I recently carried out a major semiotics project for a utilities supplier. The client was looking for companies to partner with and wanted to know what various possible candidates were communicating about themselves semiotically. As part of this, I looked at what colours mean in different contexts; for instance, purple is traditionally about royalty, especially when it is teamed with gold. It is a convention that dates back to Roman times when only people at the very top of society would wear those colours. Today, this traditional meaning of purple is still used to try and attach the impression of quality to quite everyday products – think of Cadbury's, for instance, or Silk Cut. However, when purple is used alongside other colours such as orange or shocking pink its meaning changes and it starts to be about having fun in a wacky kind of way (in Britain this meaning comes from the emergence of youth culture in the 1950s, followed by the psychedelic 1960s; the subdued colours of the war years were swapped for a new exuberance that was reflected in people's taste in clothes, home furnishings and so on). There is a good example of purple being used in that way in the communications of the Halifax Building Society, which operates in a semiotically conservative sector where you normally see a lot of sensible, reassuring black, green and navy blue. So the second reason why there is a need for ongoing semiotic research is that when you mix and match signs in your communications you produce very specific meanings. It is good to know as much as possible about those meanings so that you can make informed *decisions* about how to communicate within your particular sector and also because your communications in turn will have a direct *effect* on the language and the culture. Through your communications you can help to maintain the conventionally accepted meanings of a sign, help it to become lapsed or even push it in the direction of meaning something new.

How is semiotics actually done?

I sometimes find that the individual client commissioning this sort of work is personally excited about semiotics. They buy into it because they have had some training or heard some conference papers and they see what semiotics can accomplish. However, having commissioned the work, they may be required to pass on the findings to their clients and perhaps defend spending the research budget to people who aren't interested in semiotics and don't know whether it should be taken seriously. This can be difficult if you don't have a clear idea of what semioticians actually do. People feel more confident in research when they understand how it is carried out. At the same time as explaining what semioticians do I hope to make clear that semiotics actually is a form of research and that it merits talking about in that way.

For me, a semiotic project is typically a two-stage process. Here is an example. I recently carried out some semiotic work for an ad agency which was interested in buses. The agency had the idea that there are various prejudices and false beliefs around that discourage people from using the bus. They wanted to use semiotics to find out what these prejudices are and where they come from.

Stage 1 begins with a *brainstorming* session with a team. We free associated on buses – what kinds of things they are, who uses them, what sorts of things happen on buses. We drew on every resource we could think of: songs, jokes, TV entertainment, things in the news, personal experiences. I looked to see what our pool of ideas had in common and organised them into themes. I then did some *data searching* to find out if there was any cultural evidence for these themes; were they just things we had made up among ourselves or were they recognisably part of the cultural world? While data searching I made a *collection* of pieces of text and images from a range of sources including the Internet, TV, newspapers, magazines and even the children's section of the local library. The set of themes I was looking for changed slightly as I grew more familiar with the cultural landscape. I discovered which themes were culturally prominent and rich in detail, and which ones were impoverished and more in the cultural background.

Stage 2 of the research process is where the collected materials have to be *analysed*. Semiotics can be a fairly technical activity; when you look at some cultural material – a piece of advertising, say, or a news report – you have to come equipped with a set of tools for dismantling and making sense of what you see. Some of the things in the semiotic tool-kit are as follows (there is a glossary at the end of this paper):

- Visual signs
- Linguistic signs
- Aural signs
- The implied communication situation
- Textual structure
- Information structure
- Visual emphasis
- Genre
- Binary oppositions and contrast pairs
- Communication codes.

The semiotic tool-kit helps you to think in an organised way about what you are looking at, and to notice similarities and differences in the data within a category or sector. In the buses project, one of the themes I noted had to do with fear of crime. I collected some data – various stories and images that articulated this fear – and my Stage 2 analysis using the semiotic tool-kit revealed some interesting things about the nature of this concern. If you look at culturally available stories about bus travel, the fear is of a specific type of crime – violent physical attack as opposed to pickpocketing, say, or deception. The stories about this type of attack share the same language – never say just ‘bus-stop’ when you can put ‘lonely’ in front of it – and they share some interesting narrative conventions. For instance, it is interesting to look at how teenagers are described in these stories. In a story taking place at a bus-stop a teenager is more likely to be the victim than the assailant, but in stories where attacks happen on the bus, teenagers are the assailants while the victims occupy another category akin to ‘ordinary British citizens’.

Stage 2 where you deploy the semiotic tool-kit is crucial. I did not just say to the client ‘here are the prejudices and false beliefs you wanted to know about’. Because I had done some close analysis I was able to provide detailed insight into these culturally available themes and narratives. This was useful because it gave the client an idea of what they were up against, for instance which of these ‘prejudices’ were most amenable to change. Some are very narrowly organised so that there is little room for variation (e.g. there’s one about old people coming out in force at 9.30 in the morning and clogging up the system). Others are more flexible; stories about cruel and incompetent bus drivers often contain a caveat about how not all bus drivers are like that. In children’s books bus drivers are smiling, friendly people (although there is often a hint of something worse to come) and they are much more likely to be women in contrast to the adult stories

about volatile or inadequate men. So there is flexibility and room for some change there.

The buses client started with a fairly open brief along the lines of ‘find out this about British culture’. On other projects the client asks a specific question to do with a particular piece of packaging or an advertising campaign or similar. In such a case stages 1 and 2 are collapsed together. I analyse the materials in detail to see what I am dealing with but all the brainstorming and data searching goes on at the same time so that I can form an accurate impression of the cultural context in which the target materials are situated. Whatever the details of the project, semiotics is always a formal activity with a distinct set of tools and a research procedure.

How can anyone be sure that semiotic findings are true and not just subjective opinion?

Ordinarily, quantitative or qualitative research investigates things the client does not already know about: consumers. Irrespective of how confident you feel in the interpretive skills of your agency, at least you may be sure that they are bringing you something you didn’t have before: news of how customers or consumers respond to some topical question or piece of stimulus. However, while semiotics may be used to analyse culture in general or qualitative data such as interview or group transcripts, it frequently focuses on specific marketing communications. This material exists ready-made before the research begins; it is usually a feature of the clients’ own sectors and may have been produced by the clients themselves. You may feel that you know the material like the back of your hand and wonder what more semiotics can tell you about it. Clients sometimes articulate this problem in terms of subjective opinion. They want to know what makes semiotic findings reliably true and therefore different from a subjective opinion that they or anyone could have come up with. I am going to address this question of truth versus subjective opinion in two ways. First, I will treat the question *literally*, take it at face value and answer it as straightforwardly as possible. Second, we will look at the question again and this time I’ll take a more *semiotic* approach. First, here is the literal version.

When clients and semioticians look at some data, they may reach the same conclusions about its significance while bringing different resources to the task. The most obvious thing that semioticians bring is previous experience of doing semiotics! This is useful because when you know the

findings of other semiotic studies you can look beyond the sector at hand, making cross-connections between one sector and another. Here is an example: earlier I was talking about upmarket biscuits and noticed that some are packaged in quite unexpected materials such as corrugated cardboard. It could be that what we have here is an *emergent code* – not a one-off aberration but a new trend in ways of communicating ‘premium’ or ‘luxury’ that is presently catching on. A client might reach that conclusion on the basis of thorough knowledge about biscuits. I might get there differently – through having seen the same phenomenon elsewhere. Not long ago there was a client who wanted to expand their position in the market for premium washing and bathing products. The client had assembled a selection of premium products from competitor brands. I am sure you can guess what’s coming! While some of these premium products were packaged in materials like chrome and glass, others used rough, ‘natural’-looking card and paper. If our hypothetical biscuit client wanted to know more about this very interesting phenomenon and confirm exactly what sort of code we are looking at, I would want to gather some *corroboration* from still other sectors. That way the client would be able to see that I am not just offering a subjective opinion on what is new in the world of biscuits but that there is hard *evidence* to show that the claim for an emergent code is in fact true.

That was the literal approach to the question of truth versus opinion. Now let us do some semiotics on the question itself. ‘How can anyone be sure that semiotic findings are true and not just subjective opinion?’ Look at its structure: a *contrast pair* has been set up, with truth on the one hand and opinion on the other. Contrast pairs are usually designed so as to present one half of the pair as somehow better than the other half, and this pair is no exception. Notice how the opinion part of the pair is described as subjective, implying the truth part as objective. Also notice the ‘just’, a modifier that diminishes the thing it describes. We are left in no doubt about which part of this pair is worth having!

When you encounter truth as part of a contrast pair, it nearly always comes off as the better half. For example:

- telling the truth vs. telling lies
- true stories vs. fiction
- seeing the truth vs. distorted perception.

Things are contrasted with truth to their disadvantage. But don’t be fooled by the contrast pair! It is only a rhetorical device and deserves to be

treated with suspicion. There are two key things to notice. First, opinion has a life outside of its relationship with truth, where it is afforded a bit more dignity and respect. Indeed, opinion can sometimes be the better part of contrast pairs. For example:

- professional opinion vs. amateur guesswork/speculation
- second opinion vs. uncorroborated, single diagnosis
- valid opinion vs. uninformed conjecture.

Second, the truth is less reliable than it is credited with being. Perhaps you know some of those drawings called *ambiguous figures*. There is a famous one that could be either a vase or two faces in profile. Another one could be either a man's head or a kneeling woman. Which 'truth' you see depends on what you have been primed for. It depends on your cultural experiences to date. In short, the truth is *culturally specific* and that is why it is so important to keep studying culture. You might already know the one intended meaning of your ad campaign or front cover or whatever it is, but you cannot know its range of possible truths until you study the cultural context in which it sits. Semiotic analysis of a given piece of communication can predict a range of possible consumer take-outs, and this is useful because it helps you recognise messages you may inadvertently be communicating alongside the ones you want to be there.

Isn't semiotics just a nice supplement to other methodologies such as focus groups?

For many clients semiotics feels like a new and untested methodology, so they are understandably cautious about spending money on it, especially when the same budget could be allocated to something more familiar. For this reason, people often prefer to commission semiotics as a piece of added value on the back of some qualitative research rather than as a project in its own right. There is no doubt that semiotics works really well in conjunction with qualitative research and I will talk some more in a moment about ways of using them together, but I will also go on to explain why semiotics can be even better used alone.

Briefly, then, here are two ways of using semiotics in conjunction with a qualitative method such as groups. First, semiotics can usefully *precede* groups. You can develop hypotheses for testing with consumers, and you can refine and sharpen the objectives of qualitative research. For instance, suppose you have a potential ad campaign that you want to try out with

consumers. Semiotic analysis of the campaign up front can result in a number of predictions about likely consumer take-out, based on a formal analysis of the cultural resources that respondents will be drawing on to make sense of what they see. These predictions or hypotheses can then be used to guide and structure the group discussion. Semiotics gives you a head start on what to expect.

Second, semiotics can be used *following* qualitative research to help explain interesting or unusual findings in respondents' talk. I do a lot of qualitative research on various new devices and services in the general field of mobile communications, and I always notice how respondents describe and comment on the modernity of things. One expression that is used a lot here and in the USA is 'Star Trecky'. Teenagers and young adults nearly always use that expression approvingly to express excitement and enthusiasm. Older adults use it less consistently. It can be used to mean 'it's modern and I like it' but it can also mean 'this is modern but a bit frivolous'. Semiotics highlights these sorts of subtle differences in verbal behaviour, producing insights that you can use to communicate more effectively with your target market.

Having said that, here are a few reasons why you might want to consider semiotics as an *alternative* to qualitative research and not just an addition to it. First, some questions are better answered through semiotics than through any other method. On more than one occasion, clients have expressed an interest in learning more about the recent history of advertising within their sector; their own advertising and other people's. Semiotics sheds light on how the codes used in advertising within the category are changing, helping clients keep their ads looking and sounding up to date. It can also reveal any interesting principles and techniques that are being deployed by successful competitors. Since the objective in a project like this is to analyse the advertising *itself* and not consumer *response*, semiotics is the only sensible choice.

Relatedly, semiotics is a *visionary* methodology that can help you look to the future as well as understand the past. Ordinary qualitative research can be great for getting feedback on what is normal for consumers today but apart from some specialist groups such as early adopters, consumers are notoriously bad at imagining a world more advanced than the one they already know. Semiotics can help you look forward in two ways. It can help you spot *emergent codes in your sector*, backed up by knowledge of developments that are taking place elsewhere. It also helps you understand *consumer culture and how it is changing*. Academics have developed a significant body of theory of consumer culture that helpfully explains how

consumers express themselves through personal taste, how consumption interacts with lifestyle, and so on. This is very useful when you need to be able to anticipate how consumer behaviour might change in response to some new product, service or technological development.

Finally, semiotics as an alternative to qualitative research can *save* you both *time* and *money* – especially if you have questions about international markets or cross-cultural issues that would require interviews or groups in multiple countries. For instance, imagine the buses project on a larger scale. Suppose the client had wanted to know about the cultural barriers to bus travel in four or five countries. The materials you need to get on with semiotic analysis are the products of popular culture: newspapers, magazines, TV broadcasts, people’s websites and so on. As such they are widely available, and are usually much quicker, easier and cheaper to assemble than geographically dispersed groups of respondents, making for a cost-effective project with quick turnaround. While qualitative research can sometimes feel cumbersome, semiotics at its best is a streamlined, efficient methodology.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to demystify semiotics and make it more user-friendly by answering some key questions about what it is, how it happens and the benefits of including it in the repertoire of research methodologies that you know and use. Here are the key things to remember.

- While conventional qualitative research applies a psychological, inside-out approach to consumers, semiotics takes an outside-in approach, studying human communications and consumer culture. Thus it is *uniquely suitable for answering certain kinds of questions*.
- For instance, semiotics is cut out for *analysing marketing communications*. You can take apart your competitors’ *advertising* and examine the *techniques* they are using to sell their product or brand. If you want to interrogate communications directly rather than consumers’ response to them, semiotics is the only sensible choice.
- Semiotics is also uniquely equipped to investigate what is going on for consumers culturally. For instance, you can use it to *track* the *changing culture* of specific groups of consumers (e.g. women or young people) and *develop communications strategies* accordingly.

- Semiotics *keeps you up to date* with the communication codes currently being used within your sector or target market. It helps you *design communications* that sound both *fresh* and *culturally authentic*.
- Semiotic *analysis is a formal activity* with a set of *tools* and a definite *procedure* that is often more clearly specifiable than the qualitative analysis that goes on following ordinary interviews or focus groups. When you have an idea of how semiotics happens, the *findings are easy to understand and communicate* to others.
- Semiotic analysis of a given piece of communication can *predict a range of possible consumer take-outs* as well as those that are *likely*. This is useful because it helps you analyse your own communications and identify *messages that you may be inadvertently communicating* alongside the meanings that you intend to be there.
- Semiotics may be used *in conjunction with qualitative research*. It helps *refine the objectives* of qualitative research and *gives you a head start* on what to expect from respondents. After fieldwork, semiotics may be used *alongside* the more *psychological* type of qualitative *analysis* to interpret interview and focus group talk, *extracting maximum value from your qualitative data*.
- Where semiotics can be used as an *alternative to qualitative research*, it is often the *quicker* and more *cost-effective* option.

I hope that other people write more papers on semiotics like the ones presented at this conference. If clients and suppliers talk more to each other about semiotics, ask critical questions, raise concerns and provide explanations, there will be a change in the current culture of market research so that semiotics is both more available and more used. In my view, this is a good thing in its own right, for the reasons I have outlined above, and also because semiotics is one of the most up-to-date, rapidly evolving methodologies there is. In the academic world there is currently a lot of valuable work going on developing new theories of consumer culture and cutting-edge techniques for studying human communications. Semiotics is a constantly evolving activity that draws on this cutting-edge work and makes it available for use in market research.

The semiotic tool-kit: Glossary of key terms

- *Sign*. When people communicate with each other, they operate on the basis of an agreement about what various images, words, sounds,

gestures and so on *mean*. When an image or word has had some agreed meaning attached to it, it becomes a sign. Semioticians study signs and sign systems.

- *Visual signs*. Images that mean something: a heart to symbolise love; a smiley face icon for happiness.
- *Linguistic signs*. Words and phrases. Take Golden Nuggets breakfast cereal: the name is a linguistic sign – a *metaphor* – that evokes the surprise and delight of discovering something valuable.
- *Aural signs*. Signs you can hear: tone of voice, regional accents, ambient sound, music. Think of national anthems, the Wedding March, Happy Birthday To You.
- *The implied communication situation*. In any piece of communication – speech, writing, visual art – there is an implied speaker, the person doing the communicating and an implied recipient, the person being addressed. It is usually not too difficult to identify who they are. In this paper the implied speaker is someone with a special interest in semiotics and the implied recipient is a market research conference.
- *Textual structure*. When you look at a piece of text you notice various technical features of how it is constructed. These may include things like *narrative structure* – how it is designed so as to tell a story – or a set of *rhetorical devices* that have been used to give the impression of a truthful report.
- *Information structure*. As well as looking at the form or structure of a piece of text, you can look at its content. You can look at what information is presented as new versus taken for granted, what is treated as the important point about the information versus what is treated as incidental.
- *Visual emphasis*. When you look at a visual image such as a picture you notice how the different elements are arranged relative to each other and their relative size. You look at what is in the foreground and what is more peripheral, and how space is used in the frame.
- *Genre*. A class or category of human communication that has a distinctive style or set of conventions. Advertising, for instance, draws on lots of different genres such as documentary-style realism, drama and fantasy.
- *Binary oppositions and contrast pairs*. A noticeable feature of human communication is how much people describe and understand things through reference to how they are different from something else. Think of low-fat, low-tar, new and improved: tabloid versus broadsheet, strategic versus tactical, quantitative versus qualitative.

- *Communication codes.* Codes are the sets of unspoken rules and conventions that structure sign systems and link signs to meanings. To the extent that yesterday people were able to interpret bright gold biscuit packaging as meaning luxury and today they are able to interpret brown paper in the same way, they are using different sets of codes to make sense of what they see. Because codes change over time they are often talked about as being *lapsed* or *residual* (out of date), *dominant* (the main code or codes being used now) or *emergent* (new, on the way in).