

Representation and stuart hall's the other

Sociology, Communication



Representation connects meaning and language to culture. Theories about how LANGUAGE is used to represent the world: * the reflective, Does language simply reflect a meaning which already exists out there in the world of objects, people and events? * the intentional Does language express only what the speaker or writer or painter wants to say, his or her personally intended meaning? * the constructionist Or is meaning constructed in and through language? this perspective has had the most significant impact on cultural studies in recent years.

Two major variants or models of the constructionist approach - the semiotic approach (Ferdinand de Saussure) and the discursive approach (Michel Foucault). It is simple enough to see how we might form concepts for things we can perceive - people or material objects, like chairs, tables and desks. But we also form concepts of rather obscure and abstract things, which we can't in any simple way see, feel or touch. Think, for example, of our concepts of war, or death, or friendship or love.

And, as we have remarked, we also form concepts about things we never have seen, and possibly can't or won't ever see, and about people and places we have plainly made up. We may have a clear concept of, say, angels, mermaids, God, the Devil, or of Heaven and Hell. Culture Now it could be the case that the conceptual map which I carry around in my head is totally different from yours, in which case you and I would interpret or make sense of the world in totally different ways. We would be incapable of sharing our thoughts or expressing ideas about the world to each other.

In fact, each of us probably does understand and interpret the world in a unique and individual way. However, we are able to communicate because

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we share broadly the same conceptual maps and thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways. That is indeed what it means when we say we 'belong to the same culture'. Because we interpret the world in roughly similar ways, we are able to build up a shared culture of meanings and thus construct a social world which we inhabit together. That is why 'culture' is sometimes defined in terms of ' SHARED MEANINGS/CONCEPTUAL MAPS'.

However, a shared conceptual map is not enough. We must also be able to represent or exchange meanings and concepts, and we can only do that when we also have access to a shared language. LANGUAGE is therefore the second system of representation involved in the overall process of constructing meaning. At the heart of the meaning process in culture, then, are two related 'systems of representation'. The first enables us to give meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences or a chain of equivalences between things -people, objects, events, abstract ideas, etc. and our system of concepts, our conceptual maps. The second depends on constructing a set of correspondences between our conceptual map and a set of signs, arranged or organized into various languages which stand for or represent those concepts. The relation between 'things', concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call 'representation'. 1. 2 Language and representation Sheep, cartoon and abstract painting. Visual signs are what are called iconic signs.

That is, they bear, in their form, a certain resemblance to the object, person or event to which they refer. Written or spoken signs, on the other hand, are

what is called indexical. 1. 3 Sharing the codes The question, then, is: how do people who belong to the same culture, who share the same conceptual map and who speak or write the same language (English) know that the arbitrary combination of letters and sounds that makes up the word, TREE, will stand for or represent the concept 'a large plant that grows in nature'? The meaning is not in the object or person or thing, nor is it in the word.

It is we who fix the meaning so firmly that, after a while, it comes to seem natural and inevitable. It is constructed and fixed by the CODE, which sets up the correlation between our conceptual system and our language system. Codes fix the relationships between concepts and signs. They stabilize meaning within different languages and cultures. One way of thinking about 'CULTURE' is in terms of these... shared conceptual maps, shared language systems and the codes which govern the relationships of translation between them.

This translatability is not given by nature or fixed by the gods. It is the result of a set of social conventions. To belong to a culture is to belong to roughly the same conceptual and linguistic universe, to know how concepts and ideas translate into different languages, and how language can be interpreted to refer to or reference the world. To share these things is to see the world from within the same conceptual map and to make sense of it through the same language systems. [Inuit and English terms of snowy weather] Does this necessarily mean they experience the snow differently? . 4 Theories of representation Reflective approach meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world, and language functions like a mirror, to reflect the true meaning as it already exists in the world. As

the poet Gertrude Stein once said, 'A rose is a rose is a rose'. In the fourth century BC, the Greeks used the notion of mimesis to explain how language, even drawing and painting, mirrored or imitated Nature; they thought of Homer's great poem, The Iliad, as 'imitating' a heroic series of events.

So the theory which says that language works by simply reflecting or imitating the truth that is already there and fixed in the world, is sometimes called 'mimetic'. And if someone says to me that there is no such word as 'rose' for a plant in her culture, the actual plant in the garden cannot resolve the failure of communication between us. Within the conventions of the different language codes we are using, we are both right -and for us to understand each other, one of us must learn the code linking the flower with the word for it in the other's culture.

Intentional approach. (the opposite case.) It holds that it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language. Words mean what the author intends they should mean. Again, there is some point to this argument since we all, as individuals, do use language to convey or communicate things which are special or unique to us, to our way of seeing the world. However, as a general theory of representation through language, the intentional approach is also flawed.

We cannot be the sole or unique source of meanings in language, since that would mean that we could express ourselves in entirely private languages. But the essence of language is communication and that, in turn, depends on shared linguistic conventions and shared codes. Language can never be wholly a private game. Our private intended meanings, however personal to

us, have to enter into the rules, codes and conventions of language to be shared and understood. Language is a social system through and through.

This means that our private thoughts have to negotiate with all the other meanings for words or images which have been stored in language which our use of the language system will inevitably trigger into action. Constructivist approach The third approach recognizes this public, social character of language. It acknowledges that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language. Things don't mean: we construct meaning, using representational systems - concepts and signs.

We must not confuse the material world, where things and people exist, and the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate. Constructivists do not deny the existence of the material world. However, it is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts. It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others.

Representation is a practice, a kind of 'work', which uses material objects and effects. But the meaning depends, not on the material quality of the sign, but on its symbolic function. It is because a particular sound or word stands for, symbolizes or represents a concept that it can function, in language, as a sign and convey meaning - or, as the constructionists say, signify (sign-i-fy) 1. 5 The language of traffic lights We represent or

symbolize the different colours and classify them according to different colour-concepts.

This is the conceptual colour system of our culture. We say 'our culture' because, of course, other cultures may divide the colour spectrum differently. What's more, they certainly use different actual words or letters to identify different colours: what we call 'red', the French call 'rouge' and so on. This is the linguistic code -the one which correlates certain words (signs) with certain colours (concepts), and thus enables us to communicate about colours to other people, using 'the language of colours'.

But how do we use this representational or symbolic system to regulate the traffic? Colours do not have any 'true' or fixed meaning in that sense. Red does not mean 'Stop' in nature, any more than Green means 'Go'. In other settings, Red may stand for, symbolize or represent 'Blood' or 'Danger' or 'Communism'; and Green may represent 'Ireland' or 'The Countryside' or 'Environmentalism'. Even these meanings can change. In the 'language of electric plugs', Red used to mean 'the connection with the positive charge' but this was arbitrarily and without explanation changed to Brown!

But then for many years the producers of plugs had to attach a slip: of paper telling people that the code or convention had changed, otherwise how would they know? Red and Green work in the language of traffic lights because 'Stop' and 'Go' are the meanings which have been assigned to them in our culture by the code or conventions governing this language, and this code is widely known and almost universally obeyed in our culture and 'cultures like ours -though we can well imagine other cultures which did not possess the code, in which this language would be a complete mystery.

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Does it matter which colours we use? No, the constructivists argue. This is because what signifies is not the colours themselves but (a) the fact that they are different and can be distinguished from one another; and (b) the fact that they are organized into a particular sequence. What signifies, what carries meaning is not each colour in itself nor even the concept or word for it. It is the difference between Red and Green which signifies. If you couldn't differentiate between Red and Green, you couldn't use one to mean 'Stop' and the other to mean 'Go'. The simplest way of marking difference is, of course, by means of a binary opposition. Saussure's revolutionary proposition =: a language consists of signifiers, but in order to produce meaning, the signifiers have to be organized into 'a system of differences'. It is the differences between signifiers which signify.) In principle, any combination of colours - like any collection of letters in written language or of sounds in spoken language - would do, provided they are sufficiently different not to be confused.

Constructionists express this idea by saying that all signs are 'arbitrary'. 'Arbitrary' means that there is no natural relationship between the sign and its meaning or concept. Signs are arbitrary. Their meanings are fixed by codes. Since Red only means 'Stop' because that is how the code works, in principle any colour would do, including Green. It is the code that fixes the meaning, not the colour itself. This also has wider implications for the theory of representation and meaning in language. It means that signs themselves cannot fix meaning.

Instead, meaning depends on the relation between a sign and a concept which is fixed by a code. Meaning is 'relational'. 1. 6 Summary

Representation is the production of meaning through language. Constructionists argue we use signs, organized into languages of different kinds, to communicate meaningfully with others. Languages can use signs to symbolize, stand for or reference objects, people and events in the so-called 'real' world. But they can also reference imaginary things and fantasy worlds or abstract ideas which are not in any obvious sense part of our material world.

There is no simple relationship of reflection, imitation or one-to-one correspondence between language and the real world. The world is not accurately or otherwise reflected in the mirror of language. Language does not work like a mirror. Meaning is produced within language, in and through various representational systems which, for convenience, we call 'languages'. Meaning is produced by the practice of representation. It is constructed through signifying - i. e. meaning-producing- practices. How does this take place? In fact, it depends on two different but related systems of representation.

First, the concepts which are formed in the mind function as a system of mental representation which classifies and organizes the world into meaningful categories. If we have a concept for something, we can say we know its 'meaning'. But we cannot communicate this meaning without a second system of representation, a language. Language consists of signs organized into various relationships. But signs can only convey meaning if we possess CODES which allow us to translate our concepts into language - and vice versa. These codes are crucial for meaning and representation.

They do not exist in nature but are the result of social conventions. They are a crucial part of our culture - our shared 'maps of meaning' - which we learn and unconsciously internalize as we become members of our culture. Meaning is not fixed. For many centuries, western societies have associated the word BLACK with everything that is dark, evil, forbidding, devilish, dangerous and sinful. Yet perception of black people in America in the 1960s changed after the phrase 'Black is Beautiful' became a popular slogan - where the signifier, BLACK, was made to signify the exact opposite meaning (signified) to its previous associations.

In Saussure's terms, 'Language sets up an arbitrary relation between signifiers of its own choosing on the one hand, and signifieds of its own choosing on the other. Not only does each language produce a different set of signifiers, articulating and dividing the continuum of sound (or writing or drawing or photography) in a distinctive way; each language produces a different set of signifieds; it has a distinctive and thus arbitrary way of organizing the world into concepts and categories' (Culler, 1976, p. 23).