



1

Making Active Choices: Language as a Set of Resources

Introduction

In this chapter we lay out some of the basic principles and concepts that form the basis of the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis that we present in this book. We begin by explaining what we mean by a Social Semiotic view of language that we take in this book, which emphasises the way that we should see all communication, whether through language, images, or sounds, as accomplished through a set of semiotic resources, options and choices. It is because of this that we are so concerned to emphasise that analysis should be based on a first stage description of the semiotic choices found in talk, texts and images. We ask what options communicators use, why they use them and what the consequences of these choices are.

The chapter then moves on to look at the way that semiotic choices are able to signify broader sets of associations that may not be overtly specified. A choice of word or visual element might suggest kinds of identities, values and activities due to established associations. We think about this in terms of power relations, since CDA has traditionally been concerned with exposing ideologies that are hidden within language, whether these are produced by authorities, ruling groups, institutions or in individual face-to-face situations. The idea has been that revealing these power relations can play an important emancipatory role.

Finally we look at the way that language choices, signification, discourses and power feed into our everyday identities. Broader discourses and widely shared social meanings are played out both in the official language of politics, the news media, our major institutions, such as schools, entertainments media, but also in everyday mundane contexts.

Communication through a system of choices

In linguistics there have been a number of positions regarding the relationship between language and thought. It is important that we consider these



briefly here as this provides us with a clear foundation for the theory of language and visual communication that we use in this book, where we see communication as being done through using a system of choices that are used by humans. It is one that is interested in the means for making meanings which is always subject to social, cultural and economic situations.

Linguistic determinism

One of the best known positions on language use is based on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, named after the American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. They argued that humans do not live in an objective world, but rather that this world is shaped for them by the language that has become the medium of expression in their society. Language is therefore not just a way by which we describe the world, but rather comes to comprise what we think of as 'the real world':

According to this view, different languages will shape the world differently. So the worlds different language speakers inhabit are not simply ones with different labels but are therefore distinct worlds. (Sapir 1929/1958: 69)

Edmund Leach (1964) reflects this view in a frequently cited passage:

I postulate that the physical and social environment of a young child is perceived as a continuum. It does not contain any intrinsically separate 'things'. The child, in due course, is taught to impose upon this environment a kind of discriminating grid which serves to distinguish the world as being composed of a large number of separate things, each labelled with a name. This world is a representation of our language categories, not vice versa. Because my mother tongue is English, it seems evident that bushes and trees are different kinds of things. I would not think this unless I had been taught that it was the case. (Leach, 1964: 34)

In its extreme form, this is what we would call *linguistic determinism*, where our thinking is determined by our language. In fact, few linguists accept this strong view, but rather think about how the way we see the world might be *influenced* by the kind of language we use rather than be *determined* by it. They would also see this as a two-way process so that the kind of language we use is influenced by the way we see the world. Linguists have also focused on the importance of social context in language use, that we use certain types of language in certain settings due to social pressures rather than through linguistic determination. What is considered as appropriate language use exists both in everyday conventions and in institutionalised or specialist ones. For example, in news reading or in the university classroom we find there are certain rules and expectations as regards language use.

Until the 1970s, Structuralist views of language deriving from the work of Saussure ([1916] 1983) were prevalent and still are popular today. The idea here is that we can study the features of language, the lexical and grammatical choices, as building blocks. Communication in language is based, as in the Sapir-Whorf model, on the idea that everyone agrees to use the same words to mean the same thing. These words have no natural relationship to the world out there – the word ‘tree’ has no natural relationship to the thing in the world – but are arbitrary. Language is seen as a kind of code whose parts are therefore relational rather than referential. In other words, they have meaning by their difference from each other rather than their similarity to objects and phenomena, such as in early hieroglyphics. Saussure argued that language could be studied in terms of its use, which he called *parole*, and which would allow us to establish the underlying system, which he called *langue*.

A Social Semiotic theory of communication

This approach to language is slightly different as it is interested particularly in the way it is used in social context and the way we use language to *create* society. What is perhaps the key to this theory is the shift away from looking at language as a *system* to one where we think about language as a set of *resources*. Here we are less interested in attempting to describe a system of grammatical rules of communication, but rather are more interested in the way the communicator uses the semiotic resources available to them, either in language or in visual communication, to realise their interests. A Social Semiotic approach to communication is interested in describing the available choices of signs, but in the first place, so that we can understand what it is that people are doing with them. And Multimodal Social Semiotics is interested not just in the means for making meanings, but in what these means are, so whether we choose to use language, images, gestures, sounds, etc. (Kress, 2010).

Individuals are aware of the way words and visual elements have particular affordances or potentials to mean. They will be aware that certain words can carry particular potentials, such as Blair’s use of ‘knowledge’ discussed in the Introduction to this book, as can certain visual elements and features, as in the use of the high-key lighting in the *Cosmopolitan* image also discussed previously. They will be aware that different modes of communication offer different kinds of affordances or different means for communicating meanings. In other words, as in the case of the *Cosmopolitan* image and text, they will have a sense of the way that an image can communicate something about the broader ideas about the lives of women, in a way not so conveniently accomplished by language.

This approach to communication and society draws on the work of M.A.K. Halliday (1978, 1985). He thought that language creates dispositions in people while at the same time allowing the possibility of more open interpretations of the world. Halliday argued that speakers can see through and around the

words and concepts that they have in language. This is why we are able to explain what we mean to people if they do not initially understand what we say and can argue over definitions.

Halliday was first and foremost concerned with the social uses of language. When we code events in language this involves choices among options which are available in grammar. Kress (1985) points out that all such choices can be viewed as ideologically significant. For example, it is important which terms we use to describe people or the processes (actions) they carry out. Are women described as 'wives' and 'mothers' in the press, whereas men are not described so often as 'husbands' or 'fathers'? Why might we want to emphasise that a British soldier is a 'father' and 'husband' but not do the same for the enemy? What if we choose the word 'bloke' over 'man'? Or we might choose to represent a process as a noun, as we saw in the Introduction in the comments made by Tony Blair. For example, 'knowledge of each other is the way to avoid conflicts'. This can change the way that a conflict is perceived and also who has responsibility and what the remedy is, by concealing what it is we actually need to know through simply stating that we need 'knowledge'. All of these language choices are political in that they shape how people and events are represented.

In the 1970s and 1980s, linguists like Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew (1979) began a tradition of Critical Linguistics which, drawing on Halliday sought to begin to explore the way that language can be used, therefore, not just to represent the world but to constitute it. This was also influenced by Chomskyan linguistics and work in French semiotics (Barthes, 1973). Since language shapes and maintains a society's ideas and values, it can also serve to create, maintain and legitimise certain kinds of social practices. It can become more or less common practice to think that 'knowledge' and 'understanding' are indeed sufficient to prevent conflicts. In Britain, local governments set up opportunities for children from different ethnic groups to share in 'knowledge' and 'understanding' sessions to help create multicultural cohesion. Yet what the children's knowledge and know or understanding will lead to is never specified.

A Social Semiotic view of visual communication, or of any other mode of communication, such as sound and music, is based on the same set of principles. Social Semiotics assumes that we must understand that all processes of communication are to some extent rule-based, although the nature of these rules can vary immensely (Van Leeuwen, 2005). We are more familiar with the idea that communication through language is rule-based. And it is readily accepted that we can only communicate, in other words create and understand its meanings, through language once we have mastered its rules. In a Social Semiotic theory of visual communication, we are concerned with describing and documenting the underlying resources available to those who want to communicate meanings visually and analysing the way that these are used in settings to do particular things.

In a Social Semiotic approach we are concerned with the underlying available repertoire of signs and their use in context to communicate wider ideas, moods and attitudes and identities, and we are interested in why specific means were used to create these. We would ask upon what set of available resources the creator of the *Cosmopolitan* photograph shown in the Introduction to this book has drawn. The creator would be aware of the way that manipulating the realism of textures and colours to different degrees would tend to create specific kinds of meanings, here one that would clearly tell the viewer that this image is not intended to document the activities of a particular woman at a particular time and place. The viewer is not likely to sit there wondering 'who is this woman?' or 'I wonder where she works?'. The correct visual choices have been made to communicate to the viewer that this is meant to be viewed as a symbolic image. And it is clear that the same kind of meanings could not have been accomplished through language.

In a Social Semiotic view of visual communication, then, choices of visual elements and features do not just represent the world, but *constitute* it. Like language, visual communication plays its part in shaping and maintaining a society's ideologies, and can also serve to create, maintain and legitimise certain kinds of social practices.

As in language, where we must look at the terms used to describe people, such as women being described as 'wives' and 'mothers', or the processes they carry out, so we need to look at the visual representation of women as 'wives', 'mothers' or 'glamorous career women'. Why, we can ask, are women in *Cosmopolitan* never represented or mothers or as workers who carry out any specific task?

One final point to emphasise regarding a Social Semiotic approach is its difference from traditional semiotic approaches, which addressed the way that individual signs connote or symbolise (see Barthes, 1973). In this approach we might say a flag symbolises the nation. To those who fly the flag this might connote pride and strength, although to others it might equally connote closed-mindedness and stifling exclusion. A Social Semiotic approach would be interested in the details of things like colour and shape and their interrelationship in any visual design or image. For example, a flag might carry a bold saturated red rather than a muted or diluted one. Clearly, here there is a continuum of meaning potential in the saturation–dilution spectrum. In traditional semiotics, we might describe a saturated red as connoting sensuality. But is this the case for the flag? Clearly, more saturated colours have the meaning potential for bolder passionate visual statements. A flag carrying a very pale diluted red would not signify the correct passion of the national spirit. The point here is that in Social Semiotics, in both the study of language and images, we must be able to describe and document the precise semiotic choices made and view these in the context of the observed available resources.

Discourse, semiotic choices and signification

Through the individual semiotic choices that they make, authors and designers are able to encourage us to place events and ideas into broader frameworks of interpretation that are referred to as 'discourses'. Once one of these frameworks is activated, they bring with them different kinds of associations and, as in the use of metaphor by David Cameron and the image in *Cosmopolitan* considered in the Introduction, shape how we are encouraged to think about events.

The term 'discourse' is central to CDA. Basically, 'discourse' is language in real contexts of use. In other words, discourse operates above the level of grammar and semantics to 'capture what happens when these language forms are played out in different social, political and cultural arenas (Simpson and Mayr, 2010: 5). In CDA, the broader ideas communicated by a text are referred to as 'discourses' (Van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 2000; Wodak, 2001). These discourses can be thought of as models of the world, in the sense described by Foucault (1980). The process of doing CDA involves looking at choices of words and grammar in texts in order to discover the underlying discourse(s) and ideologies. A text's linguistic structure functions, as discourse, to highlight certain ideologies, while downplaying or concealing others. One example of such a discourse is that 'immigrants are a threat to a national culture'. This is a model of events associated with the notion that there is a unified nation and an identifiable national identity and culture. Normally this discourse encompasses a mythical proud history and authentic traditions. We can see this discourse in the following editorial from the *Daily Mail* (25 October 2007) titled 'Britain will be scarcely recognisable in 50 years if the immigration deluge continues'. The item goes on to discuss how 'we' need to 'defend' our 'indigenous culture'. Who 'we' are remains unspecified, as does the nature of our 'indigenous culture'. In Britain's evolving multicultural make-up and the diversity of ways of life and cultural values that have long been present based around social class, regional and other groupings, so how can we pin such factors down?

In the headline of this news item, immigration is described using the term 'deluge', a metaphor that draws on the idea of masses of rainfall that overspill, creating floods and damage. While the author of this text is at pains to point out that they are not racist, everything else they say suggests that they are. Of course, in this case it is clear even after a superficial reading that this *Daily Mail* text is anti-immigration and most likely racist. But by looking at the word choices in the text we can pinpoint exactly why this is so, which is even more important in texts where the discourse is less obvious.

There are other discourses for thinking about nation and national identity. A sociologist or historian would tell us that what we think of as nation and national identity is for the most part invented, with only a relatively short history (Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1983). Here the proud history and indigenous culture under threat by immigrants is itself not factual at all. And

Marxist thinkers would point to such an emphasis of difference on the basis on national identity as concealing actual divisions in society between the rich and the exploited and poor, and therefore that nationalism is a concept serving the interests of the powerful.

Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) suggest that we should think about discourses as including or being comprised of kinds of participants, behaviours, goals, values and locations. We see this in our example from the *Daily Mail*. This discourse involves participants: real British people and immigrants. It involves values or an 'indigenous culture'. It specifies that 'we' must 'defend' this culture. This discourse represents a 'we' who should not see incomers as an opportunity for change and growth, nor as fundamentally the same as ourselves on many levels, but as a threat to be repelled and something that will change 'us'.

What we can see from the *Daily Mail* example of the national 'we' versus the deluge of immigrants is that discourses do not simply mirror reality but, as Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 258) point out, bring into being 'situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relations between people and groups of people'.

Fairclough (2000) explains that these discourses, such as of national unity or racial or cultural superiority, project certain social values and ideas and in turn contribute to the (re)production of social life. In other words, it is through language that we constitute the social world, or put simply, how we talk about the world influences the society we create, the knowledge we celebrate and despise, and the institutions we build. For example, if in a society the discourse that dominates our understanding of crime is that it is simply wrongdoing which requires retribution, then we build prisons and lock people away. Yet it is the case that most people who end up in prisons are from poor or more vulnerable sections of the population. Sociologists and criminologists will tell us that if we are born black in countries like Britain or America, then our life position will mean that we are much more likely to end up in prison. This is because of the complex relationship of poverty, race and inequality. Yet we do not organise our societies on the assumption that crime is associated with such factors. Nor do we tend to associate crime with the actions of global corporations or banks in Third World countries or the acts of our governments when they go to war, or reorganise society in the interests of the wealthy. It is our dominant discourse of crime that we end up targeting only the poor and least powerful members of our societies, where we build prisons, use the police in the way that we do, take particular crime prevention measures and vote for political parties that will be tough on crime, rather than creating societies where it is less likely to take place. Of course in this sense we can see that certain discourses represent the interests of specific groups. In the case of crime it will be in the interests of those who have wealth and power to conceal its relationship to factors such as race and poverty.

The following newspaper item is about drug dealing in provincial British rural areas. What we can see here is that crime issues related to things like

social decline, unemployment and poverty are placed in a particular discourse about the threat to a rural idyll.

In such a report we might expect to become informed about these events through information about statistics and interviews with experts and victims. Yet this is not by any means what we find in this text. The journalist places the event within a particular set of associations that serve to transform or 'recontextualise' them.

It begins as follows:

THE time is 7.30pm on a quiet autumnal evening in Totnes, once a fortified Saxon settlement and now one of Devon's most elegant towns.

A place which, outwardly at least, seems far removed from the sordid world of drugs and dealers.

But within just a few minutes of arriving in the town, a female reporter has been offered Ecstasy for one of cheapest prices ever recorded in Britain – 1.25 a tablet.

What makes the transaction so shocking is that it proves Ecstasy is no longer confined to the places you would think are its natural home – music festivals, Ibiza raves and city centre nightclubs.

It can be bought in the most rural and picturesque of areas across the country for the same price as a portion of chips. (*Daily Mail* October 16, 2003)

We often think of news as informing us about events in the world. Journalists are often described as the 'eyes and the ears of the public'. They tell us about important things that are going on so that we can remain informed, so that we can call upon our politicians to make the decisions necessary to make our societies operate in the best possible way. So the news might report on a particular instance of drugs problems in our society, as in the case of this news item. The public, once informed about this problem, can then vote for those politicians who offer the best solutions for correcting these problems.

In fact, sociologists of news have long established that this is rarely what news actually does, due to a complex range of factors, related to sourcing, the pressures of filling news space, the need to make events 'newsworthy' (Bennett, 2005). Rather, news is a very peculiar social construction of reality. The news item above can be seen as one case where an event has been placed in a discourse of 'enemies of society' to give it shape and meaning. This has been accomplished through the use of certain kinds of language. The opening line tells us it is a 'quiet autumnal evening' in what was 'once a fortified Saxon settlement' and now 'one of Devon's most elegant towns'. On the one hand, we could ask how this is relevant in reporting the story. Journalists do not normally preface stories with a mention of the season, or by giving a brief history

of the setting. We would not expect to see 'On a lazy late spring evening in the once Roman outpost, Manchester, a man was attacked last night'.

In this text, the journalist is developing on a press release that referred to drugs problems in rural British areas, where there is often much unemployment and other related social issues. This is a phenomenon well known to local police. One of the authors lived for a while in such a village where there was a substantial unemployed, very poor section of the population, which had a strong drug culture among its youth, living in what otherwise was a pretty tourist attraction complete with beautiful sixteenth-century streets. But in this text the journalist has chosen to locate the events as if they have intruded into an otherwise perfect rural idyll. The text is filled with contrasts between the corrupt city and the innocent and pure countryside inhabited by 'communities' and 'innocent families'. What has happened here is that the journalist is encouraging the reader to understand these events not simply as a part of the social phenomenon that they comprise, but through a discourse of corruption to the rural heartlands of Britain. Drug dealing, their use and effects are one area where the British press has been extremely unhelpful in providing well-informed reporting to the public. In later chapters we will be looking at this in greater depth.

Discourse can also be signified through visual semiotic choices. In the image from *Cosmopolitan* considered in the Introduction, we can think about the broader ideas, values, identities and sequences of activity that are signified.

Developing on the ideas put forward by feminists since the 1960s, *Cosmopolitan* magazine originally emerged challenging existing representations of women as homemakers, mothers and wives. The magazine began to discuss women's sexuality and their more independent lives in the workplace. Still today the main topics are relationships, sex and work, although these sit seamlessly alongside promotions of fashion, accessories and consumer lifestyle products – although in *Cosmopolitan* it is never clear exactly what work women do, only that that work is in minimalist, modernist, designed office settings, where they can also look glamorous and sensual. In this sense, some argue that, while it is clearly not negative that women should be able to celebrate their sexuality and lives aside from motherhood, women's agency is still generally reduced to how they look and their need for a relationship with a man rather than how they act in society. Machin and van Leeuwen (2007) show that in women's magazines in Vietnam, women are depicted not in fashionable settings but carrying out actual work, for example, on projects helping homeless single women. Based on this observation, we can think about the way that the semiotic choices in the *Cosmopolitan* image signify a discourse of women as independent and having exciting lives. This suggests a life which is glamorous and interesting. But unlike the Vietnamese magazine, this is a world where the woman acts alone and in her own interest, often learning hot tips to look good, to keep her man, to have hot sex and to get on in the world. She has no broader contribution to make either to society or other women. So what is important here is to be aware of the way that semiotic choices

can be used to signify identities and values associated with women's agency without fully articulating them. This means that these discourses can be manipulated precisely for the purposes of aligning such identities and values with consumer behaviour. Independence can be signified through how you look, the clothes you wear and the poses you strike, and not through the way you think or act in broader political terms.

Ideology and power

The question of power has been at the core of the CDA project. Basically, power comes from privileged access to social resources such as education, knowledge and wealth, which provides authority, status and influence to those who gain this access and enables them to dominate, coerce and control subordinate groups. The aim in CDA has been to reveal what kinds of social relations of power are present in texts both explicitly and implicitly (Van Dijk, 1993: 249). Since language can (re)produce social life, what kind of world is being created by texts and what kinds of inequalities and interests might this seek to perpetuate, generate or legitimate? Here language is not simply a vehicle of communication, or for persuasion, but a means of social construction and domination. Therefore, discourse does not merely reflect social processes and structures but is itself seen to contribute to the production and reproduction of these processes and structures. As Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 258) state, 'the discursive event is shaped by situations, institutions and social structures, but it also shapes them'. It is also important to note that power can be more than simple domination from above; it can also be jointly produced when people believe or are led to believe that dominance is legitimate in some way or other. For example, in our Western democracies, people elect politicians because they believe that they have the authority to govern a country. We also believe that doctors have the 'power' to provide us with the care we need. The point is that power, at least in democratic societies, needs to be seen as legitimate by people in order to be accepted, and this process of legitimation is generally expressed through language and other communicative systems.

Research in CDA has been mainly concerned with the persuasive influence of power, a conception of power associated with Gramsci (1971), whose concept of hegemony describes the ways through which dominant groups in society succeed in persuading subordinate groups to accept the former's own moral, political and cultural values and institutions. Within this framework, discourse constructs hegemonic attitudes, opinions and beliefs and, as we shall see throughout this book, in such a way as to make them appear 'natural' and 'common sense', while in fact they may be ideological.

The term 'ideology' is yet another central concept in CDA. Coined in the early 1800s by the French philosopher Destutt de Tracy, the concept is mainly associated with Karl Marx (1933). In its original Marxist conception, ideology is

an important means by which dominant forces in society can exercise power over subordinate and subjugated groups. Over the years, the concept has developed a broader meaning to refer to belief systems held by individuals and collectives. Like discourse, it is used to capture the way that we share broader ideas about the way the world works. In CDA, ideology has been used (and without necessary adherence to Marx) to describe the way that the ideas and values that comprise these ideas reflect particular interests on the part of the powerful. So in discourses that promote being tougher on crime, where crime is identified as the relatively minor actions of the least powerful members of society, rather than those of banks and corporations who seek to reorganise society in their own interest for reasons of profit, we can ask whose interests these definitions serve.

The aim of CDA is to draw out ideologies, showing where they might be buried in texts. Drawing on Gramsci (1971), Fairclough argued that, while many institutions and forms of social organisation clearly reflect ideological interests, one place where we can observe exactly how these interests operate is in language. This is simply because language is a common social behaviour where we share our views of how the world works, what is natural and common sense. It is through language that we share the idea of things like 'British culture', 'nationalism' and what immigrants are like. People and institutions then draw on this language as it appears to be neutral and 'common sense'.

Of course ideologies and power can be found communicated through other semiotic modes and not only through language. We can ask what kinds of interests are served by the stream of visual images we find in the news media that most often represent crime not as the actions of wealthy corporate people but of the thuggish working classes, or other marginalised people, such as immigrants, often depicted as grinning at the viewer with their large families, accused of fraudulently claiming state benefits.

Ideology characterises the way that certain discourses become accepted in this way and therefore obscure the way they help to sustain power relations. According to one view of ideology, ideology obscures the nature of our unequal societies and prevents us from seeing alternatives. It limits what can be seen and what we think we can do. In present Western societies, we take it for granted or as common sense that 'business' should be at the heart of everything, that it is the lifeblood of our societies and of human existence. Such is the power of this view that alternatives are viewed with ridicule. We only have to think in this respect of how British educational institutions are run.

Ideologies can be found across whole areas of social life, in ideas, knowledge, and institutional practices. In the case of 'business', this ideology comes to dominate everything in society – even how we run schools and hospitals. Social welfare, economic equality and quality of civil life become subordinate to the logic of business 'efficiency', which in practice means profit. In Britain at the time of writing, it was becoming common to see schools being re-launched as academies, semi-privatised and apparently more attuned to

work demands, often with new buildings designed in the style of the corporate head office to communicate business-style buzzwords such as 'innovation' and 'vision'.

Halliday (1978) argued that language can create dispositions within us. CDA analysts, such as Fairclough, following Foucault, believe that one way to put this is that language constitutes us as subjects (1994: 318). This is because the person who comes to think through the discourses of business is thinking of themselves, their identity and their possibilities, through this discourse. What would be important in terms of MCDA would be to identify the kinds of semiotic choices that were being used to communicate about these things. We would ask what kinds of ideas, values, identities and sequences of activity are being represented or implied. Often, as we will show, some of these aspects may be completely suppressed or concealed for the purposes of legitimising a particular ideology.

Social Semiotics and everyday identity

It is important to realise that discourses and ideologies are not simply to be found in official and media texts. Social Semiotics views the individual as embedded in networks of social relations where all of us are communicating, making signs through semiotic choices. This network will be at the same time cooperative, contested and fragmentary as we come together with different kinds of people (Kress, 2010). It is these interactions and the needs generated in and through them, which drive communication and shape the semiotic resources available. The reader of the text about the drug problems in Totnes or the viewer of the image in *Cosmopolitan* is located in a network of social relations. These individuals too are sign makers within their own social environments. They are part of the process through which signs are made, used, and remade. Of course they may not have the power of dissemination afforded to the *Daily Mail* newspaper or to *Cosmopolitan* magazine, but nevertheless they are sign users and sign makers. They too will use language and other semiotic modes in their own interests. This is an important observation as this means that we can plot the way that the ideas, identities and values that comprise discourses have a life across networks of social relations. What follows is one such example regarding the comments and behaviour of a young woman encountered by one of the authors of this book.

One of the authors was recently in a town centre bar having a beer after work with several colleagues. Three of them, all male, were leaning at the bar. Two were listening to the other who was recounting a paper heard at a recent conference. The author noticed that a group of women came into the bar dressed as school girls, with short skirts, long socks and wigs giving them all pigtails. Most of them carried hockey sticks. Those familiar with certain British cultural practices would immediately recognise this as a 'hen night', where a bride-to-be will go out partying with her female friends on the

evening before her wedding. A typical theme is for them to dress in this manner, a cross between school uniforms and stripper clothes.

It was about 7.30pm and the women appeared already fairly drunk. One of them approached the author and engaged him in conversation. The author's aim, unsociably, and feeling slightly awkward with a drunk person, was to get rid of the woman. What we draw attention to in this case is the language used by the woman. This example reveals three things. One, it shows how as language producers what we want to say is not always made explicit. Two, it is a useful way to show how as analysts of language we can draw out what is and what is not made explicit, what remains slightly concealed beneath the surface of dialogue. Three, it points to the way that in social networks we share available semiotic resources which favour the realisation of certain discourses. And additionally, this is an opportunity to think about the other modes of communication the woman relied upon. The dialogue went like this:

Woman: Hey, do you like my hockey stick?

Author: Looks fine to me but I'm no expert.

Woman: (drunk mock seductive expression) Do you like to play?

Author: (shyly) More into football myself. You off to a game then?

Woman: Am I making you nervous?

Author: Well, I don't get out much.

Woman's friend (coming over): You scaring this nice gentleman?

Woman: No, he just thinks we are wild, crazy women.

Woman: Am I scaring you? Do you think we are scary?

Author: I am afraid I do.

Woman: Where are the real men? Everywhere we go we scare them to death.

Her friends then took her off to speak with some other people. The author shortly afterwards heard the women having a similar conversation with another group of men, and seemed to be keen to maintain the engagement about how 'scary' they were. Ten minutes later two of these men came to the bar to buy drinks for themselves and the women. One was remarking on their chances of developing something with the women and on the quality of the breasts of the particular woman who had approached the author. A few weeks later the author came across the woman again in her role as a shop-worker, selling him a sandwich. Here she was not speaking of being 'scary'.

In this short conversation a number of interesting features can be found. Of course, on the one hand, this is simply a group of women out having some

fun, being playful and flirtatious. And a group of academics, engaged in some self-important, pompous conversation, may have seemed like a good, or safe, target for such fun. But, on the other hand, this example can tell us a lot about the way that, even in the most mundane of social contexts, we will use language in creative ways to persuade, influence and manipulate people, and most importantly to lead them to kinds of understandings that we may not make explicit but that once drawn out can give us access to the available semiotic resources for communication in a social network.

The conversation began with an innuendo about the hockey stick, which the woman later used again in subsequent conversations with the other men. But what is interesting is the fact that her being 'scary' was a theme that she repeated in her talk. The author did not find her scary, although he did feel awkward. And certainly the two men who were assessing their chances with her did not find her scary, but rather a potentially easy opportunity. Had the author been able to record the women's talk throughout the time they were in the bar, we could see that the words 'scary' and 'wild' were used strikingly often. In the kind of linguistic analysis we explore in this book, where a word or kind of word is used more than might be normally expected, this would be considered as an indication of some kind of underlying but not overtly expressed contentious social issues.

So what is going on here is that the women are interacting exclusively with men in bars as they move through the town centre, flirting with them through sexual innuendo, dressed in a playful manner that appeals to traditional ideas of male sexual fantasy, telling men that they are, as a collective, being 'scary'. So what exactly is the contentious issue that is being indicated by the use of the word 'scary'?

Some researchers have explained that women represented in women's lifestyle magazines are often depicted as being 'naughty' through breaking the taboos of traditional domestic sexual behaviour (Caldas Coulthard, 1994). As noted above, since the late 1960s, British society, although to some extent in the mass media only, has seen a change in representations of women, challenging the traditional idea of the woman as homemaker, whose sexuality belongs in the domestic environment and is associated with marriage and motherhood. Later forms of feminism, taken up by *Cosmopolitan* and seen also in the television series *Sex and the City*, represented women's blatant use of their powers of seduction over men as a form of agency. Here we can see the meaning potential of, and discourses signified by, the word 'scary'. The behaviour and language of woman in the bar might therefore be interpreted as telling the author and the other men that she is powerful. Dressing in an overtly sexual fashion could be viewed as 'transgressive' and 'naughty' in the manner described by Caldas Coulthard (1994), although the woman to some extent fulfils a male fantasy. And importantly, the use of language overtly reminds men that they should be intimidated by this transgression and this taking of control.

The extensive use of the word 'scary' is evidence that this is an issue that is still considered to be contentious and far from settled. Those in society who really have power do not need to ask others if they find them scary. Had the author walked up to a woman in a bar and said 'Are you scared of me?', or 'I think you find me scary', this would have appeared odd, and indeed as scary. And a man who was overheard to spend the evening telling everyone how scary he was or how scary 'we' were, referring to him and his friends, would be viewed as rather silly.

This example shows that a closer look at the language used in everyday conversation reveals how people tell us things about themselves that are not made explicit. We could say that people, through such talk, are encouraging us to see them as having particular kinds of identities and are engaged in particular kinds of activity without actually stating this. The woman in the bar was saying something like: 'since you expect women to act in ways appropriate to a domestic model of gender roles and behaviour, our actions shock and intimidate you'. This is not said explicitly, but is signified. Put another way, in her network of social relations this woman shares semiotic resources for communication from which she chooses, aware of their meaning potential. Of course in this case the academic she encountered was not from her more usual network of social environments and the meaning potential was taken differently. But it is important to remember that all social interaction is to some extent like this, and as Kress (2010) points out, is that which provides the dynamic force that drives communication and the need to work with semiotic resources. If everything was simply fixed in meaning, there would be no sense in semiotic production. As we considered when we looked at Halliday's Social Semiotic theory of language, it is important that we view all uses of semiotic resources as evidence of people having, to some extent, an awareness of the work that they can accomplish through their choices and being aware of how to best make such choices in the context of the prompts that are provided in every social interaction.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that we should think of all communication, whether through language, images or sounds, as being accomplished through a set of semiotic resources, options and choices. Such semiotic choices are able to signify broader sets of associations that may not be overtly specified. A choice of word or visual element might suggest kinds of identities, values and activities. It is because of this that we are so concerned to emphasise that analysis should be based on careful detailed description of the semiotic choices found in talk, texts and images. We ask what options communicators use, why and what are the consequences of these choices? And crucially, we must think about these choices in terms of power relations. How do the choices we find serve the interests of authorities, ruling groups, institutions or even individuals in face-to-face situations?