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*Chapter Five*

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‘I GOTTA USE WORDS WHEN I TALK TO YOU’:  
*DECONSTRUCTING THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATION*  
[pp. 76-87]

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[deceased, rest in peace friend]

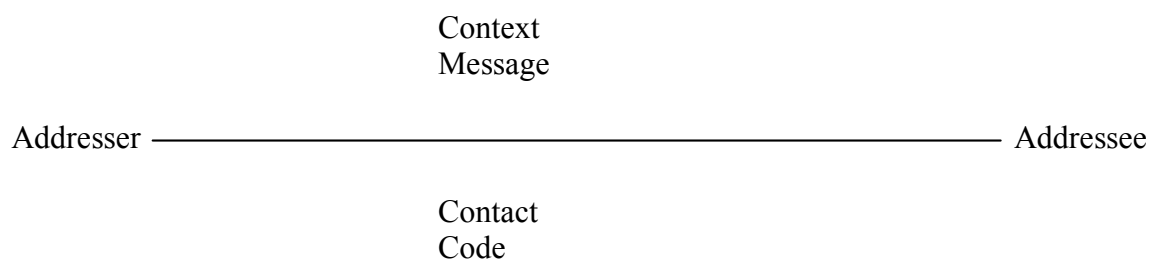
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The human species is not only a political but a talking animal. From very early in our evolutionary history we have used signs, both physical and verbal, as a way of taking part in the human community. And today through the mass media our lives are even more saturated by a world of signs, signs spoken and written but now increasingly visual in the form of photography, cinema, poster advertising, television. A theory of the sign as communication is fundamental to conventional social psychology. Yet, as I shall argue, the conventional theory is one-sided and inadequate because it assumes that living in a community of signs is simply a matter of communication. In fact communication is only one special and particular effect within the whole range of what it means to be human, to be a signifying animal, to be able to function in discourse.

#### THE CONVENTIONAL THEORY

Shannon and Weaver define communication as ‘all the procedures by which one mind may affect another’ (1949: 8) and diagram it as a thick black line or ‘Message’ passing from an ‘Information Source’ via a ‘Transmitter’ and a ‘Receiver’ to its ‘Destination’, the only possible break in the line being envisaged as a ‘Noise Source’ (ibid.: 7). This is the model of communication discussed by Deaux and Wrightsman (1984). Reproducing Shannon and Weaver’s diagram because it ‘has had a tremendous influence on the study of communication’ (p.108), Deaux and Wrightsman illustrate it with a drawing of a Message coming out of one male head and transmitted via a mouth and an ear to its [77] Destination, another male head. Similarly, Roman Jakobson, in a widely influential article (Jakobson 1960), asserts that in communication ‘The *addresser* sends a *message* to the *addressee* (see Figure 5.1).

*Figure 5.1*



*Context, message, contact* and *code* are all seen as subordinate and exterior to what is central: communication as a direct connection between two individual minds or subjects, *addresser* and *addressee*, standing there at each end of an unbroken line.

This, the dominant conception of communication, does consider other issues and questions - about the linear directionality of the model, the dependence of communication on a shared social system and a context, how messages are encoded and decoded, the nature of the *contact* - questions in fact about the *process* of communication. But these questions are relegated to a marginal position while the possibility of direct transmission is given priority.

A sign may be defined as 'something which stands to somebody for something' (Peirce, cited in Hawkes 1977: 126), and, as suggested already, a sign may be verbal, written, visual, or any other form of sign system. Here I shall concentrate on the linguistic sign rather than signs in the visual field (though the implications of the argument hold there also, Lapsley and Westlake 1987). The crucial assumption in the dominant model of the sign as communication is that the sign is by nature transparent, however much it is subject to noise and external interference or to the dangers of polysemy (multiple meaning). I shall demonstrate that the sign is not by nature transparent to meaning and that transparency (and so communication) can never be more than a contingent effect conditional upon a specific application of a particular form of discourse. [78]

## SIGNIFIER AND SIGNIFIED

We are so familiar with the linguistic sign or word that we overlook its strange and arbitrary nature. However, Ferdinand de Saussure (1974), the founder of modern linguistics, follows a tradition reaching back to the rhetoricians of the ancient world (who discriminated between *significans* and *significandum*) by analysing the 'word' as consisting of two components: the signifier and the signified. The signified is the concept or meaning of a word and the signifier is the shaped *sound* necessary to give existence to a meaning. When the two - signifier and signified - are brought together they then and only then make up the sign, the completed word. But the two orders - the shaped sound of the signifier, meaning in the signified - are by nature separate and different.

Linguistics distinguishes between phonetic, syntactic and semantic levels in language, the first pertaining to sound, the second to grammar and sentence structure, the third to systems of meaning. Out of all the sounds possible for the human voice, a specific language selects out and organises a limited number as the *phonemes* of that language, the smallest units systematised within it. In modern English the sound /l/ is opposed to the sound /r/ and this allows us to say 'law' rather than 'raw'. Japanese, however, does not make this distinction and so cannot draw on it to make up words). Phonemes are characterised not 'by their own positive quality' - they are simply 'opposing, relative and negative entities' (Saussure 1974:119). As subsequent work has indicated, the kinds of phonemic oppositions in all the known languages in the world 'amount to twelve oppositions, out of which each language makes its own selection' (Jakobson and Halle 1956:29). Single phonemes strung together syntagmatically in time can be combined to make up morphemes, the smallest units of the signifier to which meaning can be attached in a language (thus in English /cat/ is a morpheme, as is /s/ since it can be drawn on to change the singular /cat/ to the plural /cats/).

The distinction between signifier and signified has two implications, both of the first importance: (1) the system or order of the signifier, based as it is in the negative oppositions

constituting the phoneme, has an autonomous and systematic reality of its own. This is both physical and material (the shaped sounds of a language are not merely physical but are precisely [79] shaped, derive from an internal organisation which is identical whether the sound is represented physically by a tape-recording or by writing or on a compact disc); (2) because it is self-defining and autonomous, in this way signifiers do not have any *natural* or *necessary relation to any signified or meaning*. In Modern English the sound we write down as 'mare' or 'mayor' has been agreed to mean 'female horse' or 'municipal leader'. But an almost identical sound in the French language is used to give the meanings 'mother' and 'sea' (in which case the sound is written down as either *mère* or *mer*). Though the relation between signifier and signified is by nature arbitrary, signifiers come to be linked up with particular signifieds through the conventions of a given language.

The distinction between signifier and signified is both ontological and epistemological for it indicates different orders within reality and poses the problem of how we can live with them and know them. Yet the distinction is very close to common sense. Almost everyone now has had the experience of visiting a country and not being able to speak its language. The feelings of alienation and anxiety this usually causes arise from the fact that everyone else is confidently 'jabbering' away because they know the convention of that language allowing them to pass from signifier to signified, while the visitor can only hear the signifiers. Or again the case of an infant and so-called 'language-acquisition' is relevant. A baby is not born with access to any signifieds or meanings - for the very good reason that these vary from language to language and a baby arrives with the potential to speak *any* language in the world (and indeed others which have not yet come into existence). The infant (Latin: *infans*, not speaking) encounters a human world which excludes them and in which he or she has to begin by picking out the particular phonemes and so the signifiers of that language. This the infant does during the very early babbling period, between about 6 and 9 months, simply by playing with and practising the sounds well before he or she, at about a year and a half, lines up signifier with signified to produce its first word and so qualify as a child (de Villiers and de Villiers 1979).

Fundamental though it is to understanding how discourse operates, the signifier/signified distinction is misunderstood and misrepresented by proponents of the theory of language as communication. Thus, in his *Introduction to Communication Studies* (1982), Fiske erroneously identifies the signifier as 'a physical [80] object' and claims that 'the signifier is the sign's image as we perceive it - the marks on the paper or the sounds in the air' (p. 47). In fact, the signifier in language is a material not simply physical reality; and far from having a secondary and derivative existence dependent on the sign as 'the sign's image', the signifier is one side of the sign (the other being the signified) constituted by the autonomous and independent order of phonemic organisation in a given language. Similarly, Deaux and Wrightsman (1984), after noting that in its 'elements' and 'at the most basic level' a language consists of phonemes, immediately rule these outside the concern of a theory of communication:

'Although these concepts are basic to linguistic analysis, our own concern really lies at the level of *semantic analysis* - what is the meaning transmitted' (1984:110-11). They therefore proceed on the assumption of an *already* completed sign, the word, in which signifier and signified have *already* been brought into relation.

This is no accident. Those who equate communication with the nature of language *must* misrecognise the signifier/signified distinction because that distinction devastates communication theory. It is assumed that 'the addresser sends a message to the addressee', that a message is transmitted or conveyed all but directly from one head to another in very much the

same way oil might be carried by road from (say) Aberdeen to Manchester. Someone (the addresser) puts oil in a tanker at Aberdeen and someone else (the addressee) pumps almost all of it out again in Manchester; and the tanker is merely a passive vehicle perfectly adapted for transporting oil.

But language does not work like that. Barring telepathy (in which a meaning or signified might be passed directly and silently from one head to another), the only means by which one subject can have access to another is by means of the signifier and you simply cannot put a signified *into* a signifier. Whereas an oil tanker as a vehicle or means of transport is perfectly adapted for carrying oil, the relation between signified and signifier is by nature arbitrary and they have no necessary correspondence. More than this, the order of the signifier conforms in the first place not to the needs of the signified but to its own autonomous and self-defining organisation. The signifier is not a transparent means of communication through which the signified may be passed as light waves pass through a pane of glass. [81] Nevertheless, the signifier *can* be treated as a mere passive vehicle for the signified, as transparent to meaning, as external to the process of discourse. The error of conventional communication theory is to take part for whole, to equate *one* partial effect of the signifying process with its general nature. Communication, meanings passed from one subject to another, does of course take place but it is one contingent effect of discourse which occurs under special conditions. One condition for the seeming transparency of the signifier and the communication effect is a certain definition or positioning of the subject. For discourse can appear to be a transparent means of communication if the subject as addresser or addressee is able to ignore or overlook the signifier.

## TRANSPARENCY AND THE SUBJECT

Subject and object always come into existence together in a reciprocal process. As regards discourse, the signified is an object for an addresser or addressee as its subject (Lacan 1977). The signifier is the means of representation by which the object and the subject are positioned in relation to each other. It is a condition for the communication effect to take place that the signified be treated as a self-sufficient and unproduced - this happens if the signifier is treated as weightless and invisible, as it is when considered merely as a passive vehicle for transporting meaning. Reciprocally, however, if the signified as object is presented as autonomous and self-sufficient, the subject equally will be so presented - it will be positioned as an unproduced I dominating the signified as its object: meaning and the I will appear together as simply *there* (Easthope 1988). This is precisely the conception of the subject assumed in the diagrams and by the model of the communication theory, the subject as unconditioned source or point of origin of meaning. On this basis it can be argued that the subject presumed by the communication model - and by communication theories within social psychology - is the supposedly unproduced, transcendent subject whose history marks it out unmistakably as the bourgeois subject (Henriques *et al* 1984).

This difficult area can be approached and perhaps better illustrated in terms of the concept of the unconscious. Unless it is [82] innate, the I has to be developed (Freud 1914). A necessary condition for this development and for its continuation is that the signifier be disavowed or overlooked, as it is for example by most adults with their unreflecting assumption that words are words, completed signs in which signifier and signifier are *already* united, and so words can be strung together fluently and without much conscious effort. How different it is for very young

children, constantly struggling to find ways by which signified can seem to master signifier (Freud 1920) while constantly seduced by the desire to play with the signifier, treating words as things in verbal nonsense, rhymes, jests, silly sayings, and puns. From this pleasureable play the adult I must hold itself back unless it can find a legitimate adult mode for such play in the form of adult jokes, jokes with a point (Freud 1905).

Besides childhood and jokes, in both of which the signifier is not treated as weightlessly transparent and not overlooked, another vivid example of the actual material existence of the signifier is provided by so-called 'Freudian slips'. These happen all the time though we generally contrive to ignore them: the man on the television game show who says 'tarts' when he means to say 'darts', the schoolgirl who writes in an essay that 'An octopus has eight testicles'. Or there is poor old George (Bush) who to an audience in Southern Idaho on 6 May 1988 described his relationship with Ronald Reagan by saying 'we've had triumphs, we've made mistakes, we've had sex' - then explained he meant 'setbacks' and that he felt like 'the javelin competitor who won the toss and elected to receive' (a remark which explained just what kind of sex with Ronald Reagan he consciously did not want to have). In each of these instances the signifier reasserts itself, as it were, appearing from underneath the signified and so available to express a meaning supposed to remain unconscious. To conceive the subject only in relation to the signified and deny the force of the signifier is to assume the I as masterful and self-sufficient, exactly the form of subject presupposed by conventional social psychology and by communication theory.

## COMMUNICATION FROM ABSENT SUBJECTS

Negatively, the signifier/signified distinction renders the communication model untenable because the reality of the [83] signifier shatters the transparency assumed by the communication model. Now, more positively, I want to examine some ways in which the signifier always intervenes actively in making meanings possible. One way to begin is by noting how the communication model privileges speech and personal presence - it almost always prefers the example of two living subjects in contemporary communication with each other, either face to face in conversation or on the telephone. Yet an area of human signmaking essential for the persistence of culture consists of messages handed down from one generation to another, a process facilitated by the invention of writing. If we consider *inscriptions* - old manuscripts, documents, printed books, letters, epitaphs on tombstones, every linguistic means by which the past communicates with the present - the materiality of the signifier and its effects is revealed. Inscriptions are messages communicated to an addressee from an addresser who is radically absent, often in fact dead.

Attacking the speech act theory set out in Austin's *How to Do Things With Words* (1962) in the essay 'Signature Event Context' (1982a), Derrida takes writing as an example of communication. Thus, to write a message presupposes that communication can still function in the absence of the addressee - 'one writes in order to communicate something to those who are absent' (p.313). Equally, writing presupposes a function in the absence of the addresser (I can read a text even if I am not the original addresser, for example I can read today a sonnet by Shakespeare, an addresser who has been completely absent since his death in 1616). Writing is 'a kind of machine' and 'is not exhausted in the present of its inscription' (pp.316, 317). Signifiers materially present in any utterance, enable speech to be written down, inscribed and so preserved as writing.

Therefore, *a text can always be cited*. Within the social convention of a particular language a

text can always be read by others for whom it was not 'originally' intended. In fact a written text - a Shakespeare sonnet, a football report in yesterday's newspaper - can never appear as it was 'originally' intended and is always cited with a difference. That difference arises from the present context in which it is read and reproduced. Though always dependent on a context of reading, meaning always exceeds any original intention the addresser intended to communicate. This does not entail that communication is impossible but it does follow that a [84] text always and necessarily gives rise to meanings different from any 'originally' intended (and any supposedly 'original' intention itself can never be more than a retrospective construction). Because of the necessary non-correspondence of signifier and signified any reader of a text produces from its signifiers signified meanings beyond any the addresser aimed to transmit via that text. Communication, meaning as completed sign, the signifier read as transparent to signified, can never be more than one privileged and partial account of the process of signification.

#### AN EXAMPLE: THE *SUN*

Because signified meaning can only be communicated to others by means of the system of the signifier, the meaning read out of an utterance, act of communications or text, is always both the same and *different* from anything any addresser tries to put into it:

YOU BASTARD! 'Plane bomb' girl screams at Arab lover. The pregnant girl who was turned into a human bomb to blow up a Jumbo jet glared at her ex-lover across a court yesterday and screamed: 'You bastard',

(*SUN*, 8 October 1986, p.5, headlines and first sentence)

'The addresser sends a message to the addressee': this brief text has been chosen to demonstrate how inadequate would be analysis according to any conventional notion of communicating a message. In the first place, although the text and subsequent story derive from factual information (as factual as any report of proceedings in a British court of law may be) its intended meaning is less a message than an occasion for entertainment.

The story is by-lined 'James Lewthwaite', who probably but not certainly was the journalist present at the Old Bailey on 7 October 1986. But the story, with the addition of headlines written by a sub-editor as well as photographs, is the result of a collective rather than individual process. It conforms closely to the genre of popular newspaper writing and its 'author' therefore is the *Sun* newspaper. It is best regarded then as an act of communication within a social institution, an act of exchange between the *Sun* as a capitalist institution producing as commodities texts for [85] pleasurable consumption by the purchaser and reader. The nub of the argument is that because what it produces are texts it is only through a procedure of enforced reduction that this brief text can be equated with communication between producer and consumer, addresser and addressee. Because with texts there is an intervention of the signifier whatever the social intention to communicate, the reader is constituted as active in producing meaning from the text. Some of the meanings produced may well be consistent with the presumed intention of the text as commodity and others not. But this consistency alone is not enough to guarantee the communication model.

In the first instance at the level of the signifier the text is made up from within the phonemic organisation of Modern English; depending on such oppositions as /p/ and /b/ to enable

distinctions between /Plane bomb/ and (say) /Blane pom/. The syntactic system of English makes possible the elaborated syntax of the first sentence, with 'the pregnant girl' as subject, 'glared at' and 'screamed' as main verbs in a co-ordinate structure, 'her ex-lover' and the quoted phrase as objects ('who was turned...' is the antecedent and verb for a subordinate clause). At every point this sentence sustains a coherent syntagmatic chain by denying entry to other possible terms, for example, 'hysterical', 'furious', 'betrayed', 'heavily', etc. as substitutes for 'pregnant', 'lady', 'woman', 'feminist', 'person', etc. as possible substitutes for 'girl'. Thus the meaning intended is contingent upon an active *suppression* of other possible meanings which would 'make sense'. At the lexical level of words there is a further act of suppression by the intended reader, the reader of communication. Certain signifieds have to be actively discarded, such as the meaning that 'turned into' means 'underwent total bodily transformation' familiar from such utterances as 'The handsome frog turned into a chauvinist prince', or the idea that 'blow up' means 'to breathe into until inflated'. The reader must actively discard such meanings, relegating them to the unconscious, for the intended act of communication to take place (it follows from the nature of the signifier plus the semantic system that such meanings are *necessarily* present in excess of anything envisaged by the theory of communication).

Thus, although the syntagmatic chain acts to close down any such excess or rather contain it in ways consistent with the *Sun's* [86] intended communication, such closure is temporary, provisional and ultimately impossible. Any term can be taken with any other term as the text is read to produce meanings, cited in contexts beyond any definable as the 'original' context, the 'original' communication between addresser and addressee.

Briefly, there are three such contexts. One is that in which the text may be cited in the theoretical framework of historical materialism in which case it can be read as an instance of social ideology (in concentrating upon the legal and moral actions of individuals the text background, a political meaning implicit in the fact that the Palestinian Hindawi could be seen as acting as hero in the colonial struggle against Israel - the aircraft belonged to El Al), and also in terms of an ideology of gender (the relation between the man and the woman can be used as traditionally phallogocentric - she is the betrayed lover, a photograph of her is captioned 'Ann Murphy ... sobs', while he is the sexually exploitative male 'who has it all and doesn't get caught'). A second, derived from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1985), would emphasise the presentation of the self and its cultural other (thus the woman, represents self and home, and is described by the judge as 'a simple Irish girl', while Nezar Hindawi, his photograph captioned as ... denies plot', can be read as reproducing the stereotype of a foreign other, the untrustworthy and unscrupulous Arab).

A third context, drawing on psychoanalysis, would construe the text in terms of different points of identification offered to but not necessarily taken up by masculine and feminine readers, the woman as daughter and point for masochistic empathy ('Tears trickled down Ann's face...') vindicated by the father figure of Mr Justice Mars-Jones, and Hindawi as the sadistic male. A psychoanalytic reading would also construe the text in terms of a traditional if illegitimate patriarchal phantasy regarding unanticipated pregnancy - and this would seek substantiation in the way the text, somewhat anomalously, insists on the target aircraft as a *Jumbo* jet (since the pregnant woman was inside this plane, exploding that could be read as equivalent to detonating the enormous stomach of an elephant).

Each of these readings would seek to justify itself from different readings of the text, readings to which the text undoubtedly lends itself. Each would in fact be a citation, one which far exceeds [87] anything envisaged by an account of the text as communication. To these a

fourth context for citation must be added, in conclusion: the text was read as an example, cited in the context of an argument, which proposed that conventional communication theory in social psychology was reductive and inadequate. [End of page 87]