

# 4 CODES

## Codes

### *Basic concepts*

What we have been studying, in our analysis of traffic lights, is a code. Codes are, in fact, the systems into which signs are organized. These systems are governed by rules which are consented to by all members of the community using that code. This means that the study of codes frequently emphasizes the *social* dimension of communication.

Almost any aspect of our social life which is conventional, or governed by rules consented to by members of the society, can therefore be called 'coded'. We need to distinguish between *codes of behaviour*, such as the legal code, the code of manners, or the two codes of rugby, and *signifying codes*. Signifying codes are systems of signs. Having made the distinction, we must recognize that the two categories of code are interconnected. The Highway Code is both a behavioural and a signifying system. Bernstein's work links the language people use with their social life. No signifying code can be properly divorced from the social practices of its users.

In this book, though, we concentrate on the second category of code. Indeed, I use the word code to mean signifying system. All codes of this type have a number of basic features.

1. They have a number of units (or sometimes one unit) from which a selection is made. This is the paradigmatic dimension. These units (on all except the simplest on-off single-unit codes) may be combined by rules or conventions. This is the syntagmatic dimension.

2. All codes convey meaning: their units are signs which refer, by various means, to something other than themselves.
3. All codes depend upon an agreement amongst their users and upon a shared cultural background. Codes and culture interrelate dynamically.
4. All codes perform an identifiable social or communicative function.
5. All codes are transmittable by their appropriate media and/or channels of communication.

In this chapter we shall cover all of these features, but shall concentrate mainly on features 3 and 4. Feature 2 has been dealt with at some length in chapter 3, and feature 5 in chapter 1. First, though, it will be helpful to recapitulate some of the work we have already covered on the nature of the units that constitute a code and to introduce two new terms: *analogue* and *digital*.

## **Analogue and digital codes**

### *Basic concepts*

We have seen (p. 57) that paradigms are composed of units with an overall similarity, but with distinctive features that distinguish them one from another. There are two types of paradigm which give their names to two types of code: analogue and digital. A digital code is one whose units (both signifiers and signifieds) are clearly separated; an analogue code is one that works on a continuous scale. A digital watch separates one minute from the next: it is either five minutes past or six minutes past. An analogue watch has a continuous scale and it is only by putting marks on the dial that we can read it 'digitally'.

Digital codes are easier to understand simply because their units are clearly distinguished. Arbitrary codes are digital, and this makes them easy to write down or notate. Music is potentially an analogue code, though our system of notation has given it distinctive features (the notes and scales) and thus imposed upon it the characteristics of a digital code. Dance, though, is analogic. It works through gestures, posture, distance—all analogue codes and thus difficult to notate. Nature is generally composed of analogues: in trying to understand or categorize nature, we impose digital differences upon it: for example, the 'seven ages of man'; or intimate, personal, semi-public and public distances between people.

*Further implications*

This search for significant differences or distinctive features is crucial to the textual side of meaning. In arbitrary or symbolic codes it is a straightforward process, for if the units of a paradigm are stated and agreed, the differences between them must be identified.

Codes composed of iconic signs, however, pose problems. We will see how the commutation test (p. 109), or Baggaley and Duck's work with the semantic differential (p. 145), have attempted to identify what features of an iconic message are significant. Fiske and Hartley (1978) have discussed in some detail the problems and importance of identifying this 'smallest signifying unit' in a code. Our semiotic analysis of a news photograph (p. 104) will show that these distinctive features may be significant only in the second order of signification. The codes of photography pose particular problems, because photography appears to follow nature in being composed of analogical scales. The search for meaning, however, involves the identification of significant differences and thus the imposition of digital features upon an analogical reality. Putting sixty marks around the perimeter of a clockface is a metaphor of how we impose meaning upon reality.

So the perception of reality is itself an encoding process. Perception involves making sense of the data before us: it involves identifying significant differences and thus identifying units—what we are perceiving. It then involves the perception of the relationship between these units, so that we can see them as a whole. In other words, it involves creating paradigms and syntagms. Our perception and understanding of reality is as specific to our culture as our language is. It is in this sense that we talk of reality as a social construct.

**Presentational codes**

But codes are not just systems for organizing and understanding data: they perform communicative and social functions. One way to categorize these functions is to distinguish between representational and presentational codes.

Representational codes are used to produce *texts*, that is messages with an independent existence. A text stands for something apart from itself and its encoder. A text is composed of iconic or symbolic signs. Most of this book and much of the rest of this chapter is concerned with understanding texts composed of representational codes. Presentational codes are indexical: they cannot stand for something apart from

themselves and their encoder. They indicate aspects of the communicator and of her or his present social situation.

## **Non-verbal communication**

### *Basic concepts*

Non-verbal communication (or NVC) is carried on through presentational codes such as gestures, eye movements, or qualities of voice. These codes can give messages only about the here and now. My tone of voice can indicate my present attitude to my subject and listener: it cannot send a message about my feelings last week. Presentational codes, then, are limited to face-to-face communication or communication when the communicator is present. They have two functions.

The first, as we have seen, is to convey indexical information. This is information about the speaker and his or her situation through which the listener learns about her or his identity, emotions, attitudes, social position, and so on. The second function is interaction management. The codes are used to manage the sort of relationship the encoder wants with the other. By using certain gestures, posture, and tone of voice, I can attempt to dominate my fellows, be conciliatory towards them or shut myself off from them. I can use codes to indicate that I have finished speaking and it is someone else's turn, or to indicate my desire to terminate the meeting. These codes are still, in a sense, indexical, but they are used to convey information about the relationship rather than about the speaker.

These two functions of presentational codes can also be performed by the representational in so far as presentational codes can be present in representational messages. A written text can have a 'tone of voice'; a photograph can convey depression or joy. But social psychologists recognize a third function of codes which can be performed only by the representational. This is the cognitive or ideational. This is the function of conveying information or ideas about things absent, and it involves the creation of a message or a text that is independent of the communicator and situation. Verbal language or photography are examples of representational codes. Jakobson's model (see p. 35) can clarify the difference between the two types of code. Representational codes are the only ones that can perform the referential function. Presentational codes are most efficient in the conative and emotive functions. Both types of code work on the aesthetic and the phatic, though the metalinguistic is confined largely to the representational.

*Further implications*

The human body is the main transmitter of presentational codes. Argyle (1972) lists ten such codes and suggests the sort of meanings they can convey.

1. *Bodily contact* Whom we touch and where and when we touch them can convey important messages about relationships. Interestingly, this code and the next (proximity) are ones that appear to vary most between people of different cultures. The British touch each other less frequently than members of almost any other culture.

2. *Proximity (or proxemics)* How closely we approach someone can give a message about our relationship. There appear to be 'distinctive features' that differentiate significantly different distances. Within three feet is intimate; up to about eight feet is personal; over eight feet is semi-public; and so on. The actual distances may vary from culture to culture: the personal, but not intimate, distance of Arabs can be as little as eighteen inches—which can be very embarrassing for a British listener. Middle-class distances tend to be slightly larger than the corresponding working-class ones.

3. *Orientation* How we angle ourselves to others is another way of sending messages about relationships. Facing someone can indicate either intimacy or aggression; being at 90° to another indicates a co-operative stance; and so on.

4. *Appearance* Argyle divides this into two: those aspects under voluntary control—hair, clothes, skin, bodily paint and adornment—and those less controllable—height, weight, etc. Hair is, in all cultures, highly significant as it is the most 'flexible' part of our bodies: we can most easily alter its appearance. Appearance is used to send messages about personality, social status, and, particularly, conformity. Teenagers frequently indicate their dissatisfaction with adult values by hair and dress: and then complain when such messages of hostility provoke negative reactions from adults!

5. *Head nods* These are involved mainly in interaction management, particularly in turn-taking in speech. One nod may give the other permission to carry on speaking; rapid nods may indicate a wish to speak.

6. *Facial expression* This may be broken down into the sub-codes of eyebrow position, eye shape, mouth shape, and nostril size. These, in various combinations, determine the expression of the face, and it is possible to write a 'grammar' of their combinations and meanings. Interestingly, facial expression shows less cross-cultural variation than most other presentational codes.

7. *Gestures (or kinesics)* The hand and arm are the main transmitters of gesture, but gestures of feet and head are also important. They are closely co-ordinated with speech and supplement verbal communication. They may indicate either general emotional arousal or specific emotional states. The intermittent, emphatic up-and-down gesture often indicates an attempt to dominate, whereas more fluid, continuous, circular gestures indicate a desire to explain or to win sympathy. Besides these indexical gestures, there is a group of symbolic ones. These are frequently insulting or scatological and are specific to a culture or subculture: the V sign is an example. We should also mention the iconic type of gesture such as beckoning, or using the hands to describe a shape or direction.

8. *Posture* Our ways of sitting, standing, and lying can communicate a limited but interesting range of meanings. These are frequently concerned with interpersonal attitudes: friendliness, hostility, superiority or inferiority can all be indicated by posture. Posture can also indicate emotional state, particularly the degree of tension or relaxation. Interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, posture is less well controlled than facial expression: anxiety that does not show on the face may well be given away by posture.

9. *Eye movement and eye contact* When, how often, and for how long we meet other people's eyes is a way of sending very important messages about relationships, particularly how dominant or affiliative we wish the relationship to be. Staring someone out is a simple challenge of dominance; making eyes at someone indicates a desire for affiliation. Making eye contact at the beginning of or early in a verbal statement indicates a desire to dominate the listener, to make him or her pay attention; eye contact towards the end of or after a verbal statement indicates a more affiliative relationship, a desire for feedback, to see how the listener is reacting.

10. *Non-verbal aspects of speech* These are divided into two categories:

- (a) The prosodic codes which affect the meaning of the words used.

Pitch and stress are the main codes here. 'The shops are open on Sunday' can be made into a statement, a question, or an expression of disbelief by the pitch of the voice,

- (b) The paralinguistic codes which communicate information about the speaker. Tone, volume, accent, speech errors, and speed indicate the speaker's emotional state, personality, class, social status, way of viewing the listener, and so on.

These presentational codes are classified by their medium. They are all relatively simple, in that they have comparatively few units to choose from in the paradigmatic dimension, and very simple rules of combination in the syntagmatic. They are, in fact, broadly similar to what Bernstein calls 'restricted' codes.

## **Elaborated and restricted codes**

### *Basic concepts*

This famous classification of code is the work of Basil Bernstein (for example 1964, 1973). He is a socio-linguist and has concentrated his work on the language of children. So these terms apply originally to different uses of verbal language, though we may now legitimately extend them to cover other types of code. Bernstein's work has been highly controversial because he links the types of language used with the social class of the user and relates this to the educational system. He has taken linguistics into politics.

He found that there were fundamental differences in the speech of working-class and middle-class children, and he summarized these differences by claiming that working-class children tended to use a restricted code and middle-class children an elaborated code. Later, he stressed what some of his critics have ignored, and this is that social class is not of itself the determining factor. What actually determines the code used is the type of social relations that exist. Thus a tight, closed, traditional community tends to use restricted codes. The working class is one example of such a community, but so too are middle-class institutions such as the officers' mess, the legal profession, or a boys' public school: each of these communities uses its own type of restricted code.

The more fluid, changing, mobile, impersonal type of social relations typical of the modern middle class tends to produce an elaborated linguistic code. Bernstein's final point is that the working classes are

confined to a restricted code, whereas the middle classes can move from a restricted to an elaborated code at will.

### *Further implications*

But what are the characteristics of these two types of code?

1. The restricted code is *simpler*, less complex than the elaborated. It has a smaller vocabulary and simpler syntax.
2. The restricted code tends to be oral and thus is closer to the presentational, indexical codes of non-verbal communication. The elaborated code can be written or spoken and thus is better for representational, symbolic messages.
3. The restricted code tends to be redundant. Its messages are highly predictable and are likely to perform phatic rather than referential functions. The elaborated code is more entropic; it is harder to predict the verbal options open to the speaker. It is more capable of the referential function.
4. The restricted code is orientated towards social relations; the elaborated facilitates the expression of the individual's discrete intent. This means that the restricted code is indexical of the speaker's status within the group. It reinforces social relations and expresses the similarities between speaker and group, restricting the signalling of individual differences. The elaborated code, on the other hand, is geared towards the individual as a person, rather than a status role within a group; it copes with the speaker's expectation of psychological difference between him- or herself and the listener(s) and therefore facilitates the expression of individuality—where he or she differs from the listener(s). The restricted code facilitates the expression of commonality, of group membership—what the speaker shares with the listener(s). The restricted code, then, depends on a background of common assumptions, shared interests, shared experience, identifications, and expectations. It depends on a local cultural identity which reduces the need for speakers to verbalize their individual experience. The elaborated code, then, is necessary when the speaker wishes to verbalize precise meanings that are personally unique, but which he or she wishes to make available to the listener. Communication depends not on a local commonality, but on the shared arbitrary code of language which enables the elaboration of intended meaning.
5. Restricted codes rely on interaction with non-verbal codes. Indeed,



Bernstein suggests that individual differences are expressed only through non-verbal codes: speech is used to express commonality. Elaborated codes play down NVC, which is why the written language is almost invariably elaborated.

6. Restricted codes express the concrete, the specific, the here and now; elaborated express abstractions, generalities, the absent.
7. Restricted codes depend on cultural experience; elaborated on formal education and training—they need to be learnt.

To help recognize the restricted code of speech, Bernstein suggests that we imagine ourselves eavesdropping on a group of friends on a street corner. We would note the following:

1. We would be aware of our own exclusion from the group or community.
2. We would note that the speech was relatively impersonal, less individualistic: it would contain more 'you' and 'they', less 'I'; it would contain more phrases like 'isn't it', 'you see', 'you know', phrases which express the commonality of the speaker, and fewer expressions of individualism.
3. We would note the vitality, the liveliness of the speech. What matters is *how* something is said, not *what* is said. Much of the real meaning, and all the individuality, of the speaker would be conveyed through the non-verbal codes.
4. We would note that the speech flow was dislocated, disjunctive. The organization of ideas is based on association, not on logic or syntactic sequence.
5. We would note that the content was concrete, narrative, descriptive, not analytical or abstract.
6. We would note a restricted vocabulary and syntax.

Bernstein gives an example of lower-working-class speech which illustrates these points.

It's all according like well these youths and that if they get with gangs and that they most they most have a bit of a lark around and say it goes wrong and that and they probably knock some off I think they do it just to be a bit big you know getting publicity here and there.

### *Codes and value judgements*

Our society clearly values the elaborated codes. English-teaching in school concentrates on and rewards the elaborated, written language. We value

the highbrow forms of art which all use elaborated codes. Ballet is an elaborated dance form with a complex structure which requires formal education and training; disco dance is restricted and requires social or community experience rather than formal training. Folk stories or scatological jokes are restricted, the highbrow novel elaborated. And so we could continue. The culturally valued art forms are almost all elaborated.

Even the words that Bernstein has chosen—elaborated and restricted—have positive and negative social values. But if we are to make the most of Bernstein's work, we must discard these value judgements. Elaborated codes are not *better* than restricted codes, they are *different* and perform different functions. We are all of us individuals, we are all community or group members. We need restricted and elaborated codes equally. *Coronation Street*, and popular art of this sort, actually does more to keep our scattered diverse society together by providing a shared experience than does a highbrow, culturally valued play by Samuel Beckett. The terms 'restricted' and 'elaborated' must be seen as descriptive and analytical: allowing value judgements to become attached to them will merely obscure the issue.

## **Broadcast and narrowcast codes**

### *Basic concepts*

Elaborated and restricted codes are defined by the nature of the code itself and by the type of social relationship it serves. Broadcast and narrowcast codes, on the other hand, are defined by the nature of the audience. A broadcast code is one that is shared by members of a mass audience: it has to cater for a degree of heterogeneity. A narrowcast code, on the other hand, is one aimed at a specific audience, often one defined by the codes that it uses. We can say that an operatic aria is using a narrowcast code: it appeals to opera-lovers; whereas a pop song is designed to appeal to a mass, non-defined audience, and is therefore using a broadcast code. This immediately highlights similarities between, on the one hand, narrowcast and elaborated codes and, on the other, broadcast and restricted.

### *Broadcast codes: further implications*

Broadcast codes share many characteristics with restricted. They are simple; they have an immediate appeal; and they do not require an 'education' to understand them. They are community-orientated,

appealing to what people have in common and tending to link them to their society. They are frequently anonymous, or at least have 'institutional' authors: Granada Television is the 'author' of *Coronation Street*. The fact that the authors are anonymous or institutional militates against the expression of the personal, individualist viewpoint. The broadcast codes are the means by which a culture communicates with itself. Stuart Hall (1973a) makes a similar point well when he talks of the television audience as being both source and receiver of the message. Seeing the audience as the source of a message may seem paradoxical and needing of further explanation.

There are three ways in which the audience can be said to originate the broadcast message. The first is in the content. If a broadcast is to receive the mass reception it needs, it must deal with matters of general concern. The 'good' mass communicator is one who is in tune with the feelings and concerns of society at large. But content is not just the subject matter of the message; it is also the way that the subject matter is handled. There are patterns of feelings, attitudes, values within a culture that are presented in its broadcast messages. These messages then re-enter the culture from which they originated, cultivating this pattern of thought and feeling. There is a constant, dynamic interaction between audience as source, broadcasting, and audience as destination. Our analysis of the front page of the *Daily Mirror* (plate 1b, p. 17) has shown how these patterns of thought and feeling have influenced the editorial construction of that message—the audience (via the editor's professional perception of it) was in a real sense the source of the message.

The second aspect of the audience as source is the way in which the audience determines the form of the message. At the simplest level this may result in the 'formula productions' by which broadcasters produce new versions of old structures. The audience has certain expectations, based on a cultural experience shared with the broadcasters, that, for instance, broadcast messages have a beginning, a middle, and an end. An event may not have finished, but a news report on it must have a conclusion: threads introduced into a naturalistic story must all be tied up and related in a most unnatural way. This same process can be traced at less obvious levels. Stuart Hall, with Connell and Curti (1976), has shown how the fact that we live in a parliamentary democracy with a 'watchdog' press determined the form of a particular *Panorama* programme. The form of the programme was conventional: representatives of the main political parties and an 'uncommitted' media chairman debated a political issue. By a careful analysis of the way in which the politicians shared the broadcast time, took turns, and by the

way in which the media chairman treated them and behaved himself, the researchers demonstrated that the real meaning of the programme was not derived from the subject of the debate, but from its form: this meaning was that our system of parliamentary democracy *works*, and that the media institutions demonstrate it working. The mass audience 'knows' this well already; the 'form' of the programme proves it. This form is an encoded message: it is composed of units of television behaviour combined according to conventional syntagmatic practice. It is a broadcast code, it is a restricted code: and the cultural experience of the audience is the source of the message.

The third way in which the audience can be seen as the source is a development of this analysis. Broadcasting is an institutional activity and institutions are a product of their parent society. Britain, the United States, and Russia, for instance, are different societies and have consequently different broadcasting institutions. These institutions are staffed and run by what each society feels is an appropriate type of person; the priorities within each institution are the product of their staff and their society, and all of these add up to influence the type of broadcasting that each institution produces.

Stuart Hall argues that there is a hidden but determining relationship between the structures of thought and feeling in the audience, the encoded structure of the broadcast message, and the structures of the broadcasting institutions. All are interdependent, interdeterminate.

Fiske and Hartley (1978) have developed the concept of 'bardic television'. In this, they suggest that television performs seven functions in a modern society that the bard performed in a traditional society. These are as follows:

1. to articulate the main lines of the established cultural consensus about the nature of reality;
2. to implicate the individual members of the culture into its dominant value systems, by cultivating these systems and showing them working in practice;
3. to celebrate, explain, interpret, and justify the doings of the culture's individual representatives;
4. to assure the culture at large of its practical adequacy in the world by affirming and confirming its ideologies/mythologies in active engagement with the practical and potentially unpredictable world;
5. to expose, conversely, any practical inadequacies in the culture's sense of itself which might result from changed conditions in the world out there, or from pressure within the culture for a reorientation in

- favour of a new ideological stance;
- 6. to convince the audience that their status and identity as individuals is guaranteed by the culture as a whole;
- 7. to transmit by these means a sense of cultural membership (security and involvement).

These functions are performed by all television messages: audience members negotiate their response with reference to their own particular circumstances, and by so doing situate themselves in their culture. The message is anonymous or from an institutional source: the traditional bard was a 'role' in his society, not an individual as the artist is today. Thus none of these seven functions encompasses the expression of the individual's discrete intent. They are appropriately performed by broadcast codes in a mass society and by restricted codes in a subculture or a local community. This similarity of social function between broadcast and restricted codes explains why the two share so many features.

*Narrowcast codes: further implications*

A corresponding set of similarities exists between narrowcast and elaborated codes. Narrowcast codes are aimed at a defined, limited audience: usually one which has decided to learn the codes involved. They need distinguishing from restricted codes (which may also be understood by a small audience only) in that they do not rely on a shared communal experience, but on a common educational or intellectual experience. The music of Stockhausen or a specialist talk on Radio 3 are examples of narrowcast codes. They are individualist, person-orientated, not communal, status-orientated. They expect differences between communicator and audience, if only that the communicator knows more, or sees and feels differently. The audience expects to be changed or enriched by the communication, whereas the audience of broadcast, restricted codes expects reassurance and confirmation.

Narrowcast codes may be élitist or, at least, socially divisive. In art they are highbrow and culturally valued; in science they produce impressive specialist jargon that the expert uses as an index of his expertise. The exclusiveness of the medical and legal professions is due in no small measure to the narrowcast codes that they use. A sociologist who uses an impressive specialist term to refer to a piece of familiar social experience is indicating her difference from the layman, her membership of a sociological élite. Communication specialists are not immune from this either. Narrowcast codes have acquired the function

in our mass society of stressing the difference between ‘us’ (the users of the code) and ‘them’ (the laymen, the lowbrows). Broadcast codes stress the similarities amongst ‘us’ (the majority).

### **Codes and commonality**

All codes rely on commonality, that is an agreement amongst their users on their basics—the units they contain, the rules by which these units may be selected and combined, the meanings open to the receiver, and the social or communicative function they perform. But how this agreement is reached and the form that it takes can vary considerably. We consider three significant ways of reaching agreement: by convention and use, by explicit agreement, and by clues within the text.

### **Convention and use**

The first and most important way of reaching agreement is by convention and use. By this we mean the unwritten, unstated expectations that derive from the shared experience of members of a culture. Convention gives rise to expectations that people will dress or behave within certain limits, that television programmes or conversation will follow broadly familiar lines, that houses and their gardens will conform more or less to local or national practice. Convention relies on redundancy: it makes for easy decoding, it expresses cultural membership, it relies on similarity of experience, it is reassuring. It can also produce conformity, lack of originality, resistance to change. The agreements that are reached by convention are usually, but not always, unstated. This means that there is no formal paradigm of signifieds to parallel the paradigm of signifiers. Let us take the code of dress as an example.

Each type of clothing constitutes a paradigm—ties, shirts, jackets, trousers, socks. Dressing in the morning is encoding a message. We select a unit from each paradigm and combine it with others to make a statement. This statement uses a presentational, indexical code and conveys a meaning about (1) us as the wearer of the clothes, (2) our perception of our relationships with the people we expect to meet, and (3) our status or role within the social situations we shall come across during the day. Comparatively few clothes have defined meanings; that is, there is rarely a stated agreement amongst their users. When there is, they belong properly under our next heading, that of arbitrary codes. Examples are club ties, uniforms, or badges. These all denote signifieds in the first order of meaning: they are symbolic. The code of dress

usually works, however, by indexical codes. I indicate my social position by the way I dress. My choice of tie can also connote my mood—‘I feel like wearing my blue-and-white spots today’. The eccentric dress of the artist is a way of connoting lack of respect for social convention generally. The indexical nature of clothes often makes people feel very personally about them. The young man who attends a job interview wearing jeans may explain his behaviour by saying ‘They must take me as I am: I *am* a jeans-wearer.’ The index has become what it indicates. The employer may well read this as indicating a resistance to the convention of the firm and thus may not offer him the job. Jeans can connote disrespect and rebelliousness.

These misunderstandings are due to the way that the employer and the interviewee have different subcultural experience of jeans. This difference of ‘reading’ that derives from different experience is what Eco (1965) refers to as *aberrant decoding*. When an artist produces a message for a defined audience using shared codes—when, that is, s/he produces a narrowcast message—s/he can expect that the range of meanings negotiated by audience members will be very limited. Their decoding will approximate closely to the encoding. But if that message is read by a member of a different culture who brings different codes to it, aberrant decoding will produce a different meaning. The problem occurs mainly with iconic codes—verbal languages are usually so different that *no* decoding is possible. Prehistoric cave paintings of animals have normally been read as conveying graceful, light-footed movement that seems to defy the law of gravity: but Margaret Abercrombie (1960) has argued that the paintings are, in fact, of dead animals lying on their sides. Our love of living animals and distaste for dead bodies has led us into an aberrant decoding (see plate 7). A message encoded in the codes of one culture has been decoded by the codes of another. I recently saw a recording of a Russian television news item which used British news film of a clash between police and pickets outside a factory gate. The aberrant decoding was obvious.

Because the mass media have to cater for numerous subcultures whose codes might differ significantly from those of the broadcasters, aberrant decoding becomes the rule, not the exception, with mass-media messages (Eco, 1965). When we talk about the culture of a mass society we are talking about a far more varied and loosely defined body of codes, beliefs, and practices than when we refer to the culture of, say, a tribal society. Aberrant decoding results, then, when different codes are used in the encoding and decoding of the message.

In many cases, and that of the interviewee in jeans is one, it is useful to

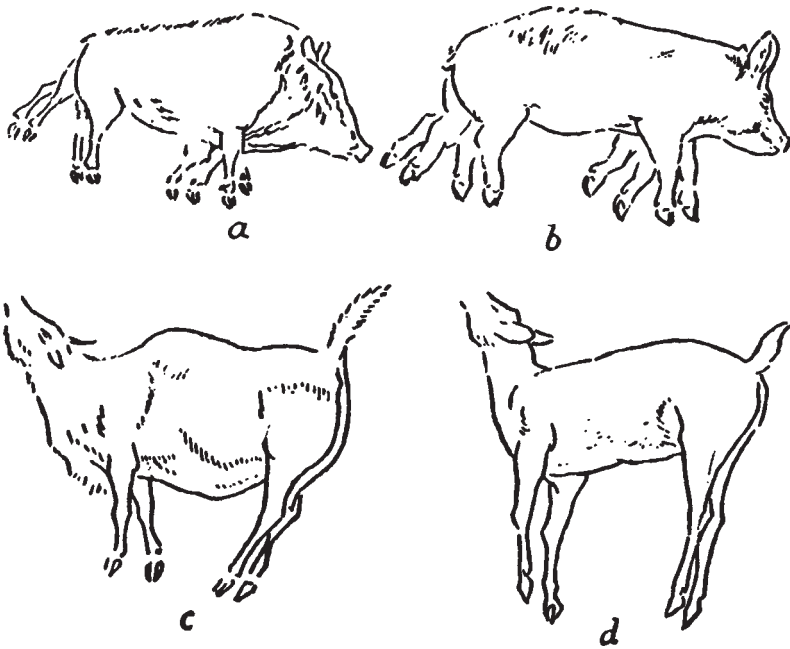


Plate 7 *Aberrant decoding. Cave paintings and dead animals.* Tracings from the Abbé Breuil's drawings of Altamira cave paintings (a, c); and from photographs of dead animals (b, d). Do (a) and (c) or (b) and (d) come closer to the codes of the original culture?

(a) A 'trotting boar'.

(b) A slaughtered pig. A composite tracing from two photographs, with legs in different positions.

(c) A 'bellowing bison'.

(d) A dead sambar hind.

From Abercrombie (1960)

extend this concept to include aberrant encoding as well. This is encoding that fails to recognize that people of different cultural or subcultural experience will read the message differently, and that in so doing they will not necessarily be blameworthy. The reading of a message does not of itself include a search for the encoder's intention. Indeed, much fruitless arguing has occurred, particularly in literary criticism, about the author's inferred intention.



## **Arbitrary codes (or logical codes)**

### *Basic concept*

These are simply defined, and easily understood. They are codes where the agreement among the users is explicit and defined. They are codes with a stated and agreed relationship between signifiers and signifieds. They are symbolic, denotative, impersonal, and static. Mathematics uses a perfect arbitrary or logical code. No one who has learnt the code can have any disagreement about the meaning of ' $4 \times 7 = 28$ '. Aberrant decodings are impossible: cultural differences are irrelevant: meaning is not negotiated between reader and text; it is contained in the message. All that is required is to learn the code. Science, the objective, impersonal, universal study of natural phenomena, attempts to communicate its findings in arbitrary, logical codes. Traffic lights, the Highway Code, military uniforms, football shirts, chemical symbols are all further examples.

### *Further implications*

The main differences between arbitrary and conventionally defined codes derive from the different natures of their paradigms. Arbitrary codes have a defined, limited paradigm of signifiers with a precisely related paradigm of signifieds. They emphasize denotative meaning. Conventional codes have open-ended paradigms: new units can be added; existing ones can drop out of use. They tend not to have an agreed paradigm of signifieds. They are thus more dynamic and capable of change. Arbitrary codes are static and can only change by explicit agreement amongst the users.

Arbitrary codes, then, are closed: they attempt to contain the meaning within the text, and do not invite the readers to bring much to their side of the negotiating process. All they require is that they know the code. Conventional codes, on the other hand, are open and invite active negotiation from the reader. Extreme types of conventional codes can be called *aesthetic*, and can sometimes be decoded only via clues within the text.

## **Aesthetic codes**

### *Basic concepts*

Aesthetic codes are harder to define simply because they are more varied,

more loosely defined, and they change so rapidly. They are crucially affected by their cultural context: they allow of, or invite, considerable negotiation of meaning: aberrant decodings are the norm. They are expressive; they encompass the interior, subjective world. They can be a source of pleasure and meaning in themselves: style is a relevant concept. Arbitrary logical codes are largely referential; aesthetic codes can perform all of Jakobson's functions.

### *Further implications*

Conventional aesthetic codes acquire their agreement amongst their users from shared cultural experience. Mass art and folk art use conventional aesthetic codes; so do dress and architecture, car and furniture design. They are the codes of the mass society as well as the codes of a traditional tribal society. Frequently, the more conventional or redundant that they are, the more they are called lowbrow and cliché-ridden.

But aesthetic codes can also break conventions as well as follow them: innovative art contains within itself clues or hints towards its own decoding. The artist who breaks with the convention of her or his time hopes society will learn the new codes of his or her work and so will gradually 'appreciate' it. A highbrow work of avant-garde art will frequently use aesthetic codes that are unique to it: the audience must seek within the work itself the clues to its decoding: all that is shared between artist and audience is the work itself. In a mass society, with mass production and mass consumption, the unique work of art acquires an additional status simply because of its uniqueness. It is not available for mass ownership or mass consumption and thus becomes especially highly valued for its ability to signal individual differences and élitist values. This is then translated into high financial value (see Benjamin, 1970).

### *Conventionalization*

There is a common cultural process by which innovative, unconventional codes gradually become adopted by the majority and thus become conventional. This is called conventionalization. This process may involve a highbrow art style, say Impressionism, gradually becoming widely accepted until it becomes the conventional way of painting nature. Or it may involve a narrowcast code, developed for a particular subculture, say jazz, gaining the same sort of broad cultural acceptance. In each case the devotees of the pure or original code will complain that the broadcast version is a degraded one.

Certainly, making a code into a broadcast one involves change: the precise, subtle communication possible when artist and audience share a narrowcast code is neither possible nor proper in a broadcast code. The heterogeneity of the audience will require the code to deal in generalities rather than specific unique meanings, and will allow the aberrant decodings necessary to fit the message into the varieties of convention or cultural experience of the mass audience. We may say these changes are for the worse: that conventionalization involves a lowering of quality because it involves appealing to the 'lowest common denominator'. Such a judgement may be valid, but we should be aware that it is made from within a particular value system, one that values elaborated, narrowcast codes and the expression of individual differences. A value system that rates highly the reinforcement of cultural ties and restricted, broadcast codes will find the metaphor of the lowest common denominator offensive, élitist, and inaccurate.

### *Codes and conventions*

Codes and conventions constitute the shared centre of any culture's experience. They enable us to understand our social existence and to locate ourselves within our culture. Only through the common codes can we feel and express our membership of our culture. By using the codes, whether as audience or source, we are inserting ourselves into our culture and maintaining that culture's vitality and existence. A culture is an active, dynamic, living organism only because of the active participation of its members in its codes of communication.

### **Suggestions for further work**

1. Discuss the role played by codes and conventions in plate 8. Note that the umbrellas are gold, that the 'unnamed' cigarettes are Benson and Hedges 'Special Filter', which have established a gold box as their image, and that a campaign of similar advertisements has 'conventionalized' the surrealist style. What does this tell you about the relationship of codes and conventions to social and communication experience? How important is our experience of other related texts in the decoding of one in particular (that is, intertextuality)? See Guiraud (1975), pp. 40–4; Fiske and Hartley (1978), pp. 61–2.
2. Compare the words of a pop song with a love poem. What light does this shed on the nature of elaborated and restricted codes and on their social function? Undertake the same exercise with reports

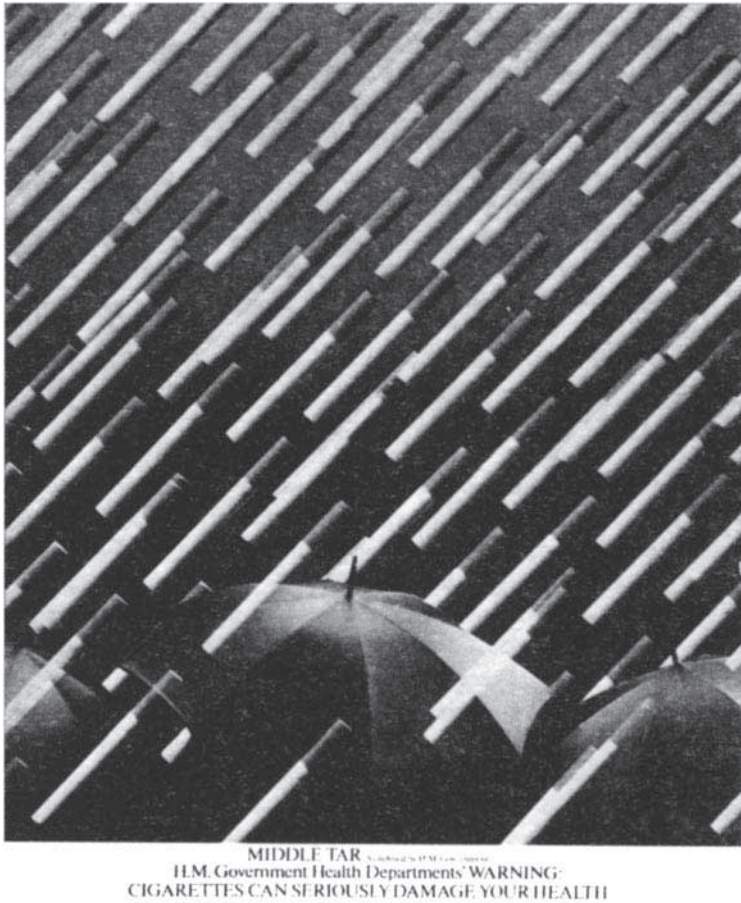


Plate 8 *'Raining Cigarettes'*

of the same event in a popular and a quality newspaper. Discuss the difference between value-free analysis and social value judgements. See Hartley (1982), chapters 2 and 10.

3. What are the main differences between arbitrary (or logical) and aesthetic codes? Use Jakobson's model to structure your analysis. See also Guiraud (1975), pp. 45–81.
4. Take one, or more, of Argyle's codes of NVC and attempt to produce a 'vocabulary' for it. What problems do you encounter, particularly those associated with analogue codes? How culture-specific are these

- codes? Is it relevant to discuss them in terms of the degree of motivation of their signs? See Guiraud (1975), pp. 88–90; Corner and Hawthorn (1980), pp. 50–61.
5. Turn to plate 4 (pp. 54–5). Discuss the images in terms of the codes they employ. How conventional are they? How aesthetic? Are some broadcast, some narrowcast? Does the medium itself (for example, painting, drawing, photography, cartoon), or the genre within the medium (for example, pornographic, fashion, or personal photography), carry meaning? Or does it identify the appropriate codes—do we decode a painted nude in the same way as a photographed nude?

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