

## **Selected Topics in Business Administration:**

### **On Representation**

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## On Representation

'Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or represent, the world meaningfully, to other people' (Hall, 1997a: 15). In other words, as a constituent moment of the 'cultural cycle' (du Gay et al: 3) it can be seen as a communicative and signifying process of construing and constructing meaning by linking concepts of the mind with semiotic resource systems, enabling us to refer to either the real or imaginary world.

Meaningful representation involves three variables, the speaker (author, photographer, painter), the vehicle (texts, sounds, images, marks, digital impulses) and the reader (beholder) and implies that through the vehicle signifying practices take place between the speaker and reader along the same codetypes of systems of representation. These consist of a shared conceptual map, a classified set of mental representations and concepts, and language, a structured system consisting of signs, symbols, and rules of signification, both dependent on an act of memory (Taylor: 99).

In what follows two approaches to 'read' a representation shall be presented, namely, the semiotic and discursive, as well as their application to specific examples to highlight their strengths and weaknesses and then establish their common features and differences while placing them in a dynamic perspective.

The semiotic approach treats the elements of cultural practices as if they were elements of language organised in texts which can be read by understanding the particular organisation of their constitutive signs.

Meaning making then, following F. de Saussure (in Hall, 1997a: 33-34), lies in *langue*, the social part of language whose structure has rules and conventions (grammar and lexis, the code of representation). This form governs the association, of content, the signified (the particular context or situation, the meaning of an object), which is realised by an expression, the signifier (the phonic and graphic substance, the representation of an object) (Hoey: 196, Slater: 138, Halliday: 3), and sometimes referring to the object itself. This relationship is arbitrary and as the signified can change historically, objects or signs do not have inherent meanings.

As meaning is constructed by a code in a system of representation, it requires the active interpretation by both the speaker and reader (Hall, 1997a: 31-33), thus looking as if it were natural (ibid: 21). This takes place when signs are in relation to one another, either forming a sequence or placed in apposition (ibid: 27). A case in point is intertextuality in the Pirelli advertisement showing Carl Lewis wearing red high-heeled shoes where the binary oppositions feminine/masculine tend to offset the stereotype of black hyper-masculinity by marking out

difference (Hall, 1997b: 233). However, language is treated as a closed system wherein the role of power in determining the choice of signs is played down. In binary oppositions, following J. Derrida (in *ibid*: 234-235), one side dominates the other as shown in the picture with the black female athlete F. Griffith-Joyner whose masculine aspect dominates, as her husband claimed. Ultimately meaning is deferred.

To take the relationship signifier-signified further, for R. Barthes (in Lidchi: 164-165) meaning is shaped on two hierarchical levels, namely, a denotative meaning whose function is merely descriptive, and a connotative meaning, showing how denotation evolves along changes in the interpretation of history, social practices, and ideologies. A case in point is Comanche which denotes a horse, but which was first connoted as vengeance against the Indians, then as the conquest of the civilised over the savage and finally as oppression leading to a shift in the perception of the 'Last Stand' battle (*ibid.*). This shows that denotation is stable over time but not connotation which is re-negotiated and questioned showing that meaning is eventually never fixed. There are thus potential meanings of which one is the preferred: in the photograph 'Heroes and Villains' B. Johnson is an ambiguous character because he is both a hero, winning the race, and the villain, drug-taker, thus the preferred meaning is both heroism and villainy (Hall, 1997b: 228). However, the social causes that effect the change in connotation and the choices for preferred meaning are left unexamined.

Connotation is linked to myth, a language which, unlike ordinary language, is based on a relationship signifier-signified which is motivated, purposeful, natural hence persuasive through the construction of new meanings. For instance, the 'Paradise' exhibition (Lidchi: 170-178, 183) was the result of deliberate actions that subtracted artefacts from Waghi ordinary life to exhibit them in an artificial and quasi-natural setting, a mythological fiction, to represent through pictures and reconstructions the tension in the Waghi reality but perpetuated the myth of paradise by contextualising and imbuing the reader with trust through the exercise of symbolic power. However, the deterministic structure of the exhibition ignores the actions the visitor performs to interpret it, let alone that a speaker can never fully represent the meaning one wishes to.

Therefore, one has to move beyond the vehicle of representation and its signs to adopt the discursive approach which stresses on the use of language not merely to convey ideas through representation but to motivate actions through the application of knowledge and power. The unit of analysis is discourse which, following M. Foucault (in Slater: 60), is a set of statements organised in either formations or epistemes, templates, that help represent, make use of, and organise the (strategic) knowledge of a topic through language to give meaning to social practices (without being reducible to meaning and language) and determine the conduct of institutions and ours (governmentality). Thus 'each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth' (Hall, 1997a: 49), a

discursive formation sustaining a regime of truth which is historical because supplanted by subsequent formations (ibid: 46).

But knowledge is enmeshed in relations of power, not reducible to class relationships as K. Marx claimed, as it determines whether and in what circumstances knowledge is to be applied or not. In other words, knowledge is empowered to become true as it has real effects when applied to material processes since it regulates the conduct of others, sets the rules, and disciplines social practices (ibid: 47). Moreover, power circulates and is productive in that it constructs new bodies and objects of knowledge, shapes new practices and forms of institutionalised authority as E. Said's discussion of 'Orientalism' confirms (in Hall, 1997b: 261).

Discursive formations direct systems of representation and affect our conceptual map by excluding other ways in which a topic could be constituted since discourse informs ways of analyses, classifications, and typologies. Thus, a museum is a discursive formation consisting of aesthetic, educational and anthropological discourses (Lidchi: 191-192) not reflecting real distinctions between people but creating them through the representation of such differences. In the Pitt Rivers Museum artefacts were collected typologically promoting a particular type of anthropological enquiry and knowledge (ibid: 186-188).

It follows that the way objects and subjects are exhibited, made visible, is linked to how power and knowledge guides one to see. In the Pitt Rivers Museum objects can be properly seen if one is involved in the evolutionary discourse where objects are used as a proof of this discourse. In other words, visibility (photograph, displays) is a socio-historical process associated with scientific knowledge (anthropology), popular culture, power geography (colonisation) and reinforced by museological representations legitimising the discourse of European superiority as during the Exposition Universelle at Paris (ibid: 195-197).

Therefore, discourses reinforce and perpetuate stereotyping, a power/knowledge game classifying people according to norms, and also, following A. Gramsci (in Hall, 1997b: 259), the site of struggle for hegemony, involving firstly, the reduction, exaggeration, essentialisation and naturalisation of types into widely recognised features, thus fixing difference which is resistant to change, secondly, the separation of what is normal from what is unacceptable, thus fixing social boundaries, and lastly, the establishment of inequalities of power (ibid: 258). Thus, stereotyping coupled with fetishism, as a strategy for both representing and not representing what is forbidden, create and sustain a regime of truth. For instance, S. Baartman whose body was considered beautiful by Hottentot standards, was pathologized as she did not fit the ethnocentric norms as applied to European women, resulting in her being represented as a savage through naturalisation, as a collection of sexual parts through reductionism and

fragmentation, hence ceased to exist as a person but rather as object through fetishism (ibid: 265-266).

Despite the importance of this approach in stressing that not only do we need language but also knowledge to convey and receive meaning through representation, it minimises the fact that individuals may resist forms of power and that the regulation of conduct may not always be successful (Nixon: 316). Moreover, neglects influence of the material, economic and structural factors present in the relation power-knowledge especially that they are important in determining the dynamic forces within culture (Lemke: 248) which points towards a relativity of regimes of truth.

Both approaches, categorised as constructionist, show that meaning is not located in the things-in-themselves, the vehicle of representation, but in the very signifying practices between speakers and readers using the same semiotic resource systems and appearing to be natural. Despite 'linguistic heteroglossia' (Lemke: 264) that within discourse formations or epistemes, a different semantic content is required since the signs and even the grammar chosen will be different from one topic to another (McGregor: 11), the same linguistic functions are used (Hoey: 211-213). In addition, since both approaches also tell us something about the process of meaning making itself, are metatheories (Halliday: 2).

Contrary to the semiotic approach, which is ahistorical, the discursive approach is historical since knowledge can be true in only one particular moment and is culture specific: there are no trans-historical continuities but rather discontinuities between one discursive formation to another (ibid: 46-47). However, this conflicts with the fact that discourse draws on language to establish knowledge, moreover ideology, because the words we use have a history that is echoed in the present (Billig: 18). Rather, sign systems and discourses despite their being instantiated as language at the time of representation, constitute a cumulative momentum of semiotic practices providing the energy for the dynamics of a culture (Halliday: 3).

Unlike the conventional notion of autonomous subject as being fully endowed with consciousness and being an authentic source of action and meaning, with both approaches the subject is absent since for the former language speaks us (albeit the subject is the author of paroles) and for the latter discourse produces knowledge (albeit the subject may produce a particular text) entrapping the subject within the limits of a regime of truth. This follows M. Halbwachs' argument (in Billig: 7) that we are but an unconscious echo of our social reality and the community in which we live, thus passive recipients of ideas. This position is clearly shown through the reading of painting 'Las Meninas' (Hall, 1997a: 54-61) where there is double subjectification: that produced by the system of representation and within discourse.

Nevertheless, power can operate through the ethical technologies of the self-

giving individuals the possibility for self-management and constitution of lifestyles (Slater: 61). Seen differently, semantic conventions and discourses are in constant movement as each 'contains speakers combining and recombining to form new patterns of discourse, as they jostle with their opinions and counter-opinions' (Billig: 20). Furthermore, since meaning is contextualised (Lemke: 248), the progressive change in context leads to new representations and interpretations and their selection, an indication that 'human thinking is not merely a matter of processing information or following cognitive rules' (Billig: 17), as both approaches assume, and that we can eventually disengage ourselves from the web of patterns of language (McGregor: 38) thus act upon our environment.

From the above discussion we can generalise that the semiotic approach is concerned with the internal organisation of representation, its poetics, and the discursive approach with the effect of representation, its politics. Despite the differences in focus, the approaches are complementary in that both are necessary to understand the object and manner of representation. In other words, the discursive approach requires the construction of signs and the semiotic approach requires an understanding of what connotations or signifiers the discourse has produced and by placing them in a dynamic perspective, one can understand the developmental trajectory of representational systems of cultures.

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