

Module 4

Communication and Representation

Introduction

This module focuses on representation as an aspect of communication. Stuart Hall (2013) defines representation as “the use of signs and symbols...to stand for our concepts, ideas and feelings” (xvii). Different groups of people around the world have invented and developed their own sets of signs and symbols to represent and communicate what they are thinking and feeling. In this module we will consider theoretical perspectives on the process of meaning-making through representation.

Learning Outcomes

After working on this module, you should be able to:

1. Discuss the theories of representation;
2. Explain concepts in semiotics; and
3. Analyze various media content using relevant concepts in semiotics.

1.0 Theories of Representation

People are not designed with bluetooth capabilities. We cannot transmit our ideas and emotions to others by simply putting our heads close to each other. There are individuals who seem to be able to read other people’s minds, but this is a rare gift. Under ordinary circumstances, we need to represent our thoughts and feelings in some form so that we can pass them on to others.

Different groups of people around the world have developed their own languages to represent the various elements of their respective environments, relationships, experiences, and understanding of their own universe. As environments and experiences vary, so do languages. For example, those who live in extremely cold places have developed a sophisticated vocabulary for snow. Scientists and other professionals also have their own language for communicating with each other. Medical doctors and lawyers, for instance, use words that need to be simpli-

fied for lay people. Artists have developed various forms of media — choreography, photography, graphics, music, theater/drama, etc. — each with its corresponding vocabulary, to represent their views of the world. The LGBTQ community, for their part, has developed a flamboyant way of speaking, and at one time *jejemon* was popular.

The development of mass and social media technologies has led to representation through other forms of language, such as audio, video, and film. To understand these different kinds of languages, you have to know the codes or rules for using them, or you have to be part of the group that uses the language. In other words, you have to belong to that particular culture.

The representations that people use and which are meaningful to others who belong to the same group, are also known as **signs**. Some signs are circulated globally while others are meaningful only to the members of a certain village or culture. The meanings of certain signs can also be learned. Product brands and logos, such as the Golden Arches and the Swoosh, are examples of signs that are understood internationally.

A large part of the study of communication and representation is looking at mimicry. People invented drama, film and video to imitate and present human characters, actions, and objects in the real world. Aristotle says that mimesis, or *panggagaya*, is basic to human nature:

...Ang hilig para sa panggagaya ay taal sa tao mula pa sa kaniyang sinaunang mga araw. Naiiba siya sa ibang mga hayop dahil siya ang pinakamapanggaya sa lahat ng nilikha, at natutuhan niya ang kaniyang pinakaunang leksiyon sa pamamagitan ng panggagaya. Ipinanganak din tayong lahat na may hilig masiyahan sa mga gawain ng panggagaya. Ang nangyayari sa aktuwal na karanasan ay ebidensiya nito; dahil nasisiyahan tayong tumingin sa pinakatumpak na representasyon ng mga bagay na kung totohanan ay ikinalulungkot nating tingnan, gaya ng mga anyo ng pinakamababang mga hayop at ng mga bangkay. (Aristotle, 2017, p. 9; translation by Virgilio S. Almario, 2017)

Popular television soap operas, for example, can be studied as mimetic representations of what happened or what may happen in real life. The actors represent characters and the sets and settings are supposed to create realistic scenes. Photographs and documentaries are often perceived as “truthful” or representing aspects of the real world. But the phenomena of Photoshop, digital editing, and manipulation of information put into question the truthfulness of many signifying practices. Advertisements, for instance, generally present things and/or people in ideal, sometimes too perfect, forms. Often, representations reflect the values and opinions of the ruling or dominant class.

Activity 1

Read Chapter 1 of *The Work of Representation* by Stuart Hall (2013, pp.1-26), which is available at <https://eclass.aueb.gr/modules/document/file.php/OIK260/S.Hall%2C%20The%20work%20of%20Representation.pdf> and https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/66880_The_Work_of_Representation.pdf.

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The theories of representation grapple with the question of where the meanings of signs come from.

1.1 Reflective theory of representation

Representation as imitation/mimesis assumes that meaning exists objectively in the physical world of objects, people and events, and that language functions as a mirror of an objective

reality (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013). Examples of the reflective approach can be seen in the claim that TV news programs are simply reporting what has happened or what is happening, and in the idea that documentaries show and record “real life”. The limitation of this approach becomes apparent if we closely examine the truth claims made in photographs.

Activity

Examine your selfies and reflect on your practices and the processes you engage in to make your photos more appealing/attractive.

1. Do your selfies reflect or mirror who you really are? Why or why not?
 2. What do you do to make your selfies more appealing/pleasing/attractive?
 3. Would you consider your selfies a fair representation of yourself? Why or why not?
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1.2 Intentional theory of representation

The intentional approach assumes that meanings are determined by author of texts. Authors include artists, poets, performers, writers, movie directors, and ad producers, and texts are the varied works produced by these authors which take the form of print, broadcast, and even on-line materials. The intentional approach posits that the ultimate source of the meaning of a text is the author who created or produced it. Representation in the intentional approach is thus a subjective process affected by an author’s experiences, background, and perspectives.

The limitation of the intentional approach becomes apparent when one realizes that there are as many interpretations as there are readers of a text. Once a text is produced and circulated, there are multiple meanings that can be arrived at when readers decode the text. This does not mean that the author's intentions are immaterial or irrelevant in making sense of his/her work or text. However, a text cannot be limited to a singular, ultimate meaning that is faithful to the author's intentions. For one, readers cannot easily determine or figure out an author's intentions. Even if one successfully decodes the author's intentions, there is no reason why readers must leave it to the authors to dictate and determine how a text must be read.

Activity 2

Think of a movie, TV ad, or song where the author has expressed his/her preference for how the work or text (i.e. the movie, ad, or song) should be interpreted and answer the following questions:

1. Is the author's intended meaning immediately apparent in the movie, ad, or song? Explain.
 2. Do you agree with the author's message or intended meaning? Why or why not?
 3. What other interpretations can be made of the movie, ad, or song?
 4. How important is it to give space to these other interpretations?
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1.3 Constructionist theory of representation

The reflective and intentional approaches both assume that representation is a linear process of transmission — i.e. that reality is simply reflected from one point to the other, that meanings originate from a source/author and are sent to the readers/receivers. In contrast, the constructionist approach emphasizes the active role of the reader in the process of decoding, making sense, and constructing meaning out of texts. Meaning is neither limited to the material world as it exists out there, nor is it contained within an author's intentions. Meanings are constructed by readers themselves and reality is subjective and multiple.

The constructionist approach allows for a critical questioning and possible subversion of a dominant reading or interpretation of a text. This is important because representations are not neutral but are sites of struggles where myths and ideologies often mask realities and reinforce a status quo which excludes other voices or pushes other realities to the margins. Consider for example how media churn out myths about beauty, the good life, the value of hard work, and the like. Moreover, the constructionist approach allows for readings of texts in a way that would facilitate appropriation or use of texts to resist stereotypes and assert alternative perspectives or positions.

2.0 Semiotics, the Discursive Approach, and the Production of Meaning

A key concept in representation is the use of signs. The study of signs is called **semiotics** (by Saussure) or **semiology** (by Peirce). Signs consist of a signifier and signified. The signifier is the word or, more generally, the physical object (such as a drawing or traffic lights) that we use to represent our thoughts, while the signified is thought or idea that is represented. All signs belong to paradigms and syntagms. Peirce classifies signifiers into icon, index, and symbol. An icon resembles what it represents. An index has a logical or natural relationship to what it represents. Finally, a symbol has no relationship or resemblance to what it represents, but its meaning is agreed upon by people.

While semiotics deals with how language constructs meaning, the discursive approach questions the perceived neutrality of language and the supposed innocence of the meaning-making process. According to Foucault, discourse appears in a body or across a range of texts. Discourse is not just a single statement or simple message, but the sum of what is said and what is NOT said about a topic. It also includes who can talk and how to talk about certain issues. Therefore, the discursive approach emphasizes the connection between discourse and power, regulation of conduct, and construction of identity and subjectivities (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013). At this point it will suffice to know what discourse is. Module 7 (Communication and Discourse) will further elaborate on discourse and power.

3.0 Media Content and Representation

In the previous sections, we learned about the theories of representation and the semiotic and the discursive approach to representation. In this section we shall look at social representation in media.

deals with how mainstream media content contributes to the racialization of crime, dissemination of patriarchal narratives on gender, and the othering of immigrants, Muslims, and the poor. Can the same be said of Philippine mainstream media? Explain your answer and cite specific examples.

In the United States, media representations of “non-white” or non-Caucasian races and ethnic groups such as African Americans, Native Americans, Asians, Latinos, and other minorities have been critiqued (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003, p. 201). In the Philippines, the role of mainstream mass media in the reproduction of certain representations of various sectors and demographics in Philippine society has also been noted. For example, Rolando Tolentino (2006) states that the mainstream mass media are “a major factor in the dissemination of the popular imaginary of the ethnic figure” as “*negra* (dark-skinned), *probinsyana* (provincial), *manang* (conservative), *tanga* (fool), *magaspang* (crass) at *kaiba* (different)” (iii). Indigenous peoples such as the Badjaos of Mindanao and the Igorots of Northern Luzon are also usually portrayed in film, television, and print media as backward, primitive, exotic, savages, uneducated, and poor, among others (Fong, 2006; Tindaan, 2010; Toohey, 2005). Gender inequalities are also visible in the appearance, assigned roles, and characteristics attributed to women in film, television, radio, print media, and online and social media.

On the other hand, media anthropologists have observed the emerging function of the mass media as tools for self-representation of minoritized groups and cultures. In the case of indigenous peoples, they have consciously and unconsciously utilized different forms of media to correct or battle stereotypes about them, as well as to represent their worldviews that were previously “othered” by colonial or imperial forces (Ginsburg, 2002). Other minoritized genders have also used media to resist patriarchal ideology in media and in society (See Austria, 2007; Austria, 2014; Dobson, 2015). In the discussion below we will look into how the various forms of mass media are used for self-representation by different classes, genders, and other sectors of society. We will also learn how to conduct textual analyses of media content.

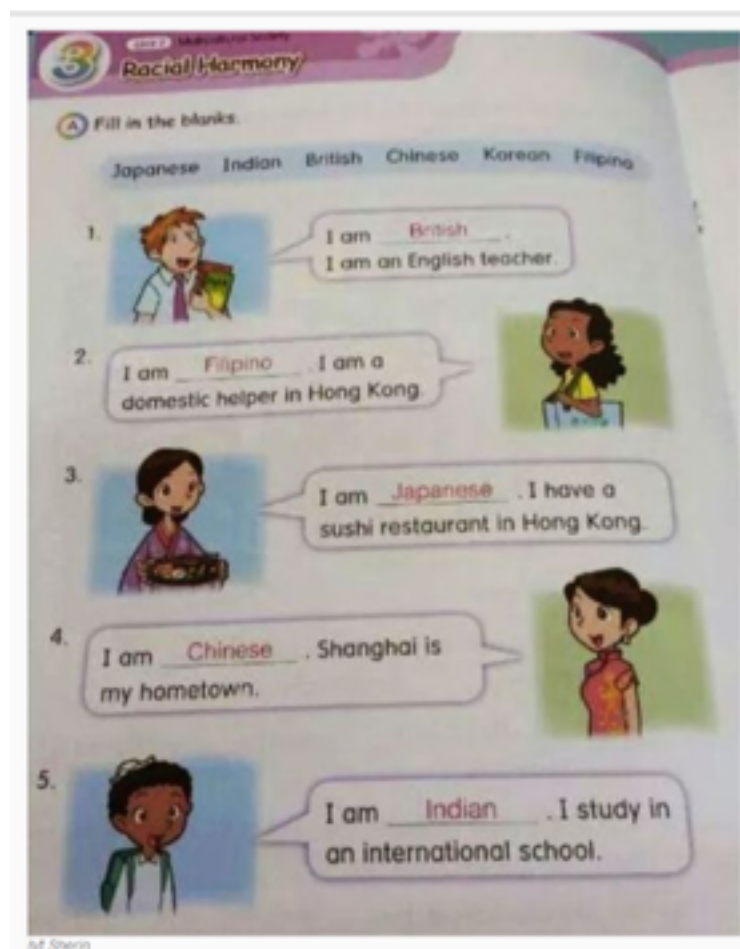
3.1 Representations in Print Media and Advertisement/Branding

Print media refer to written or pictorial signs published for distribution to a mass audience through printing, photocopying, or digital methods. Examples of these include newspapers, magazines, books, journals, newsletters, photographs, postcards, brochures, posters, billboards, books, and the like. As tools for mass communication, they have disseminated representations and imaginaries of various groups, sectors, and other aspects of reality. Let us look into how some researchers have interpreted or evaluated printed texts in this regard.

In analyzing print media texts, one must look at the use of visual codes, narrative, layout, and design to representations of a particular group, experience, class, idea, or topic. Visual codes especially in photographs include the use of color; gestures, expressions, and the gaze of subjects; lighting; types of shots; and character proxemics. Layout and design in newspapers and magazines may include the font styles and sizes used, placement of an article, and how much

space is allotted to it. The words used and the narratives communicated could also mean something. Let's examine some examples.

A. Examine this page from a textbook from Hong Kong. Take note of how the different racial groups are represented and answer the questions below.



Source: <https://macoycayabyab.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/hong-kong-textbook.png>

1. On the denotative level, how were the British, Filipinos, Japanese, Chinese, and Indians described or portrayed in the textbook through (a) the words used and (b) illustrations?
2. Interpret the portrayals at the connotative level.
3. What do these representations say about the perception of "racial harmony"?



3.2 Representations in Broadcast/Video/Film

Radio broadcasting communicates via sound (i.e. human voice, sound effects, and music).

Note that representations are affected by the inherent nature of a medium. For instance, representations on radio are only aural. Television, on the other hand, has multi-dimensional representations. Also, a single medium may have different groups of audiences who may have their own way of interpreting or decoding what they have perceived. Moreover, producers of media messages try their best to manipulate signs and symbols, hoping to homogenize the decoding process. Let us look at how radio can be a tool for self-representation.

On television, video, and film, both audio and visual elements are used to communicate representations of various groups, topics, events, and other aspects of reality. Reading the content of these media forms entails an analysis of their visual elements or *mise-en-scene*. For specific characters, their movements, roles, manners of speaking, attitudes, activities, and appearance contribute to the representation of certain groups or sectors of society.

3.3 Representations in Online and Social Media

The emergence of online and social media has given rise to more platforms for representation. It also paved the way for media convergence and provided traditional media with more outlets.

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