

shaped the *semiotic* approach to the problem of representation in a wide variety of cultural fields. You will recognize much about Saussure's thinking from what we have already said about the *constructionist* approach.

For Saussure, according to Jonathan Culler (1976, p. 19), the production of meaning depends on language: 'Language is a system of signs.' Sounds, images, written words, paintings, photographs, etc. function as signs within language 'only when they serve to express or communicate ideas ... [To] communicate ideas, they must be part of a system of conventions ...' (ibid.). Material objects can function as signs and communicate meaning too, as we saw from the 'language of traffic lights' example. In an important move, Saussure analysed the **sign** into two further elements. There was, he argued, the *form* (the actual word, image, photo, etc.), and there was the *idea or concept* in your head with which the form was associated. Saussure called the first element, the **signifier**, and the second element – the corresponding concept it triggered off in your head – the **signified**. Every time you hear or read or see the *signifier* (e.g. the word or image of a *Walkman*, for example), it correlates with the *signified* (the concept of a portable cassette-player in your head). Both are required to produce meaning but it is the relation between them, fixed by our cultural and linguistic codes, which sustains representation. Thus 'the sign is the union of a form which signifies (*signifier*) ... and an idea signified (*signified*). Though we may speak ... as if they are separate entities, they exist only as components of the sign ... (which is) the central fact of language' (Culler, 1976, p. 19).

Saussure also insisted on what in section 1 we called the arbitrary nature of the sign: 'There is no natural or inevitable link between the signifier and the signified' (ibid.). Signs do not possess a fixed or essential meaning. What signifies, according to Saussure, is not RED or the essence of 'red-ness', but *the difference between RED and GREEN*. Signs, Saussure argued 'are members of a system and are defined in relation to the other members of that system.' For example, it is hard to define the meaning of FATHER except in relation to, and in terms of its difference from, other kinship terms, like MOTHER, DAUGHTER, SON and so on.

This marking of difference within language is fundamental to the production of meaning, according to Saussure. Even at a simple level (to repeat an earlier example), we must be able to distinguish, within language, between SHEEP and SHEET, before we can link one of those words to the concept of an animal that produces wool, and the other to the concept of a cloth that covers a bed. The simplest way of marking difference is, of course, by means of a binary opposition – in this example, all the letters are the same except P and T. Similarly, the meaning of a concept or word is often defined in relation to its direct opposite – as in night/day. Later critics of Saussure were to observe that binaries (e.g. *black/white*) are only one, rather simplistic, way of establishing difference. As well as the stark difference between *black* and *white*, there are also the many other, subtler differences between *black* and *dark grey*, *dark grey* and *light grey*, *grey* and *cream* and *off-white*, *off-white* and *brilliant white*, just as there are between *night*, *dawn*, *daylight*, *noon*, *dusk*.

and so on. However, his attention to binary oppositions brought Saussure to the revolutionary proposition that a language consists of signifiers, but in order to produce meaning, the signifiers have to be organized into 'a system of differences'. It is the differences between signifiers which signify.

Furthermore, the relation between the *signifier* and the *signified*, which is fixed by our cultural codes, is not – Saussure argued – permanently fixed. Words shift their meanings. The concepts (signifieds) to which they refer also change, historically, and every shift alters the conceptual map of the culture, leading different cultures, at different historical moments, to classify and think about the world differently. For many centuries, western societies have associated the word BLACK with everything that is dark, evil, forbidding, devilish, dangerous and sinful. And yet, think of how the perception of black people in America in the 1960s changed after the phrase 'Black is Beautiful' became a popular slogan – where the *signifier*, BLACK, was made to signify the exact opposite meaning (*signified*) to its previous associations. In Saussure's terms, 'Language sets up an arbitrary relation between signifiers of its own choosing on the one hand, and signifieds of its own choosing on the other. Not only does each language produce a different set of signifiers, articulating and dividing the continuum of sound (or writing or drawing or photography) in a distinctive way; each language produces a different set of signifieds; it has a distinctive and thus arbitrary way of organizing the world into concepts and categories' (Culler, 1976, p. 23).

The implications of this argument are very far-reaching for a theory of representation and for our understanding of culture. If the relationship between a signifier and its signified is the result of a system of social conventions specific to each society and to specific historical moments – then all meanings are produced within history and culture. They can never be finally fixed but are always subject to change, both from one cultural context and from one period to another. There is thus no single, unchanging, universal 'true meaning'. 'Because it is arbitrary, the sign is totally subject to history and the combination at the particular moment of a given signifier and signified is a contingent result of the historical process' (Culler, 1976, p. 36). This opens up meaning and representation, in a radical way, to history and change. It is true that Saussure himself focused exclusively on the state of the language system at one moment of time rather than looking at linguistic change over time. However, for our purposes, the important point is the way this approach to language *unfixes* meaning, breaking any natural and inevitable tie between signifier and signified. This opens representation to the constant 'play' or slippage of meaning, to the constant production of new meanings, new interpretations.

However, if meaning changes, historically, and is never finally fixed, then it follows that 'taking the meaning' must involve an active process of **interpretation**. Meaning has to be actively 'read' or 'interpreted'. Consequently, there is a necessary and inevitable imprecision about language. The meaning we take, as viewers, readers or audiences, is never exactly the meaning which has been given by the speaker or writer or by other

interpretation

viewers. And since, in order to say something meaningful, we have to 'enter language', where all sorts of older meanings which pre-date us, are already stored from previous eras, we can never cleanse language completely, screening out all the other, hidden meanings which might modify or distort what we want to say. For example, we can't entirely prevent some of the negative connotations of the word BLACK from returning to mind when we read a headline like, 'WEDNESDAY – A BLACK DAY ON THE STOCK EXCHANGE', even if this was not intended. There is a constant *sliding of meaning* in all interpretation, a margin – something in excess of what we intend to say – in which other meanings overshadow the statement or the text, where other associations are awakened to life, giving what we say a different twist. So interpretation becomes an essential aspect of the process by which meaning is given and taken. The *reader* is as important as the *writer* in the production of meaning. Every signifier given or encoded with meaning has to be meaningfully interpreted or decoded by the receiver (Hall, 1980). Signs which have not been intelligibly received and interpreted are not, in any useful sense, 'meaningful'.

2.1 The social part of language

Saussure divided language into two parts. The first consisted of the general rules and codes of the linguistic system, which all its users must share, if it is to be of use as a means of communication. The rules are the principles which we learn when we learn a language and they enable us to use language to say whatever we want. For example, in English, the preferred word order is subject–verb–object ('the cat sat on the mat'), whereas in Latin, the verb usually comes at the end. Saussure called this underlying rule-governed structure of language, which enables us to produce well-formed sentences, the *langue* (the language system). The second part consisted of the particular acts of speaking or writing or drawing, which – using the structure and rules of the *langue* – are produced by an actual speaker or writer. He called this *parole*. 'La *langue* is the system of language, the language as a system of forms, whereas *parole* is actual speech [or writing], the speech acts which are made possible by the language' (Culler, 1976, p. 29).

For Saussure, the underlying structure of rules and codes (*langue*) was the social part of language, the part which could be studied with the law-like precision of a science because of its closed, limited nature. It was his preference for studying language at this level of its 'deep structure' which made people call Saussure and his model of language, **structuralist**. The second part of language, the individual speech-act or utterance (*parole*), he regarded as the 'surface' of language. There were an infinite number of such possible utterances. Hence, *parole* inevitably lacked those structural properties – forming a closed and limited set – which would have enabled us to study it 'scientifically'. What made Saussure's model appeal to many later scholars was the fact that the closed, structured character of language at the level of its rules and laws, which, according to Saussure, enabled it to be

studied scientifically, was combined with the capacity to be free and unpredictably creative in our actual speech acts. They believed he had offered them, at last, a scientific approach to that least scientific object of inquiry – culture.

In separating the social part of language (*langue*) from the individual act of communication (*parole*), Saussure broke with our common-sense notion of how language works. Our common-sense intuition is that language comes from within us – from the individual speaker or writer; that it is this speaking or writing subject who is the author or originator of meaning. This is what we called, earlier, the *intentional* model of representation. But according to Saussure's schema, each authored statement only becomes possible because the 'author' shares with other language-users the common rules and codes of the language system – the *langue* – which allows them to communicate with each other meaningfully. The author decides what she wants to say. But she cannot 'decide' whether or not to use the rules of language, if she wants to be understood. We are born into a language, its codes and its meanings.

Language is therefore, for Saussure, a social phenomenon. It cannot be an individual matter because we cannot make up the rules of language individually, for ourselves. Their source lies in society, in the culture, in our shared cultural codes, in the language system – not in nature or in the individual subject.

We will move on in section 3 to consider how the constructionist approach to representation, and in particular Saussure's linguistic model, was applied to a wider set of cultural objects and practices, and evolved into the *semiotic* method which so influenced the field. First we ought to take account of some of the criticisms levelled at his position.

2.2 Critique of Saussure's model

Saussure's great achievement was to force us to focus on language itself, as a social fact; on the process of representation itself; on how language actually works and the role it plays in the production of meaning. In doing so, he saved language from the status of a mere transparent medium between *things* and *meaning*. He showed, instead, that representation was a practice.

However, in his own work, he tended to focus almost exclusively on the two aspects of the sign – *signifier* and *signified*. He gave little or no attention to how this relation between *signifier/signified* could serve the purpose of what earlier we called *reference* – i.e. referring us to the world of things, people and events outside language in the 'real' world. Later linguists made a distinction between, say, the meaning of the word BOOK and the use of the word to refer to a *specific* book lying before us on the table. The linguist, Charles Sanders Pierce, whilst adopting a similar approach to Saussure, paid greater attention to the relationship between signifiers/signifieds and what he called their *referents*. What Saussure called signification really involves *both* meaning and reference, but he focused mainly on the former.

Another problem is that Saussure tended to focus on the *formal* aspects of language – how language actually works. This has the great advantage of making us examine representation as a practice worthy of detailed study in its own right. It forces us to look at language for itself, and not just as an empty, transparent, ‘window on the world’. However, Saussure’s focus on language may have been too exclusive. The attention to its formal aspects did divert attention away from the more interactive and dialogic features of language – language as it is actually used, as it functions in actual situations, in dialogue between different kinds of speakers. It is thus not surprising that, for Saussure, questions of *power* in language – for example, between speakers of different status and positions – did not arise.

As has often been the case, the ‘scientific’ dream which lay behind the structuralist impulse of his work, though influential in alerting us to certain aspects of how language works, proved to be illusory. Language is *not* an object which can be studied with the law-like precision of a science. Later cultural theorists learned from Saussure’s ‘structuralism’ but abandoned its scientific premise. Language remains rule-governed. But it is not a ‘closed’ system which can be reduced to its formal elements. Since it is constantly changing, it is by definition *open-ended*. Meaning continues to be produced through language in forms which can never be predicted beforehand and its ‘sliding’, as we described it above, cannot be halted. Saussure may have been tempted to the former view because, like a good structuralist, he tended to study the state of the language system at one moment, as if it had stood still, and he could halt the flow of language-change. Nevertheless it is the case that many of those who have been most influenced by Saussure’s radical break with all reflective and intentional models of representation, have built on his work, not by imitating his scientific and ‘structuralist’ approach, but by applying his model in a much looser, more open-ended – i.e. ‘post-structuralist’ – way.

2.3 Summary

How far, then, have we come in our discussion of theories of *representation*? We began by contrasting three different approaches. The *reflective* or *mimetic* approach proposed a direct and transparent relationship of imitation or reflection between words (signs) and things. The *intentional* theory reduced representation to the intentions of its author or subject. The *constructionist* theory proposed a complex and mediated relationship between things in the world, our concepts in thought and language. We have focused at greatest length on this approach. The correlations between these levels – the material, the conceptual and the signifying – are governed by our cultural and linguistic codes and it is this set of interconnections which produces meaning. We then showed how much this general model of how systems of representation work in the production of meaning owed to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. Here, the key point was the link provided by the codes between the forms of expression used by language (whether speech,

writing, drawing, or other types of representation) – which Saussure called the *signifiers* – and the mental concepts associated with them – the *signifieds*.

The connection between these two systems of representation produced *signs*; and signs, organized into languages, produced meanings, and could be used to reference objects, people and events in the ‘real’ world.

3 From language to culture: linguistics to semiotics

Saussure’s main contribution was to the study of linguistics in a narrow sense. However, since his death, his theories have been widely deployed, as a foundation for a general approach to language and meaning, providing a model of representation which has been applied to a wide range of cultural objects and practices. Saussure himself foresaw this possibility in his famous lecture-notes, collected posthumously by his students as the *Course in General Linguistics* (1960), where he looked forward to ‘A science that studies the life of signs within society ... I shall call it semiology, from the Greek *semeion* “signs” ...’ (p. 16). This general approach to the study of signs in culture, and of culture as a sort of ‘language’, which Saussure foreshadowed, is now generally known by the term **semiotics**.

semiotics

The underlying argument behind the semiotic approach is that, since all cultural objects convey meaning, and all cultural practices depend on meaning, they must make use of signs; and in so far as they do, they must work like language works, and be amenable to an analysis which basically makes use of Saussure’s linguistic concepts (e.g. the signifier/signified and *langue/parole* distinctions, his idea of underlying codes and structures, and the arbitrary nature of the sign). Thus, when in his collection of essays, *Mythologies* (1972), the French critic, Roland Barthes, studied ‘The world of wrestling’, ‘Soap powders and detergents’, ‘The face of Greta Garbo’ or ‘The *Blue Guides* to Europe’, he brought a *semiotic* approach to bear on ‘reading’ popular culture, treating these activities and objects as signs, as a language through which meaning is communicated. For example, most of us would think of a wrestling match as a competitive game or sport designed for one wrestler to gain victory over an opponent. Barthes, however, asks, not ‘Who won?’ but ‘What is the meaning of this event?’ He treats it as a *text* to be read. He ‘reads’ the exaggerated gestures of wrestlers as a grandiloquent language of what he calls the pure spectacle of excess.

FIGURE 1.4
Wrestling as a language of ‘excess’.



You should now read the brief extract from Barthes's 'reading' of 'The world of wrestling', provided as Reading B at the end of this chapter.

In much the same way, the French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, studied the customs, rituals, totemic objects, designs, myths and folk-tales of so-called 'primitive' peoples in Brazil, not by analysing how these things were produced and used in the context of daily life amongst the Amazonian peoples, but in terms of what they were trying to 'say', what messages about the culture they communicated. He analysed their meaning, not by interpreting their content, but by looking at the underlying rules and codes through which such objects or practices produced meaning and, in doing so, he was making a classic Saussurean or structuralist 'move', from the *paroles* of a culture to the underlying structure, its *langue*. To undertake this kind of work, in studying the meaning of a television programme like *Eastenders*, for example, we would have to treat the pictures on the screen as signifiers, and use the code of the television soap opera as a *genre*, to discover how each image on the screen made use of these rules to 'say something' (signifieds) which the viewer could 'read' or interpret within the formal framework of a particular kind of television narrative (see the discussion and analysis of TV soap operas in Chapter 6).

In the semiotic approach, not only words and images but objects themselves can function as signifiers in the production of meaning. Clothes, for example, may have a simple physical function – to cover the body and protect it from the weather. But clothes also double up as signs. They construct a meaning and carry a message. An evening dress may signify 'elegance'; a bow tie and tails, 'formality'; jeans and trainers, 'casual dress'; a certain kind of sweater in the right setting, 'a long, romantic, autumn walk in the wood' (Barthes, 1967). These signs enable clothes to convey meaning and to function like a language – 'the language of fashion'. How do they do this?

Look at the example of clothes in a magazine fashion spread (Figure 1.5). Apply Saussure's model to analyse what the clothes are 'saying'? How would you decode their message? In particular, which elements are operating as *signifiers* and what concepts – *signifieds* – are you applying to them? Don't just get an overall impression – work it out in detail. How is the 'language of fashion' working in this example?

The clothes themselves are the *signifiers*. The fashion code in western consumer cultures like ours correlates particular kinds or combinations of clothing with certain concepts ('elegance', 'formality', 'casual-ness', 'romance'). These are the *signifieds*. This coding converts the clothes into *signs*, which can then be read as a language. In the language of fashion, the signifiers are arranged in a certain sequence, in certain relations to one another. Relations may be of similarity – certain items 'go together'

(e.g. casual shoes with jeans). Differences are also marked – no leather belts with evening wear. Some signs actually create meaning by exploiting ‘difference’: e.g. Doc Marten boots with flowing long skirt. These bits of clothing ‘say something’ – they convey meaning. Of course, not everybody reads fashion in the same way. There are differences of gender, age, class, ‘race’. But all those who share the same fashion code will interpret the signs in roughly the same ways. ‘Oh, jeans don’t look right for that event. It’s a formal occasion – it demands something more elegant.’

You may have noticed that, in this example, we have moved from the very narrow linguistic level from which we drew examples in the first section, to a wider, cultural level. Note, also, that two linked operations are required to complete the representation process by which meaning is produced. First, we need a basic *code* which links a particular piece of material which is cut and sewn in a particular way (*signifier*) to our mental concept of it (*signified*) – say a particular cut of material to our concept of ‘a dress’ or ‘jeans’. (Remember that only some cultures would ‘read’ the signifier in this way, or indeed possess the concept of (i.e. have classified clothes into) ‘a dress’, as different from ‘jeans’.) The combination of signifier and signified is what Saussure called a *sign*. Then, having recognized the material as a dress, or as jeans, and produced a sign, we can progress to a second, wider level, which links these signs to broader, cultural themes, concepts or meanings – for example, an evening dress to ‘formality’ or ‘elegance’, jeans to ‘casualness’. Barthes called the first, descriptive level, the level of **denotation**: the second level, that of **connotation**. Both, of course, require the use of codes.

Denotation is the simple, basic, descriptive level, where consensus is wide and most people would agree on the meaning (‘dress’, ‘jeans’). At the second level – *connotation* – these signifiers which we have been able to ‘decode’ at a simple level by using our conventional conceptual classifications of dress to read their meaning, enter a wider, second kind of code – ‘the language of fashion’ – which connects them to broader themes and meanings, linking them with what, we may call the wider *semantic fields* of our culture: ideas of ‘elegance’, ‘formality’, ‘casualness’ and ‘romance’. This second, wider meaning is no longer a descriptive level of obvious interpretation. Here we are beginning to interpret the completed signs in terms of the wider realms of



FIGURE 1.5
Advertisement for
Gucci, in *Vogue*,
September 1995.

denotation
connotation

social ideology – the general beliefs, conceptual frameworks and value systems of society. This second level of signification, Barthes suggests, is more ‘general, global and diffuse ...’. It deals with ‘fragments of an ideology... These signifieds have a very close communication with culture, knowledge, history and it is through them, so to speak, that the environmental world [of the culture] invades the system [of representation]’ (Barthes, 1967, pp. 91–2).

In his essay ‘Myth today’, in *Mythologies*, Barthes gives another example which helps us to see exactly how representation is working at this second, broader cultural level. Visiting the barbers’ one day, Barthes is shown a copy of the French magazine *Paris Match*, which has on its cover a picture of ‘a young Negro in a French uniform saluting with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on the fold of the tricolour’ (the French flag) (1972b, p. 116). At the first level, to get any meaning at all, we need to decode each of the signifiers in the image into their appropriate concepts: e.g. a soldier, a uniform, an arm raised, eyes lifted, a French flag. This yields a set of signs with a simple, literal message or meaning: *a black soldier is giving the French flag a salute* (denotation). However, Barthes argues that this image also has a wider, cultural meaning. If we ask, ‘What is *Paris Match* telling us by using this picture of a black soldier saluting a French flag?’, Barthes suggests that we may come up with the message: ‘*that France is a great Empire, and that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors*’ (connotation) (ibid.).

Whatever you think of the actual ‘message’ which Barthes finds, for a proper semiotic analysis you must be able to outline precisely the different steps by which this broader meaning has been produced. Barthes argues that here representation takes place through two separate but linked processes. In the first, the signifiers (the elements of the image) and the signifieds (the concepts – soldier, flag and so on) unite to form a sign with a simple denoted message: *a black soldier is giving the French flag a salute*. At the second stage, this completed message or sign is linked to a second set of signifieds – a broad, ideological theme about French colonialism. The first, completed meaning functions as the signifier in the second stage of the representation process, and when linked with a wider theme by a reader, yields a second, more elaborate and ideologically framed message or meaning. Barthes gives this second concept or theme a name – he calls it ‘a purposeful mixture of “French imperialism” and “militariness”’. This, he says, adds up to a ‘message’ about French colonialism and her faithful Negro soldier-sons. Barthes calls this second level of signification the level of *myth*. In this reading, he adds, ‘French imperialism is the very drive behind the myth. The concept reconstitutes a chain of causes and effects, motives and intentions ...

Through the concept ... a whole new history ... is implanted in the myth ... the concept of French imperialism ... is again tied to the totality of the world: to the general history of France, to its colonial adventures, to its present difficulties' (Barthes, 1972b, p. 119).

READING C

Turn to the short extract from 'Myth today' (Reading C at the end of this chapter), and read Barthes's account of how myth functions as a system of representation. Make sure you understand what Barthes means by 'two staggered systems' and by the idea that myth is a 'meta-language' (a second-order language).

For another example of this two-stage process of signification, we can turn now to another of Barthes's famous essays.

ACTIVITY 6

Now, look carefully at the advertisement for *Panzani* products (Figure 1.6) and, with Barthes's analysis in mind, do the following exercise:

- 1 What *signifiers* can you identify in the ad?
- 2 What do they mean? What are their *signifieds*?
- 3 Now, look at the ad as a whole, at the level of 'myth'. What is its wider, cultural message or theme? Can you construct one?

READING D

Now read the second extract from Barthes, in which he offers an interpretation of the *Panzani* ad for spaghetti and vegetables in a string bag as a 'myth' about Italian national culture. The extract from 'Rhetoric of the image', in *Image-Music-Text* (1977), is included as Reading D at the end of this chapter.



FIGURE 1.6

'Italian-ness' and the *Panzani* ad.

AND PUT THEM INTO PERFECT ENGLISH.



AND PUT THEM INTO PERFECT ENGLISH.

FIGURE 1.7
An image of
'Englishness'
— advertisement
for Jaguar.

Barthes suggests that we can read the *Panzani* ad as a 'myth' by linking its completed message (*this is a picture of some packets of pasta, a tin, a sachet, some tomatoes, onions, peppers, a mushroom, all emerging from a half-open string bag*) with the cultural theme or concept of 'Italianicity' (or as we would say, 'Italian-ness'). Then, at the level of the myth or meta-language, the *Panzani* ad becomes a message about the *essential meaning of Italian-ness as a national culture*. Can commodities really become the signifiers for myths of nationality? Can you think of ads, in magazines or television, which work in the same way, drawing on the myth of 'Englishness'? Or 'Frenchness'? Or 'American-ness'? Or 'Indian-ness'? Try to apply the idea of 'Englishness' to the ad reproduced as Figure 1.7.

What the examples above show is that the semiotic approach provides a method for analysing how visual representations convey meaning. Already, in Roland Barthes's work in the 1960s, as we have seen, Saussure's 'linguistic' model is developed through its application to a much wider field of signs and representations (advertising, photography, popular culture, travel, fashion, etc.). Also, there is less concern with how individual words function as signs in language, more about the application of the language model to a

much broader set of cultural practices. Saussure held out the promise that the whole domain of meaning could, at last, be systematically mapped. Barthes, too, had a 'method', but his semiotic approach is much more loosely and interpretively applied; and, in his later work (for example, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 1975), he is more concerned with the 'play' of meaning and desire across texts than he is with the attempt to fix meaning by a scientific analysis of language's rules and laws.

Subsequently, as we observed, the project of a 'science of meaning' has appeared increasingly untenable. Meaning and representation seem to belong irrevocably to the interpretative side of the human and cultural sciences, whose subject matter – society, culture, the human subject – is not amenable to a positivistic approach (i.e. one which seeks to discover scientific laws about society). Later developments have recognized the necessarily interpretative nature of culture and the fact that interpretations never produce a final moment of absolute truth. Instead, interpretations are always followed by other interpretations, in an endless chain. As the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, put it, writing always leads to more writing. Difference, he argued, can never be wholly captured within any binary system (Derrida, 1981). So any notion of a *final* meaning is always endlessly put off, deferred. Cultural studies of this interpretative kind, like other qualitative forms of sociological inquiry, are inevitably caught up in this 'circle of meaning'.

In the semiotic approach, representation was understood on the basis of the way words functioned as signs within language. But, for a start, in a culture, meaning often depends on larger units of analysis – narratives, statements, groups of images, whole discourses which operate across a variety of texts, areas of knowledge about a subject which have acquired widespread authority. Semiotics seemed to confine the process of representation to language, and to treat it as a closed, rather static, system. Subsequent developments became more concerned with representation as a source for the production of social *knowledge* – a more open system, connected in more intimate ways with social practices and questions of power. In the semiotic approach, the subject was displaced from the centre of language. Later theorists returned to the question of the subject, or at least to the empty space which Saussure's theory had left; without, of course, putting him/her back in the centre, as the author or source of meaning. Even if language, in some sense, 'spoke us' (as Saussure tended to argue) it was also important that in certain historical moments, some people had more power to speak about some subjects than others (male doctors about mad female patients in the late nineteenth century, for example, to take one of the key examples developed in the work of Michel Foucault). Models of representation, these critics argued, ought to focus on these broader issues of knowledge and power.

Foucault used the word 'representation' in a narrower sense than we are using it here, but he is considered to have contributed to a novel and significant general approach to the problem of representation. What concerned him was the production of knowledge (rather than just meaning)

through what he called **discourse** (rather than just language). His project, he said, was to analyse 'how human beings understand themselves in our culture' and how our knowledge about 'the social, the embodied individual and shared meanings' comes to be produced in different periods. With its emphasis on cultural understanding and shared meanings, you can see that Foucault's project was still to some degree indebted to Saussure and Barthes (see Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p. 17) while in other ways departing radically from them. Foucault's work was much more historically grounded, more attentive to historical specificities, than the semiotic approach. As he said, 'relations of power, not relations of meaning' were his main concern. The particular objects of Foucault's attention were the various disciplines of knowledge in the human and social sciences – what he called 'the subjectifying social sciences'. These had acquired an increasingly prominent and influential role in modern culture and were, in many instances, considered to be the discourses which, like religion in earlier times, could give us the 'truth' about knowledge.

We will return to Foucault's work in some of the subsequent chapters in this book (for example, Chapter 5). Here, we want to introduce Foucault and the *discursive* approach to representation by outlining three of his major ideas: his concept of *discourse*; the issue of *power and knowledge*; and the question of *the subject*. It might be useful, however, to start by giving you a general flavour, in Foucault's graphic (and somewhat over-stated) terms, of how he saw his project differing from that of the semiotic approach to representation. He moved away from an approach like that of Saussure and Barthes, based on 'the domain of signifying structure', towards one based on analysing what he called 'relations of force, strategic developments and tactics':

Here I believe one's point of reference should not be to the great model of language (*langue*) and signs, but to that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power not relations of meaning ...

(Foucault, 1980, pp. 114–5)

Rejecting both Hegelian Marxism (what he calls 'the dialectic') and semiotics, Foucault argued that:

Neither the dialectic, as logic of contradictions, nor semiotics, as the structure of communication, can account for the intrinsic intelligibility of conflicts. 'Dialectic' is a way of evading the always open and hazardous reality of conflict by reducing it to a Hegelian skeleton, and 'semiology' is a way of avoiding its violent, bloody and lethal character by reducing it to the calm Platonic form of language and dialogue.

(ibid.)

4.1 From language to discourse

The first point to note, then, is the shift of attention in Foucault from 'language' to 'discourse'. He studied not language, but *discourse* as a system of representation. Normally, the term 'discourse' is used as a linguistic concept. It simply means passages of connected writing or speech. Michel Foucault, however, gave it a different meaning. What interested him were the rules and practices that produced meaningful statements and regulated discourse in different historical periods. By 'discourse', Foucault meant 'a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment. ... Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But ... since all social practices entail *meaning*, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect' (Hall, 1992, p. 291). It is important to note that the concept of *discourse* in this usage is not purely a 'linguistic' concept. It is about language *and* practice. It attempts to overcome the traditional distinction between what one *says* (language) and what one *does* (practice). Discourse, Foucault argues, constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. Just as a discourse 'rules in' certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it 'rules out', limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it. Discourse, Foucault argued, never consists of one statement, one text, one action or one source. The same discourse, characteristic of the way of thinking or the state of knowledge at any one time (what Foucault called the *episteme*), will appear across a range of texts, and as forms of conduct, at a number of different institutional sites within society. However, whenever these discursive events 'refer to the same object, share the same style and ... support a strategy ... a common institutional, administrative or political drift and pattern' (Cousins and Hussain, 1984, pp. 84–5), then they are said by Foucault to belong to the same **discursive formation**.

Discursive formation

Meaning and meaningful practice is therefore constructed within discourse. Like the semioticians, Foucault was a 'constructionist'. However, unlike them, he was concerned with the production of knowledge and meaning, not through language but through discourse. There were therefore similarities, but also substantive differences between these two versions.

The idea that 'discourse produces the objects of knowledge' and that nothing which is meaningful exists *outside discourse*, is at first sight a disconcerting proposition, which seems to run right against the grain of common-sense thinking. It is worth spending a moment to explore this idea further. Is Foucault saying – as some of his critics have charged – that *nothing exists outside of discourse*? In fact, Foucault does *not* deny that things can have a

real, material existence in the world. What he does argue is that '*nothing has any meaning outside of discourse*' (Foucault, 1972). As Laclau and Mouffe put it, 'we use [the term discourse] to emphasize the fact that every social configuration is *meaningful*' (1990, p. 100). The concept of discourse is not about whether things exist but about where meaning comes from.

Turn now to Reading E, by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, a short extract from *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (1990), from which we have just quoted, and read it carefully. What they argue is that physical objects *do* exist, but they have no fixed meaning; they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge *within discourse*. Make sure you follow their argument before reading further.

- 1 In terms of the discourse about 'building a wall', the distinction between the linguistic part (asking for a brick) and the physical act (putting the brick in place) does not matter. The first is linguistic, the second is physical. But *both* are 'discursive' – meaningful within discourse.
- 2 The round leather object which you kick is a physical object – a ball. But it only becomes 'a football' within the context of the rules of the game, which are socially constructed.
- 3 It is impossible to determine the meaning of an object outside of its context of use. A stone thrown in a fight is a different thing ('a projectile') from a stone displayed in a museum ('a piece of sculpture').

This idea that physical things and actions exist, but they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse, is at the heart of the *constructionist* theory of meaning and representation. Foucault argues that since we can only have a knowledge of things if they have a meaning, it is discourse – not the things-in-themselves – which produces knowledge. Subjects like 'madness', 'punishment' and 'sexuality' only exist meaningfully *within* the discourses about them. Thus, the study of the discourses of madness, punishment or sexuality would have to include the following elements:

- 1 statements about 'madness', 'punishment' or 'sexuality' which give us a certain kind of knowledge about these things;
- 2 the rules which prescribe certain ways of talking about these topics and exclude other ways – which govern what is 'sayable' or 'thinkable' about insanity, punishment or sexuality, at a particular historical moment;
- 3 'subjects' who in some ways personify the discourse – the madman, the hysterical woman, the criminal, the deviant, the sexually perverse person; with the attributes we would expect these subjects to have, given the way knowledge about the topic was constructed at that time;
- 4 how this knowledge about the topic acquires authority, a sense of embodying the 'truth' about it; constituting the 'truth of the matter', at a historical moment;

In myth, we find again the tri-dimensional pattern which I have just described: the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a *second-order semiological system*. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. We must here recall that the materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth. Myth sees in them only the same raw material; their unity is that they all come down to the status of a mere language. Whether it deals with alphabetical or pictorial writing, myth wants to see in them only a sum of signs, a global sign, the final term of a first semiological chain. And it is precisely this final term which will become the first term of the greater system which it builds and of which it is only a part. Everything happens as if myth shifted the formal system of the first significations sideways. As this lateral shift is essential for the analysis of myth, I shall represent it in the following way, it being understood, of course, that the spatialization of the pattern is here only a metaphor:

Language MYTH	{	I Signifier	2 Signified	
		3 Sign		
		I SIGNIFIER	II SIGNIFIED	
		III SIGN		

It can be seen that in myth there are two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language (or the modes of representation which are assimilated to it), which I shall call the *language-object*, because it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system; and myth itself, which I shall call *metalanguage*, because it is a second language, in which one speaks about the first. When he reflects on a metalanguage, the

semiologist no longer needs to ask himself questions about the composition of the language-object, he no longer has to take into account the details of the linguistic schema; he will only need to know its total term, or global sign, and only inasmuch as this term lends itself to myth. This is why the semiologist is entitled to treat in the same way writing and pictures: what he retains from them is the fact that they are both *signs*, that they both reach the threshold of myth endowed with the same signifying function, that they constitute one just as much as the other, a language-object.

Source: Barthes, 1972b, pp. 114-5.