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DOCTUMENTARY data have always been central to social science, but modes of analyzing them vary, and the centrality of documentary evidence also varies within the social sciences and in subfields within them. Some of these shifts are the topic of this chapter. We intend to chart the relationships among narrative, content, and semiotic analysis, illustrating the changing meanings of texts (written documents) and their role in social research and theorizing.

In the early part of this century, social scientists studied people, trying to extract from written materials the patterns, orders, senses, and meanings of their life experiences. Documents, almost from the beginning of empirical work in sociology, have been controversial (Blumer, 1939; Gottschalk, Kluckhohn, & Angell, 1945). The first major American empirical study, the classic by W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, The Polish Peasant (1918), relied upon diaries, letters, and other personal documents to characterize the impact of immigration to the United States upon Polish immigrants. However, since Emile Durkheim's Suicide (1951) established sociology as a discipline, sociology and other social sciences have been wedded to positivist methods (methods that take the external world as extant and reproducible through scientific or logical means) and associated concepts of validity, reliability, generalization, prediction, and control (Denzin, 1989). They combine these methodological and often technical concerns (based on the canons of statistical measurement) somewhat uneasily with often subtle interpretive theoretical frameworks.

In many respects, the debate over the use of documents in social science concerns validity, reliability, representativeness, and generalizability of findings drawn from textual evidence. Ironically, the question of which methodology is superior for interpreting words, rather than numbers, has not been debated. The social sciences, with the possible exception of content analysis, have not developed systematic evaluative techniques for documentary analysis (see Berelson, 1952; Holsti, 1969). The dominance of quantitative methods has resulted in an underdeveloped theory of qualitative textual analysis and heavy reliance on literary criticism, linguistics, computer science, and cognitive psychology for models for assessing the quality of documents.

This Chapter's Focus

We begin with a brief history of documentary or textual analysis, outlining the changing paradigms within which these research approaches are used, including documentary research and narrative, discourse, and content analysis. We then introduce semiotics, which brings us to examples.
of the varieties of structuralist and semiotic analysis. Structuralists assume that content is a function of form and code and meaning is a product of a system of relationships. Documents are "products," like speech itself, of a system within which elements so defined are converted into "texts" to be read and interpreted (Foucault, 1973, p. 47).

This radical redefinition of documents, we argue in the penultimate section of the chapter, changes methodological stances. The impact of independent and "exogenous variables" on the meaning, content, or structure of documents, and their validity or reliability, becomes a background, whereas the foreground is the relationship between the "text" as a social construction and its form or its imputed audience-derived meanings. In the final section of the chapter we address selected consequences of the radical relativism produced by structuralism and semiotics. We illustrate these consequences with examples of ethnographic, or culturally descriptive, semiotic research. We end the chapter with two forms of semiotic analysis of McDonald's.

Content and Narrative Analysis

Content Analysis

After World War II, sociologists and students of mass communications refined content analysis. Content analysis is a quantitatively oriented technique by which standardized measurements are applied to metrically defined units and these are used to characterize and compare documents (Berelson, 1952; Kracauer, 1993). Content analysis has been used to characterize the content of popular magazines (Lowenthal, 1962) and other documents. Content analysis was massively facilitated by the electronic computer and computer-based programs such as the General Enquirer (Stone, Dunphy, & Kirsch, 1967). Recently, its use has been most popular in cultural studies and mass communications research.

Aside from the methodological problems associated with any quantitative technique (sampling, generalization, validity, especially external validity, and reliability), content analysis has been unable to capture the context within which a written text has meaning. Context has been variously defined, in terms of an ongoing narrative ("plot"), the immediate semantic environment, the literary tropes operating, and connections between the text and experience or knowledge (Eco, 1979). Ethnomethodological approaches (see Holstein & Gubrium, Chapter 16, this volume) attempt to understand context as the taken-for-granted knowledge brought to the experience and displayed in the talk. Levinson (1983) defines context as a matter of pragmatics, "what the reader brings to" the utterance or, in this case, the text. The microinteractional aspect of content analysis has been carefully explored, but it remains to be elucidated to a reading by a reader can be estimated using panels or samples of readers or coders, or by literary or social science experts who define meaning authoritatively. Barthes (1975b), in urging consideration of the "readerly text," highlights the subtle interactions among reading, the text, and the reader. This remains an open or moot point.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis takes a number of analytic forms. We discuss them here in declining level of formality, that is, the degree to which the internal coherence of the text is defined in advance with reference to codes, syntax, grammar, or forms.

Russian formalism, associated with the works of R. Jakobson, V. Sklovskij, M. Bakhtin, B. Uspensky, and V. Propp, and the Rumanian-French writer Tzvetan Todorov, emphasizes the role of form in conveying meaning in a narrative (see Jameson, 1972). Perhaps the most famous example of formalist-structuralism is Propp's (1968) elegant propositional quasi-algebraic analysis of the Russian fairy tale. Propp claims the Russian fairy tale can be understood using only four principles: The functions of characters are stable elements in a tale; the functions known in a fairy tale are limited; the sequence of functions is always identical; and fairy tales are of one type with regard to structure (our paraphrase from Propp, 1968, chap. 2). Lévi-Strauss's (1963) analysis of myth (based in Roman Jakobson's structural linguistics) uses binary oppositions, a closed system of relations, a synchronic model, and standardized units. Lévi-Strauss, unlike Propp, argues that a story ("myth") unfolds paradigmatically in terms of oppositions, rather than linearly in terms of functions. Other variants on structuralist semiotics are found in the works of Lotman (1990) and Griesmer (1966), which can be summarized by the semiotic square that combines opposition and contradiction to analyze the structure of social systems (e.g., law; see Jackson, 1986).

Systematic forms of narrative analysis, "top-down" or "bottom-up" approaches, make quite different assumptions about the organization of cognitive meaning. Top-down versions have had considerable influence in education and cognitive psychology (Rumelhart, 1977; Rumelhart & Norman, 1981). The investigator begins with a set of rules and principles and seeks to exhaust the meaning of a text using the rules and principles (see Boje, 1991; Heise, 1992). In using the ethnog-
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raph, a program for narrative analysis, an event such as the Russian Revolution is first reduced to a series of propositions. Events require prerequisites (preconditions such as those leading to the Russian Revolution—hunger); events must exhaust (all conditions must be related to an outcome—hunger leads to riots); events' prerequisites must be subsequently exhausted before they can be repeated. Thus what is "tested" is the preconceived closed and logically constrained binary model (events either happened or they did not) of the researcher. This approach is influenced by cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence, and such analyses are made possible by the memory capacity and flexibility of computers and software. Bottom-up versions, found in most ethnographic work, on the other hand, derive context-dependent units to produce an infrastructure that explains the tale's effect. Dwyer (1982), for example, presents his material as a dialogue between himself and the other, a Faqir, whereas Crapanzano (1980) interpolates and comments on Moroccan culture. Often such reports rely on personal interviews or documents, and the translation of these materials into parts of a coherent argument remains fuzzy (Atkinson, 1992; Riessman, 1993).

Some studies contrast narratives, self-formatted stories, with formal, externally formatted narratives, such as medical interviews. Cicourel (1973, 1982, 1985, 1986) demonstrates that neither approach adequately captures human information processing and sense making. Furthermore, he questions the assumption of both of these models that views human reasoning as algorithmic and linear. The basic distinction between a preformatted interaction with an instrumental purpose, such as a medical or survey research interview, and a personal story, with its wandering, complex, sen- sate, and expressive forms, is a primary contrast in the literature on narratives. Whereas the life situation of the person, the embodied here-and-now reality, is looked at from the body's perspective, the medical interview looks at the body as an objective, functioning machine.

Medical writing on stories is revealing. Diverse writers, many of them medically trained, such as Kleinman (1988), Brody (1987), Coles (1989), Mishler (1984), and Paget (1988) in medical social science, argue for the utility of narrative analysis but share no common definition, purpose, method or technique, or mode of analysis. They assert that stories reflect human feelings and lived experience, and that healing necessarily involves the telling, hearing, and unraveling of stories. However, each presents a unique, appealing, aesthetic, and humanistic rationale for his or her approach and weaves it into the logic of the medical interview.

The concern with lives and lived experience resurfaced relatively late in narrative analysis.

The emphasis in contemporary anthropology and feminism is upon the study of lives from the narrator's experience, as a shared production with social scientists. These stories are seen as real, yet with a tenuous grip on a consensually defined social reality. Examining, as in Sapir-Whitten (1991), how people and events are produced by social scientists. Emphasizing the role of these narratives in empowering persons through more subtle understandings of their life situations stands the structuralist concern with the power of codes, rules, and social functions of texts on its head.²

To a striking extent, narrative analysis is rather loosely formulated, almost intuitive, using terms defined by the analyst (see Riessman, 1993). Narrative analysis typically takes the perspective of the teller, rather than that of the society, as in Propp's and Levi-Strauss's models. If one defines narrative as a story with a beginning, middle, and end that reveals someone's experiences, narratives take many forms, are told in many settings, before many audiences, and with various degrees of connection to actual events or persons. Thus themes, principal metaphors, definitions of narrative, defining structures of stories (beginning, middle, and end), and conclusions are often defined poetically and artistically and are quite context bound (Atkinson, 1990; see also Potter & Wetherell, 1987). For example, using a small number of stories, or even one, organizational analysts assert the importance of stories in organizations (Martin, 1990; Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983). These approaches are little shaped by the traditions of content analysis or the coding used in quantitative and logical work, and are used to contrast the "human" or "cultural" dimension of organizations rather than to illuminate personal lives.

At the extreme, macrotextual analysis sees the verbalization and representation of society and groups through words. These representations are seen as marking, dramatizing, and constructing often complex social relations. Macrotextual work draws on the ideas of Kenneth Burke—dramaturgy (1966; Gusfield, 1989), Hugh D. Duncan—dratasm (1962, 1968, 1969), and Murray Edelman—symbolic analyses of politics (1966, 1977, 1992; Merelman, 1984, 1992). This approach views texts as symbolic action, or means to frame a situation, define it, grant it meaning, and mobilize appropriate responses to it. Burke, for example, uses five basic terms of dramatism for analysis of any discourse: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose (these ideas are paralleled in Goffman's early work; see Perinbanayagam, 1991). This scheme has been well applied to the assessment of the effectiveness of court stories (Bennett & Feldman, 1986). Societal-level analysis of discourse, such as of anti-drunk driving messages (Gusfield, 1966, 1986; Jacobs, 1989), tourism (MacCannell,
1976/1989), and comparative societal representation (Lincoln, 1992), works by identifying broad themes, audiences, and symbols used to persuade and mobilize groups. In this sense, macrotextual or narrative analysis sees society as a "speaker" and

Semiotics

Semiotics, or the science of signs, provides a set of assumptions and concepts that permit systematic analysis of symbolic systems. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) founded semiotics (Culler, 1977). Saussure's (1915/1966) work and writings of the American pragmatist Charles Peirce (1931) and Charles Morris are the primary sources of the theory underlying semiotics. Although semiotics is based on language, language is but one among many sign systems of varying degrees of unity, applicability, and complexity. Morse code, etiquette, mathematics, music, and even highway signs are examples of semiotic systems. Sign systems can be loosely or tightly connected or articulated, and the relations within them can be various: homological, analogical, even metaphoric. Social semiotics sees social life, group structure, beliefs, practices, and the content of social relations as functionally analogous to the units that structure language. By extension of this semiotic position, all human communication is a display of signs, something of a text to be "read." Disagreement remains about the utility of semiotics and the relevance of the linguistic concept or analogy to social analysis (see, for example, Noth, 1990).

A sign is something that represents or stands for something else in the mind of someone. A sign is composed in the first instance of an expression, such as a word, sound, or symbol, and a content, or something that is seen as completing the meaning of the expression (Hjemslev, 1961). For example, a lily is an expression linked conventionally with death, Easter, and resurrection as a content. Smoke is linked to cigarettes and to cancer, and Marilyn Monroe to sex. Each of these connections is social and arbitrary, so that many kinds of links exist between expression and content. 3

The process of linking or connecting expression and content is social and depends upon the perspective of the observer. A sign is essentially incomplete because it requires an interpretant, or context. That which links the expression and the content is brought to the signifying event. When the interpretant changes, the sign changes meaning. Behind any idea or feature of the social world is yet another interpretant. This is the basis for the

radical claim that no reality lies under or behind a sign, and no "real world" exists. Semiotics, in short, studies whatever can be taken to be a sign, or against which any sign can be checked. The interpretant of a sign is another sign, and that sign can be broken down to the same signification process. In other words, there is a divide between expression and content, but there is also a flow between expression and content as well (Eco, 1979, p. 7).

The connections made between expression and content and among signs are mental. Thus semiotics depends upon a "primitive phenomenology"; that is, meaningful connections between the expression and content are socially created and maintained (Culler, 1975). Typically, these connections are shared and collective, and provide an important source of the ideas, rules, practices, codes, and recipe knowledge called "culture" (Barley, 1983; Culler, 1975). Culture is a reference point—a means by which one comes to believe in the reality of the expression (Eco, 1979, pp. 71-72). These connections between clusters of signs are sometimes called paradigms. Several paradigms or domains of meaning, when collected, constitute a field (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 47). A field may be created or constituted by discourse, as for example in an artistic or scientific field, by practices, or by material objects. Of particular interest here are discourse fields that can be mapped onto larger social structures of signs. Organizations, for example, can be characterized by logic that is constituted of fields of argumentation. That which provides the social connection among the components of a sign, a set of signs clustered as texts, and even assembled as discourse, is a code.

Sign functions are important in social analysis because signs, and signs about signs, that represent social differentiation mark and reinforce social relations (Guiraud, 1975). To some degree, the potentially volatile contextual nature of meaning is reduced by shared knowledge, rules and codes employed within a culture to make sense of fields of signs. More often, the meanings may be a function of knowledgeability" (Giddens, 1984) or tacit, nonverbal meanings, taken for granted and unrecognized even by participants. Nevertheless, these are powerful constraints upon meaning.

The connections among signs are variable, and the resultant meanings are variable as well. It has been conventional to restrict the range of meanings of expression content to three levels: denotive, connotative, and mythological or allegorical. Denotive meaning is seen in connections between a grade and a level of school performance. We read one as the other: 4.0 = excellent; 3.5 = very good, and so on. A connotation is created when "honors" are conferred on those scoring above a given GPA level. This status becomes "mythical" if the label "honors" is taken to indicate "knowledge." The connotative and mythological level of interpretation, as Barthes (1967, 1972, pp. 115ff.) illustrates, results from the un-

examined nonempiricai assumptions drawn between meanings. Signs, which produce or express empirical or logical formulations. As meaningful knowledge, unpacking them problematic, and knowledge essential. Culture is seen as "pin down" and stabilized and content and the potentially migratory (2077). Thus, within a stable and authority stabilizes expressions to establish its legitimacy (2077).

As a result of these themes, flow from structure to phenomenological society as a "structure postmodernity" (Borgon, Denzin, 1986; Guiraud, Zwiell, 1980; Rose, 1979). Let us see

Structuralism

Structuralism, both and methodological social sciences, explanation found in m., and analysis. Semiotics, Structuralism is derived from Saunder reality as constant in language forms social research if social theory resurfa- tion of social structuralism by the anthropologist (1966). Structuralism in social theory, resha Structuralism sees actual physical or cultural as "texts," analytic perspectives and theories tendencies. Foucault, 1973, p. 4 ered self-writings for real and decipherably generated codes. Structuralism seeks a whole through the system of analysis is strict object analyzed, is arranged of its parts. Structuralism is essentially because it seeks is
examined nonempirical or belief-based connections drawn between denotative and connotative meanings. Signs, whatever the context, can also be understood in terms of causal relationships or logical formulations.

As meanings collect under an ideological canopy, unpacking them becomes more complex and problematic, and knowing the culture becomes essential. Culture is sedimented in institutions that "pin down" and stabilize the links between expression and content and contain the codes that anchor the potentially migratory expression (Bourdieu, 1977). Thus, within a given cultural system, power and authority stabilize floating and arbitrary expressions to establish and generate structurally dictated sign concreteness.

As a result of semiotics, theoretic influences now flow from structural linguistics, pragmatics, phenomenological sociology, and, most notably, varieties of "structuralism," poststructuralism, and postmodernism (Borgmann, 1992; Culler, 1975; Denzin, 1986; Guiraud, 1975; Hawkes, 1977; Kurzweil, 1980; Rose, 1992; Rosenau, 1992; Sturrock, 1979). Let us review them.

Structuralism

Structuralism, both a theoretical perspective and methodological approach in contemporary social sciences, combines a formal model of explanation found in math, economics, and psychology, and an analytic approach derived from semiotics. Structuralism, a formal mode of analysis derived from Saussurian linguistics, sees social reality as constructed largely by language, and language forms as the material from which social research is fashioned. A major shift in social theory resulted in the 1960s from popularization of structuralism in social science initiated by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963, 1966). Structuralism produced the "linguistic turn" in social theory, reshaping American social thought. Structuralism sees "documents," once viewed as actual physical or concretely assessable objects, as "texts," analytic phenomena produced by definitions and theoretical operations (Barthes, 1975b; Foucault, 1973, p. 47). Texts, previously considered self-writings for others' readings, become real and decipherable through a set of institutionally generated codes, or interpretive frames.

Structuralism seeks to identify the elements of a whole through systematic procedures "the method of analysis is structuralist when, in the object analyzed, is taken to be dependent on the arrangement of its parts" (Descombes, 1980, p. 84). Structuralism is essentially a comparative method, because it seeks isomorphism in two or more contents. Once these units, parts, or elements are analytically sorted out, they can be combined, recombined, and transformed to create new models.

Cultural analysis is partly the identification and descrip-
tive units in a system to discover the "deeper" relationships or pattern(s) underlying an event or series of events. The explanation sought for observed phenomena is in terms of underlying rules, principles, or conventions that produce surface meanings. Structuralism relies on tautology, not causal explanations, synchronic analyses that obviate history (except as a signified representation). In theory, structuralism works with a closed system of meanings in which elements can be derived and sorted according to some principles or rules, and some calculus of possibilities can be derived (Ricoeur, as quoted in Culler, 1975, p. 26). Explanation is "a semantic process that generates a certain type of statement: namely, one that meaningfully encodes already encoded . . . values" (Lemert, 1979a, p. 944).

Structuralism is called "dehumanizing" in its drift and implications. It rejects the "homocentric" subjectivism and metaphysics of theories such as existentialism and pragmatism: Persons are not seen as bundles of sentiments or investigated "with reference to inner subjective and cultural meanings" (Lemert, 1979b, p. 100). Experience is secondary to systems of order, such as kinship, or law, or education. The person is merely the "speaking object," a user of codes and symbols who selects among preconstituted options, voices, and programs. Structures exist as the organizing centers of social action; persons are in every sense not only the creations of such structures, but manifestations of elements and rules created by social structures.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism, illustrated in the works of Lacan, Kristeva, Barthes, Foucault, Bourdieu, Touraine, Ricoeur, and Guattari and Deleuze, contains modifications of structuralist themes. The philosopher Jacques Derrida, who developed Heidegger's notion of deconstruction, is "poststructuralist" in chronological terms, but in many respects he interpolates between the varieties of structuralism (Lemert, 1981, 1990). Poststructuralism contains some elements of the original Saussurian model and elaborates others that emerged after the decline in interest in the rigid program of Lévi-Strauss.

The "undecidable" or the uncertainty in meaning that arises from changes in context is an irreducible and a given in all texts. One must accept the difficulty of reading intentions from speech acts or texts and eschew final answers through philosophical analysis. Formal models of meaning
The Interactionist Model

The Interactionist Model suggests that the interaction between the writer and the reader is fundamental to understanding the text. According to this model, the writer constructs the text, and the reader interprets it. The interaction is bidirectional, as both the writer and the reader influence each other. The model emphasizes the role of the reader in actively constructing meaning from the text. This is in contrast to the more passive role often attributed to readers in traditional models of communication.

The Interactionist Model can be applied to various contexts, such as literary analysis, critical theory, and media studies. It highlights the importance of context and the reader’s background and experiences in the interpretation process. This model is particularly useful in understanding how texts are produced and consumed in different social, cultural, and historical contexts.
the writing, the text, and its readings into alternative contexts or fields, or to recode the text. Adequate criticism should enable others to "penetrate" the author's intent and the tenor of the times with which the text existed, to strip away lies and stylistic bombast and discover the deeper or "real" meaning of a written product. Various levels of social reality can be explored, much as an archaeological expedition penetrates ever more deeply into a site.

A Structuralist Model

Structuralists modify Figure 29.1 (a model of artistic "production" generally, if one substitutes "plastic form" or "representation" for "text" in the figure). They make several radical disjunctive moves that alter many of the assumptions of objective/positivist social sciences as well as literary criticism. Fundamentally, the assumed-to-be-intimate and indivisible connections among persons, bodies, selves, lives, experiences, and stories are made problematic (see Denzin, 1989, chap. 2). Reality is socially constructed, as are the signs that convey, indicate, or represent it. Structuralists assume the relativity of the expression (including the possibility of nonreferential expressions). Meaning is context dependent, a function of coding (Barthes, 1975b). Loose relationships exist between the surface features of a narrative and underlying code(s) for decoding or translating a text. Although, ironically, stories always have this loose connection to the world—that is, they are not always referential to actual events—the elision of forms in the narrative model makes judgments of the meaning of a "story" problematic. A text can always be rendered in another code, another voice can be heard, a new standpoint illuminated (Clifford, 1988; Tyler, 1987; Van Maanen, 1988).

All texts metaphorically speak with many voices and contain within them many potential alternative readings. Within any story, the narrative line can be distinguished from the subject of the story. Reading as an activity creates another representation and shifts the field of the text. The unity of embodied self-writer-text-audience is analytically strewn asunder. Even the modes of discourse of science and history are seen as problematic (H. White, 1978).

But this repositioning of meaning as a function of codes has even more radical variants. A "crisis in representation" is precipitated by structuralism and semiotics. Consider these examples.

Frequently seen now is the journalistic conceit of wholly fabricating quotes, persons, scenes, long dialogues, and even events as a means of dramatizing and integrating "truth" and "fiction." Popularized by Tom Wolfe, and displayed in The Right Stuff (1979), the "new journalism" stylishly integrates the discretion to create lives found in fiction with the appeal of characters who are real people making real decisions in real life (see Agar, 1990). The consequences of these modes of Ford trial (in May 1993), in which damaging quotes alleged to be from Masson and used by Malcolm were contested by Masson.

Media logic suffuses all media forms and confounds experienced reality with the artifacts of the media. Fiction, news, and current events are collapsed in TV programs such as Top Cops, Cops, and Rescue 911. All produce versions of reality. Altheide (1983) notes that the elision of social control through the media with entertainment is rapidly escalating. A current television show, Case Closed, employs private investigators to hunt clues and pursue cases abandoned by the police. Further, the integration of advertising, news, and drama is now proceeding. Real-life events (e.g., the invasion and fire at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas; the explosion of a Pan Am jet over Lockerbie, Scotland) are "news" and "advertisements" for forthcoming television films (Altheide, 1993).

The media influence the diffusion of rapid-fire collage, atemporal, surreal, vividly colored, and fragmented imagery, almost a visual explosion, associated with many music videos, into television news, melodrama, and advertising. The model is MTV (Kaplan, 1987). These sound fragments and geometric distortions of faces and figures have largely displaced films with a logical progression, a story line, and a narrative structure (beginning, middle, and end, or opening, crisis, resolution, and closing).

These manifestations of structuralism's influence move a considerable distance from the classic interactionist model of reading and meaning. These changes in form result because social relations produce similar modes of experiencing and analysis of such experiencing for media, the public, and scholars. Highly reflexive societies reflect on and analyze that preoccupation with reflection.

Two Semiotic Approaches
to McDonald's

Structuralist semiotics is not without weaknesses. It has limited capacity to explain change, the interaction of self and group, the history of an individual or group experience with a symbol system, or changes in sign systems themselves. Change in the meaning of signs over time, semiosis, is best revealed through in-depth interviewing and systematic observation. The interpretant, perspective, or
standpoint of the observer from which the system is constructed must be identified in social and cultural context. In this sense, a social semiotics requires (or assumes) a rich ethnographic texture within which the semiotic analysis can be socially embedded. To analyze a menu, for example, semiotically and out of ethnographic context is sensible only if the writer or researcher is an observer of the same "facts."

We contend that a semiotic discourse analytic (Cullum-Swan, 1989) provides a history and context for understanding meaning that is congruent with a symbolic interactionist perspective. Meaning is derived or accomplished from an understanding of cultural knowledge and social forms rather than from personal knowledge gained through reflexive communication with others (Mead, 1934). The purpose of such an analysis is to place signs in context with the relevant interpretants over time. This permits analysis of differential meaning by demographic features, such as gender, race, and class; and by personal elements, such as self, role relations, and group membership (Blumer, 1969). Our examples illustrate the utility of both a semiotic method (an analysis of the codes that organize the menu) and semiotic discourse analysis. We believe they are complementary methods that together provide a more complete understanding of how personal experience and cultural milieu contribute to sign interpretation.

A Menu: The Structuralist View

McDonald's is perhaps the world's best-known business, and among the most successful (Peters & Waterman, 1982). Its success is related to its fit with many contemporary urban lifestyles: it is fast, efficient, predictable, standardized, routinized, and bureaucratically organized (Ritzer, 1993). Its logic is apparent and seems to tap into basic understandings of categories, classifications, boundaries and frames, associations, and meaningful divisions among foods and drinks. Perhaps two generations have been socialized to the McDonald’s experience, and the menu needs little explanation for the typical American child (who can connect the pictures to the physical objects to which they refer). The conventions connecting expression and content are known; the McDonald's sign system is known and well embedded in the culture. With the exception of a few local variations, the menu is standardized to facilitate rapid decisions at any McDonald's. Below, we attempt to show how these signs convey meaning in a particular context.

The first task is to discover the political and social field, the set of objective and subjective pressures giving meaning to the structure and codes to be studied. We call this the "fast food" field. The signs and sign vehicles (which carry the abstract sign) speak to rapidity of transaction (the cash registers are built into the counters). The modes of service available to the customer—drive through, take out, or eat in—range from fast to faster.

Taking the menu, a central symbol or collection of symbols, as primary data, we ask: What principles organize it? How does it convey constraint and order choice? The menu is divided into colored panels. These are devoted to types of items, some of which are clustered into "meals." This suggests that a color and meal-based code, or principle for assembling meaning and constituting messages (Eco, 1979), organizes the menu. Shown above and in front of the customer and extending from left to right are 13 plastic boxes: 8 panels list food or drink items and 5 show pictures. Pictures contrast with, mark, and dramatize the information-laden panels. The panels, from left to right, show the following:

1. picture (Egg McMuffin)
2. breakfast items—7
3. Extra Value (breakfast) Meals—5 (side items underneath)
4. picture (McCChicken sandwich)
5. sandwiches (beef)—6
6. sandwiches (chicken and fish)—3 (french fries listed underneath)
7. picture (Extra Value Meals)
8. Extra Value (lunch or dinner) Meals
9. beverages—11 with size variations
10. picture (McDonald's Value Pack Meals and children's meals that include toys)
11. Happy Meals (children's) (salads listed underneath)
12. desserts (gift certificate listed underneath)
13. picture (ice cream sundaes)

What do the colors on the panels mean? Above the colored panels are labels: over panels 1-3, "breakfast" (yellow); over 5, 6, and 8, "sandwiches," "french fries," and "Extra Value Meals" (red); over 9, "beverages" (blue); over 11, "Happy Meals" and "salads" (brown); and over 12, "desserts" (purple). Primary colors (yellow, red, and blue) divide and mark core items, whereas subdued colors (brown and purple) mark peripheral items (drinks and desserts are not included in combination meals). In addition to marking core and periphery items, the colors indicate courses, if one considers salads and desserts as such in an Anglo-American meal. The color-coded panels mark a base breakfast divided between red for a child or either lunch.

The individual (a "meal"; "Value" meals in the example, a large collection of sausages, core items, drink, and person) and billing: Having divide item and age of panel to a within it. (paradigm metasubstitutal of beef or cheese, burger (biscuit or burger). I rearranged; What is it? Price is no code. The sandwich for their o of complex is an adverb; items are Coke, and Coca-Cola decaffeinated or tomato. Having about the the Do they o in the or primary denote prices, sin periphery, the "Mc." McMuffin McNuggets, or significant items into links between similar on similar. In short, are well c...
mark a basic division in the United States between breakfast and lunch or dinner. The color code divides breakfast (yellow) from lunch and dinner (red) for adults. No such distinction is made for either lunch or dinner.

The horizontal panels are also coded by individual (à la carte items) and three combination "meals": "Happy Meals" for children and "Extra Value" breakfast and lunch/dinner combinations. Meals include base items plus a core item. For example, breakfast value meals include hash browns, a large coffee or an orange juice, and one of the five (sausage or egg, biscuit or muffin) breakfast core items. Extra Value Meals include a medium drink, large fries, and a sandwich or Chicken McNuggets. Combinations not only increase per person spending, but speed and simplify ordering and billing.

Having seen that colors and space are used to divide items and distinguish meals by time of day and age of consumer, we can look inside each panel to ask what orders the items (expressions) within it. Each panel is an associative context (paradigm) listing similar foods. The panels contain metonymic (part/whole) contrasts between substitutable items (e.g., panel 5 shows six types of beef sandwich: Big Mac, Quarter Pounder with Cheese, McLean burger, hamburger and cheeseburger (listed on the same line), and double cheeseburger). Is there a rationale for the vertical arrangement of the items, one on top of the other? What is it? What things does the menu not reflect? Price is not primary, but a secondary or tertiary code. The price is shown to the right of each sandwich in panels 5, 6, and 9, but is not the basis for their order. Nor are sandwiches listed in order of complexity (layers, sauces) or size. The menu is an advertisement. The most commonly ordered items are high on the list. Similarly, Coke, Diet Coke, and Sprite, followed by H-C Orange (all Coca-Cola products), are the first two lines, and decaffeinated coffee and orange juice are the bottom two.

Having seen the codes, what can one discover about the associations across items of the menu? Do they cohere as a sign system? Both connotative and denotative meanings are shared. The primary denotations of each item, as noted, are courses, prices, single and combination "meals," core and periphery of given meals, and adult/child. Adding the "Mc" prefix creates connotative unity: "Egg McMuffin," "McLean," "Big Mac," "Chicken McNuggets." These "Mc's" are institutional markers, or signs about signs, that collect disparate items into a unifying institutional theme. The links between these signs are analogical, or based on similarity.

In short, the semantics of the McDonald's menu are well chosen for effect. They reflect knowledge of the content and timing of American meals as well as age and lifestyle distinctions, and employ spatial and visual organization that facilitates visibility, simplicity, and utilitarian orientation to the consumer (cf. Drum, 1966). To summarize the coding of the McDonald's menu, the most important code is color/meal, followed by core/periphery (of meal items), adult/child, and individual/combination meals. A secondary code is vertical placement within a panel, a metonymic list of items. These placements reflect marketing aims and the popularity of items—that is, the higher, the more popular.

This analysis suggests that the purpose of the sign system is to convey messages that enable fast decisions and increase turnover, and clusters that raise per person expenditure and minimize complex, ad hoc item selection. Colors, panels, clusterings of signs, and the simple, brief, evocative, and terse names coded into the menu and the cash register for billing and collection ease all bespeak efficient, routinized, fast-transaction-based food service.

A Semiotic Discourse Approach to McDonald's Experiences

We draw on focused, in-depth interviews to draw out the meaning of the McDonald's experience. Such interviews provide the best tool for eliciting data for a semiotic discourse analysis because they reveal the circumstances subjects recall in going to McDonald's and their associations with the visits. Selves, developed over time and reflecting the sedimentation of experience, are intertwined with McDonald's. These selves are linked to significant others lodged in the "me" and are part of the replaying of joint actions. Self, other, and experience are inextricably interwoven in a biographical and physical context. These associations are personal and historical but also organizationally generated; they explore the experiential meanings attached to individual visits to McDonald's rather than cultural knowledge displayed in a skillful order.

Biographical Associations

Any McDonald's visit may call up past visits with family, a team, friends, and personal associations. The following scenario typifies individual associations and experiences at McDonald's and suggest how two are woven together.

One example comes from a colleague. As a child, she had chronic health problems calling for regular and painful treatments at a doctor's office. A trip to McDonald's was the reward for being a "good girl." As an adult, she has extremely negative
associations about McDonald's; she rarely enters its dreaded portals, and has been there only twice in the past 25 years. On the first of those two visits, she was sold a still-frozen "file of fish" sandwich. On that visit, she was in line with a "regular" who was firmly entrenched in his customer role. He was a reticent,而不是 lonely, and short of cash. Only children with no negative associations (going happily with friends or family) and disenfranchised, marginal adults—such as the homeless or the mentally ill or retarded—remain entirely positive, and anticipate, McDonald's. The corporation, through charitable activities and gaudy, enthusiastic, loud, family-focused ads, simulates happiness, togetherness, and "giving Mom a break" ("You deserve a break today, so get up and get away to McDonald's" was a recent ad jingle).

These are systematic attempts to replace or displace attention from the potentially ambivalent or negative significance of a McDonald's trip. The symbolization serves to defer focus from the reality of a visit. Organizational processes are linked to the creation of a consumer culture, marketing the positive experience of going to McDonald's, such as "happy" meals, clowns, playgrounds, golden arches—reminiscent of rainbows and heaven. Further organizational attempts to create a pseudogemeinschaft (Merton, 1961) environment are manifest in the physical and spatial attributes of the place and the "professional education" given to employees.

Many themes of American society—fast, cheap food, served by strangers with minimal of interaction, obligation, and reciprocity—are displayed in the social organization of serving as well as in the well-recognized building (Ritzer, 1993). The rhetoric of space, spoken by convenient and capacious parking lots, broad, glass-enclosed buildings, semipen kitchens, and abundant seating, is welcoming to Americans.

The time element is suspended in McDonald's. It is always daytime, and light and ambiance are not softened to romanticize the experience. Inside, one's gaze falls upon the huge, sunlike, lighted menu. The yellow brightness is almost overwhelming to burned-out, tired, and jaded "evening diners." The building conveys antisepctic cleanliness. The early original buildings were constructed of white, tilelike materials and resembled operating rooms. The severe simplicity of architecture and the interior decor do not connote any particular class or culture, except that of postindustrial society. There are no personal menus, maître d's, waiters to tip, or preferred seating areas. All are treated equally, and "what you want is what you get." The only requirements are shoes, shirt, and a couple of bucks. One is not encouraged to eat at a leisurely pace. (In a London McDonald's near Marylebone Road, the molded plastic seats are slanted downward, so that one rests against them, but cannot really occupy them.)

The organization works efficiently and effectively to present a front-stage set of simulacra that communicate a fun and friendly, family-oriented, accessible, convenient setting for eating staffed by pleasant and tidy people. This is the public, advertised front. There is a systematic attempt to connote "home" as well. One can see backstage into the kitchen, which is the hub and heart of a home, and see and hear the cooking and compiling of food orders ("I need another Big Mac, please").

Public presentation and private reality differ. Supposedly, as at home, one can dash in and "grab something" or spend some time eating and relaxing. However, it is not a relaxing atmosphere: People rush in and out, babies cry, employees wash tables as one eats, and lonely diners sit silently, not participating in leisurely conversation with significant others. McDonald's confuses in other ways, claiming to be the world's biggest recycler of paper and waste, but not mentioning that it is also the world's biggest producer of trash. It displays pamphlets emphasizing nutrition, yet most of the entrées have dangerously high levels of fat and calories. "Environment-friendly" pamphlets written in 1990 project unfilled levels of recycling for 1991, and function ritually to show the organization's concern for health and the environment. Despite these apparent conflicts, the obvious appeal of McDonald's to many is that it offers cheap food, quick service, and instrumental modes of obtaining it.
McDonald’s tries to ritualize the experience. A key ritual is the greeting, “Welcome to McDonald’s. How may I serve you?” as if it were a home, not a restaurant. Logically, choice and “having it your way” are extremely important. Did you attempt to order a Big Mac without sauce? You wait—or perhaps as punishment for interrupting the system. Or you may be informed that you must accept it as is. This does not mimic the indulgent mother who cooks for 10 years without onions to please a family member. The identification of food with mother, comfort, and love is implicit, even though the meals are not served by motherly people, but by a diverse lot of mostly young teenagers.

McDonald’s efficient and democratic servers learn their trade at “Hamburger U.” They learn the theory and practice of standardized food production, including such elements as the size of bag required for a given number of items, the ritual greeting, proper hygiene and attire, and the execution of snappy service. The best learners are inculcated with management skills and will acquire the nuances of supervising production. McDonald’s promotes from within.

However, this apparent egalitarianism does not always work. Sometimes, the interactive effects among race, sex, age, and ethnicity of the servers, management, and customers can result in frustration and passive aggressive behaviors. Waiting 20 minutes for a Big Mac is considerably more annoying than a similar wait for cherries jubilee. One informant of ours recounted a McDonald’s visit on an Ohio turnpike. The “management” was a Caucasian female; most of the employees were young Afro-American males. The entire crew claimed to be “on break,” and was totally unresponsive to the manager’s instructions and virtually ignored the milling and irritated customers.

McDonald’s as a Dramatic Production

Impression management is essential to modern business success. Erving Goffman (1959) has alerted us to the importance of fronts, strategies, and impression management with reference to individuals, but organizations also manage impressions. The costumes and props of McDonald’s have become more complex, elaborated, and expensive over time. The original “restaurant” was a small, boxy “drive-in” with two or three employees and no seating. This differed from the typical drive-in, which offered personalized curb service and delivery at the car. The primary innovation was the speed of service. This change in service, in reality extremely depersonalizing, required the customer to wait in line at a window with a tray, carry his own food to a table, and neatly clean the table and dispose of all trash at the completion of the meal. This was touted as an advance because it was fast (or faster).

As the organizational chart became more elaborate, so did the dramatic production of the McDonald’s. Each McDonald’s operationally transformed! Indoor seating, increased menu items, fancy and colorful uniforms, drive-through windows, buildings with historical themes, children’s accoutrements (highchairs, bibs, diaper changing areas), the cast of Ronald McDonald and Friends, attached indoor and outdoor playgrounds, and large, gleaming restrooms symbolized the new meaning attached to a McDonald’s visit. These simple and powerful organizational signifiers become unconsciously combined with complex and sometimes conflicting personal associations.

These changes are indicative of semiosis, the changing meaning of the McDonald’s sign production apparatus over time. Transformations in menu items, building form, seating arrangements, bathroom facilities, and the standardized cheerful affect of the employees are reactive to societal shifts as well as to changes in individual “taste.” The continued worldwide growth and profitability of the organization testify to management’s ability to “read” and manipulate the audience.

In this semiotic discourse analysis, ethnographic materials illuminate the signification process. A theme here is the complex interplay of private, experiential, and personal signifiers with public and organizationally constructed signifiers. This symbolic “struggle” is a function of the organizationally generated meanings, the elaborate and methodical cultural production of McDonald’s, as well as personal meanings.

McDonald’s is an example of an organizational culture that strategically facilitates management’s aims: making profits and pleasing customers (Peters & Waterman, 1982). As we have attempted to show here, McDonald’s is a brilliantly conceived dramatic production well designed to confuse. It manipulates people’s sense of front- and backstage areas, public and private spaces, home and business, and instrumental and expressive aspects of food and eating, and subtly markets the creation and consumption of experience. As in the case of Disneyland, the fundamental purpose is to market experience at a profit (Van Maanen, 1992). The symbolizations employed by McDonald’s serve to suppress and delay personal and group meanings contrary to the business purposes of the corporation and to elevate the connotations of “fun eating.”

Conclusion

We have argued that although documents have long occupied an important role in the social
sciences, the perspectives within which they are viewed as data have changed significantly. The quest changed from the reconstruction of personal experience to the epistemology and production of a text. Content and narrative analysis struggle continuously with the problem of content as embodiment of a text or story within personal or group experience. Semiotics seizes on signs and how they mean, obviating the question of experience, the self, and much of the Western attitude toward literature and the social sciences. Emphasis shifts to codes, paradigms, and explanations for the ordered meaning of a text, rather than the character, biography, or intent of the writer or subject of the writing. We have also provided a brief example of semiotic discourse analysis, using the McDonald’s menu and the McDonald’s experience as topics. It would appear that these points are consistent with the drift of postmodernist thinking. McDonald’s exemplifies the postmodern idea of “floating signifiers,” contents arbitrarily linked to expressions, and the generation of desire by sign manipulation (Baudrillard, 1979). Once the aim is selling experience, even the connotation or suggestion of desirability produced by associations with a signifier is a powerful tool. McDonald’s is a vast enactment of commodified experience, and it is a “text to be read.” Thus the humanistic concerns of the social sciences return, awkwardly, in the analysis of the structural sources of the production of experience and the simulation of culture.

Notes

1. In psychology, for example, texts were analyzed with a combination of projective tests, clinical analyses, and more precise modes of assessing the content of written documents. Psychology essentially abandoned what Robert White (1963), following Henry A. Murray, called “the study of lives,” autobiographical materials, history, and even the self as a fundamental concept (Gergen, 1991; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

2. Some of these ideas are modified from Green (1993, p. 3, Table 1.1). Semiotics takes as its fundamental unit the sign and studies the types of coherence among signs and sign systems. Its pragmatic dimensions concern how signs are used and what they mean in context. Related areas of study (see Eco, 1979) are sign production (how new signs are developed), a theory of codes (how signs are understood as messages and the underlying principles organizing a given sign system), and signification and communication (the structure of information conveying systems and S-codes, or a system of elements that can be linked to others to communicate, e.g., information theory, physics, mathematics). Speech act theory, which is not discussed here, as it is not a textual analysis or production methodology, uses the “utterance” or speech act as a key unit, and studies language performance, the social organization of speech acts, and meaning as related to the cultural and historical context in which they occur. Discourse analysis uses sentences and larger fragments of texts as units of analysis, and studies the interaction between textual forms and genres and audience reactions or responses produced. Although heavily influenced by computer-generated content analysis, the original purpose was interpretation of the hermeneutics of texts. Discourse analysis takes as its unit longer segments of texts or rhetoric, oscillating between the structure of the argument to the impact or meaning of it.

3. All of our examples are “arbitrary,” or based on cultural knowledge. C. S. Peirce (1931) argues that we call sign-referent links are of three kinds: (a) iconic, based on the mode of representation; (b) indexical, based on natural or causal relations between expression and content; and (c) arbitrary, based on cultural knowledge. Eco (1979, p. 178) argues, and we agree, that Peirce’s tripartite distinctions are based on the assumption that the “real” character of content can be known.

4. Our fieldwork was done previously. We refined our analytic focus and modes of data gathering and reduction. The fieldwork reported here, substantiated by some 40 years of McDonald’s dining, was executed in two McDonald’s in East Lansing, Michigan, on May 29–June 1, 1993.

5. Among the national organizations in this field are Arby’s, Burger King, McDonald’s, and Wendy’s (see Feinstein, 1989). The “fast-food” field contrasts with other forms of restaurant dining. It is indicated by a brief, limited public menu, shown above the server as an overhead lighted display at the front of every store, uncomfortable seats, food dispensed at a counter (no table service), optional take-out service, and preprepared standardized food. The server, cashier, and cleaner roles are interchangeable. Customers dispose of their rubbish when finished, sharing the task with young workers.

6. Space does not permit a more detailed analysis of the coding of particular food and drink items using two oppositions to organize them (Lévi-Strauss, 1969): the raw versus the cooked, and hot and cold.

7. Another friend has a terrible fear of clowns and had recurrent childhood nightmares involving villainous clowns. As Ronald McDonald, a clown, is the personal representative of the corporation, and his frightening visage is omnipresent in the media and at the restaurant, our friend fears McDonald’s. The prospect of a combination of a circus and a trip to McDonald’s is enough to send him off the deep end. Similarly, many children of divorced families are taken to McDonald’s because of chaos during the breakup of the household and subsequently by their fathers during visitation. These children might also have very negative feelings about fast-food chains.
References


