DISCOURSES IN PLACE

LANGUAGE IN THE MATERIAL WORLD

RON SCOLLON AND SUZIE WONG SCOLLON

Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details

Discourses in place

Discourses in Place develops the first systematic analysis of the ways we interpret language as it is materially placed in the world.

In this book Ron and Suzie Scollon argue that we can only interpret the meaning of public texts like road signs, notices and brand logos by considering the social and physical world that surrounds them. Drawing on a wide range of real examples, from signs in the Chinese mountains to urban centers in Austria, France, North America and Hong Kong, this textbook equips students with the methodology and models they need to undertake their own research in 'geo-semiotics', the key interface between semiotics and the physical world. The book is highly illustrated, containing real examples of language in the material world.

Including a 'how to use this book' section, group and individual activities and a glossary of key terms, *Discourses in Place* is essential reading for anyone with an interest in language and the way we communicate.

Ron Scollon is Professor of Linguistics at Georgetown University, USA, and Editor of *Visual Communication*. His previous publications include *Mediated Discourse* (Routledge). **Suzie Wong Scollon** is Research Coordinator, Associated Socio-cultural Research Projects, Georgetown University, USA. Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon have co-written *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach* (second edition) and (with Yuling Pan) *Professional Communication in International Settings*.

Discourses in Place

Language in the material world

Ron Scollon and
Suzie Wong Scollon

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2003 by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-203-42272-4 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-42450-6 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0–415–29048–1 (hbk)
ISBN 0–415–29049–X (pbk)

Contents

Preface

In their book *The Social Life of Information* (2002) John Seely Brown, Chief Scientist at Xerox Corporation and Paul Duguid of the University of California, Berkeley argue that in our enthusiasm for the massive increase in information in today's world we have neglected to understand that, as they put it, 'information and individuals are inevitably and always part of rich social networks' (p. xxv). Their thesis is that information only becomes knowledge when it is grounded quite concretely in the social, material world.

There are just three ways a sign such as a word, a sentence, a picture, a graph or a gesture can have meaning in semiotic theory. It can be a picture of the thing in the world. In that case we call it an *icon*. The little picture of a happy face made by email users out of a colon and the right parenthesis (:)) is an icon. It shows us a schematic picture of a smiling face. A sign can also be a completely arbitrary representation of the thing in the world. In that case we call it a *symbol*. A green traffic light means we can continue driving. There is nothing inherent in the color green that 'means' move ahead or keep going. It is an arbitrary association. Finally, a sign means something because of where and when it is located in the world. In this case it is called an *index*. An arrow pointing one direction down a street is an index which shows the exact direction in which traffic should go.

There is a difference among these three types of signs, though. Icons and symbols can exist independently and can encode independent although entirely abstract meanings. The property of indexicality, however, is a property of all signs. Icons, symbols, and indexes are all three of them also indexes. This difference between indexes and the other two categories is the substance of this book *Discourses in Place: Language in the Material World*.

All signs, whether they are icons or symbols are also indexes. That is because all signs must be located in the material world to exist. Information and knowledge must be represented by a system of signs – icons, symbols, and indexes; information and knowledge cannot have any independent existence. The familiar stop sign on the street corner is a symbol in several ways: The letters 'S', 'T', 'O', and

'P' symbolize the English word 'stop' which itself symbolizes the meaning 'to progress no further'. It also symbolizes this meaning through the conventional use of a red color on a hexagonal background. Until it is placed in the world, this sign only means to stop in the abstract. On the sign painter's bench it does not mean that he should stop painting. It only means that a car should stop when it is placed physically in the world at a place such as a street intersection. This shift from abstract meaning potential to actual, real-world meaning is the property of indexicality. The sign abstractly symbolizes 'to stop', but it indexes where and how and who in what container is to stop in the real world only when it is grounded in the material world of cement roadways, curbs, and metal poles. You can get a ticket for passing up a stop sign placed at an intersection but not for doing the same to a stop sign in the back of the worker's truck or on the painter's bench. Indexes have meaning in the real material and social world in which we live.

This is what Brown and Duguid are talking about when they say that we neglect at our peril this situatedness or groundedness of the signs of our information highway. *Discourses in Place* is a book about the situatedness of signs in the world. In it we outline a preliminary grammar of the 'placeness' of discourses in place by combining sociocultural theory, semiotic theory, and ethnographic studies of signs in place.

Fifteen days after Christopher Columbus sailed to the New World to colonize its spaces for Queen Isabella of Spain, Elio Antonio de Nebrija presented the Queen with his *Gramatica Castellana*, the Grammar of Castilian Spanish. Ivan Illich describes this work as

> a tool for conquest abroad and a weapon to suppress untutored speech at home (1981: 35)
>
> a tool to colonize the language spoken by her own subjects (1981: 4)

Finding the Latin spoken in Spain too corrupt a language to be worthy of the name, young Antonio went to Italy to learn proper Latin, published a grammar of it, then upon returning home proceeded to engineer the vulgar speech he heard in Spain into what he regarded as a proper language, Castilian Spanish. The result was the first grammar in any modern European tongue. Thus the first great move in the integration of language and the forces of social control within the nations of Europe was made.

Nebrija was distraught at the degeneration of ancient Latin and at the diversity of tongues that had found their way into print by way of the new invention of the printing press. He proposed to Queen Isabella that she standardize the language with his grammar and that she declare the printing of any vernacular to be against the law. Illich terms this 'a system of scientific control of diversity within the entire kingdom' (1981: 36). In the introduction to his grammar, Nebrija wrote,

> So far, this our language has been left loose and unruly and, therefore, in just a few centuries this language has changed beyond recognition. If we were to compare what we speak today with the language we spoke five hundred years ago, we would notice a difference and a diversity that could not be any greater if these were two alien tongues.
>
> (Illich 1981: 38)

> Now more than 500 years later we have come to take the standardization of language for granted and to think of it as a simple necessity for teaching people to read and for schooling. The original aim, however, was to control the reading of the populace, who Nebrija wrote 'waste their time on novels and fanciful stories full of lies.'
>
> (Illich 1981: 39)

He proposed to restrict printing to Castellano, spoken by no-one including the Queen, as a way to control what appeared in print and require citizens to be educated in order to be able to read or write. With this move, printed language disappeared from the commons and fell under the control of the nation state.

Language indexes the world. We speak and listen, write and read not only *about the world* but *in the world*, and much of what we understand depends on exactly where we and the language are located in the world. 'We would like you to read this' uses indexical expressions such as the pronouns 'we', and 'you' and the demonstrative 'this' but we cannot know *who* 'we' are or *who* 'you' are, or *what* 'this' is until we know how this sentence is physically located in the world on paper and in the hands of a reader.

Much more important than this simple indexing of 'you' and 'me', of 'here' and 'there', of 'this' and 'that', language indexes who and what we are in the world as we use it. We are writing and publishing this book in English. This is an observation that is almost entirely invisible until we call your attention to it. Our writing in English and your reading it in English indexes us as members of a particular social group with particular forms of power in the world in just the same way that Nebrija's grammar was used by Queen Isabella to control diversity and produce social uniformity within her nation. It must be remembered that the year 1492 saw not only the voyage of Columbus and the grammar of Nebrija but also the expulsion of 'the Moors', Muslims, from Queen Isabella's territory in one of history's most infamous cases of ethnic cleansing. A person who does not read English is indexed by the very choice of language in this book as an outsider to this discussion even as we index ourselves as insiders.

Geographers have been concerned with making a distinction between the concept of space and the concept of place. Harvey (1989) in his widely read *The Condition of Postmodernity* comments that the spaces of our earth have been carved

out and mapped to reflect systems of command and control. As in the case of Queen Isabella, one of the major means by which this sociopolitical control of the spaces in which we live is produced and maintained is through the control of the discourses in those spaces. Everywhere about us in our day-to-day world we see the discourses which shape, manage, entice, and control our actions. Instrumental to the process of shaping those discourses are the objects by which we index our own positions and identities in the world. The traffic light at a busy intersection not only narrowly manages the flow of automobiles through the intersection, it also indexes the municipal regulatory powers and apparatus that have placed the traffic light and which maintain its functioning. Furthermore, as we approach the light and make our choices about stopping or driving right through it, we index ourselves in respect to those regulatory powers and that municipal power apparatus. Mostly, of course, we index ourselves as law-abiding citizens by stopping when instructed to do so.

Geosemiotics is the study of the meaning systems by which language is located in the material world. This includes not just the location of the words on the page you are reading now but also the location of the book in your hands and your location as you stand or sit reading this. It includes the urban planning designs by which the streets in your city are laid out as well as the signs placed on those streets. It also includes the many forms of what Erving Goffman calls the interaction order – the ways we organize ourselves as single individuals or as conversational partners out for a lunchtime walk – through which we interact with these many semiotic systems of the world around us.

Professionals, travelers, advertisers, and government officials in our globalizing world economy communicate daily with people who are very different from themselves. Developing a brand name for a product, speaking on the phone to a colleague on the other side of the world, reading the road signs on an interstate highway, or the sign on the door of a shop, we can no longer just trust our own intuitions of how to read the systems of indexicality in the world around us. In many cases we cannot read either what sociocultural or political powers are being indexed or the ways in which our own actions are positioning ourselves within those structures of meaning and power. A pair of pants bought recently by Ron for camping has zippers which allow the user to remove the lower parts of the legs to produce a pair of shorts. A tag that came with the pants noted that this would allow adjustment between pants and shorts 'as needed by the weather or by the local culture'. While clothing now may allow this adjustment we still have very few clues about how to read the discourses in place around us when we are in spaces that are in some way not 'our own'.

There are many books on intercultural communication, including our own, but scant attention is focused on the question of how the physical/material characteristics of language in the world give meaning to communications and how those

meanings may be radically different from place to place in the world. Based on an extensive body of research into geosemiotics conducted by ourselves and our students in several countries including China and Hong Kong, Finland, the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Austria, Germany, Brazil, Hungary, Lebanon, and France, this book develops the first systematic analysis of the ways we interpret language as it is materially placed in the world. We bring together research from our own fields of linguistic anthropology and social psychology as a contribution to the understanding of discourses in place in studies of communication and intercultural communication, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, semiotics, visual anthropology and sociology, and cultural geography. Geosemiotics as we conceive the field here is also directly useful in graphic arts and design, art and architecture, urban planning, public relations, advertising, and marketing because of the insights it provides for practitioners working across cultural-semiotic boundaries in designing public spaces and communication campaigns.

When Quebec asserted its wish to be independent from Canada this was written across the Province in the names of roadways, of government offices, and of stores and services. French was placed above English or any other language in all bilingual signs. When Estonia, Ukraine, and the other former Soviet Republics emerged from under the control of the central state one of the first displays of political independence was seen in the public commercial and government signs with Estonian or Ukrainian or even English placed in the privileged position over the formerly dominant Russian. In our own research projects we plotted the political currents of change in Hong Kong and China during the period in which sovereignty over Hong Kong returned from Britain to China. Our interest in this book began as we saw that whether it was the name of a post office, of a fashion boutique, or a food court, how and where those words were placed, the letterforms of those words, and the materials out of which they were made were a central part of their sociopolitical meaning.

We quickly realized that it was not simply a matter of the signs and lettering of signs in public places that we were investigating. We found that we needed to develop a broad and systematic analysis of how language appears in the material world, whether that language is on the lips of two people having a casual conversation or engraved in stone on the face of a national public monument. In each case one very important aspect of the meaning of language is based on the concrete, material, physical placement of that language in the world.

From the study of what we called the literate design of discourse in public we have now come in this book to a broad analytical position we call *geosemiotics*. We have begun with the classical research of Edward T. Hall and Erving Goffman on the ways in which we position ourselves in relationship to each other as we take up and perform what Goffman called the interaction order. This is the fundamental basis of indexicality – the quality of language that it makes reference to things in

the world by pointing to or locating itself on or in them and in doing so positions us within that world.

We then turn to the visual semiotic framework of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen as the basis for our analysis of the signs and pictures themselves as semiotic structures. We believe that much of the meaning structure of signs and pictures derives from the more fundamental systems of indexicality of the social interaction order. A close-up photograph of a person's face signals a close relationship between the person in the photo and the viewer of the photo because the close-up is analogized on the social relationship of intimate or personal distance as observed by Hall and Goffman.

The main substance of *Discourses in Place: Language in the Material World* comes out of our own research projects. Using prior research such as that we have presented in the first sections of the book, we present a system for analyzing code preference when there are two or more languages or codes used in a picture, a system for the analysis of inscription – the material substance of signs, and a system for analyzing emplacement – the when and where of the physical location of language in the world. The final two chapters bring this analytical framework together to argue that all instances of language in the world occur in semiotic aggregates – very complex systems of the interaction of multiple semiotic systems. Human action is enabled only through the semiotic systems we use. We close our *geosemiotic* analysis by pointing out that any human action is a process of selection among many semiotic systems which are always in a kind of dialectical dialogicality with each other. Indexicality – the meaning of signs which is based on their material location – is the key to the analysis of any human action.

A project that spans many countries in several continents incurs a large debt to people everywhere we have gone. Since we began the research projects on which this book is based six years ago we have researched, lectured, given conference papers, taught classes, and simply traveled with our cameras in many countries of the world. Everywhere people have been generous with their ideas and it would be impossible to include the names of so many people who have been willing to discuss these ideas with us. In the first project we were joined by our colleague Dr Yuling Pan and our daughter, Rachel Scollon. Dr Yoshiko Nakano, our colleague at City University of Hong Kong, was also very helpful particularly in discussing the ways in which Japanese visual semiotics has penetrated into contemporary China in the form of Japanese popular culture. Dr Lucia Pan of Fudan University spent many hours with us researching problems of code preference in Hong Kong and China. Beatrice Chan was our always able research assistant on the Hong Kong projects and assisted us in transferring our archives to Washington, DC.

Our students at Georgetown University, Alex Johnston, Ingrid de Saint-

Georges, Sigrid Norris, and Alla Yeliseyeva have conducted their own geosemiotics projects and the results of these are cited in the bibliography. Their contribution goes much beyond such academic citations in that we enjoyed many hours of discussion of these topics with them. Students in R. Scollon's Public Discourse class in 1999 (Najma Al Zidjaly, Susan Chen, Elisa Everts, Shiraz Felling, Cynthia Gordon, Andy Jocuns, Gia Ann Russo) and again in 2002 (Jessica Bauman, Michael Blasenstein, Shanna Estigoy, Philip LeVine, Meaghan Nelson, Jackie Novak, Brendan O'Connor, Phil Piety, Aida Premilovac, Shana Semler, Margaret Toye, Veronika Zielinska) suffered through the first rough drafts of these ideas and it would be impossible to have arrived at this stage without their careful consideration and criticism of the ideas we present here.

Photos 4.15 and 8.02 are used by permission of Virginia Zavala-Cisneros who was one of the very first 'geosemioticians'.

1 Geosemiotics

Geosemiotics: Discourses in place

A website on California nudist beaches posts the following clarification of legal requirements:

> Before the citations were issued it's clear there's an ordinance in place and there were notice signs in place and people were clearly violating those posted notices.

'Ordinance in place', 'signs in place', 'people were clearly violating': these are crucial concepts in law and in life, whether we are thinking of nude bathing, crossing against a sign saying 'Do Not Walk', or driving through a red traffic light. There is a social world presented in the material world through its discourses – signs, structures, other people – and our actions produce meanings in the light of those discourses.

This book is about the 'in place' meanings of signs and discourses and the meanings of our actions in and among those discourses in place. A municipal ordinance prohibiting nude bathing or driving above a certain speed limit is an outcome of a complex and lengthy legal discourse. Meetings are held, investigations made; ordinances are drafted, opened for public comment, passed, and finally posted. All of this legal discourse becomes binding law when and where the signs are posted, when and where the signs become discourses in place.

Or we could put this the other way around: signs are designed by sign-makers, they are made in the shops and workplaces of sign-makers, they are taken out to the relevant site, and finally, some worker puts them up and they become 'signs in place.' The sign saying that nude bathing is prohibited has the same words, the same sentences, cites the same ordinances, and all the rest while it is riding in the back of the truck of the worker taking it out to the beach to be posted. During this time the sign may have abstract linguistic meaning but it does not

have any binding 'in place' meaning until it is actually posted firmly in place at the beach.

This book is called *Discourses in Place: Language in the Material World*. It is a book which deals with *geosemiotics* – the study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs and discourses and of our actions in the material world. With this title we are trying to capture this 'in place' aspect of the meanings of discourses in our day-to-day lives. When we cross a street corner we encounter a complex array of signs and discourses. There are signs regulating vehicular traffic, there are signs regulating pedestrian traffic. We see lines painted on the street: some for pedestrians, some for automobiles, some for electrical workers who are to pull up a manhole to repair the lines underneath. We see commercial advertisements, public official notices, street and building identifications, graffiti, and pasted up notices for legal and even illegal goods and services. As we walk we may be chatting with a friend. This friend and all of the others present are also signs in place which we 'read' in taking our actions.

All of the signs and symbols take a major part of their meaning from how and where they are placed – at that street corner, at that time in the history of the world. Each of them indexes a larger discourse whether of public transport regulation or underground drug trafficking.

But this does not only apply to the signs and other symbols posted here and there about our worlds as we go through daily life. Our own bodies make and give off much of their meanings because of where they are and what they are doing 'in place'. A person who is wearing no clothing on a public beach is a 'nude bather' (whether legal or not). A person who is wearing no clothing in the privacy of his or her bathroom is simply a person preparing to take a bath, hardly a 'nude bather'.

Discourses in Place: Language in the Material World is a book about how we use language in concrete, physical instances: A heavy brass sign means this company is here to stay; a hastily made cloth banner means this sale will not last long; you'd better buy now. *Discourses in Place* gathers together insights from a wide variety of fields from linguistics to cultural geography and from communication to sociology into a perspective we are calling *geosemiotics*. We begin with the problem of indexicality.

Indexicality and the indexable

'What is that?' cannot be understood unless we look at the world outside of language to fix a meaning for 'that' and unless we look at where exactly in the world the person saying this is located as well as what he or she is doing. The meaning of 'What is that?' is anchored in a person (who is the speaker?), a social relationship (who is the hearer?), a social situation (what are the speaker and hearer

doing – looking or pointing at something?), and a physical world (what is a potential 'that' within the spaces of those people?).

The meaning of a sign is anchored in the material world whether the linguistic utterance is spoken by one person to another or posted as a stop sign on a street corner. We need to ask of the stop sign the same four questions we would ask of a person: Who has 'uttered' this (that is, is it a legitimate stop sign of the municipal authority)? Who is the viewer (it means one thing for a pedestrian and another for the driver of a car)? What is the social situation (is the sign 'in place' or being installed or worked on)? Is that part of the material world relevant to such a sign (for example, is it a corner of the intersection of roads)?

This is the property of language called indexicality. Indexicality has been known to be a universal characteristic of language at least since the turn of the past century in the work of Charles S. Peirce, regarded by many as the founder of the field of semiotics. Indexicality is the property of the context-dependency of signs, especially language; hence the study of those aspects of meaning which depend on the placement of the sign in the material world. In geosemiotics, as in all branches of semiotics, the word 'sign' means any material object that indicates or refers to something other than itself. Of course language and discourse are our primary interest and so in that case we would speak of this sentence, this paragraph, or this book as a sign albeit a very complex sign. But we also include signs in the more conventional sense of shop names, traffic regulatory devices, and even the built environment such as roadways – a 'sign' that one can and should drive in this particular space. And, of course, we cannot forget that we ourselves are the embodiment of signs in our physical presence, movements, and gestures.

Because indexicality has been most fully studied in relationship to language, we begin with indexicality in language. Language indexes the world in many ways. The most frequently noted indexicals are personal pronouns ('I', 'we', 'you', etc.), demonstratives ('this', 'that'), deictics ('here', 'there, 'now'), and tense and other forms of time positioning ('smiles', 'smiled', 'will smile'). Our understanding of both spoken utterances and written texts must be anchored in the material world. To understand a sentence such as, 'Would you take this over there,' we need a provisional location for myself (the speaker – a meaning for here), for 'you' (my addressee), for the object ('this'), and for the goal intended ('there').

While anthropological linguists such as Haviland, Hanks, and Silverstein have dealt with the question of how indexicality is structured within languages of the world as a universal characteristic of language, sociolinguists have remained a bit reluctant to enter into the study of the semiotic systems in the material world apart from grammar which must necessarily be called upon for users of language to perform indexicality. To understand the phrase, 'As we have written above' we rely upon a semiotics of written objects which tells us that 'above' must index

text written within the same document, that it will not be a comment scribbled in the margin but rather in the same general text portion of the pages, and so forth. It does not literally mean 'above' (in the air or on the ceiling) if we are writing on a table surface or if it is being read horizontally.

More to the point of this book, to understand the meanings and negations of the sign in image 1.01, we need a theoretical framework which first can take into consideration the telegraphic language of 'TRAFFIC LIGHT OUT OF ORDER' to tell us *which* traffic light is out of order – normally it is the next one the driver will encounter. Hence we need a theory of motion through space and the use of public spaces which will tell us where traffic lights are conventionally located. We also need a theory which will tell us that this sign is negated – it is *not* to be read (because of its physical position away from the flow of traffic, on the other side of the fence, and in a 'blocked' orientation.)

We are calling this theoretical framework *geosemiotics* to make reference to the social meanings of the material placement of signs (semiosis, to use Peirce's term) particularly in reference to the material world of the users of signs. For us, as linguists, the primary sign system (semiotic system) is language, though as we have noted above and as we will see in the chapters which follow, mostly we focus on rather simple signs. This narrowing of focus is for two reasons. In the first place,

1.01

the signs we find around us in daily life are extremely abundant though they have rarely been taken up for analysis by linguists and other specialists in language, discourse, and communication. Everywhere in our world are the logos and brand names on the products we use in daily life and on the shops that line our streets and malls. Wherever we go we see the sociocultural, sociopolitical regulatory apparatus of our worlds in the traffic regulations displayed in painted lines on streets that indicate where we may drive or walk and we see this apparatus in the traffic lights at intersections. We see signs for infrastructural work such as the electrical boxes that run the street lights and we see announcements and notices of events taking place. We see signs saying 'Post No Bills' and we see graffiti. The meanings of all these signs depend on forms of indexicality we will take up in the chapters which follow.

While linguistics has given us the most thorough foundation for the study of indexicality in signs, our primary interest in this book is not indexicality in language. This has been and is being widely studied within linguistics. Our interest here is in the ways in which this sign system of language indexes the other semiotic systems in the world around language. That is, we are more interested in the *indexable world* than in the systems of indexicality in language.

A restaurant in Kunming, China has the sign in 1.02 posted above the door.

Native speakers of English generally read this sign as saying, DNALIAHT followed by some Chinese characters. They can make no sense of it. People

1.02

who are from Taiwan, China, or Hong Kong, however, read this sign as saying 'King of Dai food [*Tai Wang Ge* in Chinese] or THAILAND [TAI WANG GE] THAILAND'. For them it is a straightforward sign telling them this is a Dai National Minority restaurant.

What makes some readers try to read this sign in a universalized left-to-right reading path while others read the sign starting from the Chinese characters over the central doorway and then read outward from center toward the margins? Part of this reading is based on knowing Chinese characters, of course, and that is the subject of many books on translation. But more fundamental than the question of translation is knowing *how* to read the sign in relationship to its placement above the door of a restaurant. Before we can think about *what* we are reading we have to have a principle to tell us *how* to read it. We have to know whether we should read from left to right, right to left, or from the center outward. This example illustrates that the first principle in the interpretation of language is to solve the problem of indexability – to locate language in the physical world.

A 'grammar' of indexability

Most of the semiotic systems which we index in daily life are completely transparent and invisible to us. Of course the language we use is invisible in this way, at least until it is made painfully visible in those grammar classes in school which so many of us resisted. This does not mean, however, that these all but invisible systems of meaning are unimportant in our lives. On the contrary as Michael Billig has noted in his book *Banal Nationalism*, it is just these invisible, almost banal, systems of meaning which form the sociopolitical systems that so closely define us and our actions in the world. Billig notes, for example, that we may not talk at all about our nation or even feel that there is any question about nationalism involved in such a simple daily event as the weather report, but as the map appears on the television screen here in the United States we see that there is a sharp boundary between the US and Canada on the north and between the US and Mexico on the south. Canada has no weather, nor does Mexico. The fronts and sweeps of climate are entirely 'national', represented as starting sharply at the borders on the map. Sadly for those of us who live in Alaska and Hawaii, both states of the United States, these are also not part of the weather picture. The contiguous 'Lower 48' as it is said in Alaska indexes 'the nation' in these weather reports in which Hawaiians and Alaskans are marginalized right along with Canadians and Mexicans. With a weather map a political concept is framed; with the definite article *the* in 'the nation' a political entity is flagged as surely as if it flew the red, white, and blue colors of the national flag.

Much of the substance of this book is taken up with the fairly straightforward description of the systems and sub-systems which can be indexed by language and

by which language becomes indexable in the material world. Because of the rather compressed nature of this analysis which covers a very wide range of semiotic systems, we cannot in each case also dwell on the ways in which each of these semiotic systems indexes the sociocultural and sociopolitical structures of power in the world around us. Is it of value in and of itself to develop this comprehensive analysis? We believe it is, for two reasons. First of all, as has been well established in the field of linguistics, the grammatical systems of language are among the most visible external manifestations of human cognitive capacities. That is, grammar has been regarded by psychotherapists and cognitive scientists as well as by linguists as a window on the human mind. We believe that it will prove to be highly productive to extend the studies of semiotic systems beyond the analysis of the grammars of languages into the grammars of 'texts' taken in the much broader sense that we use here.

Our second reason, however, is for us the more important one. All semiotic systems operate as 'social semiotic' systems as we have suggested above in making reference to the ways in which nationalism is flagged in such a simple matter as the production of a weather map. In producing meanings we must make choices; as we make choices we preference one option over another. All semiotic systems operate as systems of social positioning and power relationship both at the level of interpersonal relationships and at the level of struggles for hegemony among social groups in any society precisely because they are systems of choices and no choices are neutral in the social world. This is a point well established in the work of M. A. K. Halliday and many other social semioticians, the analytical tradition within which we place this book.

In this book, of course, we cannot do more than show how three broad systems of social semiotics are interconnected at any site of social action – the interaction order, visual semiotics, and place semiotics. Research in critical discourse analysis has shown abundantly that texts themselves are among the most powerful tools for the production of social power relations. The systems of text, however, we will simply have to leave implicit in our discussion here, largely because they have been so widely studied elsewhere. We do not mean to dismiss the role of textual analysis, however; we simply mean to focus on these other three systems which have as yet not been so extensively studied and almost never in interaction with each other.

For the first of these three broad systems we use Goffman's term 'the interaction order' though, of course, we mean to include any of the research within a broad range of disciplines from social psychology and interactional sociology to communication, sociolinguistics, and conversational analysis which develops an understanding of the ways in which humans form social arrangements and produce social interactions among themselves. It is taken as central in these fields of study that discourse is a major organizing system in this interaction order

though it is important to recall Goffman's caution that we should take the interaction as primary, not the language.

For the second of these systems we use Kress and van Leeuwen's term 'visual semiotics.' Here our purpose is to focus on all of the ways in which pictures (signs, images, graphics, texts, photographs, paintings, and all of the other combinations of these and others) are produced as meaningful wholes for visual interpretation. Again, this focus would necessarily want to include art history, typography, visual design, and any other area of study or discipline which takes as its main object to understand how we produce meanings through visual artifacts. Our use of Kress and van Leeuwen's framework is studied in that we feel their framework fits well with our overall social semiotic understanding of semiotics, but we do not intend to exclude the very much wider range of work that might have been included were there more space to do so.

The term 'place semiotics' is a coinage of sorts here without intending in any way to elevate this broad set of meaning systems to any sort of theoretical prominence. All we mean to indicate here is the huge aggregation of semiotic systems which are not located in the persons of social actors or in the framed artifacts of visual semiotics. This would naturally have to include architecture, urban planning, landscape planning and analysis, highway engineering, and so many other fields of analysis as to be positively daunting. Cultural geographers are working very actively in coming to productive analyses of such 'place semiotics' and we hope here to signal an interest in bringing about some future integration of these three very broad systems of semiotics into a more comprehensive framework.

Geosemiotic systems

The three main systems of geosemiotics, then, are the interaction order, visual semiotics, and 'place' semiotics. This last system is far from a single or internally unitary system, as we have said. As we shall see in Chapters 6 through 8, there is really a continuum that runs from the semiotics of code preference in signs that use multiple codes such as street signs in bilingual communities through to the meanings that are the result of where a sign is physically placed on the ground as is the case with the stop sign positioned on a street intersection.

Image 1.04 gives a schematic diagram of how we see these three systems grouping as the main semiotic systems of any form of social action. Any and all social actions take place at some intersection of the interaction order (a conversation, a meeting, a walk with a friend in a city park or square or in a shopping mall, a single reading a newspaper in a café) of visual semiotics (the design, layout, and production of all the signs, pictures, books, newspapers, posters, and other images which are either being used by the interaction order or being ignored by

them), and place semiotics (the built environment along with the 'natural' landscape within which the action takes place). While all of these separate semiotic systems have been studied to a greater extent elsewhere (greater for the linguistic study of texts or the social psychological and interactional sociological studies of social interaction; lesser in the case of the semiotics of public squares), this book brings these factors together within the single framework of geosemiotics.

The example below will to help to make these relationships clearer at the outset though each of these areas of study will be taken up separately in the chapters which follow. We begin with the interaction order in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4 we give a necessarily selected summary of Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996, 2001) grammar of visual semiotics. Then in Chapters 6 through 9 we outline in sequence our grammar of place semiotics: the code preference system (Chapter 6), the inscription system (Chapter 7), the emplacement system (Chapter 8), and then the properties of the semiotic aggregates which are the intersections of all of these subsystems in which social action takes place (Chapter 9).

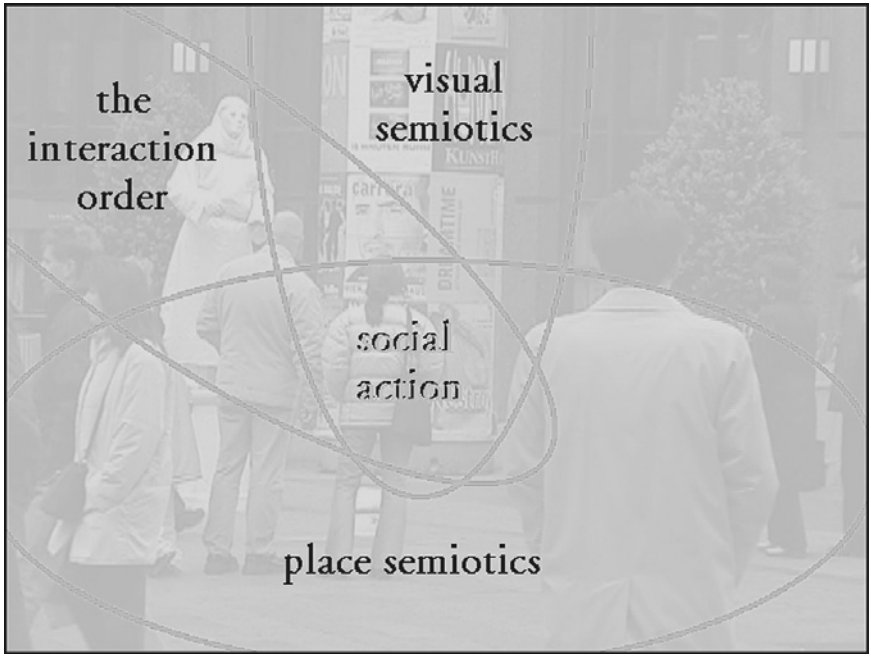
In photo 1.03 we see a corner section of the busy and elegant Stephansplatz in Vienna. Here in front of St Stephen's Cathedral are banks, fashionable shops and cafés, pedestrians and, as in this case, a street performer. Dressed as a statue, this performer stands motionless until passersby make donations in a box placed on the

1.03

ground in front of him. At that point he very slowly bows and extends a hand toward the donor. In some cases the donors will take the hand and give it a slow and solemn handshake before the 'statue' returns to his immobile position.

This small scene of social action entails all of the elements we will discuss even though there is no actual speech exchanged between the street performer and the audience. There are the social interactions both among the various people passing by and between at least some of them and the performer. There are the visual semiotics of the kiosk of posters we see to the side of the street performer which taken together form an important part of the sense of this public place. They link this place to the theater and other performances taking place currently throughout Vienna. Then there are the 'place' semiotics of the performer who teases the distinction between being part of the built environment on the one hand and being a social actor on the other. He is a social actor who embodies himself as the built environment as his performance.

The relationships among semiotic systems can be sketched as we have done in image 1.04. Of course there are many social actions going on just within the frame of this photo and many more in the proximal environment. If we just focus on the couple standing watching the performer we can say that the action (at the moment)



1.04

is just that of watching. Another photo not included here shows the man in this couple bending over to make a donation. This social action of watching is taking place within what Goffman calls a 'with' (Chapter 3). That is, it is a small group of two who are 'together' and can be seen to be together. We see another 'with' moving off toward the left and not watching the performer. On the right side is another 'with', a couple, who are reading the posters on the kiosk and in the foreground is a single who is somewhat indeterminately watching the scene which includes the two 'withs' and the performer. The performer himself together with the observers forms the unit of the interaction order that Goffman calls a 'platform event'.

The fact that we can relatively simply write about 'the couple' or 'the with' and have confidence that the reader can identify who we are writing about suggests that this structured bit of social interaction – what Goffman calls the 'interaction order' (Chapter 3) is directly indexable. That is, we can point to this bit of structured social interaction as a semiotic object in this photo. The photo consists of discernable objects – the couple watching, the couple moving off to the left, the couple looking at the kiosk, the single watching the scene in the foreground, the street performer, the kiosk, the tree, the posters which we can take pretty much at face value when we index this scene. The interaction order, then, is itself a semiotic object in the world to which we can point and about which we can talk. This is the property of being indexable which we will discuss in Chapter 2. This indexability that is provided by the configurations of social interactions within any social scene is what we mean by the interaction order aspect of geosemiotics.

Any social action must be somehow positioned within the interaction orders appropriate for the society within which it takes place as we will see in Chapter 3. It is this very complex aspect of geosemiotics with which we begin because it is the social-interactional ground on which all of our actions in the world take place.

We might use the term 'visual semiotics' to refer to any and all of the ways in which meaning is structured within our visual fields, but in this book we prefer to use the analysis provided by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen in their books *Reading Images* (1996) and *Multimodality* (2001) and restrict ourselves to the semiotic systems of framed images and pictures (graphs, charts, books, posters, photos, art works, scientific illustrations, shop signs, or advertisements). In this photo the main visual semiotics is available for interpretation on the many posters pasted on the kiosk at the center of the photo. In the same way that the street performer forms a semiotic object that we can recognize when we say 'the couple is looking at the street performer', the kiosk of posters forms a similar visual focus for attention. In the case of the couple we are looking at here, the two who are watching the street performer, the visual semiotics of the poster kiosk is being disattended. As we will discuss in Chapter 9, a crucial aspect of geosemiotics is negative in the sense that we believe we must not only account for the