



SAGE Publications

London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

in association with



REPRESENTATION

Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices

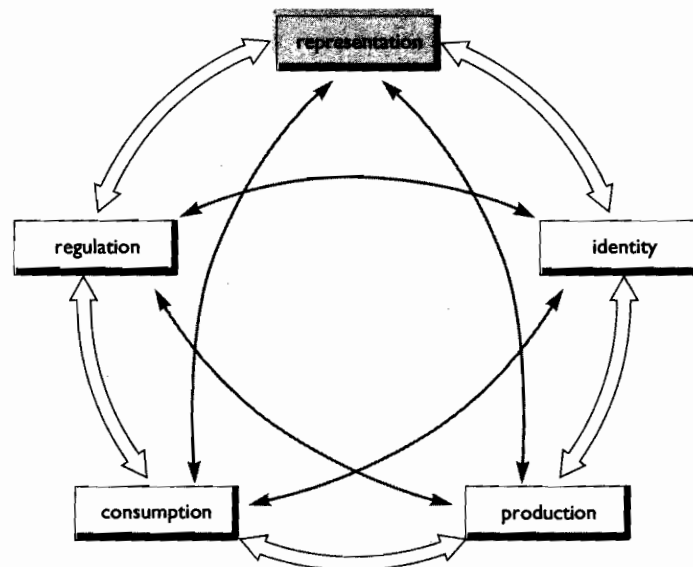
Edited by **STUART HALL**

1997

Introduction

Stuart Hall

The chapters in this volume all deal, in different ways, with the question of representation. This is one of the central practices which produce culture and a key 'moment' in what has been called the 'circuit of culture' (see **du Gay, Hall et al., 1997***). But what does representation have to do with 'culture': what is the connection between them? To put it simply, culture is about 'shared meanings'. Now, language is the privileged medium in which we 'make sense' of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged. Meanings can only be shared through our common access to language. So language is central to meaning and culture and has always been regarded as the key repository of cultural values and meanings.



The circuit of culture

But how does language construct meanings? How does it sustain the dialogue between participants which enables them to build up a culture of shared understandings and so interpret the world in roughly the same ways? Language is able to do this because it operates as a *representational system*. In language, we use signs and symbols – whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects – to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings. Language is one of the 'media' through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in a culture. Representation through language is therefore central to the processes by which meaning is produced. This is the basic, underlying idea which underpins all six chapters in this book. Each chapter examines 'the production and circulation of meaning through language' in different ways, in relation to different examples, different areas of social

* A reference in bold indicates another book, or another chapter in another book, in the series.

practice. Together, these chapters push forward and develop our understanding of how representation actually *works*.

'Culture' is one of the most difficult concepts in the human and social sciences and there are many different ways of defining it. In more traditional definitions of the term, culture is said to embody the 'best that has been thought and said' in a society. It is the sum of the great ideas, as represented in the classic works of literature, painting, music and philosophy – the 'high culture' of an age. Belonging to the same frame of reference, but more 'modern' in its associations, is the use of 'culture' to refer to the widely distributed forms of popular music, publishing, art, design and literature, or the activities of leisure-time and entertainment, which make up the everyday lives of the majority of 'ordinary people' – what is called the 'mass culture' or the 'popular culture' of an age. High culture versus popular culture was, for many years, the classic way of framing the debate about culture – the terms carrying a powerfully evaluative charge (roughly, high = good; popular = debased). In recent years, and in a more 'social science' context, the word 'culture' is used to refer to whatever is distinctive about the 'way of life' of a people, community, nation or social group. This has come to be known as the 'anthropological' definition. Alternatively, the word can be used to describe the 'shared values' of a group or of society – which is like the anthropological definition, only with a more sociological emphasis. You will find traces of all these meanings somewhere in this book. However, as its title suggests, 'culture' is usually being used in these chapters in a somewhat different, more specialized way.

What has come to be called the 'cultural turn' in the social and human sciences, especially in cultural studies and the sociology of culture, has tended to emphasize the importance of *meaning* to the definition of culture. Culture, it is argued, is not so much a set of *things* – novels and paintings or TV programmes and comics – as a process, a set of *practices*. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings – the 'giving and taking of meaning' – between the members of a society or group. To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other. Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways.

This focus on 'shared meanings' may sometimes make culture sound too unitary and too cognitive. In any culture, there is always a great diversity of meanings about any topic, and more than one way of interpreting or representing it. Also, culture is about feelings, attachments and emotions as well as concepts and ideas. The expression on my face 'says something' about who I am (identity) and what I am feeling (emotions) and what group I feel I belong to (attachment), which can be 'read' and understood by other people, even if I didn't intend deliberately to communicate anything as formal as 'a

message', and even if the other person couldn't give a very logical account of how s/he came to understand what I was 'saying'. Above all, cultural meanings are not only 'in the head'. They organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects.

The emphasis on cultural practices is important. It is participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects and events. Things 'in themselves' rarely if ever have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning. Even something as obvious as a stone can be a stone, a boundary marker or a piece of sculpture, depending on *what it means* – that is, within a certain context of use, within what the philosophers call different 'language games' (i.e. the language of boundaries, the language of sculpture, and so on). It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we *give them a meaning*. In part, we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation which we bring to them. In part, we give things meaning by how we use them, or integrate them into our everyday practices. It is our use of a pile of bricks and mortar which makes it a 'house'; and what we feel, think or say about it that makes a 'house' a 'home'. In part, we give things meaning by how we *represent* them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them. Culture, we may say, is involved in all those practices which are not simply genetically programmed into us – like the jerk of the knee when tapped – but which carry meaning and value for us, which need to be *meaningfully interpreted* by others, or which *depend on meaning* for their effective operation. Culture, in this sense, permeates all of society. It is what distinguishes the 'human' element in social life from what is simply biologically driven. Its study underlines the crucial role of the *symbolic* domain at the very heart of social life.

Where is meaning produced? Our 'circuit of culture' suggests that, in fact, meanings are produced at several different sites and circulated through several different processes or practices (the cultural circuit). Meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we 'belong' – so it is tied up with questions of how culture is used to mark out and maintain identity within and difference between groups (which is the main focus of Woodward, ed., 1997). Meaning is constantly being produced and exchanged in every personal and social interaction in which we take part. In a sense, this is the most privileged, though often the most neglected, site of culture and meaning. It is also produced in a variety of different *media*; especially, these days, in the modern mass media, the means of global communication, by complex technologies, which circulate meanings between different cultures on a scale and with a speed hitherto unknown in history. (This is the focus of du Gay, ed., 1997.) Meaning is also produced whenever we express ourselves in, make use of, consume or appropriate cultural 'things'; that is, when we incorporate them in different ways into the everyday rituals and practices of daily life and in this way give them value or

significance. Or when we weave narratives, stories – and fantasies – around them. (This is the focus of **Mackay**, ed., 1997.) Meanings also regulate and organize our conduct and practices – they help to set the rules, norms and conventions by which social life is ordered and governed. They are also, therefore, what those who wish to govern and regulate the conduct and ideas of others seek to structure and shape. (This is the focus of **Thompson**, ed., 1997.) In other words, the question of meaning arises in relation to *all* the different moments or practices in our ‘cultural circuit’ – in the construction of identity and the marking of difference, in production and consumption, as well as in the regulation of social conduct. However, in all these instances, and at all these different institutional sites, one of the privileged ‘media’ through which meaning is produced and circulated is *language*.

So, in this book, where we take up in depth the first element in our ‘circuit of culture’, we start with this question of meaning, language and representation. Members of the same culture must share sets of concepts, images and ideas which enable them to think and feel about the world, and thus to interpret the world, in roughly similar ways. They must share, broadly speaking, the same ‘cultural codes’. In this sense, thinking and feeling are themselves ‘systems of representation’, in which our concepts, images and emotions ‘stand for’ or represent, in our mental life, things which are or may be ‘out there’ in the world. Similarly, in order to *communicate* these meanings to other people, the participants to any meaningful exchange must also be able to use the same linguistic codes – they must, in a very broad sense, ‘speak the same language’. This does not mean that they must all, literally, speak German or French or Chinese. Nor does it mean that they understand perfectly what anyone who speaks the same language is saying. We mean ‘language’ here in a much wider sense. Our partners must speak enough of the same language to be able to ‘translate’ what ‘you’ say into what ‘I’ understand, and vice versa. They must also be able to read visual images in roughly similar ways. They must be familiar with broadly the same ways of producing sounds to make what they would both recognize as ‘music’. They must all interpret body language and facial expressions in broadly similar ways. And they must know how to translate their feelings and ideas into these various languages. Meaning is a dialogue – always only partially understood, always an unequal exchange.

Why do we refer to all these different ways of producing and communicating meaning as ‘languages’ or as ‘working like languages’? How do languages work? The simple answer is that languages work *through representation*. They are ‘systems of representation’. Essentially, we can say that all these practices ‘work like languages’, *not* because they are all written or spoken (they are not), but because they all use some element to stand for or represent what we want to say, to express or communicate a thought, concept, idea or feeling. Spoken language uses sounds, written language uses words, musical language uses notes on a scale, the ‘language of the body’ uses physical gesture, the fashion industry uses items of clothing, the language of facial expression uses ways of arranging one’s features, television uses digitally or

electronically produced dots on a screen, traffic lights use red, green and amber – to ‘say something’. These elements – sounds, words, notes, gestures, expressions, clothes – are part of our natural and material world; but their importance for language is not what they *are* but what they *do*, their function. They construct meaning and transmit it. They signify. They don’t have any clear meaning *in themselves*. Rather, they are the vehicles or media which *carry meaning* because they operate as *symbols*, which stand for or represent (i.e. symbolize) the meanings we wish to communicate. To use another metaphor, they function as *signs*. Signs stand for or *represent* our concepts, ideas and feelings in such a way as to enable others to ‘read’, decode or interpret their meaning in roughly the same way that we do.

Language, in this sense, is a signifying practice. Any representational system which functions in this way can be thought of as working, broadly speaking, according to the principles of representation through language. Thus photography is a representational system, using images on light-sensitive paper to communicate photographic meaning about a particular person, event or scene. Exhibition or display in a museum or gallery can also be thought of as ‘like a language’, since it uses objects on display to produce certain meanings about the subject-matter of the exhibition. Music is ‘like a language’ in so far as it uses musical notes to communicate feelings and ideas, even if these are very abstract, and do not refer in any obvious way to the ‘real world’. (Music has been called ‘the most noise conveying the least information’.) But turning up at football matches with banners and slogans, with faces and bodies painted in certain colours or inscribed with certain symbols, can also be thought of as ‘like a language’ – in so far as it is a symbolic practice which gives meaning or expression to the idea of belonging to a national culture, or identification with one’s local community. It is part of the language of national identity, a discourse of national belongingness. Representation, here, is closely tied up with both identity and knowledge. Indeed, it is difficult to know what ‘being English’, or indeed French, German, South African or Japanese, *means* outside of all the ways in which our ideas and images of national identity or national cultures have been represented. Without these ‘signifying’ systems, we could not take on such identities (or indeed reject them) and consequently could not build up or sustain that common ‘life-world’ which we call a culture.

So it is through culture and language *in this sense* that the production and circulation of meaning takes place. The conventional view used to be that ‘things’ exist in the material and natural world; that their material or natural characteristics are what determines or constitutes them; and that they have a perfectly clear meaning, *outside* of how they are represented. Representation, in this view, is a process of secondary importance, which enters into the field only after things have been fully formed and their meaning constituted. But since the ‘cultural turn’ in the human and social sciences, meaning is thought to be *produced* – constructed – rather than simply ‘found’. Consequently, in what has come to be called a ‘social constructionist approach’, representation is conceived as entering into the very constitution of things; and thus culture

is conceptualized as a primary or 'constitutive' process, as important as the economic or material 'base' in shaping social subjects and historical events – not merely a reflection of the world after the event.

'Language' therefore provides one general model of how culture and representation work, especially in what has come to be known as the *semiotic* approach – *semiotics* being the study or 'science of signs' and their general role as vehicles of meaning in culture. In more recent years, this preoccupation with meaning has taken a different turn, being more concerned, not with the detail of how 'language' works, but with the broader role of *discourse* in culture. Discourses are ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or *formation*) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society. These *discursive formations*, as they are known, define what is and is not appropriate in our formulation of, and our practices in relation to, a particular subject or site of social activity; what knowledge is considered useful, relevant and 'true' in that context; and what sorts of persons or 'subjects' embody its characteristics. 'Discursive' has become the general term used to refer to any approach in which meaning, representation and culture are considered to be constitutive.

There are some similarities, but also some major differences, between the *semiotic* and the *discursive* approaches, which are developed in the chapters which follow. One important difference is that the *semiotic* approach is concerned with the *how* of representation, with how language produces meaning – what has been called its 'poetics'; whereas the *discursive* approach is more concerned with the *effects and consequences* of representation – its 'politics'. It examines not only how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practised and studied. The emphasis in the *discursive* approach is always on the historical specificity of a particular form or 'regime' of representation: not on 'language' as a general concern, but on specific *languages* or meanings, and how they are deployed at particular times, in particular places. It points us towards greater historical specificity – the way representational practices operate in concrete historical situations, in actual practice.

The general use of language and discourse as models of how culture, meaning and representation work, and the 'discursive turn' in the social and cultural sciences which has followed, is one of the most significant shifts of direction in our knowledge of society which has occurred in recent years. The discussion around these two versions of 'constructionism' – the *semiotic* and *discursive* approaches – is threaded through and developed in the six chapters which follow. The 'discursive turn' has not, of course, gone uncontested. You will find questions raised about this approach and critiques offered, as well as different variants of the position explored, by the different

authors in this volume. Elsewhere in this series (in **Mackay**, ed., 1997, for example) alternative approaches are explored, which adopt a more 'creative', expressive or performative approach to meaning, questioning, for example, whether it makes sense to think of music as 'working like a language'. However, by and large, with some variations, the chapters in this book adopt a broadly 'constructionist' approach to representation and meaning.

In Chapter 1 on 'The work of representation', Stuart Hall fills out in greater depth the theoretical argument about meaning, language and representation briefly summarized here. What do we mean by saying that 'meaning is produced through language'? Using a range of examples – which it is important to work through for yourself – the chapter takes us through the argument of exactly what this entails. Do things – objects, people, events in the world – carry their own, one, true meaning, fixed like number plates on their backs, which it is the task of language to reflect accurately? Or are meanings constantly shifting as we move from one culture to another, one language to another, one historical context, one community, group or sub-culture, to another? Is it through our systems of representation, rather than 'in the world', that meaning is fixed? It is clear that representation is neither as simple nor transparent a practice as it first appears and that, in order to unpack the idea, we need to do some work on a range of examples, and bring to bear certain concepts and theories, in order to explore and clarify its complexities.

The question – 'Does visual language reflect a truth about the world which is already there or does it produce meanings about the world through representing it?' – forms the basis of Chapter 2, 'Representing the social: France and Frenchness in post-war humanist photography' by Peter Hamilton. Hamilton examines the work of a group of documentary photographers in France in the fifteen years following World War II, all of whom, he argues, adopted the representational approach, subject-matter, values and aesthetic forms of a particular practice – what he calls the 'humanist paradigm' – in French photography. This distinctive body of work produced a very specific image and definition of 'what it meant to be French' in this period, and thus helped to give a particular meaning to the idea of belonging to French culture and to 'Frenchness' as a national identity. What, then, is the status, the 'truth-claims', which these documentary photographic images are making? What are they 'documenting'? Are they to be judged by the authenticity of their representation or by the depth and subtlety of the feelings which the photographers put into their images? Do they reflect 'the truth' about French society at that time – or was there more than one kind of truth, more than one kind of 'Frenchness', depending on how it was represented? How did the image of France which emerges from this work relate to the rapid social changes sweeping through France in that period and to our (very different?) image of 'Frenchness' today?

Chapter 3, 'The poetics and the politics of exhibiting other cultures' by Henrietta Lidchi, takes up some of the same questions about representation, but in relation to a different subject-matter and a different set of signifying

practices. Whereas Chapter 2 deals with the practice of photography – the production of meaning through images – Chapter 3 deals with exhibition – the production of meaning through the display of objects and artefacts from ‘other cultures’ within the context of the modern museum. Here, the elements exhibited are often ‘things’ rather than ‘words or images’ and the signifying practice involved is that of arrangement and display within a physical space, rather than layout on the page of an illustrated magazine or journal. Nevertheless, as this chapter argues, exhibition too is a ‘system’ or ‘practice of representation’ – and therefore works ‘like a language’. Every choice – to show this rather than that, to show this in relation to that, to say this about that – is a choice about how to represent ‘other cultures’; and each choice has consequences both for *what* meanings are produced and for *how* meaning is produced. Henrietta Lidchi shows how those meanings are inevitably implicated in relations of *power* – especially between those who are doing the exhibiting and those who are being exhibited.

The introduction of questions of power into the argument about representation is one of the ways in which the book consistently seeks to probe, expand and complexify our understanding of the process of representation. In Chapter 4, ‘The spectacle of the “Other”’, Stuart Hall takes up this theme of ‘representing difference’ from Chapter 3, but now in the context of more contemporary popular cultural forms (news photos, advertising, film and popular illustration). It looks at how ‘racial’, ethnic and sexual difference has been ‘represented’ in a range of visual examples across a number of historical archives. Central questions about how ‘difference’ is represented as ‘Other’, and the essentializing of ‘difference’ through stereotyping are addressed. However, as the argument develops, the chapter takes up the wider question of how signifying practices actually structure the way we ‘look’ – how different modes of ‘looking’ are being inscribed by these representational practices; and how violence, fantasy and ‘desire’ also play into representational practices, making them much more complex and their meanings more ambivalent. The chapter ends by considering some counter-strategies in the ‘politics of representation’ – the way meaning can be struggled over, and whether a particular regime of representation can be challenged, contested and transformed.

The question of how the spectator or the consumer is drawn into and implicated by certain practices of representation returns in Sean Nixon’s Chapter 5, ‘Exhibiting masculinity’, on the construction of new gendered identities in contemporary advertising, magazines and consumer industries addressed especially to men. Nixon asks whether representational practices in the media in recent years, have been constructing new ‘masculine identities’. Are the different languages of consumer culture, retailing and display developing new ‘subject-positions’, with which young men are increasingly invited to identify? And, if so, what do these images tell us about how the meanings of masculinity are shifting in late-modern visual culture? ‘Masculinity’, Nixon argues, far from being fixed and given biologically, accretes a variety of different meanings – different ways of ‘being’

or 'becoming masculine' – in different historical contexts. To address these questions, Nixon not only expands and applies some of the theoretical perspectives from earlier chapters, but adds new ones, including a psychoanalytically informed cultural analysis and film theory.

In the final Chapter 6, 'Genre and gender: the case of soap opera', Christine Gledhill takes us into the rich, narrative world of popular culture and its genres, with an examination of how representation is working in television soap opera. These are enormously popular sources of fictional narrative in modern life, circulating meanings throughout popular culture – and increasingly worldwide – which have been traditionally defined as 'feminine' in their appeal, reference and mode of operation. Gledhill unpacks the way this gendered identification of a TV genre has been constructed. She considers how and why such a 'space of representation' should have opened up within popular culture; how genre and gender elements interact in the narrative structures and representational forms; and how these popular forms have been ideologically shaped and inflected. She examines how the meanings circulated in soap operas – so frequently dismissed as stereotypical and manufactured – nevertheless enter into the discursive arena where the meaning of masculine and feminine identifications are being contested and transformed.

The book uses a wide range of examples from different cultural media and discourses, mainly concentrating on *visual* language. These examples are a key part of your work on the book – they are not simply 'illustrative'. Representation can only be properly analysed in relation to the actual concrete forms which meaning assumes, in the concrete practices of signifying, 'reading' and interpretation; and these require analysis of the actual signs, symbols, figures, images, narratives, words and sounds – the material forms – in which symbolic meaning is circulated. The examples provide an opportunity to practise these skills of analysis and to apply them to many other similar instances which surround us in daily cultural life.

It is worth emphasizing that there is no single or 'correct' answer to the question, 'What does this image mean?' or 'What is this ad saying?' Since there is no law which can guarantee that things will have 'one, true meaning', or that meanings won't change over time, work in this area is bound to be interpretative – a debate between, not who is 'right' and who is 'wrong', but between equally plausible, though sometimes competing and contested, meanings and interpretations. The best way to 'settle' such contested readings is to look again at the concrete example and to try to justify one's 'reading' in detail in relation to the actual practices and forms of signification used, and what meanings they seem to you to be producing.

One soon discovers that meaning is not straightforward or transparent, and does not survive intact the passage through representation. It is a slippery customer, changing and shifting with context, usage and historical circumstances. It is therefore never finally fixed. It is always putting off or 'deferring' its rendezvous with Absolute Truth. It is always being negotiated

and inflected, to resonate with new situations. It is often contested, and sometimes bitterly fought over. There are always different circuits of meaning circulating in any culture at the same time, overlapping discursive formations, from which we draw to create meaning or to express what we think.

Moreover, we do not have a straightforward, rational or instrumental relationship to meanings. They mobilize powerful feelings and emotions, of both a positive and negative kind. We feel their contradictory pull, their ambivalence. They sometimes call our very identities into question. We struggle over them because they matter – and these are contests from which serious consequences can flow. They define what is ‘normal’, who belongs – and therefore, who is excluded. They are deeply inscribed in relations of power. Think of how profoundly our lives are shaped, depending on which meanings of male/female, black/white, rich/poor, gay/straight, young/old, citizen/alien, are in play in which circumstances. Meanings are often organized into sharply opposed binaries or opposites. However, these binaries are constantly being undermined, as representations interact with one another, substituting for each other, displacing one another along an unending chain. Our material interests and our bodies can be called to account, and differently implicated, depending on how meaning is given and taken, constructed and interpreted in different situations. But equally engaged are our fears and fantasies, the sentiments of desire and revulsion, of ambivalence and aggression. The more we look into this process of representation, the more complex it becomes to describe adequately or explain – which is why the various chapters enlist a variety of theories and concepts, to help us unlock its secrets.

The embodying of concepts, ideas and emotions in a symbolic form which can be transmitted and meaningfully interpreted is what we mean by ‘the practices of representation’. Meaning must enter the domain of these practices, if it is to circulate effectively within a culture. And it cannot be considered to have completed its ‘passage’ around the cultural circuit until it has been ‘decoded’ or intelligibly received at another point in the chain. Language, then, is the property of neither the sender nor the receiver of meanings. It is the shared cultural ‘space’ in which the production of meaning through language – that is, representation – takes place. The receiver of messages and meanings is not a passive screen on which the original meaning is accurately and transparently projected. The ‘taking of meaning’ is as much a signifying practice as the ‘putting into meaning’. Speaker and hearer or writer and reader are active participants in a process which – since they often exchange roles – is always double-sided, always interactive. Representation functions less like the model of a one-way transmitter and more like the model of a dialogue – it is, as they say, *dialogic*. What sustains this ‘dialogue’ is the presence of shared cultural codes, which cannot guarantee that meanings will remain stable forever – though attempting to fix meaning is exactly why *power* intervenes in *discourse*. But, even when power *is* circulating through meaning and knowledge, the codes

only work if they are to some degree shared, at least to the extent that they make effective 'translation' between 'speakers' possible. We should perhaps learn to think of meaning less in terms of 'accuracy' and 'truth' and more in terms of effective exchange – a process of *translation*, which facilitates cultural communication while always recognizing the persistence of difference and power between different 'speakers' within the same cultural circuit.

References

- DU GAY, P. (ed.) (1997) *Production of Culture/Cultures of Production*, London, Sage/The Open University (Book 4 in this series).
- DU GAY, P., HALL, S., JAMES, L., MACKAY, H. and NEGUS, K. (1997) *Doing Cultural Studies: the story of the Sony Walkman*, London, Sage/The Open University (Book 1 in this series).
- HALL, S. (ed.) (1977) *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*, London, Sage/The Open University (Book 2 in this series).
- MACKAY, H. (ed.) (1997) *Consumption and Everyday Life*, London, Sage/The Open University (Book 5 in this series).
- THOMPSON, K. (ed.) (1997) *Media and Cultural Regulation*, London, Sage/The Open University (Book 6 in this series).
- WOODWARD, K. (ed.) (1997) *Identity and Difference*, London, Sage/The Open University (Book 3 in this series).

REFERENCES	63
READINGS FOR CHAPTER ONE	
READING A:	
Norman Bryson, 'Language, reflection and still life'	65
READING B:	
Roland Barthes, 'The world of wrestling'	66
READING C:	
Roland Barthes, 'Myth today'	68
READING D:	
Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the image'	69
READING E:	
Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, 'New reflections on the revolution of our time'	70
READING F:	
Elaine Showalter, 'The performance of hysteria'	71

I Representation, meaning and language

In this chapter we will be concentrating on one of the key processes in the 'cultural circuit' (see du Gay, Hall et al., 1997, and the Introduction to this volume) – the practices of *representation*. The aim of this chapter is to introduce you to this topic, and to explain what it is about and why we give it such importance in cultural studies.

The concept of representation has come to occupy a new and important place in the study of culture. Representation connects meaning and language to culture. But what exactly do people mean by it? What does representation have to do with culture and meaning? One common-sense usage of the term is as follows: 'Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people.' You may well ask, 'Is that all?' Well, yes and no. Representation *is* an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It *does* involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things. But this is a far from simple or straightforward process, as you will soon discover.

How does the concept of representation connect meaning and language to culture? In order to explore this connection further, we will look at a number of different theories about how language is used to represent the world. Here we will be drawing a distinction between three different accounts or theories: the *reflective*, the *intentional* and the *constructionist* approaches to representation. Does language simply reflect a meaning which already exists out there in the world of objects, people and events (*reflective*)? Does language express only what the speaker or writer or painter wants to say, his or her personally intended meaning (*intentional*)? Or is meaning constructed in and through language (*constructionist*)? You will learn more in a moment about these three approaches.

Most of the chapter will be spent exploring the *constructionist* approach, because it is this perspective which has had the most significant impact on cultural studies in recent years. This chapter chooses to examine two major variants or models of the constructionist approach – the *semiotic* approach, greatly influenced by the great Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, and the *discursive* approach, associated with the French philosopher and historian, Michel Foucault. Later chapters in this book will take up these two theories again, among others, so you will have an opportunity to consolidate your understanding of them, and to apply them to different areas of analysis. Other chapters will introduce theoretical paradigms which apply constructionist approaches in different ways to that of semiotics and Foucault. All, however, put in question the very nature of representation. We turn to this question first.

1.1 Making meaning, representing things

What does the word **representation** really mean, in this context? What does the process of representation involve? How does representation work?

representation

To put it briefly, representation is the production of meaning through language. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* suggests two relevant meanings for the word:

- 1 To represent something is to describe or depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination; to place a likeness of it before us in our mind or in the senses; as, for example, in the sentence, 'This picture represents the murder of Abel by Cain.'
- 2 To represent also means to symbolize, stand for, to be a specimen of, or to substitute for; as in the sentence, 'In Christianity, the cross represents the suffering and crucifixion of Christ.'

The figures in the painting *stand in the place of*, and at the same time, *stand for* the story of Cain and Abel. Likewise, the cross simply consists of two wooden planks nailed together; but in the context of Christian belief and teaching, it takes on, symbolizes or comes to stand for a wider set of meanings about the crucifixion of the Son of God, and this is a concept we can put into words and pictures.

ACTIVITY 1

Here is a simple exercise about representation. Look at any familiar object in the room. You will immediately recognize what it is. But how do you *know* what the object is? What does 'recognize' mean?

Now try to make yourself conscious of what you are doing – observe what is going on as you do it. You recognize what it is because your thought-processes decode your visual perception of the object in terms of a concept of it which you have in your head. This must be so because, if you look away from the object, you can still *think* about it by conjuring it up, as we say, 'in your mind's eye'. Go on – try to follow the process as it happens: There is the object ... and there is the concept in your head which tells you what it is, what your visual image of it *means*.

Now, tell me what it is. Say it aloud: 'It's a lamp' – or a table or a book or the phone or whatever. The concept of the object has passed through your mental representation of it to me *via* the word for it which you have just used. The word stands for or represents the concept, and can be used to reference or designate either a 'real' object in the world or indeed even some imaginary object, like angels dancing on the head of a pin, which no one has ever actually seen.

This is how you give meaning to things through language. This is how you 'make sense of' the world of people, objects and events, and how you are able to express a complex thought about those things to other people, or

communicate about them through language in ways which other people are able to understand.

Why do we have to go through this complex process to represent our thoughts? If you put down a glass you are holding and walk out of the room, you can still *think* about the glass, even though it is no longer physically there. Actually, you can't think with a glass. You can only think with *the concept* of the glass. As the linguists are fond of saying, 'Dogs bark. But the concept of "dog" cannot bark or bite.' You can't speak with the actual glass, either. You can only speak with the *word* for glass – GLASS – which is the linguistic sign which we use in English to refer to objects which you drink water out of. This is where *representation* comes in. Representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to *refer to* either the 'real' world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events.

So there are *two* processes, two **systems of representation**, involved. First, there is the 'system' by which all sorts of objects, people and events are correlated with a set of concepts or *mental representations* which we carry around in our heads. Without them, we could not interpret the world meaningfully at all. In the first place, then, meaning depends on the system of concepts and images formed in our thoughts which can stand for or 'represent' the world, enabling us to refer to things both inside and outside our heads.

Before we move on to look at the second 'system of representation', we should observe that what we have just said is a very simple version of a rather complex process. It is simple enough to see how we might form concepts for things we can perceive – people or material objects, like chairs, tables and desks. But we also form concepts of rather obscure and abstract things, which we can't in any simple way see, feel or touch. Think, for example, of our concepts of war, or death, or friendship or love. And, as we have remarked, we also form concepts about things we never have seen, and possibly can't or won't ever see, and about people and places we have plainly made up. We may have a clear concept of, say, angels, mermaids, God, the Devil, or of Heaven and Hell, or of Middlemarch (the fictional provincial town in George Eliot's novel), or Elizabeth (the heroine of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*).

We have called this a '*system* of representation'. That is because it consists, not of individual concepts, but of different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts, and of establishing complex relations between them. For example, we use the principles of similarity and difference to establish relationships between concepts or to distinguish them from one another. Thus I have an idea that in some respects birds are like planes in the sky, based on the fact that they are similar because they both fly – but I also have an idea that in other respects they are different, because one is part of nature whilst the other is man-made. This mixing and matching of

stems of
presentation

relations between concepts to form complex ideas and thoughts is possible because our concepts are arranged into different classifying systems. In this example, the first is based on a distinction between flying/not flying and the second is based on the distinction between natural/man-made. There are other principles of organization like this at work in all conceptual systems: for example, classifying according to sequence – which concept follows which – or causality – what causes what – and so on. The point here is that we are talking about, not just a random collection of concepts, but concepts organized, arranged and classified into complex relations with one another. That is what our conceptual system actually is like. However, this does not undermine the basic point. Meaning depends on the relationship between things in the world – people, objects and events, real or fictional – and the conceptual system, which can operate as *mental representations* of them.

Now it could be the case that the conceptual map which I carry around in my head is totally different from yours, in which case you and I would interpret or make sense of the world in totally different ways. We would be incapable of sharing our thoughts or expressing ideas about the world to each other. In fact, each of us probably does understand and interpret the world in a unique and individual way. However, we are able to communicate because we share broadly the same conceptual maps and thus make sense of or interpret the world in roughly similar ways. That is indeed what it means when we say we 'belong to the same culture'. Because we interpret the world in roughly similar ways, we are able to build up a shared culture of meanings and thus construct a social world which we inhabit together. That is why 'culture' is sometimes defined in terms of 'shared meanings or shared conceptual maps' (see du Gay, Hall et al., 1997).

However, a shared conceptual map is not enough. We must also be able to represent or exchange meanings and concepts, and we can only do that when we also have access to a shared language. Language is therefore the second system of representation involved in the overall process of constructing meaning. Our shared conceptual map must be translated into a common language, so that we can correlate our concepts and ideas with certain written words, spoken sounds or visual images. The general term we use for words, sounds or images which carry meaning is *signs*. These signs stand for or represent the concepts and the conceptual relations between them which we carry around in our heads and together they make up the meaning-systems of our culture.

Signs are organized into languages and it is the existence of common languages which enable us to translate our thoughts (concepts) into words, sounds or images, and then to use these, operating as a language, to express meanings and communicate thoughts to other people. Remember that the term 'language' is being used here in a very broad and inclusive way. The writing system or the spoken system of a particular language are both obviously 'languages'. But so are visual images, whether produced by hand, mechanical, electronic, digital or some other means, when they are used to express meaning. And so are other things which aren't 'linguistic' in any

ordinary sense: the 'language' of facial expressions or of gesture, for example, or the 'language' of fashion, of clothes, or of traffic lights. Even music is a 'language', with complex relations between different sounds and chords, though it is a very special case since it can't easily be used to reference actual things or objects in the world (a point further elaborated in du Gay, ed., 1997, and Mackay, ed., 1997). Any sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign, and is organized with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning is, from this point of view, 'a language'. It is in this sense that the model of meaning which I have been analysing here is often described as a 'linguistic' one; and that all the theories of meaning which follow this basic model are described as belonging to 'the linguistic turn' in the social sciences and cultural studies.

At the heart of the meaning process in culture, then, are two related 'systems of representation'. The first enables us to give meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences or a chain of equivalences between things – people, objects, events, abstract ideas, etc. – and our system of concepts, our conceptual maps. The second depends on constructing a set of correspondences between our conceptual map and a set of signs, arranged or organized into various languages which stand for or represent those concepts. The relation between 'things', concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call 'representation'.

1.2 Language and representation

Just as people who belong to the same culture must share a broadly similar conceptual map, so they must also share the same way of interpreting the signs of a language, for only in this way can meanings be effectively exchanged between people. But how do we know which concept stands for which thing? Or which word effectively represents which concept? How do I know which sounds or images will carry, through language, the meaning of my concepts and what I want to say with them to you? This may seem relatively simple in the case of visual signs, because the drawing, painting, camera or TV image of a sheep bears a resemblance to the animal with a woolly coat grazing in a field to which I want to refer. Even so, we need to remind ourselves that a drawn or painted or digital version of a sheep is not exactly like a 'real' sheep. For one thing, most images are in two dimensions whereas the 'real' sheep exists in three dimensions.

Visual signs and images, even when they bear a close resemblance to the things to which they refer, are still signs: they carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted. In order to interpret them, we must have access to the two systems of representation discussed earlier: to a conceptual map which correlates the sheep in the field with the concept of a 'sheep'; and a language system which in visual language, bears some resemblance to the real thing or 'looks like it' in some way. This argument is clearest if we think of a cartoon drawing or an abstract painting of a 'sheep', where we need a very

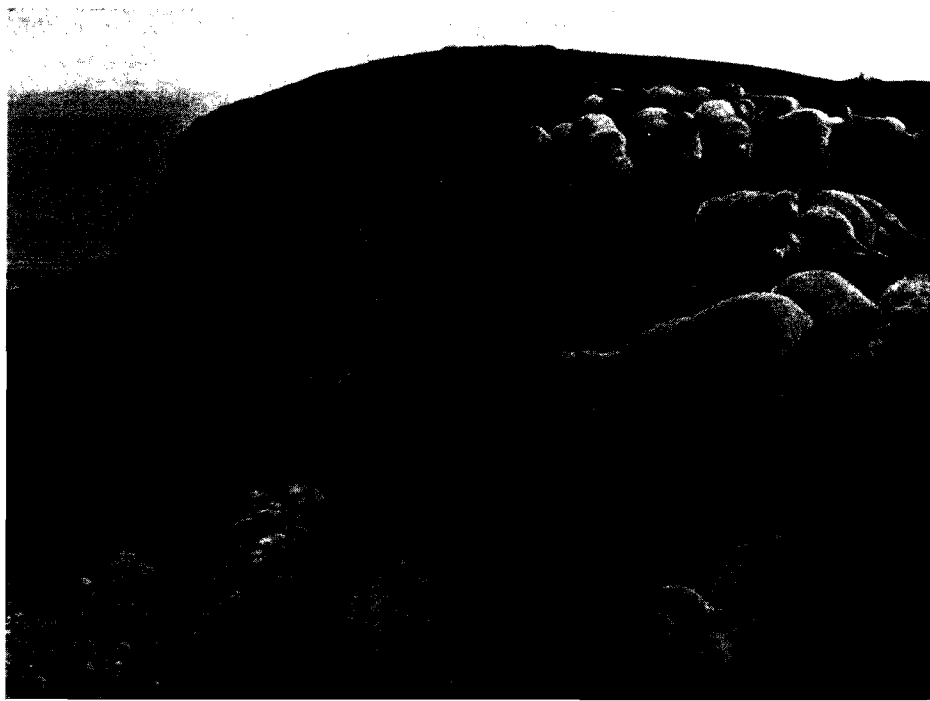


FIGURE 1.1
William Holman
Hunt, *Our English
Coasts ('Strayed
Sheep')*, 1852.

sophisticated conceptual and shared linguistic system to be certain that we are all 'reading' the sign in the same way. Even then we may find ourselves wondering whether it really is a picture of a sheep at all. As the relationship between the sign and its referent becomes less clear-cut, the meaning begins to slip and slide away from us into uncertainty. Meaning is no longer transparently passing from one person to another ...

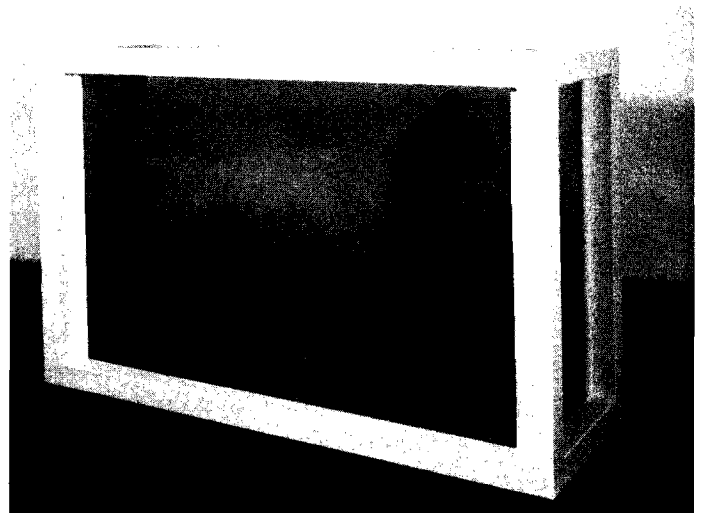
So, even in the case of visual language, where the relationship between the concept and the sign seems fairly straightforward, the matter is far from simple. It is even more difficult with written or spoken language, where words don't look or sound anything like the things to which they refer. In part, this is because there are different kinds of signs. Visual signs are what are called *iconic* signs. That is, they bear, in their form, a certain resemblance to the object, person or event to which they refer. A photograph of a tree reproduces some of the actual conditions of our visual perception in the visual sign. Written or spoken signs, on the other hand, are what is called *indexical*.

FIGURE 1.2

Q: When is a sheep not a sheep?

A: When it's a work of art.

(Damien Hirst, *Away from the Flock*, 1994).



They bear no obvious relationship at all to the things to which they refer. The letters T,R,E,E, do not look anything like trees in Nature, nor does the word 'tree' in English sound like 'real' trees (if indeed they make any sound at all!). The relationship in these systems of representation between the sign, the concept and the object to which they might be used to refer is entirely *arbitrary*. By 'arbitrary' we mean that in principle any collection of letters or any sound in any order would do the trick equally well. Trees would not mind if we used the word SEERT – 'trees' written backwards – to represent the concept of them. This is clear from the fact that, in French, quite different letters and a quite different sound is used to refer to what, to all appearances, is the same thing – a 'real' tree – and, as far as we can tell, to the same concept – a large plant that grows in nature. The French and English seem to be using the same concept. But the concept which in English is represented by the word, TREE, is represented in French by the word, ARBRE.

1.3 Sharing the codes

The question, then, is: how do people who belong to the same culture, who share the same conceptual map and who speak or write the same language (English) know that the arbitrary combination of letters and sounds that makes up the word, TREE, will stand for or represent the concept 'a large plant that grows in nature'? One possibility would be that the objects in the world themselves embody and fix in some way their 'true' meaning. But it is not at all clear that real trees *know* that they are trees, and even less clear that they know that the word in English which represents the concept of themselves is written TREE whereas in French it is written ARBRE! As far as they are concerned, it could just as well be written COW or VACHE or indeed XYZ. The meaning is *not* in the object or person or thing, nor is it *in* the word. It is we who fix the meaning so firmly that, after a while, it comes to seem natural and inevitable. The meaning is *constructed by the system of representation*. It is constructed and fixed by the *code*, which sets up the correlation between our conceptual system and our language system in such a way that, every time we think of a tree, the code tells us to use the English word TREE, or the French word ARBRE. The code tells us that, in our culture – that is, in our conceptual and language codes – the concept 'tree' is represented by the letters T,R,E,E, arranged in a certain sequence, just as in Morse code, the sign for V (which in World War II Churchill made 'stand for' or represent 'Victory') is Dot, Dot, Dot, Dash, and in the 'language of traffic lights', Green = Go! and Red = Stop!

One way of thinking about 'culture', then, is in terms of these shared conceptual maps, shared language systems and the *codes which govern the relationships of translation between them*. Codes fix the relationships between concepts and signs. They stabilize meaning within different languages and cultures. They tell us which language to use to convey which idea. The reverse is also true. Codes tell us which concepts are being referred to when we hear or read which signs. By arbitrarily fixing the relationships

between our conceptual system and our linguistic systems (remember, 'linguistic' in a broad sense), codes make it possible for us to speak and to hear intelligibly, and establish the translatability between our concepts and our languages which enables meaning to pass from speaker to hearer and be effectively communicated within a culture. This translatability is not given by nature or fixed by the gods. It is the result of a set of social conventions. It is fixed socially, fixed in culture. English or French or Hindi speakers have, over time, and without conscious decision or choice, come to an unwritten agreement, a sort of unwritten cultural covenant that, in their various languages, certain signs will stand for or represent certain concepts. This is what children learn, and how they become, not simply biological individuals but cultural subjects. They learn the system and conventions of representation, the codes of their language and culture, which equip them with cultural 'know-how' enabling them to function as culturally competent subjects. Not because such knowledge is imprinted in their genes, but because they learn its conventions and so gradually *become* 'cultured persons' – i.e. members of their culture. They unconsciously internalize the codes which allow them to express certain concepts and ideas through their systems of representation – writing, speech, gesture, visualization, and so on – and to interpret ideas which are communicated to them using the same systems.

You may find it easier to understand, now, why meaning, language and representation are such critical elements in the study of culture. To belong to a culture is to belong to roughly the same conceptual and linguistic universe, to know how concepts and ideas translate into different languages, and how language can be interpreted to refer to or *reference* the world. To share these things is to see the world from within the same conceptual map and to make sense of it through the same language systems. Early anthropologists of language, like Sapir and Whorf, took this insight to its logical extreme when they argued that we are all, as it were, locked into our cultural perspectives or 'mind-sets', and that language is the best clue we have to that conceptual universe. This observation, when applied to all human cultures, lies at the root of what, today, we may think of as cultural or linguistic *relativism*.

ACTIVITY 2

You might like to think further about this question of how different cultures conceptually classify the world and what implications this has for meaning and representation.

The English make a rather simple distinction between sleet and snow. The Inuit (Eskimos) who have to survive in a very different, more extreme and hostile climate, apparently have many more words for snow and snowy weather. Consider the list of Inuit terms for snow from the Scott Polar Research Institute in Table 1.1. There are many more than in English, making much finer and more complex distinctions. The Inuit have a complex classificatory conceptual system for the weather compared with the English. The novelist Peter Hoeg, for example, writing

about Greenland in his novel, *Miss Smilla's Feeling For Snow* (1994, pp. 5–6), graphically describes ‘frazzil ice’ which is ‘kneaded together into a soapy mash called porridge ice, which gradually forms free-floating plates, pancake ice, which one, cold, noonday hour, on a Sunday, freezes into a single solid sheet’. Such distinctions are too fine and elaborate even for the English who are always talking about the weather! The question, however, is – do the Inuit actually experience snow differently from the English? Their language system suggests they conceptualize the weather differently. But how far is our experience actually bounded by our linguistic and conceptual universe?

Table 1.1 Inuit terms for snow and ice

snow		ice	siku
blowing —	piqtuluk	— pan, broken —	siqumniq
is snowstorming	piqtuluktuq	— ice water	immiugaq
falling —	qanik	melts — to make water	immiuqtuaq
— is falling; — is snowing	qaniktuq	candle —	illauyiniq
light falling —	qaniaraq	flat —	qairmiq
light — is falling	qaniaraqtuq	glare —	quasaq
first layer of — in fall	apilraun	piled —	ivunrit
deep soft —	mauya	rough —	ivvuit
packed — to make water	aniu	shore —	tugiu
light soft —	aquluraq	shorefast —	tuvaq
sugar —	pukak	slush —	quna
waterlogged, mushy —	masak	young —	sikuliaq
— is turning into <i>masak</i>	masaguqtuaq		
watery —	maqayak		
wet —	misak		
wet falling —	qanikkuk		
wet — is falling	qanikkuktuq		
— drifting along a surface	naturuvik		
— is drifting along a surface	naturuviktuq		
— lying on a surface	apun		
snowflake	qanik		
is being drifted over with —	apiyuaq		

One implication of this argument about cultural codes is that, if meaning is the result, not of something fixed out there, in nature, but of our social, cultural and linguistic conventions, then meaning can never be *finally* fixed. We can all ‘agree’ to allow words to carry somewhat different meanings – as we have for example, with the word ‘gay’, or the use, by young people, of the word ‘wicked!’ as a term of approval. Of course, there must be *some* fixing of

meaning in language, or we would never be able to understand one another. We can't get up one morning and suddenly decide to represent the concept of a 'tree' with the letters or the word VYXZ, and expect people to follow what we are saying. On the other hand, there is no absolute or final fixing of meaning. Social and linguistic conventions do change over time. In the language of modern managerialism, what we used to call 'students', 'clients', 'patients' and 'passengers' have all become 'customers'. Linguistic codes vary significantly between one language and another. Many cultures do not have words for concepts which are normal and widely acceptable to us. Words constantly go out of common usage, and new phrases are coined: think, for example, of the use of 'down-sizing' to represent the process of firms laying people off work. Even when the actual words remain stable, their connotations shift or they acquire a different nuance. The problem is especially acute in translation. For example, does the difference in English between *know* and *understand* correspond exactly to and capture exactly the same conceptual distinction as the French make between *savoir* and *connaître*? Perhaps; but can we be sure?

The main point is that meaning does not inhere *in* things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is the result of a signifying practice – a practice that *produces* meaning, that *makes things mean*.

1.4 Theories of representation

There are broadly speaking three approaches to explaining how representation of meaning through language works. We may call these the reflective, the intentional and the constructionist or constructivist approaches. You might think of each as an attempt to answer the questions, 'where do meanings come from?' and 'how can we tell the "true" meaning of a word or image?'

In the **reflective approach**, meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world, and language functions like a mirror, to *reflect* the true meaning as it already exists in the world. As the poet Gertrude Stein once said, 'A rose is a rose is a rose'. In the fourth century BC, the Greeks used the notion of *mimesis* to explain how language, even drawing and painting, mirrored or imitated Nature; they thought of Homer's great poem, *The Iliad*, as 'imitating' a heroic series of events. So the theory which says that language works by simply reflecting or imitating the truth that is already there and fixed in the world, is sometimes called 'mimetic'.

reflective or
mimetic approach

Of course there is a certain obvious truth to mimetic theories of representation and language. As we've pointed out, visual signs do bear some relationship to the shape and texture of the objects which they represent. But, as was also pointed out earlier, a two-dimensional visual image of a *rose* is a sign – it should not be confused with the real plant with thorns and blooms growing in the garden. Remember also that there are many words, sounds and images which we fully well understand but which are entirely fictional or fantasy and refer to worlds which are wholly imaginary – including, many people now

think, most of *The Iliad*! Of course, I can use the word 'rose' to *refer* to real, actual plants growing in a garden, as we have said before. But this is because I know the code which links the concept with a particular word or image. I cannot *think* or *speak* or *draw* with an actual rose. And if someone says to me that there is no such word as 'rose' for a plant in her culture, the actual plant in the garden cannot resolve the failure of communication between us. Within the conventions of the different language codes we are using, we are both right – and for us to understand each other, one of us must learn the code linking the flower with the word for it in the other's culture.

The second approach to meaning in representation argues the opposite case. It holds that it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language. Words mean what the author intends they should mean. This is the **intentional approach**. Again, there is some point to this argument since we all, as individuals, do use language to convey or communicate things which are special or unique to us, to our way of seeing the world. However, as a general theory of representation through language, the intentional approach is also flawed. We cannot be the sole or unique source of meanings in language, since that would mean that we could express ourselves in entirely private languages. But the essence of language is communication and that, in turn, depends on shared linguistic conventions and shared codes. Language can never be wholly a private game. Our private intended meanings, however personal to us, have to *enter into the rules, codes and conventions of language* to be shared and understood. Language is a social system through and through. This means that our private thoughts have to negotiate with all the other meanings for words or images which have been stored in language which our use of the language system will inevitably trigger into action.

The third approach recognizes this public, social character of language. It acknowledges that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language. Things don't *mean*; we *construct* meaning, using representational systems – concepts and signs. Hence it is called the constructivist or **constructionist approach** to meaning in language. According to this approach, we must not confuse the *material* world, where things and people exist, and the *symbolic* practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate. Constructivists do not deny the existence of the material world. However, it is not the material world which conveys meaning; it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts. It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others.

Of course, signs may also have a material dimension. Representational systems consist of the actual *sounds* we make with our vocal chords, the *images* we make on light-sensitive paper with cameras, the *marks* we make with paint on canvas, the digital *impulses* we transmit electronically. Representation is a practice, a kind of 'work', which uses material objects and

intentional
approach

constructionist
approach

effects. But the *meaning* depends, not on the material quality of the sign, but on its *symbolic function*. It is because a particular sound or word *stands for*, *symbolizes or represents* a concept that it can function, in language, as a sign and convey meaning – or, as the constructionists say, signify (sign-i-fy).

1.5 The language of traffic lights

The simplest example of this point, which is critical for an understanding of how languages function as representational systems, is the famous traffic lights example. A traffic light is a machine which produces different coloured lights in sequence. The effect of light of different wavelengths on the eye – which is a natural and material phenomenon – produces the sensation of different colours. Now these things certainly do exist in the material world. But it is our culture which breaks the spectrum of light into different colours, distinguishes them from one another and attaches names – Red, Green, Yellow, Blue – to them. We use a way of *classifying* the colour spectrum to create colours which are different from one another. We *represent* or *symbolize* the different colours and classify them according to different colour-concepts. This is the conceptual colour system of our culture. We say ‘our culture’ because, of course, other cultures may divide the colour spectrum differently. What’s more, they certainly use different actual *words* or *letters* to identify different colours: what we call ‘red’, the French call ‘rouge’ and so on. This is the linguistic code – the one which correlates certain words (signs) with certain colours (concepts), and thus enables us to communicate about colours to other people, using ‘the language of colours’.

But how do we use this representational or symbolic system to regulate the traffic? Colours do not have any ‘true’ or fixed meaning in that sense. Red does not mean ‘Stop’ in nature, any more than Green means ‘Go’. In other settings, Red may stand for, symbolize or represent ‘Blood’ or ‘Danger’ or ‘Communism’; and Green may represent ‘Ireland’ or ‘The Countryside’ or ‘Environmentalism’. Even these meanings can change. In the ‘language of electric plugs’, Red used to mean ‘the connection with the positive charge’ but this was arbitrarily and without explanation changed to Brown! But then for many years the producers of plugs had to attach a slip of paper telling people that the code or convention had changed, otherwise how would they know? Red and Green work in the language of traffic lights because ‘Stop’ and ‘Go’ are the meanings which have been assigned to them in our culture by the code or conventions governing this language, and this code is widely known and almost universally obeyed in our culture and cultures like ours – though we can well imagine other cultures which did not possess the code, in which this language would be a complete mystery.

Let us stay with the example for a moment, to explore a little further how, according to the constructionist approach to representation, colours and the ‘language of traffic lights’ work as a signifying or representational system. Recall the *two* representational systems we spoke of earlier. First, there is the conceptual map of colours in our culture – the way colours are distinguished

from one another, classified and arranged in our mental universe. Secondly, there are the ways words or images are correlated with colours in our language – our linguistic colour-codes. Actually, of course, a *language* of colours consists of more than just the individual words for different points on the colour spectrum. It also depends on how they function in relation to one another – the sorts of things which are governed by grammar and syntax in written or spoken languages, which allow us to express rather complex ideas. In the language of traffic lights, it is the sequence and position of the colours, as well as the colours themselves, which enable them to carry meaning and thus function as signs.

Does it matter which colours we use? No, the constructionists argue. This is because what signifies is not the colours themselves but (a) the fact that they are different and can be distinguished from one another; and (b) the fact that they are organized into a particular sequence – Red followed by Green, with sometimes a warning Amber in between which says, in effect, 'Get ready! Lights about to change.' Constructionists put this point in the following way. What signifies, what carries meaning – they argue – is not each colour in itself nor even the concept or word for it. It is *the difference between Red and Green* which signifies. This is a very important principle, in general, about representation and meaning, and we shall return to it on more than one occasion in the chapters which follow. Think about it in these terms. If you couldn't differentiate between Red and Green, you couldn't use one to mean 'Stop' and the other to mean 'Go'. In the same way, it is only the difference between the letters P and T which enable the word SHEEP to be linked, in the English language code, to the concept of 'the animal with four legs and a woolly coat', and the word SHEET to 'the material we use to cover ourselves in bed at night'.

In principle, any combination of colours – like any collection of letters in written language or of sounds in spoken language – would do, provided they are sufficiently different not to be confused. Constructionists express this idea by saying that all signs are 'arbitrary'. 'Arbitrary' means that there is no natural relationship between the sign and its meaning or concept. Since Red only means 'Stop' because that is how the code works, in principle any colour would do, including Green. It is the code that fixes the meaning, not the colour itself. This also has wider implications for the theory of representation and meaning in language. It means that signs themselves cannot fix meaning. Instead, meaning depends on *the relation between* a sign and a concept which is fixed by a code. Meaning, the constructionists would say, is 'relational'.

ACTIVITY 3

Why not test this point about the arbitrary nature of the sign and the importance of the code for yourself? Construct a code to govern the movement of traffic using two different colours – Yellow and Blue – as in the following:

When the yellow light is showing, ...

Now add an instruction allowing pedestrians and cyclists only to cross, using Pink.

Provided the code tells us clearly how to read or interpret each colour, and everyone agrees to interpret them in this way, any colour will do. These are just colours, just as the word SHEEP is just a jumble of letters. In French the same animal is referred to using the very different linguistic sign MOUTON. Signs are arbitrary. Their meanings are fixed by codes.

As we said earlier, traffic lights are machines, and colours are the material effect of light-waves on the retina of the eye. But objects – things – can also function as signs, provided they have been assigned a concept and meaning within our cultural and linguistic codes. As signs, they work symbolically – they represent concepts, and signify. Their effects, however, are felt in the material and social world. Red and Green function in the language of traffic lights as signs, but they have real material and social effects. They regulate the social behaviour of drivers and, without them, there would be many more traffic accidents at road intersections.

1.6 Summary

We have come a long way in exploring the nature of representation. It is time to summarize what we have learned about the constructionist approach to representation through language.

Representation is the production of meaning through language. In representation, constructionists argue, we use signs, organized into languages of different kinds, to communicate meaningfully with others. Languages can use signs to symbolize, stand for or reference objects, people and events in the so-called 'real' world. But they can also reference imaginary things and fantasy worlds or abstract ideas which are not in any obvious sense part of our material world. There is no simple relationship of reflection, imitation or one-to-one correspondence between language and the real world. The world is not accurately or otherwise reflected in the mirror of language. Language does not work like a mirror. Meaning is produced within language, in and through various representational systems which, for convenience, we call 'languages'. Meaning is produced by the practice, the 'work', of representation. It is constructed through signifying – i.e. meaning-producing – practices.

How does this take place? In fact, it depends on two different but related systems of representation. First, the concepts which are formed in the mind function as a system of mental representation which classifies and organizes the world into meaningful categories. If we have a concept for something, we can say we know its 'meaning'. But we cannot communicate this meaning without a second system of representation, a language. Language consists of signs organized into various relationships. But signs can only convey meaning

if we possess codes which allow us to translate our concepts into language – and vice versa. These codes are crucial for meaning and representation. They do not exist in nature but are the result of social conventions. They are a crucial part of our culture – our shared ‘maps of meaning’ – which we learn and unconsciously internalize as we become members of our culture. This constructionist approach to language thus introduces the symbolic domain of life, where words and things function as signs, into the very heart of social life itself.

ACTIVITY 4

All this may seem rather abstract. But we can quickly demonstrate its relevance by an example from painting.

Look at the painting of a still life by the Spanish painter, Juan Sanchez Cotán (1521–1627), entitled *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* (Figure 1.3). It seems as if the painter has made every effort to use the ‘language of painting’ accurately to reflect these four objects, to capture or ‘imitate nature’. Is this, then, an example of a *reflective* or *mimetic* form of representation – a painting reflecting the ‘true meaning’ of what already exists in Cotán’s kitchen? Or can we find the operation of certain codes,

the language of painting used to produce a certain meaning? Start with the question, what does the painting mean to you? What is it ‘saying’? Then go on to ask, how is it saying it – how does representation work in this painting?

Write down any thoughts at all that come to you on looking at the painting. What do these objects say to you? What meanings do they trigger off?

FIGURE 1.3
Juan Cotán,
*Quince, Cabbage,
Melon and
Cucumber*,
c. 1602.

