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## 8. Recognising meaning: semiotics in entrepreneurial research

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Entrepreneurship is a process which involves discontinuity and change; entrepreneurs create disequilibria and exploit the resulting change. Thus, entrepreneurship is in essence change. This fundamental characteristic of entrepreneurship makes it difficult to pin down or even to categorise. But certain aspects of entrepreneurial change remain similar through space and time, so that the exploration of the signs and symbolism of enterprise can provide us with the tools to picture a continuity of meaning. Semiotics, the doctrine of signs, is a useful tool for exploring the depth and scope of what we mean by entrepreneurship. Consequently this chapter argues that an appreciation of entrepreneurial semiotics enables an understanding of the meanings of enterprise; what it is; how it is practised; why it is practised and why it is encouraged. Many of these meanings lie at the ideological level, they are taken for granted, often implicit, rarely explicit, but analysis of entrepreneurial symbolism gives us some purchase in understanding. By reading and analysis, the decoding of signifiers enables us to get beneath the taken-for-granted iconographic, to begin to understand the nature of entrepreneurial meanings.

### INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship has become fashionable and as a theme, arises in some extraordinary places; promoted by politicians, patronised by royalty, “taught” in schools, colleges and universities across the world and is very much in vogue in academia. Yet a fundamental problem is the lack of agreement, perhaps even understanding, of exactly what we mean by entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is a poorly defined concept and that people use the bits of entrepreneurship meaning which suit their purposes. For example, politicians talking about entrepreneurship often construe it as some sort of universal panacea for all sorts of economic problems, unemployment, innovation, growth, and new firm formation. All seem to be lumped together under enterprise. Academics are generally more cautious and set out careful definitions. Nonetheless, the width of the application suggests that entrepreneurship meaning really is broad and means different things to different groups or people. Moreover, how groups employ these different meaning may also be significant. We are not arguing that there should be one universal interpretation of the term. Not only is this unrealistic, but it could be counterproductive in trying to build understanding about entrepreneurship. However, it is only by exploring the margins of meaning and practices that we can hope to paint a complete picture. For example, how might ‘social’ or ‘criminal’ entrepreneurship be understood, if we didn’t compare it too more conventional forms? We ask what is similar, what is different and in this way we come to construct a fuller appreciation of meaning, practice and content. But setting aside the semantics of definition, the breadth of the concept is intriguing. It indicates that entrepreneurship, as a concept, is a socially constructed phenomenon which possesses different layers of meaning.

Does this matter, the classic academic question, so what? Even if it is a social construct what difference does this make? We argue that it makes a big difference to how academics, practitioners and entrepreneurial promoters, come to understand enterprise and entrepreneurship. In particular, understanding how entrepreneurship is portrayed enables us to see what meanings lie behind the concept and its applications. This is neither pedantic nor trivial, but about understanding the big issues of how and why. By understanding these applications of meaning we can help discern the purpose, the power and perhaps even make some informed predictions based on that understanding. So there are good sound academic reasons for trying to understand the different meanings of enterprise.

In this chapter we argue that semiotics, the doctrine of signs, is a useful tool for exploring the depth and scope of the meaning of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship process involves discontinuity and change where entrepreneurs create disequilibria and exploit change. This fundamental characteristic makes it difficult to pin down, to categorise or to appreciate the meanings which underpin the phenomenon. Yet, although the constituents of enterprise inevitably change through time and space, some continuity can be maintained by framing entrepreneurial explanation within traditional linguistic and semiotic methods such as storytelling. For example, in telling culturally accepted entrepreneurial stories, one recreates the previous state, and meaning, of 'taken-for-granted-ness' of enterprises externalising structures (Pile, 1993). But power and purpose lie behind these externalising structures and understanding meaning may reveal these underpinnings. Consequently, an appreciation of the entrepreneurial semiotic enables a richer understanding of the meanings of enterprise - what it is; how it is practised; why it is practised and why it is encouraged. Many of these meanings lie at the ideological level; they are taken for granted, often implicit, rarely explicit; but analysis of entrepreneurial symbolism gives us some purchase in understanding. By reading and analysis, the decoding of "texts" (any carrier of signs, books, films, pictures, almost everything that people use becomes an object for analysis) enables us to get beneath the taken-for-granted and iconographic, to begin to understand the nature and purpose of entrepreneurial meaning.

## SEMIOTICS

According to Leach (1974), meaning lies in the linguistic domain of Semantics (the study of meaning), but we argue that semiotics enables us to *recognise* meaning, a first step towards understanding meaning. The chapter first explores the nature of semiotics. We note that whilst some fairly extravagant claims have been made for the utility of semiotics, a particular problem is the subjectivity of interpretation and the risk of being too self-referential. Moreover, the topic is often clouded by jargon and a bewildering array of approaches. Accordingly the second part of the chapter is an attempt to demonstrate how we have tried to use semiotics to help our understanding of entrepreneurship.

Defining semiotics is problematic because of the diversity which characterises semiotics. Nonetheless it is useful to explore how semiotics is described, we can then talk about it and think around it. In many ways this talking around the subject mirrors the techniques of semiotics in that we are trying to get beneath the surface to establish what semiotic analysis means. A classic paper on semiotics in business, Barley (1983),

describes how many organisational theorists have, in noting how culture is embodied and transmitted by stories, myths and symbols, urged researchers to scrutinise these vehicles closely. Although culture, like entrepreneurship, can be variously defined, there does seem to be some agreement that culture is about a socially constructed system of meaning. If we wish to actually understand what meanings lie behind the narratives that circulate, we need some way of dealing with these signs and symbols. If we don't tackle this issue, we have to relegate "meanings" to a background assumption. Semiotics puts representations as the focus of enquiry and problematises the process of representations. It offers an approach for analysing sign and the meaning systems of entrepreneurship. For the purpose of this paper, we argue that entrepreneurship is "*the creation, extraction and communication of value*" and that semiotics permits "*the creation, extraction and communication of meaning*". Thus two phenomena, symbols and practices combine symbiotically, as in dance. To misquote Yeats (1956) we have no need "*to know the dance from the dancer*", dancing can explain the dance.

Eco (1979:6) describes semiotics as a formal mode of analysis to identify rules, whilst Griemas (1987) notes how patterns of beliefs are grounded in the underlying meanings attached to self and to others. But identifying these patterns (Fiol, 1989) also requires a methodology able to detect the meanings assigned to events and situations whilst specifying the rules that govern meaning in a given context. Semiotics provides such a methodology. Lawes (2002) stresses that semiotics takes an outside-in approach and is concerned with establishing how reality is formed cognitively. For Lawes, semiotics is a visionary methodology that helps understand the past whilst looking to the future. This view demonstrates the utility for entrepreneurship. Semiotics offers the analysis of communication, operating via the complex system of signs, signals, codes, texts and genres, which form semiotic, sign systems or mental maps. In this way, knowledge, meaning, intention and action are fundamental to semiotics. Chandler (1994) sees it as a conceptual crowbar with which to deconstruct the codes at work in particular texts and practices. He considers its power to lie in the visual availability of seeing a genre in movement and action, which Shanks (1995:7) refers to as "*a notion of semiotic reality*" and not merely expressed via the frozen modality of the printed word. Semiotic analysis allows us to deconstruct cultural myths and separate the ways in which codes operate within particular popular texts or genres, thus revealing how certain values, attitudes and beliefs are supported whilst others are suppressed. It helps us denaturalise theoretical academic assumptions and raise new theoretical issues (Culler, 1985). It provides us with a unifying conceptual framework, a set of methods and terms encompassing the full range of signifying practices, including gesture, posture, dress, writing, speech, photography, film, television and other media. It can uncover hidden meaning beneath the obvious. Chandler (1994) suggests it enables us to cross academic boundaries making connections between apparently disparate phenomena.

## CONSTRUCTIVIST METHODOLOGIES AND SEMIOTICS

Semiotics lies within the broad school of social constructivism whose philosophical underpinning is that reality is socially constructed and cannot be understood by resorting to facts. In social reproduction, we draw upon interpretative schemes, resources and norms via existing structures of signification, domination and

legitimation (Gregory, 1981:940). Chell (2000) argues that it allows us to understand the ways and mechanisms which individuals use to interpret their social environment, showing how language guides our sense of social reality, by framing, filtering and creation to transform the subjective into the plausible.

Ontologically, reality is constructed, and is rooted in viewing “reality” as a social construction with mankind being its creator. Thus all ‘truth’ claims are socially negotiated. It is the researcher’s role to try to inter-subjectively understand it. Epistemologically, social constructions are not based on facts but values (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), including those of the researcher. The epistemological aim of semiotics is thus to identify the codes and recurring patterns of a particular sign system and to understand how these are used to communicate meaning (Echtner, 1999; Fiol, 1991). Indeed, its power lies in its utility to analyse the visual and textual carriers of the entrepreneurial story line. We argue that the principle benefit of a semiotic analysis is in revealing underlying structures, not just of signs, but also of the whole phenomena under investigation. If we compare semiotics with other techniques for exploring text, for example, content analysis, we can see how these benefits accrue. Content analysis is a quantitative approach measuring the manifestation of content, themes or patterns. In contrast, a semiotic analysis of the pictorial and textual looks holistically, by investigating the meanings behind the sign it develops a deeper, broader more complete textual picture and challenges the natural and taken-for-granted of appearance.

Social constructionism is claimed to be a liberating methodology placing no particular constraints or demands in terms of preferred visions of the future (Gergen, 2001). Yet semiotics possesses an archetypal element, whereby the power of the symbol lies in its ability to attract people and lead them towards that which they are capable of becoming (Singer, 1994). Aldrich and Fiol (1994) stress how entrepreneurs develop new meaning through the process of social construction, thus moving social construction away from being a unit of analysis to the subject of analysis, and present it as a way through which entrepreneurship is achieved. Aggestam & Keenan (2002) view the entrepreneurial act as socially constructed and relationally responsive, emerging in discourse and talk, thus embedded in the linguistic process and grounded in the entrepreneur’s experience. Moreover, they also note that the entrepreneurial outcome has no intrinsic meaning which is separate from the meaning entrepreneurs create through their lived experiences. Casson (2000) regards entrepreneurship as an integrated social science, incorporating anthropology with social constructionism playing a central role. However, social constructions both inform and misinform expectation and we are bounded by social construction and “*reconstructions of reality*” (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986:11). With justification, Anderson (2003:11) argues that as a social construct, entrepreneurship is both fact and fiction. Indeed, Gergen (1998) urges us to observe “*a range of variegated and overlapping conversations and practices that draw from various resources and with varying emphases and combinations...nothing is fixed - including the meaning of constructionism itself*”. However, as Table 8.1 illustrates, there is a bewildering choice of constructivist approaches.

Table 8.1 Constructionist stances

Stance	Emphasis upon
Radical Constructivism	The way in which individual minds construct reality.

Constructivism	How the mind constructs reality within systematic relationships with the external world.
Social Constructivism	How the mind constructs reality in its relationship to the world, but informed by social relationships.
Social Representation	Takes cognisance of broad social conventions.
Social Constructionism	Uses discourse as a vehicle through which self and the world are articulated and the way in which they function within social relationships.
Sociological Constructionism	The way understandings of the self and world are influenced by the power that social structures exert over people.

The subtle differences in these categorisations seem to obfuscate rather than clarify, particularly as the terms are often used interchangeably or even erroneously. Nonetheless, the common argument of such stances is that any phenomenon resulting from human agency does not occur naturally, but is shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts. Ultimately, what constitutes reality is unknowable except as a mediated phenomenon. There is no one reality, instead there is multiple, socially constructed realities (Yin, 1993). As a research methodology in its own right, constructionism has a double hermeneutic, as a unit of analysis and a subject matter under review. Incisively, Nicol (2003:29) noted that the literature itself forms part of a social construct. Broadly speaking, we can say that social constructionism leans towards the general, whilst semiotics illustrates the specifics.

## THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF SEMIOTICS

Semiotics has a long, if not entirely respectable, history; signs and meaning were systematically studied during the medieval and renaissance periods (Echtner, 1999). Semiotics is rooted in the structural linguistic principles of Saussure (1974) but in semiotics, emphasis is placed on the use of sign systems as a model to identify and make explicit the rules. The key assumption is that meanings are related to diverse signs or expressions because they are grounded in a common set of underlying rules. Semiotics has taken two differing pathways which form distinctive approaches; Saussurian, European and closely related to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's work and termed semiology; and Piercian, American and developed by the pragmatist philosopher, Charles Peirce (1958). This latter form is usually termed semiotics and, as the most common, is the focus of this section.

Saussure typifies structuralist thinking by concentrating his linguistic enquiry on the underlying rules that allow language to operate, so grammar rather than usage; *langue* (language) rather than *parole* (speech) investigated the infrastructure that operates at an unconscious level. This concern for discovering underlying rules, rather than surface phenomena, found an anthropological home in the work of Lévi-Strauss, so semiology came to look beyond language to culture and more general social artefacts. More generally, Roland Barthes took up semiotics for cultural studies, his *Mythologies* (1970) increased awareness of the value of this approach and *Camera Lucida* (1981) increased awareness of the importance of photography and visual images for social research.

Semiotics has moved away from the original Saussurian interpretation. Not only in terms of the alternatives of Piercian semiotics, but in the last few decades there has been a shift from the classification of sign towards trying to understand the "work" that signs

do. This fits rather neatly with social construction because it allows the recognition that signs are not simply transmitted, but that readers of these texts actively engage in the construction of their meaning. Hence, it becomes particularly relevant for the study of entrepreneurship. For example, consider our understanding of the power of the notion of the enterprise culture- issues such as whose power, the legitimation processes associated with entrepreneurship, even enterprise itself; what it is; how it is practised; why it is practised and why it is encouraged. All these become appropriate targets for semiotic analysis. Understanding entrepreneurial symbolism can enable us to appreciate the ideological and taken-for-granted meanings by giving us some purchase in understanding. "Reading" and analysis enables us to get beneath the taken-for-granted iconographic and fathom the nature of entrepreneurial meaning.

We turn now to consider some of the critiques of and problems with semiotics. Semiotics has so many different elements that it is confusing. We believe that it is certainly not a science, but then too "entrepreneurology" has similar problems! In the same way as entrepreneurial scholars have different approaches to studying their phenomenon, varieties of semiotics can offer some insights into meanings. It is probably best to see semiotics as an approach, a way of looking at the issue of meaning. Others might argue that it is a "world view", but we feel that this may place just too much emphasis on the "significance of signs". Although semiotics has been defined as the "science of the sign", the idea of it being a science is rather misleading. There is no broad consensus on the theoretical assumptions or empirical methodologies of semiotics. Indeed many theorists are still trying to establish the scope and even the general principles. Because all signs are open to subjective interpretation; 'you see it this way but I see it another way', there is no bedrock of objectivity. Signs are meaningful but there is a significant risk of becoming self-referential. Another major criticism of constructionist stances and semiotics is that their exponents merely '*talk around*' a subject, over analysing and stating the obvious. Many constructionist tracts do make simplicity complicated. Semiotic analysis has at times been justifiably stigmatised; Chandler (1994) even described it as the last vestige of the academic charlatan.

Semiotics has been criticised as jargon riddled and this is certainly true. Semiotics can be encountered under a perplexing array of pseudonyms e.g. Semiosis (Sonneson), Sémiologie and Semiology (Pierce) and even as visual sociology (Baker, 1994). (In the latter case semiotic attribution is denied, such is the academic stigma it can carry.) The denseness of 'linguistic' terminology can be off putting. Eugene Gorny (1995) acknowledges that even when explained in print, semiotics can appear to be obscure, abstruse, laden with special terminology, schemes and formulas, sufficiently so to make it unintelligible even to university educated students. With justification, Gorny (1995) refers to the pretensions of semiotics. For example, the lexicon of semiotics is complex e.g. phonemes, morphemes, hyposemy, hypersemy, graphemes, and sememes. Thus the definition of semiotics as a science of signs carries little explanatory value. Gorny (1995) expresses surprise that people continually ask him "what is semiotics?" but considers it a normal reaction to the word. Gorny notes that few people ask what mathematicians and biologists do. Nevertheless, he finds it a difficult concept to articulate succinctly and deliberately evades the direct question. Candidly he admits that he does not know what it is. He describes it as being a cross between philosophy and philology, (the science of language). Perceptively, Gorny considers semiotics to be a state of mind despite, or perhaps because, the basic semiotic concepts being indefinable.

Nonetheless, as Baker (1994) argues research using visual methodologies is particularly useful when researching fields, such as entrepreneurship, that are not clearly defined.

According to Lewis (1982) visual images carry and convey messages, so an interesting subset is semiotic analysis of pictures. For Schere (1990), we picture cultures whilst Harper (1996) argues for “*seeing sociology*”. However, the practice of visual semiotics transcends the descriptive. Words describe, whilst pictures illustrate and illuminate. Visual semiotics or ‘Pictorial Semiotics’ [2] which like all branches of semiotics is a noematic science concerned with generalities and their qualities. Such pictorial significations permeate many qualitative works but are often not chosen for presentation. Baker (1994) argues that visual images present material for descriptive and analytical purposes, but more importantly, photographic images allow us to think visually (Curry & Clarke, 1977). Bignell (1997) proposes that photographs function as the proof that the text's message is true and for Becker (1974) visual images bridge the gap between concepts and behavioural indicators. Baker (1994) notes that certain research problems lend themselves more readily to incorporating visual images because pictures are direct referents. The semiotic analysis of images deals with themes and general meaning, whilst the semiotic analysis of literary text deals with the way in which meaning is produced by the structures of interdependent signs, by codes and conventions. Visual semiotics therefore assists in the production of meaning. Banks (1995) argues that images must be evaluated in tandem for content and context, thus considering image and text. Capturing visual meaning is difficult because there is a lack of structured research approaches to code and categorize such information. Whilst meaning is produced and conveyed in messages that are primarily visual, each viewer constructs their own meanings from visual communication cues. Overcoming the subjectivity inherent in this construction of individual meaning presents great difficulty in semiotic analysis, but some elements of technique can help.

## OPERATIONALISING SEMIOTICS

Semiotics is a practical science. For entrepreneurship, two schools of semiotics seem important, the structuralist and the social. Chandler (1994) explains that structuralist semioticians focus on the internal structure of the text and language rather than on the processes involved in its construction or interpretation, whilst social semioticians focus on the social processes. Social semiotics, on the other hand, is the study of situated semiotic practices which are revealed using ethnographic and phenomenological methodologies. Interest focuses on the semiotic chain that begins with the basic units of communication, such as phenomes, which are built into words and sentences and formed into texts and stories. Communication and semiotics can metaphorically be likened to a chain because with each level of competence that one adds the length and strength of the semiotic chain extends. Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) stipulate that semiotic systems have three essential metafunctions :

- 1) Ideational – to represent aspects of the experiential world;
- 2) Interpersonal – to project the relations between the producer of a sign and its receiver; and
- 3) Textual – to form internally and externally understood cohesive texts and signs.



Noth (1995:89) refers to a *semiotic triangle*, composed of sense, sign vehicle and referent. It is not the object or symbol we are concerned with, but the message, which can be iconic, symbolic or indexical. In reading a text, we check it for coherence – textual, pragmatic and semantic. However, signs can mean anything we agree that they mean, and can mean different things to different people. *Iconic* signs look like what is being represented, whilst *symbolic* signs are determined by convention. They are arbitrary and based upon agreement and learned through experience. *Indexical* signs provide a clue or link. As an example, visual communications often use all three sign types. Within cultural communities, ‘communities of visual meaning’ and ‘meaning clusters’ develop. These occur over time through convention, conformity and cultural preferences. Certain items and artefacts become ‘visual metaphors’ revered by the culture that shares their perceived qualities and values. Thus we can see that the semiotic system includes language, ideology, myth, images, sounds, objects, and acts. Importantly these have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we attribute meaning to them.

The plethora of possible elements in semiotics makes it confusing for practitioners. Many constructionist tracts do complicate simplicity. Another criticism is that semioticians do not construct a specific model of how to conduct semiotic analysis but concentrate upon on individual abstract linguistic notions and categorical identity generally epitomized as metaphors (Sonesson, 1994). Gorny’s (1995) explanation of semiotics, Table 8.2, by method and theory is helpful because it illustrates the underlying assumptions. Gorny’s (ibid) explains semiotics as a transfer of metaphor from language to object, and thus becoming symbolic, broadly explains the process that we want to investigate.

Table 8.2 *Explaining semiotics*

Canonical definition by subject	Considering semiotics as the science of signs and/or sign systems is problematic – is it a science? Secondly, who establishes what is / is not a sign? Semiotics permits us to consider anything as signs and sign systems.
Definition by method	The application of linguistic methods to objects other than natural language is a way of viewing anything as constructed and functioning similarly to language. Similarity is the essence of the method and everything is capable of being described via language. Specifically, Gorny regards semiotics as a transfer of metaphor from language to object – an extension of the linguistic domain. Semiotics considers anything as a metaphor of language.
Theoretical perspectives	Theories which emphasise the significance of language e.g. hermeneutics (opposed to semiotics) regards language as the universal medium of human experience. Conversely semiotics considers signs as symbolic apparatus.

Source: adapted from Gorny (1995).

## APPLYING SEMIOTICS

Another facet of semiotic application, also akin to metaphor, is that of morphological figures or metamorphs. This operates by addition, subtraction, permutation and substitution. Morphing is the process by which we insert commonly understood images or phrases into others to subtly change their meaning. For Gorny (1995), inter-textuality

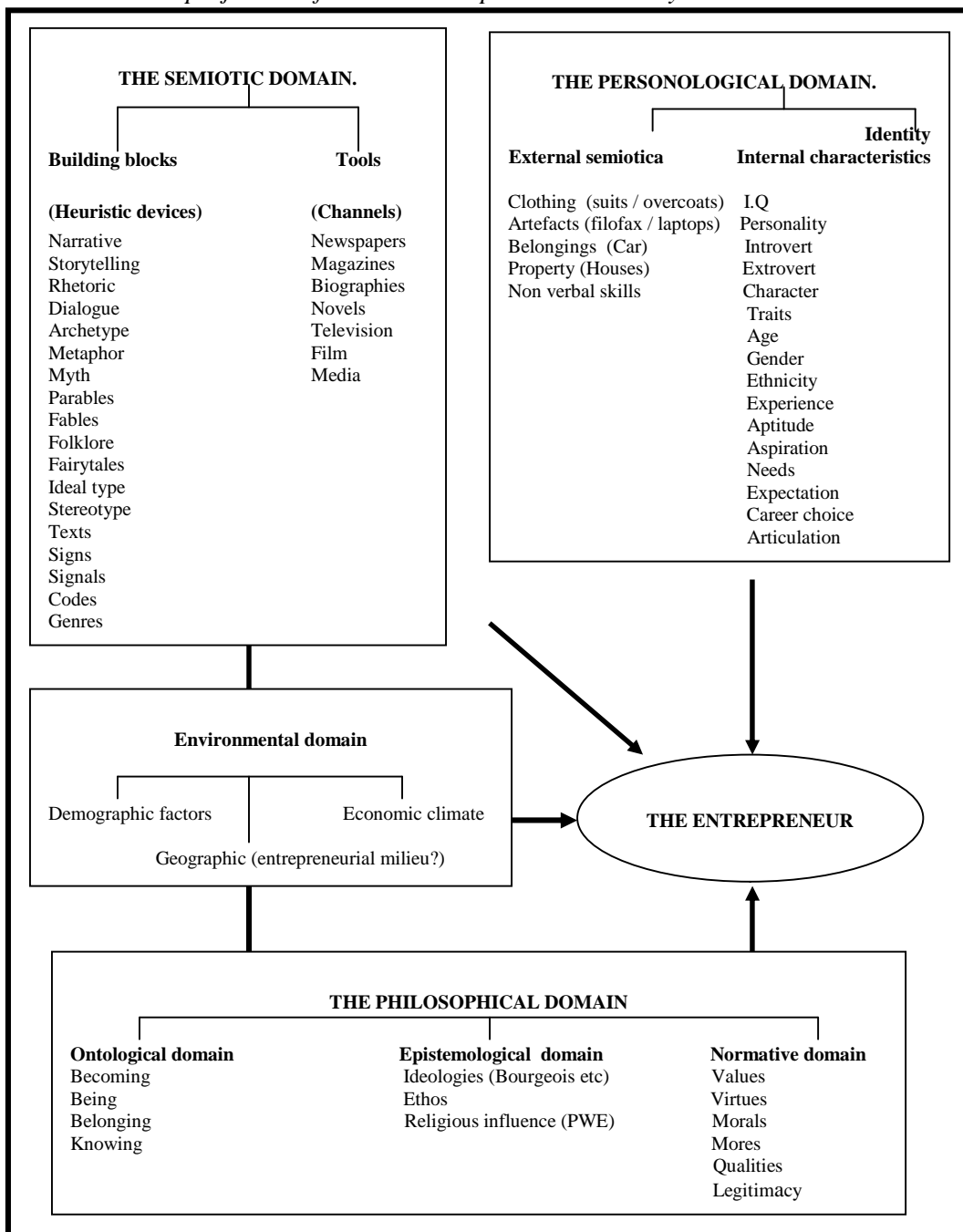
renders this achievable and works on the conception of culture as a reservoir of meanings interpreted in the sense of information, that is, naturally given knowledge. Thus our ability to find linguistic similarities in quotations, paraphrases, metaphors and the like, permits us to understand new worlds. Semiotics reduces culture to the level of migratory "*ready-made knowledge*". Such linguistic and semiotic borrowings from other literal interpretative codes (myth/metaphor) enable us to construct and interpret understandable texts. Semiotics has a social aspect because the same image and text can invoke different meanings in different subjects. Therefore what is regarded as obvious, natural, universal, given, permanent, and incontrovertible is the result of socially constructed discourses and sign systems. For example, consider the entrepreneurial narrative as a carrier of taken-for-granted values about what is good about entrepreneurship. Words such as entrepreneurial hero permeate such narratives and pictures of these heroes, such as Richard Branson, present an entrepreneurial iconology. A practical way of approaching semiotic analysis is to consider the different domains that contain semiotic significance, the semiotic, the personological, the environmental and the philosophical as described in Figure 8.1.

Each of the domains impinges upon how meaning is constructed and projected. They may combine to construct a visual imagery, as for example, the visual image of the entrepreneur; or textually in stories about entrepreneurs. Intuitively, they can be ranked by importance, yet to fully describe them in relation to each other would require an extensive tome. Semiotics bypasses this lengthy process by recourse to visual, linguistic, phonetic and culturally specific linkages. We merely have to recognise their significance. Signs provide a raft of socially occurring sense-making inductive linkages, semiotic analysis makes these linkages manifest.

Semiotic analysis is a wide domain. However all are concerned with identifying the constituent units in a paradigmatic semiotic system and the structural relationships between them; paradox, oppositions, correlations and logical relations. The broad approach is textual analysis, where the objective is to understand the system or rules. This is often followed by a system analysis, where we attempt to access the system of meaning. That is to say, how and in what ways do these symbols belong to a constellation of meaning; how do they conform, and how can they be ascribed to a category. It may be helpful to provide a brief worked example of semiotic analysis. One of our recent studies involved criminal entrepreneurs (Smith and Anderson, 2004). Since this "group" is relatively under-researched we applied some semiotic techniques to try to understand the meanings that lay behind this group. Although semiotics was only one of the research techniques we employed, the range of material which was available, including books, pictures and magazines, lent itself to semiotic analysis. The categorisation of criminal entrepreneurs was ours, but we quickly found strong semiotic evidence to support such a grouping. Dress codes; expensive suits with long jackets which reached beyond the knee, heavy gold jewellery and long dark overcoats and short hair all symbolised belonging. Yet these artefacts in conjunction with the trappings of success, such as expensive motorcars, set this group apart from other criminals or businessmen. In conforming to the dress code they signalled their belonging to this category and set themselves apart from others. The obvious coding for success, the ability to own these trappings, signalled to us that material wealth was a significant part of the meaning system. As criminals it also indicated some success in evading the clutches of the law! We were able to make this categorisation on a visual basis, our own observations and from pictures. However, this told us very little about rules, yet given

the illegal work of this group, we suspected that there had to be powerful rules to control interactions. Obviously legal sanctions could not be applied to extortionists. However, we had access to alternative sources, since this group was involved in making a film about their exploits and several books had been written about them. We found that there were implicit rules of acceptable behaviour and group members were expected to conform. For example, drug dealing was taboo, but threatening and acting out serious violence was permitted. Yet this violence was approved only when somebody had themselves infringed a moral code of behaviour. So in fact there was a very powerful system of codes and rules of what was acceptable and what was not acceptable. Moreover we found that the group identified their interactions by words such as trust and reliability. For us this was another indicator of group coherence and rule following behaviour, albeit in deviant circumstances.

Figure 8.1 The projection of semiotic entrepreneurial identity.



Another technique, which can be applied to understand meaning, is experimental semiotics. This simply involves showing images and symbols to a particular referential group and recording their responses. A specific text can also be used. Sonesson (1994) criticises the artificiality of experimental semiotics. Certainly there is a high risk of researcher bias and it can also be very difficult to analyse diverse responses. The classic semiotic methodology follows a favoured ‘didactic’ method of presentation, the ‘*Semiotic Reading*’ where an expert points out significance with a guided tour through a text.

Whilst there is no universal method of conducting semiotic analysis, but there are basic generic steps. Firstly, an extensive reading or scanning to appreciate the message and extract levels of abstraction from the data. Secondly, a reflective analysis of the subject matter, essentially asking what is going on here. Thirdly, a comparison and ask the important who, why, what, where questions to challenge, refute or support the perceived message. The fourth step often involves an ‘imaginative’ explanatory (an inductive) ‘leap’. Barthes (1988:127) refers to “*shifting up a semiotic gear*. Normally this involves comparative analysis of the patterns perceived and discerning what these mean. Finally, and often problematically there is a requirement to present the findings by ‘telling a convincing story’. In other words, sharing the logic and process of signification with the reader, so that they too can appreciate structure and meaning.

The logical way to begin is by trying it out. Semiotic analysis is a tool, but the interpretation of a text is, and must be, that which the author negotiates with the reader. The best way to learn is by doing semiotics. Baker (1994) provides some instructive pointers, which have been adapted and presented in Table 8.3 below.

Table 8.3      *Some pointers for doing semiotic analysis*

Generic to all categories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beware of judgmental evaluations, of ambiguity and idiosyncratic interpretations.</li> <li>• Consider dominant images, characters and objects, background / environmental images and how the various message elements function in terms of semiotic meaning: iconic, symbolic, indexical?</li> <li>• Look for contrasting pairs of images, attempt to identify common themes.</li> <li>• Use several people to conduct the analysis (Delphi methodology?).</li> <li>• Consider the personal qualities of the researcher.</li> </ul>
Pictorial / Visual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the dominant visual images - how are they described and what do they symbolize?</li> <li>• Consider colour imagery, the size of the photograph in relation to the text. Images/pictures are anchored to text by heading/caption. Paradigmatically, photographs involve connotations.</li> <li>• Consider the presence of iconic signs, and of indexicality in pictures and the possibility of dividing up the picture into units with independent meaning and the question of what makes up the specificity of particular picture types. The semiotic character of pictures, and their peculiarities differentiate pictorial meaning from other kinds of signification.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider aesthetic appeal of cultural images and whether it is possible to dissolve the picture into layers?</li> </ul>
News papers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All that appears in print has been selected and is thus socially constructed via learned journalistic behavioural codes. Newspaper articles attach significance to people / events. Headlines act as linguistic syntagms attracting the attention of the reader to new stories / topics.</li> <li>• Consider the connotations of the linguistic and visual signs presented.</li> <li>• Tabloids use oral based vocabulary, slang and dramatic, sensational language and short terse sentences – mixed small &amp; large font sizes. More authoritarian papers use proper grammar / structure with longer sentences / paragraphs – same font size. This connotes authority and formality to the reader.</li> <li>• Consider the distancing process of using surnames to vilify and the use of typographic devices to break up the text e.g. bold text to extend the headline and the use of bold and one-word sub-headings directing the reader to a conclusion.</li> <li>• Be aware of editing.</li> </ul>
Film / television	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action and sound can be iconic, indexical, and symbolic. Consider the use of slow motion as a liminal device, sound, motion and interpretation of dynamics and message elements – actions, colours, clothing, and sounds.</li> <li>• Importantly, films are representations of original data not recollections.</li> </ul>
Textual analysis.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Textual analysis treats as meaningful any phenomenon occurring in a culture, e.g. a story, an image, a behaviour as being reducible to a series of repeatable elements and the rules for their combination. Literary texts provide a framework pointing out certain parts as being of relevance.</li> <li>• Consider the dialectic between system and text and the relationship between related images.</li> </ul>

Source: constructed from Baker (1994)

Semiotic analysis is a comparative, interpretative methodology that permits the subjectivication of the objective. Indeed, it demands that one be subjectively analytical. Indeed this often involves much trial and error. We offer the following pragmatic advice, as ways of overcoming some of the issues.

- Do not dismiss semiotic analysis out of hand as it is a useful corroborative methodology [3].
- Learn by doing and experimenting.
- Do not adhere rigidly to textbook advice (although they are an aid).
- Do not attempt to understand everything at one reading.
- Do not expect your first or second attempts to succeed.
- Persevere and do not consign failed attempts to the bin because initial failure can aid the recognition of meaning.
- A failure to produce meaning may be an important research finding.
- Consider semiotic analysis as a complementary approach.

In reflecting on the earlier section about the critiques of the semiotic method, we believe that it is useful to consider how to avoid some of the problems. These issues and suggestions are set out in the following table 8.4. We are particularly obliged to one of our anonymous reviewers for these suggestions.

*Table 8.4 Problems associated with doing semiotic analysis*

Problem	Discussion and ways of addressing the problem
The issue of when signification ends	There appears to be no simple correspondence between signifier and signified (or referent). Indeed, is any signifier ever free of any other signifier? It could be argued that everything is linked together in a kind of infinite semiosis and that semioticians merely 'talk around in circles'. This can be resolved by acknowledging the problem and by being sensible and confining arguments to those applicable to the subject matter being studied.
Choice of research methodology	It can be argued that choosing a qualitative approach should be justified by the nature of the research question. For semiotics, with its particular strengths and weaknesses, it seems likely that the research question should reflect the need and benefits of applying semiotic analysis.
The accusations of theoretical arrogance and mastery	There is no justification for considering semioticians' accounts of the deep structure of texts as being any better, more reliable, more accurate or more scientific than anyone else's view. Indeed, it could be argued that semioticians are guilty of 'theoretical arrogance' and the appearance of manufacturing mastery through the use of exclusionist jargon. One can partly avoid this accusation by avoiding the over use of semiotic jargon and by providing a reflective account of how the analysis was conducted. In this way a more convincing case can be made. At the very least the reader is permitted to share the logic of the analytical process.
The accusation that we are prisoners of language	Semioticians argue that we are prisoners of our language and signifying systems. It is still open to debate as to whether this argument can reasonably be defended. Take for instance the 'Cartesian linguistics' approach, i.e. based on the premise that the brain has a language acquisition device with an understanding of 'universal grammar' built into it at birth, which proposes that the acquisition of language is an instinct. Such a belief has far-reaching consequences. Thinking of language as an instinct reduces language to nothing more than a manifestation of a general intellectual capacity to use symbols. Seeing language not as the essence of human uniqueness, but rather as a biological capacity of adaptation to communicate information, it no longer seems relevant to see language as an insidious shaper of thought.
Explicating the limitations of semiotic techniques	It is important to make explicit the limitations of semiotic techniques. It is not a general-purpose tool concerned with, and applicable to, anything and everything. Its employment requires justification, awareness and presentation of the problems.
The issue of the objectification of 'analyses and interpretations'	It is dangerous to present semiotic studies as if they are purely objective 'scientific' accounts rather than subjective interpretations. Thus it is important to provide empirical evidence for particular interpretations. This helps prevent semiotic analysis becoming too impressionistic and highly unsystematic. Such false objectification can generate taxonomies with little evident practical application. To prevent this, semioticians should take care to make their analytical strategy sufficiently explicit thus enabling others to

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apply it either to the examples used or to others.

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Assessing what is good semiotic research

Because semiotics is a loosely defined critical practice rather than a unified, fully-fledged analytical method or theory, it is often difficult to assess what constitutes 'good' semiotic analysis. It is helpful to separate good semiotic analysis from that which is little more than a pretentious form of literary criticism applied beyond the bounds of literature and based merely on subjective interpretation and grand assertions. The inclusion of a rigorous methodology section can help prevent this problem but ultimately the effectiveness of any qualitative research lies in its power to be convincing.

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## DOING SEMIOTICS

According to Barthes (1988) semiotics is full of blockages of knowledge. This was certainly our experience in doing semiotics. Nonetheless we have been modestly successful, at least in our own terms, in finding and demonstrating the deeper meaning which underpins a number of entrepreneurial artefacts. Table 8.5 provides some examples of where we have managed to employ semiotics to some advantage. The principal benefit of the studies listed was the exploration of many taken for granted issues, but readers may also be interested in the range of material examined. The paper "Inspirational tales" (Smith 2002) is rather different in that it actually employs and applies semiotics to create meaning. In turning the research method into the production of meaning, a series of semiotic pictures and texts were created which combined to tell a story about entrepreneurship. This story used and capitalised upon a diverse, but established range of entrepreneurial icons and image to promote entrepreneurship as a worthy practice for children.

Table 8.5 *The semiotic / constructivist research stream of the authors*

<b>Paper</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Purpose / meaning</b>
Smith & Anderson (2001) <i>Crossed Words: Entrepreneurship as criminality</i>	Pictorial	To demonstrate the power of semiotic imagery in projecting a criminal identity conflated with entrepreneurial imagery. Entailed the use of slides of London Gangster Dave Courtney contrasted against images of the fictional Del Boy and Arthur Daley.
Smith (2002) <i>Inspirational tales: propagating the entrepreneurial narrative amongst children.</i>	Pictorial and textual	To conduct textual analysis and content analysis to develop common themes in entrepreneur stories. It also entailed the author writing an entrepreneur story specifically for children entitled 'Ernie the entrepreneur'. This was a picture book story, which was piloted in primary schools using action research.
Smith (2003a) <i>Entrepreneurial identity and bad-boy iconology</i>	Pictorial, textual and experimental	The presentation revolved around the pictorial methodology by presenting twenty images associated with entrepreneurship and criminality, discussing their individual significance in building up the overall construct. Audience interaction demonstrated the significance of the universality of the bad-boy image

		(projected via artefacts) of the entrepreneur across national boundaries. At the same seminar the author also piloted the experimental methodology by distributing a survey / questionnaire accompanied by line drawings of several negative, masculine entrepreneurial types.
Smith (2003b) <i>Constructing The Heroic / Fabled Entrepreneur: A Biographical Analysis</i>	Textual	To conduct a semiotic analysis / textual analysis of several biographies and novels of entrepreneurs drawing out common themes and culminating in a diagram depicting typologies of entrepreneur stories and highlighting the anthological nature of the construct.
Smith & Anderson (2003) <i>Conforming Non Conformists: A Semiotic Analysis of Entrepreneurial identity</i>	Pictorial & textual	To conduct a semiotic analysis of pictures, images and photographs associated with entrepreneurship. In Britain entrepreneurial iconology is conflated with images of class and criminality and that despite the maverick imagery entrepreneurs were conforming non-conformists. The power point presentation of the images provoked intense discussion. The paper developed from an appreciation that many entrepreneurs employ semiotics as part of their modus operandi, cultivating a visible image / personal trademark or were prone to semiotic exhibitionism and 'clowning' about.
Wade, Smith & Anderson (2004) <i>Becoming, Being and Belonging: The Stories about Babson Distinguished Entrepreneurs.</i>	Textual and pictorial	To conduct an analysis of storyboards at Babson College -containing the photographic images and eulogistic text of 80 or so entrepreneurs who make up the Academy of Distinguished Entrepreneurs. Few of the distinguished entrepreneurs fitted the common narrative of the heroic entrepreneur being from humble beginnings. The majority, were of the corporate mould and from privileged backgrounds, but paradoxically where the classical entrepreneurial narrative could be bent to fit their individual stories it was. The distinguished entrepreneurs adopted a serious, conservatively dressed, non-smiling persona and were surrounded by images associated with tradition. Conversely, those who conformed more closely to entrepreneurial ideology presented themselves as casually dressed, smiling personas and were less likely to surround themselves with traditional images

Probably the most developed of our semiotic work is Anderson et al (2004), "Becoming, being and belonging". This study looked at the images and texts of successful entrepreneurs who were members of Babson College's Academy of Distinguished Entrepreneurs. A consistent pattern of meaning was presented and promoted; e.g. success equals hard work; entrepreneurs overcome difficulty; poor boy makes good. We argued that these all underpinned the entrepreneurial ethos. We noted how these meaning systems were employed as a form of legitimization. First, Babson as an academic institution legitimised the actions of the selected entrepreneurs. Second,

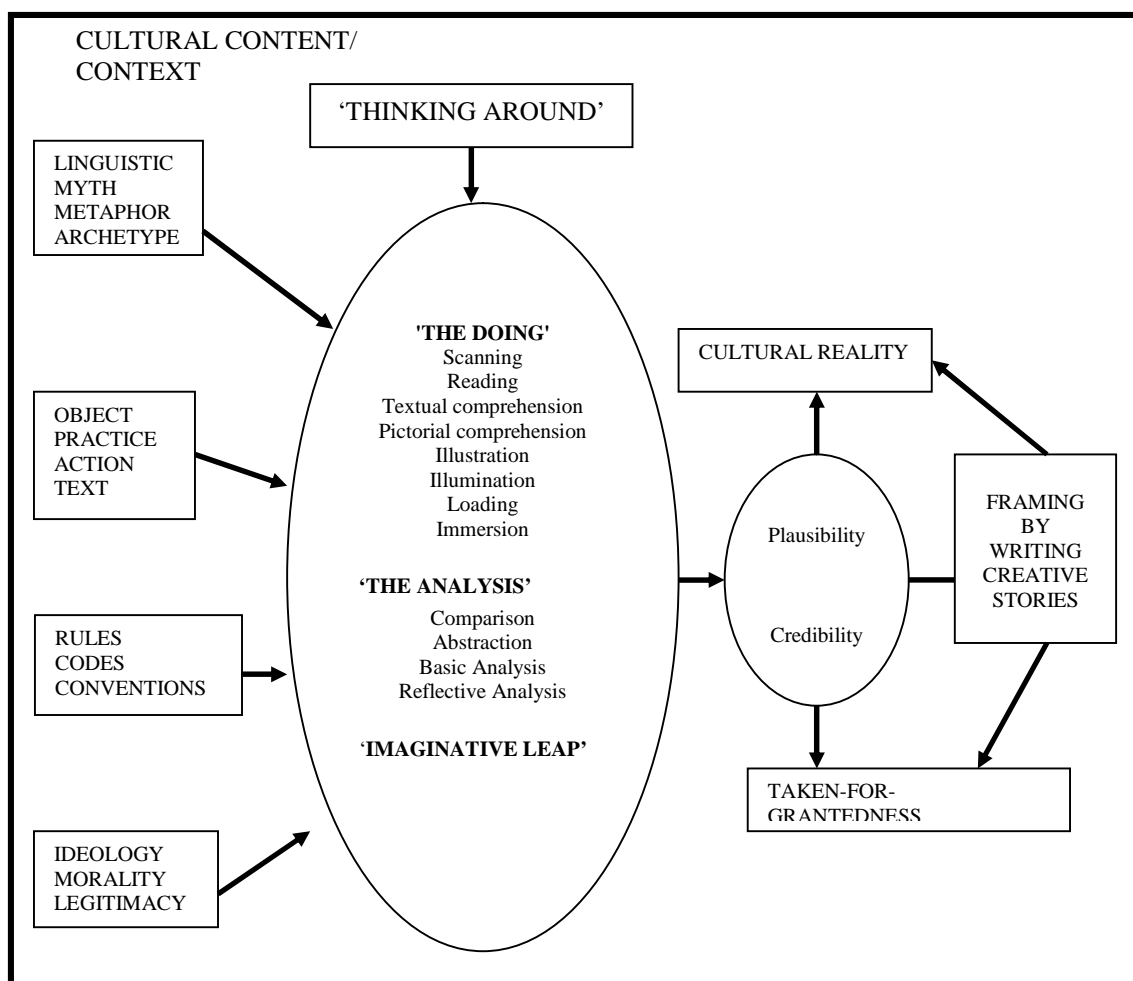


these distinguished legitimised Babson as a suitable place to learn about enterprise. This convergence of legitimacy was made possible only because of the power of the underlying meaning in the texts and pictures. In this way the semiotic analysis showed both meaning and purpose. Given the nature of the data, we feel that this study demonstrates the power of semiotics to look beneath the obvious. Moreover we cannot envisage any other methodology which would have allowed us to explore the relationship between the entrepreneurs and Babson College in such a purposeful way.

## REFLECTIONS ON SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

For us, semiotics required to be learned over time and through experience. En-route we developed a model to help us analyse image and text (please refer to Figure 8.2). It is not a complete process model because, as we have argued semiotic analysis is rarely linear, it does describe some helpful stages and highlights areas of useful data. Of course it is neither complete nor perfect, moreover it our way of doing things, and semiotics is subjective. But readers can use it as a guide, employ those bits which work for them, reject the bits that don't work. Like most research efforts our work is never over, all we can offer is to say this is where we have got to thus far.

Figure 8.2 *Interpreting semiotic phenomenon*



analytic phase in the philosophical construction of meaning. In reflection, we look back on what has been posited and try to understand what has occurred and what it means. In

doing so we evaluate the effectiveness our actions and words. Many research methodologies (particularly quantitative) are sequential, requiring one to conduct analysis in an ordered chronological manner. Semiotics is not such a methodology as recognition, interpretation, analysis, synthesis and conclusion can all occur simultaneously. Human cognition enables stages to be short-circuited hence the speed of perception attributable to semiotic imagery.

The research described above challenges expected notions of entrepreneurial research enabled by qualitative research methodologies. In particular, it emphasised the pictoriality of the entrepreneurial construct. Appreciation of semiotics requires a creative state of mind and thrives upon experimentation. As has been argued in this chapter, if entrepreneurship is the creation, extraction and communication of value then semiotics permits the creation, extraction and communication of meaning. This is apt because as Barthes (1988:203) points out the French word '*Semiotique*' originates from the battlefields of Medieval Europe where it described a system of marshalling troops by signalling with flags. From the very same battlefields the word *entrepreneur* originated as descriptor of bold action (a forgotten connection re-affirmed).

Semiotic analysis and associated qualitative methodologies are often misunderstood or avoided completely as being too complex. However, semiotics investigates the continuous dialogue between a culture and its own otherness and as such, is a potentially rewarding methodology. Yet, it is wise to heed the advice of Gorny (1995) that semiotics is a science institutionalised by semioticians themselves by virtue of the language system of conventional semiotic terminology - sign, code, signification, semiosis, and so on. It is thus that which is called semiotics, by self-styled semioticians. This has important implications for the articulation of entrepreneurial research because there is a danger of that we will fall into the same trap. When the majority of the population instinctively appreciate what we do as a discipline will have succeeded in our objective. Simplicity and clarity of explanation should be our aims. Further excellent advice comes from Casson (2000:22) who argues that the study of discourse has completely supplanted the study of reality with many academics now merely deconstructing "*each others texts rather than re-examine reality*". Properly constructed semiotic analysis allows an understanding of the actual signs and symbols of a given system as they occur naturally, rather than deconstruct the texts of others. Leech (1974) argues that meaning itself is notoriously difficult to define, therefore to try and understand the indefinable (entrepreneurship) by recourse to the indefinable (meaning) requires patience, skill and humility. The virtue of semiotics is that it permits us to recognise meaning.

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## NOTES

- 1 Initially in terms of quantity, we found studies concerning the semiotic analysis of visual images to be rare. As is often the case our search parameters were perhaps not extensive enough. In researching this chapter (ironically after we had conducted the actual research) we found a wealth of useful articles. Academic texts that discuss semiotic analysis, include - Becker (1974), Eco (1976), Curry & Clarke (1977), Lewis (1982), Hockings (1985), Harper (1987), Schere (1990), Merrill (1992), Cooté & Shelton (1992), Collier & Collier (1992), Edwards (1992), Bryson et al (1994), Baker (1994), Chaplin (1994), O'Toole (1994), Chandler (1994), Gorny (1995), Banks (1995), Harper (1996), Bignall (1997), McDougall (1997), Edwards (1997), Preziosi (1998), Barry (1999), Deely (1999), Barry (1999), Emmison & Smith (2000) and Holliday (2000). Alternatively, one can research it on the web although few sites are focused specifically on analysis of visual images. See Chandler and Ryder. Also, what we had set out to do on our own - enterprising anthropologists and sociologists had done before us.

- 2 Pictorial semiotics includes the study of still photographs, video footage, films, CD's and anything capable of being portrayed visually. There are critics of visual semiotics e.g. Emmison & Smith (2000:20) suggest the adaptation of criticality and of researching the visible social world, not pictures of it. Emmison & Smith argue that visual data is simply illustrative and elsewhere argue that visual sociology is an isolated sub field of marginal interest to other sociological researchers. One of the dangers is that one must be constantly aware of posed material and also of researcher bias.
  - 3 By using a series of complementary qualitative and quantitative methodologies such as constructivism in its many guises, semiotic analysis; content analysis; ethnography; ethno methodology; surveys; in-depth interviews; the Delphi methodology; and action research one contributes to a richer understanding of the meaning of entrepreneurship.
- 