

SEMIOSIS IN JAPANESE CULTURE: SIGN-MAKING PRACTICES ACROSS MODES

SEAN WILLIAM Mc GOVERN

INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

**2010**

---

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines a set of student texts produced in the context of a course in learning English as a foreign language in Japan. The data analyzed are multimodal texts that convey meaning through written language in collaboration with pictorial images, spatial relations and 'other means of representation and expression. I have examined these texts based on the premise that cultural values and meaning-making principles inevitably affect the making of texts that cross languages and cultures. My assumption is that a close analysis of these texts will show traces of culturally distinctive sign-making elements and cohesive patterns. In analyzing these texts for what they reveal about the cultural sign-making resources of the students' culture, my wider aim has been contribute to describing the broader 'cultural semiotic' of Japanese, the unifying system of sign-forms and grammatical relationships that productively operate across semiotic modes.

The social semiotic theoretical approach that I have followed is based on a model of communication which maintains that acts of sign-making involve the dynamic processes of selection and transformation in the use of semiotic materials. In my analysis, I have focused particular attention on the creative agency of these authors, who have drawn on this distinctive array of cultural forms and meaning-making principles in creating these texts.

My research has been directed towards an understanding of the deeper cultural organization of the society in which my students have been socialized. The results of the thesis have shown how cultural meanings find expression in social interaction, textual practices and

cultural artifacts that draw from the broadest spectrum of semiotic modes. The thesis results suggests that, without a clear recognition of this more comprehensive and underlying cultural semiotic, the nature of second language learning remains at a problematically superficial level of understanding.

**Keywords** Social semiotics, Multimodality, Culture, Japan, Foreign language education