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Directionality in TV News: NHK and the BBC

Koga-Browes, Scott
(Associate Professor, College of International
Relations, Ritsumeikan University)

The study of directionality - the uses in meaning-making of left-ness and right-ness - has been approached from a number of angles; this presentation introduced a number of the threads of thought that can be brought together usefully in a consideration of directionality in the realistic images of television news.

The three major areas I draw on are; firstly, Halliday's functional grammar and the 'social semiotics' it inspired, secondly, art history and thirdly, neurology and cognitive science. Whilst these areas of knowledge may seem perhaps overly distant to be considered as components in the same study, they all contribute information important to an overall understanding of uses of directionality as a semiotic resource.

Halliday's functional grammar is driving force behind 'social semiotics', a field of research which seeks to re-establish the links between meaningful texts of all types and the social conditions of their creation (see in particular Hodge and Kress(1988) and Kress and van Leeuwen(2006)).

According to Halliday, the flow of information in human speech tends to progress as follows: utterances start by referring back to something what is already known to the participants (this concept is known as the 'Given'), it then proceeds to add new information or comment (the 'New') about the established topic. Thus in speech 'Given' temporally precedes 'New', and in written language 'Given' is to the left of 'New' in languages written left-to-right and reversed in right-to-left languages. Social semiotics draws on this idea of 'progress of information' in its interpretations of images, which it implies are 'read' in the same ways as written language.

Art history - also drawn on by 'social semiotics' - seems to have arrived at a similar understanding of the functions of direction and the roles of left and right through other more 'instinctive' techniques. There is thus a degree of cross-fertilisation between these two areas of thought when we begin to trace the development of current theoretical interpretations. Traditionally, art historians have attributed such attributes as 'weight', 'importance' or 'salience' to one side of an image or another.

Thirdly, studies in neurology have identified the phenomenon of 'pseudo-neglect', a tendency apparent in healthy adults to overemphasise the importance of information entering the left-hand field of vision. Furthermore, neurologists have also argued that 'reading direction' may be linked to other more general visual habits, particularly the way human beings scan their surroundings.

The linkages between neurological and cultural levels are complex with trains of causality being difficult to trace; unfortunately there is insufficient space here to present any discussion in depth.

Drawing in information and aspects of theory from each of the areas above I attempt to compare the uses of 'left' and 'right' in the creation of images for television news in Japan (using NHK news as a data source) and the UK (BBC). Based on an understanding of the approaches mentioned above it is possible to hypothesise that we might expect uses of left and right to differ in Japan and the UK, primarily on the basis of differences in the predominant reading/writing direction.

My data was derived from coding a sample of images which incorporate a certain aspect of directionality; interviews in which the interviewee is pictured facing either left or right and certain types of panning shots.

It was found that the tendencies one might expect on the basis of variations in writing direction (Japan: more free, mixed left-to-right, top-to-bottom. UK: strong left-to-right) are reflected in the types of directionality chosen by image creators. Pans from BBC news programming showed a strong left-right tendency while NHK's pans were evenly split between left-to-right and right-to-left. Likewise, BBC interviews tended to place the interviewee facing right more often than NHK.

These results are very preliminary but I hope to increase the sample size and present

more reliable findings at some time in the near future.

References

- Hodge, B. and Kress, G. R. (1988). *Social Semiotics*. Polity, Cambridge.
- Kress, G. R. and van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Routledge, London, 2nd edition.