

# Semiotics of climate change

## A conceptual introduction

07.04.2025

Daniel Tamm

PhD student, University of Tartu

[daniel.tamm@ut.ee](mailto:daniel.tamm@ut.ee)

# Outline for the lecture

- Part I: What is semiotics?
  - Introduction to key concepts
    - Meaning, signs, sign systems/discourses, translation
- Part II: How can it help us combat climate change disinformation?
  - Introduction to discursive strategies and translation strategies



C-SPAN  
cspan.org

# Weather ≠ Climate

Why are they so often confused?

# Meaningful = Real

How do we make (anthropogenic) climate change meaningful?

# Three interpretations

- “We’re not entirely sure what the truth is, but it’s certainly not here and must therefore be somewhere out there”
  - Conspiracy theorists
- “We actually know what the truth is, please listen to us”
  - Climate scientists
- “We don’t have direct access to the truth, but we have some thoughts on how to get the idea across”
  - Semioticians




# What is semiotics?

“Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands in for it.

Thus semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used ‘to tell’ at all.”

(Eco 1976: 7)



Heard some of the men  
talking about the comet.

# What is a sign?

A meaningful relation between...  
something (signifier)

- A red comet

standing in for something else (signified)

- An omen (Robb's victory)
- Lannister red (Lannister rule)
- Blood (The death of someone)
- Dragons

If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?

If a forest is cut down and no one is around to call it out, is it really deforestation?

## An earthquake: a natural phenomena or the wrath of god?

“The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will.

But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of 'natural phenomena' or 'expressions of the wrath of God', depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence.”

(Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 108)

# Translation

- The partial transfer of information between different sign systems (languages)
- Stressing semioticians' interest in dynamics, rather than „collecting“ signs
- More focus on possible interpretations on the receiving end, rather than the original intent of the author/sender
- Highly dependant on the interpretive context



(e.g. Ojamaa & Torop 2014)

# Mistranslation



„The formula of art is: “I know that it is not what it depicts, but I clearly see that it is what it depicts”.“

(Lotman [1967] 2011: 250)

# Semiotics in a nutshell

- All meaning is mediated (via signs)
- Any act of communication entails a choice
- Miscommunication is a prerequisite for communication

Always has been

Wait, it's all signs?



# Where do we go from here?

- “I’m almost afraid of making art now” – a concerned former student
- Semiotics is admittedly *post hoc* in its approach
- The good news is that we can also work backwards from the presumption of meaningfulness
- Namely by mapping out possible interpretations (and the inevitable misinterpretations) beforehand



Part II  
A selection of conceptual tools

# Disinformation vs misinformation

- **Misinformation:** „a claim that contradicts or distorts common understandings of verifiable facts“ (Guess & Lyons 2020: 10)
- **Disinformation:** „a subset of misinformation that is deliberately propagated“ (ibid: 11)
- To be taken with a grain of salt, however
  - Intent can be difficult to determine
  - Fake news (false reporting) vs „fake news“ (accusation of bias)

# Discursive strategies

That is, “systemic ways of using language” that aim to achieve a particular goal; be it social, political, psychological or linguistic

(Reisigl & Wodak 2001: 44)

# Nomination

How are persons, objects, phenomena, events, processes and actions related to climate change named and referred to linguistically?

“Mother nature” vs “Planet earth”

# Predication

What characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to social actors, objects, phenomena/events and processes?

“We’re all going to die” vs “We’re all in the same boat”

# Argumentation

What arguments are employed in discourses about climate change?

“The Arctic has been ice free numerous times in the past and yet we are here“

VS

„The end of the world has been announced before, we’re warned of tornados, meteors and tsunamis on the daily“

# Perspectivisation

From what perspective are these nominations, attributions and arguments expressed?

“I’ve heard” vs “Some say”

## **Intensification and mitigation:**

Are the respective utterances articulated explicitly, are they intensified or mitigated?

“I wouldn’t be worried” vs “I shouldn’t be worried”



Top scientist revealed that “Even if a small fraction of the Arctic carbon were released to the atmosphere, we’re f\*\*ked”

This and other examples from Reisigl & Wodak (2016: 34-56)

# To note

- Context is vital, the examples here were simply a case in point
- Distinctions between the strategies are merely heuristic
  - They almost always overlap in practice
- Discursive strategies are not exclusive to oral/written language
  - C.f. a drawing of a suffering animal vs a photo (mitigation vs intensification)
- Also relevant to consider what is excluded entirely (non-choices)
- Works both ways: in analysing communication and communicating yourself

Selected strategies	Linguistic means	Examples of realisations (types)
COLLECTIVISATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>deictics</li> <li>collectives (they can also belong to the respective categories mentioned in the following rows)</li> </ul>	we, us, they, them family, group, team, tribe, troupe/army, class, population, the people, 'ethnos', nation (literally and originally an oronym), race (originally possibly an oronym), 'Völk', community, union, majority
SPATIALISATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>toponyms used as metonymies or/and personifications (place/state/town for people)</li> <li>anthroponyms referring to a person in terms of living on a place</li> </ul>	<i>Deutschland</i> (Germany), <i>Österreich</i> (Austria), Turkey, Asia, Africa, America, <i>das Ausland</i> (the foreign countries) resident, inhabitant, occupier, dweller
DE-SPATIALISATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>de-toponymic anthroponyms (including reference based on local orientation)</li> <li>de-adverbial anthroponyms</li> </ul>	<i>WienerIn</i> (Viennese), <i>EngländerIn</i> (Englishman/English) <i>Ausläm</i> (outland) <i>Südlän</i> (Europe) Asians, outside

EXPLICIT DISSIMILATION	ORIGONALISATION	ACTIONALISATION/ PROFESSIONALISATION	SOMATISATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>xenonyms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>oronyms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>actionyms/praxonyms and professionyms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SOMATONYMS</li> <li>'racionyms' (often based on colour metaphors and selected body meronyms)</li> </ul>

'engendering'	'genderonyms'	ma
'enagcing'	gerononyms	the you [rel gen]
		outside
		specific body fragmentation
		reference in terms of the state of health
		reference in terms of permanent or temporary bodily dysfunctionalities or handicaps
		reference in terms of instruments and activities that help to compensate permanent or temporary bodily dysfunctionalities or handicaps
		reference in terms of bodily activities, including insufficient physical control
		reference in terms of mental deficiency
		reference in terms of temporary artificial alteration of bodily, sensual and mental capacities
		reference in terms of 'bad', negatively sanctioned, abusive actions or habits
		reference in terms of sexual orientation or habits

CULTURALISATION	ECONOMISATION	'POLITICISATION'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ethnification</li> <li>linguification</li> <li>religionisation</li> <li>primitivisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ethnonyms</li> <li>linguonyms</li> <li>religionyms</li> <li>synecdochising or metonymic anthroponyms denoting 'primitivity' or lack of civilisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>professionals</li> <li>(de-)possessivisation</li> <li>problematisation</li> <li>ideologisation</li> </ul>

ECONOMYMS	POLITONYMS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>professionyms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'nationyms'</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>anthroponyms referring to persons in terms of possession</li> <li>(negative) metaphorical anthroponyms</li> <li>ideologonyms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'classonims' [in part, they are also politonyms]</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>rich, poor, <i>EigentümerIn</i> (owner), <i>BesitzerIn</i> (holder/proprietor)</li> <li>guest worker, <i>Schwarzarl</i> (person doing illicit work) [criminonym]</li> <li>capitalist</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>nationals, <i>Deutsche</i> (Germans), <i>ÖsterreicherInnen</i> (Austrians), <i>TürkInnen</i> (Turks), <i>Kanak</i> (wops), <i>ZigeunerInnen</i> (gypsies), Romanians, Poles, Hungarians</li> <li><i>ProletInnen</i> (proles), proletarians, the rich [economy], the poor [economy], h society [metonymy], up class [collective]</li> </ul>
--	---

SOCIAL PROBLEMATISATION	MILITARISATION	RELATIONALISATION/ SOCIATIVISATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>negation</li> <li>criminalisation</li> <li>negative ideologisation</li> <li>pathologisation</li> <li>victimisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>negation</li> <li>criminalisation</li> <li>negative ideologisation</li> <li>pathologisation</li> <li>victimisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>specific negative qualonyms, negationyms</li> <li>criminonyms</li> <li>negative ideologonyms</li> <li>pathologonyms</li> <li>victimonyms</li> <li>relationyms/sociatives (relational identification)</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>party political alignment</li> <li>rough political alignment (polarisation)</li> <li>'organisationalisation'</li> <li>'professionalisation'</li> <li>political actionalisation</li> <li>granting or deprivation of political rights</li> <li>ascription or denying of political membership to a national/state organisation</li> <li>ascription of membership to supranational political organisations</li> <li>ascription of being or not being in need of political support</li> <li>temporalisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>party names [often metaphors and synecdoches]</li> <li>anthroponyms referring to persons in terms of rough political orientation [often orientational metaphors]</li> <li>names of political organisations (political organisationyms)</li> <li>anthroponyms referring to persons in terms of political professions (political professionyms)</li> <li>anthroponyms referring to persons in terms of political activities</li> <li>anthroponyms referring to persons in terms of political activities</li> <li>negation</li> <li>criminalisation</li> <li>negative ideologisation</li> <li>pathologisation</li> <li>victimisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>die Roten</i> (the Reds = Socialists), <i>die Schwarzen</i> (the Blacks), <i>die Blauen</i> (the Blues = Austrian Freedom Party), <i>die Grünen</i> (the Greens), National Socialists</li> <li>leftists, right-wing extremists [negative ideologonym]</li> <li>committee congress, parliament, government party</li> <li>politician, minister, major, president</li> <li>voters, civilians, <i>ausländische/jüdische MitbürgerInnen</i> (foreign/Jewish fellow)</li> <li>illegals [criminonym], unemployed, unskilled, <i>Unmensch</i> (inhuman person)</li> <li>criminals, illegals, dealers, mafiosi, delinquents, gang, murderer [relationym], '<i>Schubhäftling</i>' ('remand pending deportation prisoner/detainee'), '<i>Schübling</i>' (pejorative for 'remand pending deportation prisoner/detainee'), bogus refugee ('Scheinasylant'), perpetrator, culprit, victimiser, <i>SchwarzarbeiterIn</i> (person doing illicit work)</li> <li>racist, nationalist, ethnicist, sexist, misogynist, chauvinist, fascist, Nazi, imperialist, right-wing extremist</li> <li>psychopath, schizo, schizophrenic, nymphomaniac</li> <li>victim, <i>NotleidendeR</i> (person suffering deprivation)</li> <li>enemies/opponents, <i>ausländische/jüdische Mitmenschen</i> (foreign/Jewish fellow persons), guest, victim, victimiser, oppressor, oppressed, murderer, friends, neighbours, compatriots, <i>Mitmenschen</i> (fellow persons), children, (blood) relatives,</li> </ul>
--	---	---

# Translation strategies

„Studying meaning in terms of translation as the primary mechanism of communication through which meaning-systems or discourses are constituted is the main task of semiotics.“

(Selg & Ventsel 2020: 173)

# Discrete and continuous translation

- The relationship between a part and the whole
- Discrete translation is focused on difference
- Continuous translation is focused on equivalence
- A matter of perspective and balance: the example of a painting
  - Discrete: individual brushstrokes
  - Continuous: the painting as a whole
  - Discrete: the painting as a part of an art movement
  - Continuous: the art movement as a whole

(Lotman 1990: 36-38)

## Discrete and continuous translation(s) as means of identification

- „Us“ vs „them“ as a matter of establishing similarities and differences
- Also corresponds to different understandings of governance
  - How should problems be solved? How should power be exercised?
- Allows us to prioritise form over content
  - How something is spoken about can be more important than what is spoken about
  - Cf. “Forcing someone to be free” vs “Allowing someone to obey”

# Prevalence of continuous translation

- Appeals to homogeneity (both in terms of „us“ and „them“)
- Myths, stereotypes, fear and securitisation as the driving forces
- De-problematisation of climate change
  - “The migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa will take your jobs”  
Dismissing why they’re emigrating in the first place
  - “We have always been a people of forests and always will be”  
Appeals to myths and thought-terminating clichés
  - “The climate will change, but so will we”  
Petty populism, getting the issue off the table

# Prevalence of discrete translation

- Appeals to plurality (both in terms of „us“ and „them“)
- Directives, debates and contingencies as the driving forces
- Problematisation of climate change
  - „Solving global warming is also a question of innovation”  
Delegating the issue to the private sector, clientelism
  - „We can't move forwards without the proper studies“  
Risk of disintegration of action, even if the concern is genuine
  - „The administrators will go through the proper channels and process the claim in due time“  
Possible overemphasis on processuality, excessive bureaucracy borders on alienation

# To note

- Discrete/continuous translation is always a matter of degree
- Translation strategies are not exclusive to oral/written language
- Works both ways: in analysing communication and communicating yourself
- While the dominance of discreteness is associated with democracy/plurality/deliberation, it can lead to a game of „hot potato“
  - The examples here were cynical on purpose, given the urgency of the issue
- See Selg (2021) and Selg & Ventsel (2020: 277-307) for proper analysis

## Cited works

Eco, U. (1976). *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press.

Guess, A. M., & Lyons, B. A. (2020). Misinformation, Disinformation, and Online Propaganda. In N. Persily & J. A. Tucker (Eds.), *Social Media and Democracy* (pp. 10–33). Cambridge University Press.

Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). London: *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. Verso.

Lotman, J. [1967] (2011). The Place of Art Among Modelling Systems. *Sign Systems Studies*, 39 (2/4), 249–70.

Lotman, J. (1990). *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. I. B. Tauris & Co.

Ojamaa, M., & Torop, P. (2014). Transmediality of cultural autocommunication. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18(1), 61-78.

Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2001). *Discourse and discrimination, rhetorics of racism and anti-Semitism*. Routledge.

Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2016). The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* (3rd ed., pp. 23–61). Sage.

Selg, P. (2021). A Political-Semiotic Explanation of Wicked Problems. In E. Hałas & N. Maslowski (Eds.), *Politics of Symbolization Across Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 41–71). Peter Lang.

Selg, P. & Ventsel, A. (2020). *Introducing Relational Political Analysis: Political Semiotics as a Theory and Method*. Palgrave Macmillan.