



Consultant Assembly for Discussing the Idea of Urban Discourse in Semiotic Terms

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Urban Environment, Metropolitan Discourse and Verbal Proxemics: Searching for the Meanings in the City

by MIKOŁAJ SOBOCIŃSKI

Casimir the Great University in Bydgoszcz

At the beginning of the 21st century the number of city-dwellers and rural folk has equalled for the first time in human history. However, in the next 30-40 years it is expected that on average two thirds of mankind will live in towns and cities. In the most developed countries the number of urbanites will surpass 95% of all citizens, which will create a new society uprooted from earlier rural connections which were still visible in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the long history of human kind this situation is relatively new and the drastic transition from a familiar and limited space of a village or town district inhabited by communities (of knowers), we have entered a new city-space environment of poorly bound communities or previous-era ghettos. Those new spaces together with the rapid development of service and industrial sectors as well as enormously inflated legislation on town planning and proper behaviour create a situation where a multitude of signs of various origin and purpose coexist side by side in a cacophony of colours, sounds, and shapes. Nevertheless, urbanites of the last few decades who travel around the world find it relatively easy to manage and navigate those new spaces despite their superficial differences. Therefore, there seems to be a growing need for a thorough discussion of urban spaces and urban signs thanks to which the plethora of messages as well as meanings and interactions could be approached and explained in a manageable paradigm.

Before the proper discussion of metropolitan discourse, which follows in due course, one must realise how vast the field of urban signs is. In order to achieve this aim it is necessary to list just the most essential channels of exchanging information, or more precisely of giving and giving off of meaning to follow Erving Goffman's approach to social communication. The first to be mentioned must be the visual channel due to the number of linguistic and pictorial messages and signs. However, other means of transmitting meaning are equally important in a dense city

jungle: auditory, olfactory, thermal, and tactile. Signs constituting the city may seem to be predominantly visual, but more often than not it is those other channels that are used for sending and receiving of signs and meanings in a visually-crowded environment. Restaurants and factories are found by their smell, markets and concert halls by noise, and charming parks are not limited to nice views but to benches pleasant to touch and warm in the sunshine. It is the amalgam of all those channels with all their signs that create the space, the city, as different from other human settlements or from the Nature. For this reason, when analysing urban signs it is essential to understand that very rarely signs stand on their own, without neighbouring signs from other channels, and in due course it would be much more productive to analyse signs in relation to discourses or even to particular city-type discourses showing those typical connections. A list of channels used for transmitting messages in urban environments should encompass the following:

types of signs and messages, or their elements

visual

verbal

non-verbal

non-visual

verbal

non-verbal

structure of messages

verbal

“pure” verbal

verbal substituting non-verbal

verbal and non-verbal

key verbal elements accompanied by the non-verbal

key non-verbal element accompanied by the verbal

mutually relevant verbal and non-verbal elements

non-verbal

“pure” non-verbal

non-verbal with a (possible to define) verbal counterpart

non-verbal substituting verbal

When finally from the level of individual signs and messages the level of a discourse is reached another dilemma becomes obvious. A century

ago human settlements could be easily divided into villages, towns, local cities, national cities, and global cities – metropolis. However, this division cannot be accepted any longer as there are hundreds of cities and thousands of towns. Even when thinking of metropolis in the nineteenth-century manner, there will be quite a few dozen of cities fulfilling all prerequisites. Modern geography and town planning have not yet managed to cope with the problem of new urban environments and their classifications which can be visible also in the problem of addressing the issue of shanty towns, some of which are cities in their own right. Therefore, the problem of investigating urban signs gained two new facets: it is difficult to decide what types of city-settlements we have, and how far city-types may or do influence urban communication and interactions. A simple list of possible city functions should be sufficient to hint the problem: agrarian, accommodation, production, industrial, trade, colonial, transport and communication, service, employment, political, administrative, military, maintaining law and order, company seat, educational, scientific, publisher and media centres, touristic, religious, leisure, relaxation and health, medical, and metropolitan.

On the other hand, it seems that despite the staggering amount of various messages reflecting those city functions, messages supported or accompanied by additional signs coming from other channels, their number may stand for a limited amount of interactions and a few basic interpersonal linkages, which actually may be quite similar to those of the past. The hundreds and thousands of signs present on any city street around the globe may be grouped under a few major headings reflecting their origin and purpose: municipal, infrastructural, commercial, industrial, and transgressive. After presenting a detailed description and definition of these message types, or more precisely topic-types, it should become obvious that there is a limited number of discourses present in cities. All messages and signs, however varied and multi-channel in nature, can be quite precisely ascribed to one discourse or at least to one discourse predominantly. As before, discussing individual messages and signs from the perspective of their constituent and channels used was difficult, and as pinpointing the connection between towns and signs seems nearly impossible due to the problem with defining city-types, taking the whole discussion of urban signs to the level of discourse may actually solve most of previous problems. Various messages both in form and content may easily be grouped together in one discourse. Moreover, it can be

claimed that if it was possible to create a list of necessary city-discourses, and if they could be successfully set against village-discourses, it should be possible to distinguish numerous town- and city-types on the basis of messages and discourses. In this manner, one could receive a thorough insight into communication and interactions in a particular urban environment only thanks to the understanding of urban signs and discourses they come from.

discourses (a revised version of *Discourses in Place* postulates by Ron and Suzie Wong Scollon)

municipal regulatory (directed to the public)

vehicle traffic and pedestrian traffic

public notices (e.g., from the town hall, the police, fire stations, etc.)

municipal informative (direct to the general public, dwellers and tourists)

public labels (e.g., Oak St, St James School, Regent's Park)

questions directed to the public/community

municipal infrastructural (directed to various town services and institutions)

transparent notices of various city services (e.g., water or gas supply)

commercial and institutional (non-municipal)

advertising (from billboards to shop window notices)

sector of goods or services provided, lifestyle promoted

(e.g., entertainment, food, travel, religion or values)

shops, brands or products (e.g., Harrods, H&M, Adidas trainers)

regulatory (e.g., staff only)

informative (e.g., help desk)

forbidding (e.g., do not touch items at display)

transgressive (unlike in *Discourses in Place* treated as not inherent to any message)

illegal

aesthetic values

against the general public values

community or subculture specific

Such a train of thought inevitably leads to a question if there is a pan-discourse or at least a set of most city-centred discourses, which must be present in order for a space to be treated as urban and metropolitan. This question is difficult to answer and probably is highly dependant on individual definitions of discourse, communication, interaction, and space or environment. Nevertheless, it seems to be a productive approach to assume, at least for the time being, that there is a metropolitan discourse which is brought to existence as a higher function of individual city discourses. Only when there is a need for institutions and individuals to surpass the level of communicating to the community of knowers, to the familiar neighbours, only when the intended recipient of messages is every possible passer-by, only then the number of individual signs grows exponentially, and particular city-discourses create the pan-discourse characteristic of metropolis. The needs and drives of individual sign creators are at the root of this pan-discourse as the legislation and industrialisation are rather the consequence of this trend. However, when the threshold is reached, metropolitan discourse must be used and obeyed in every part of the environment as long as it wants to (or more precisely its users and owners want it to) be perceived as metropolitan. In this way metropolitan discourse is inevitable just as before in towns and villages it was only optional.

Due to the fact that in modern cities, the number and size of which is constantly growing, signs are omnipresent and metropolitan discourse seems to hold sway, there is another question which may be posed: how precisely can interactions and interpersonal relations be deduced from individual signs belonging to metropolitan discourse. Again the question is already based on a few assumptions, e.g., that the majority of signs placed in cities are somehow influenced by the relation between sender and receiver in a particular interaction. Despite the fact that all assumptions can be opposed, we should concentrate on the question itself. When individual messages are analysed without relating them to space, time, and a prototypical recipient it may be very difficult if not even impossible to decipher meanings of some signs. A simple word "exit" may seem to mean a way out, however, usually the door marked with an exit sign is an emergency exit that actually may not be used as an ordinary exit. Words "attention" and "watch out" do not imply that pedestrians should be cautious of everything around but rather that they must read a note and

follow the instructions of this particular note. The meaning is obvious in here-now-for me relation.

Exactly for this self-centred reading of messages, the interpersonal factor seems to become so strong in both creation and inferring of meaning of messages and signs. The connection between sender and reader become much more personal, at least on the part of the recipient of the message, than could be predicted before. In metropolitan discourse, which tunnels a limited number of functions and meanings into a plethora of shapes and sizes of signs, the effort invested into inferring meaning and making it relevant becomes so strenuous that any difficulty in arriving at the meaning or any negative meaning may actually be treated as a personal insult. In this way a verbal or non-verbal message posted on a wall may be read just like an utterance in a face-to-face discussion with all possible consequences. Just like in any interactions power relations, ideology, and proxemic barriers play role in reaching and negotiating meaning, also signs and messages of metropolitan discourse, especially those of municipal and institutional origin, seem to exert a similar interpersonal influence. Verbal proxemics is a force used openly in face-to-face exchanges, however, this force, and the illocutionary acts present in messages, is even more important when analysing how messages are read and understood withing discourses in urban environments. Therefore, each message is assessed in reference to possible functions of any verbal exchange and in due course the verbal proxemics force is deduced from the inferred and relevant meaning here-now-for me:

function

- informative (e.g., open from 9 am to 5 pm)
- phatic (e.g., customers are kindly asked to ...)
- regulatory or directive (e.g., road closed)
- forbidding (e.g., no bikes allowed at the premises)
- community including-excluding/in-out group binding (e.g., skin-heads rule)
- manipulative and propaganda (e.g., the only toothpaste you'll ever need)
- creating space (e.g., school)
- indexical and deictic (place, person, and/or time) (e.g., “push” for the door or entrance)

In addition, not only the verbal or pictorial elements of signs and messages must be taken into consideration when they are read. Firstly, when a sign is encountered, it is set against the previous experiences and already familiar text types. On this basis a particular register and discourse type is chosen as a decoding tool for the sign. The inferred meaning originates from the discourse the sign is supposed to come from, but also any deviation in meaning and the verbal proxemic force connected to its lexical elements. Therefore, a proper understanding and differentiation of sub-discourses of the pan-discourse seem so vital. In order to assess which discourse and register a particular sign belongs to, which functions and interactions should be inferred, and finally what meanings and verbal proxemic force will be given and given off may be the result of a complicated combination of the following factors (after *Discourses in Place*):

modality

colour saturation, differentiation, and modulation
 size and shape
 contextualisation
 representation
 depth, illumination, and brightness

code preferences/composition of information

centred

circular

triptych

centre–margin

polarised

top–bottom (ideal–real)

left–right (given–new)

earlier–later

inscription

fonts and typeface, letterform

material qualities

permanence or durability

temporality or newness

quality

layering; add-ons or extensions

state changes

emplacement

decontextualised

transgressive

situated

exophoric

situated ('feng-shui')

represented participants

narrative

conceptual

interactive participants

producer – image participant

image participant – image participant

image participant – viewer/reader

producer – viewer/reader (not included in *Discourses in Place*)

As presented in this paper, the process of reading urban signs may be strenuous and time consuming to individuals. Especially in the new environment of urban settlements as complex as never before, the mechanisms of spotting, assessing, reading, and inferring meanings cannot be limited to the information level alone. Signs and messages become to some extent like face-to-face interactions; they are much more personal and based in the immediate situation. Without the ability to pinpoint here-now-for me relation between sender-message-reader it would be extremely difficult to understand urban signs and to navigate spaces. In this paper the author claims that Verbal Proxemics is the tool which may explain how messages are read within Metropolitan Discourse. Moreover, this pan-discourse is believed to be necessary for two reasons. Firstly, it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to classify towns and urban interactions in any other way. Secondly, the inclusion of sub-discourses and registers explains why signs are read so efficiently despite the multitude of messages and channels in urban environments. Verbal proxemics may also explain one more feature of today's communities and interactions between senders and receivers of messages. As we are becoming homo urbanis, we tend to infer meanings from all and any signs in the vicinity. As social animals, or more precisely as animal symbolism, after Ernst Cassirer, we refer messages to interactions and to people, to the whole society, and we place ourselves in those relations be-

tween other people and surrounding signs. Verbal proxemics may show to what extent the visibly inhuman interaction between a note and readers is actually a fully fledged communicative behaviour, and how much signs at a street corner create urban space and communities.

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