

## **Semiotic analysis: compositional meanings of corporate web pages**

### Abstract

Web page layouts are fascinating because there are different kinds of elements loaded on a single page. The arrangement of the elements therefore plays an important role in the effective delivery of the intended message to Web readers. Web readers, unfortunately, rarely take notice of the layout and the arrangements of the elements on Web pages, until it is time for them to write a Web page themselves. This suggests that a Web page is usually written using common features and organisation, and is based on copying others. The aim of this paper is therefore to unfold the potential meanings of the Web page designs, which are derived from their composition. In analyzing multimodal texts, that is, the texts that have a multiplicity of semiotic modes of which language may be one (Kress 2001), one might want to consider using semiotics. Even though multimodal texts are commonly encountered everywhere at all times, not many analysts are familiar with semiotics. Semiotics does not only focus on language per se (even though language is the dominant mode), but on other modes as well, for example, visual images and sound. Hence, semiotics fits the multimodal text analysis very well. Semiotics, as described by its founder Ferdinand de Saussure, is ‘a science that studies the life of signs within society’ (1916) and a sign is derived from two concepts: signifier and signified. The signifier is said to have a potential meaning but not an actual meaning, while the signified is the meaning which the signifier refers to. Peirce (1985), who is the co-founder of semiotics, classified signs into three major types: icon, index, and symbol. An icon is a sign that refers to a direct or photographic representation, in other words, the depicted object and its representation look alike. An Index, on the other hand, is a sign which had some common quality with the intended signified, for example, the Eiffel Tower is the index of Paris (Dyer 1982). In symbols, the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary, in which the meaning, according to Peirce (1985), is derived by ‘the virtue of law’. The examples of symbols given by Dyer (1982), include a rose as a symbol for love or passion, and a pair of scales as a symbol for justice. The recent semiotic approach, which is known as ‘visual grammar’, is introduced by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996). Following Halliday’s metafunctional theory (1994), ‘visual grammar’ is divided into three elements: Representation, Process and Composition (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996; 2002). Representation which resembles ideational can either be people, places or things. Processes, on

the other hand, are divided into two types: conceptual and narrative. Conceptual process, borrowing from Halliday's notion on transitivity (1994), is the attributive process, i.e. the 'process of being', while the narrative process is the material process: the 'process of happening or doing' (Halliday 1994; Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996). Composition, an analogy to textual metafunction, comprises three crucial criteria such as Information value, Salience and Framing. Composition, as a whole, is the means by which 'elements are integrated into a meaningful whole' (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996: 181). The discussion of this paper is however limited to the third element of semiotics, that is, composition.