

Beneath the surface of language - the critical analysis of discourse - Dr David Hyatt (2008)

Dr David Hyatt explains what Critical Discourse Analysis offers as a way of thinking about texts and the relationship between language and power. He presents his Critical Literacy Frame for analysing texts and looks in detail at two aspects: evaluation, and interdiscursivity, and intertextuality.

The main way in which people make sense of the world is through language - it is an extremely powerful medium, and one which is used to convey information, persuade, justify and also to legitimate and control. Rather than being a neutral reflection of the way the world is (for example, are al-Qaeda terrorists, freedom fighters or something else? Are the US forces in Iraq liberators, imperialist occupiers or something else?), language plays an active role in the way we classify the phenomena and experiences through which we understand and represent reality. The way we make sense of the world is mediated through discourse.

Language and power

Critical discourse analysis is an approach to the analysis of texts (which could be spoken, written, visual, or evident in other ways) that is centrally concerned with the relationship between language and power. It is primarily concerned with the way that power relations, domination, and inequality are enacted through language use and the ways in which this is sometimes disguised or hidden. Consequently CDA attempts to unmask and expose these hidden agendas and consider ways in which they could be resisted and unequal relationships could be reconstructed. This means it is particularly suitable for looking at institutional discourses such as the media, political language, advertising, and resisting unequal representations of the world such as racism, poverty and environmental issues, and aspects of globalisation. It is therefore an unashamedly political approach to language analysis, committed to an agenda of social justice.

Language in context

The relationship between language and the way we view the world is central here. CDA views discourse as more than language - discourse is concerned with the way specific uses of language affect relationships, identities and the ways in which people behave, think and act. Language always occurs in context - it happens between particular people, for particular purposes, in particular circumstances and so any analysis of the meaning of language needs to take the context into account. Because of this, CDA attempts to look at language at three levels.

Level 1 - words and grammar

It looks at the words and grammar of the texts themselves - how presenting a position in a particular way can suggest a certain meaning, when presenting it in different language might suggest a very different meaning. For example changing a verb from an active form to a passive form can work to hide or put in the background the responsibility for actions. Compare the following:

Tokyo was bombed in 1945
The American Air Force bombed Tokyo in 1945

where the former example is less explicit regarding who is responsible for the action.

Level 2 - production, distribution, consumption

Secondly, CDA looks at the processes of production, distribution and consumption of texts (how texts are written and interpreted, often in very different ways by different groups of people). Consider the ways in which groups of people are labelled as less socially valued (due to their gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability etc), in order to legitimize the arguments of those who hold power, or to suggest that a pejorative or stereotyping presentation of such people is a 'normal', naturalised and commonly-shared viewpoint. For example, it has been argued that the use of the term 'special needs' in education in relation to individuals with disabilities ensures continuing segregation rather than inclusion and lays the blame for barriers to inclusion on the physical 'deficiencies' of individual people rather than focusing on the ways in which schools and educational policies could be changed to address issues of inclusion.

Level 3 - texts in the wider world

Thirdly, CDA looks the interaction of these texts with the wider social world (the effect that particular texts may have on the way people think and behave) - the degree to which people may believe views that are presented to them, are 'common sense', 'natural' and 'normal'. For example when I went to school in the 1970's corporal punishment was a normal daily occurrence in my school whereas now it is illegal and unthinkable. Other examples of such 'naturalisation' of ways of thinking about the world are linked with the philosophical position called essentialism - ascribing fixed properties, qualities and abilities to various categories and groups of people. For example women are not assertive because they are women, Asian students are passive because they are Asian, black people are good at sport because they are black, etc. The basic principles of stereotyping any cultural group are rooted in essentialist thinking. An alternative to this is social constructivism which emphasizes the role of social learning in acquiring supposedly 'essential' characteristics - this position could be summed up by Simone de Beauvoir's statement 'one is not born a women; one becomes one.'

Evaluation

Evaluation is a term used by linguists essentially to talk about the way in which a writer/speaker presents the subject under discussion as 'good' or 'bad'. This can be done in two ways: the judgement or evaluation may be inscribed or overtly suggested by the words used: for example 'wonderful', 'terrible', 'brilliant', 'crap' and so on. In addition, however, to inscribed evaluation, it is also important to consider what is called evoked evaluation. This type of evaluation uses superficially neutral terms but which have the potential to evoke or imply judgmental responses, in those who share a particular set of values. These evoked evaluations in themselves do not state the text producer's attitude to the content overtly, but leave the value judgement to the reader/listener. However, they are mechanisms through which evaluation is covertly constructed. For example, in tourism texts the terms 'natural' and 'sunny' appear to be neutral descriptive terms but are used to construct a positive image of the places described, even when the description is not always accurate. In food promotional texts, terms such as 'natural', 'homemade' and 'organic' operate in a similar way to present a positive picture. Negative evaluation can also be evoked by terms such as 'asylum seeker', 'insurgent' or 'hoody'. Such mechanisms can be seen as powerful devices in the role they play in projecting a notion of 'common sense', by appearing as universal descriptive statements when in fact they are judgements representing certain value positions.

Reference to other texts, genres and discourses

One consistent way in which texts from all genres seek to establish the legitimacy of their claims, their common-sense assumptions and their world views is through reference to other

texts, genres, discourses and individuals. Two key ideas here are interdiscursivity and intertextuality.

Interdiscursivity refers to the diverse ways in which genres and discourses interpenetrate each other, for example, the relationship of the discourses of advertising and science. We may not really understand what 'nanopeptides' in our shampoo or 'calcium phosphate for remineralisation' in our toothpaste are, but because they are linked with the very powerful discourse of science, we may be convinced that they are tried, tested and proved to be 'good for us'. Similarly, there is a mixing of the discourses of education and consumerism - the growing trend to describe students as 'customers' or 'clients' who earn 'credits' which they can 'cash in' for qualifications, which implies that is all about acquiring measurable outcomes (for example grades, qualifications etc) rather than about processes of learning. Intertextuality is perhaps better viewed as the identifiable (either clear or more indistinct) borrowings from other texts. Quotation from, citation of, and reference to other texts are clear examples, whereas the use of phrasing, style and metaphor originating in other texts may be more opaque, yet equally revealing. The impact of intertextuality, used as a technique for particular construction, representation and projection of preferred meanings, can be used to support, reinforce and legitimize the argument of the writer. The careful selection and editing of 'borrowed' texts, and the use of other genres and discourses can help the author's argument to appear more credible. For example, reference to other texts, directly through quotation or indirectly through paraphrasing, can imply a connection to 'reality' and, therefore, that the author's claims are 'true'. Key figures, such as politicians, academics, professionals etc., are often referred to as their status is used to imply a legitimising respectability.

Their presence supports the claim that the writer's assertions are 'true'. Consider the way in which academic authors add credibility to their claims through the use of quotation, citation of key research literature, and references to key academic figures. It's as though they are telling the reader 'not only do I think this but these important people do as well'. Quotations and references such as these are not always spurious but do need to be considered in terms of the effect they have on the reader - think about why I used the de Beauvoir quote and a reference to my own article earlier!

Adapting the frame

The Critical Literacy Frame is not meant to be a fixed framework, but can and should be adapted by users depending on their contexts, needs and interests. One recommended element of the process however would be the use of an orientation task, either in the form suggested below, or an adaptation of this, with the aim of contextualising the procedure. Prior to the actual textual analysis, I feel it is useful to engage and orient ourselves with a series of macro-questions, aimed at fostering a critical outlook toward text in general. These questions might serve to orient the reader towards a more critical way of thinking about the text, its terms of its genre, its authorship, its audience, its purposes, the choices made and alternatives ignored in its production, its relationship to social norms, and how these societal conditions influence the production of the text. The following are the questions that I have used, but again alternatives could be used depending on context, needs and interests.

- Is this a typical text of its type?
- Who produced this?
- Who will read it?
- Will everyone understand this text in the same way?
- Why was it produced?

- What other ways could it have been written?
- What is missing from this text?
- How does this text reflect the wider society? Does it support or challenge the status quo?
- What could we do about this text if we disagree with it?

After these questions have been addressed, a more detailed analysis of the text, along the lines suggested in my frame, could be employed.

Textual practices are social

In this article, I have tried briefly to focus on encouraging awareness of the ways in which systems of power affect people by the meanings they construct and represent. I would argue that it is valuable to investigate and elucidate how textual practices are social practices, taking place within social, historical, and political contexts. As Farahmandpur and McLaren assert:

Preparing students for critical citizenship through critical literacy deepens the roots of democracy by encouraging students to actively participate in public discourses and debates over social economic and political issues that affect everyday life in their own and neighbouring communities. In this way, students can acquire the civic courage and moral responsibility to participate in democratic life as critical social agents, becoming authors of their own history rather than being written off by history. (Farahmandpur & McLaren 2001)

This approach represents one step along such a pathway to encouraging the critical decoding and analysis of powerful texts and discourses. In turn, this can help us to investigate the way language can be used to persuade us that certain ways of thinking about the world are 'correct', and crucially to help us to put ourselves in a position to be able to do something about it.

Making Monsters - How the Press Decide Who We Love and Who We Hate

Monsters, dragons, vampires, zombies, ghosts, incubi, succubi: creatures of myth, folklore and superstition. It's easy to assume that in twenty-first century Britain, we have moved beyond the need to believe in monsters. Danuta Reah argues not.

A quick glance at the popular press will produce many examples of what looks suspiciously like monsters. Serial killers, paedophiles and terrorists are frequently depicted in terms that makes them closer to monsters than to human beings, and the more we look closely at examples of these modern 'monsters' in the press, the more these people start to look like the monsters of tradition.

It is easy to assume that because these people did dreadful things, the depictions of them in the press are no more than truthful representations. Does it matter if people are depicted as monsters? In many cases, don't their actions make them monsters? I believe it does matter, and I will explain this by outlining one case of the creation of a monster, and then look at the broader implications of this for our society.

The Power of Newspapers

Newspapers are selective in the way they report the news. They decide what the news of the day will be, report it to us, and decide what the slant on the story will be: good news or bad news? Good people or bad people? Heroes or monsters? Most of our most famous monsters are killers, but for each murderer convicted and denigrated across the front pages of newspapers, scores more are quietly tried and locked away with little fanfare.

Until recently, newspaper editors could decide with impunity who the heroes and monsters of the day could be. They could even be the same people, heroes one day, monsters the next: the parents of the still missing child Madeline McCann went from tragic heroes (parents doing everything they could to find their missing daughter) to neglectful monsters (parents who had abandoned their child and may even have killed her), even though the facts of the case remained the same. Sadly, public opinion all too often follows the lead the newspapers give.

To understand why and how this matters, we need to move back a bit - from newspapers and the minutiae of language study, to a more universal perspective.

Archetypes of Newspapers

As I have suggested above, all societies and cultures have the concept of the monster. The monster in this sense is rather like a Jungian archetype, something that exists in the collective unconscious, a primordial image that reflects basic patterns we share in common and that has existed universally from the very beginnings of civilisation.

The monster can also be found in the myths, the religions and belief systems of a culture, and in the folklore, the encoding of cultural mores and history in narrative, song and dance. Myth and folklore of all cultures contain gods, heroes and monsters. The archetype of the monster - the universal, recurring images, patterns and motifs that represent monsters - remain constant.

Grendel - an Early Monster

Let's look at a very early monster and a more recent one.

The poem Beowulf exists in one surviving manuscript, dated around the late tenth or early eleventh century. It was composed much earlier and handed down through oral tradition. It recounts the exploits of the hero, Beowulf, and in part his battle with the monster, Grendel.

The first appearance of Grendel, as he approaches the king's hall of Heorot to kill the king's men shows us a monster we can all recognise.

*á cóm of more
Grendel gongan
under misthleoum
godes yrre bær...
ligge gelícost
him of éagum stód
léoht unfaéger...
Né æt se áglæca
ac hé geféng hrae
slaépendne rinc
bát bánlocan·
synsnaédum swealh
unlyfigendes
fét ond folma
yldan óhte
forman síe
slát unwearnum
blód édrum dranc
sóna hæfde
ealgefeormod*

Then came from the moor under the banks of mist Grendel walking, he bore God's anger...from his eyes issued, like a flame, a horrible light... The monster did not think to delay but he quickly grasped at the first opportunity a sleeping warrior, tore greedily, bit into the bone-locks, drank the blood from the veins, swallowed great chunks; soon he had devoured the unliving one, feet and hands. Grendel lives in an isolated, cursed mere. It is secret, guarded by wolf-infested slopes. The mere is dark, and no one knows how deep it is.

Dracula

A more recent monster is the vampire (currently undergoing a rehabilitation from monster to dark hero in its recent depictions in Buffy The Vampire Slayer, the Twilight series and the True Blood TV series). Here is the vampire as true monster in Bram Stoker's Dracula.

Within, stood a tall old man, clean-shaven save for a long, white moustache, and clad in black from head to foot, without a single speck of colour about him anywhere. He held in his hand an antique silver lamp, in which the flame burned without chimney or globe of any kind, throwing long quivering shadows as it flickered in the draught of the open door. The old man motioned me in with his right hand with a courtly gesture, saying in excellent English, but with a strange intonation:

'Welcome to my house! Enter freely and of your own will!' He made no motion of stepping to meet me, but stood like a statue, as though his gesture of welcome had fixed him into stone. The instant, however, that I had stepped over the threshold, he moved impulsively forward, and holding out his hand grasped mine with a strength which made me wince, an effect which was not lessened by the fact that it seemed as cold as ice - more like the hand of a dead than a living man.

Dracula and Grendel

What do Dracula and Grendel have in common?

- First of all, their appearance. Dracula is clad in black, with no trace of colour about him. He is described as more like a dead man than a living one. Grendel has flames issuing from his eyes.
- They are creatures of the night. Both Grendel and Dracula first appear in darkness. Grendel comes from under the 'mist slopes'; Dracula is in his castle at night. Both of them show supernatural powers.
- Dracula's castle is isolated, a long way from any settlements of civilisation. Grendel's mere, too, has these qualities. Monsters are outcasts.
- Monsters can also be identified by their actions. Grendel tears men apart and eats them alive, Dracula, we find out later, drains the blood from his victims and steals their souls. Monsters are frequently associated with perverse sexuality. This is not an aspect of Grendel, but Dracula is depicted as having a sexual hold over his female victims. Incubi and succubi, for example, are sexual predators.

Shared Understandings

Writers have made use of our awareness of monsters for centuries. The monsters of literature share the same qualities from the snake of Genesis to the creatures of the Alien films. Writers can rely on our shared understanding to create meaning. Newspapers, like fictional texts, make use of shared archetypes. By drawing on these, they can make implied claims about their subjects that can be hard to challenge.

A Case Study - Chris Jeffries

In Bristol in December 2010, a young woman, Joanna Yeates, was murdered. Joanna Yeates' disappearance happened close to Christmas, and there were CCTV pictures of her last movements on her way home before she vanished. She was an attractive young woman. The newspapers fell on the story.

In the course of their investigations, the police suspected, and subsequently arrested, Joanna Yeates' landlord, Chris Jeffries. Newspaper reports of the arrest pre-empted the process of justice, and created a monster.

The following descriptions of Chris Jeffries are taken from reports in The Daily Mail and The Telegraph. In The Daily Mail, Chris Jeffries is described as 'Wearing a long coat with fur collar.' Both newspapers quote an ex-student who described him as 'flamboyant' and as having 'blue hair' or 'a blue rinse.' None of this descriptive detail is relevant to the actual news: the story of a young woman's murder and the arrest of a suspect. They serve to suggest Chris Jeffries' appearance is odd or different. A photograph of him taken at the time shows that his 'long coat with a fur collar' is actually an everyday anorak and unremarkable.

Monsters have very specific attributes and associations. They are linked with darkness and the night, and they are associated with sexual deviation and predation.

The Daily Mail makes the point that Chris Jeffries was arrested in 'a dawn raid,' and describes him as 'a luminary' which means a person of prominence, but can also mean a celestial object, which is more likely to be visible at night. Both newspapers emphasise the fact the Chris Jeffries is solitary. This is mentioned in both papers more than once. The Daily Mail describes him as 'a bachelor' and as 'an only child' who 'never married.' The Telegraph uses several interview quotes that describe him as 'a confirmed bachelor' (which is an old-fashioned euphemism for homosexual). The Telegraph also uses quotes that describe him as 'eccentric' and 'odd.'

Both news reports make a point of his interest in the poems of Christina Rossetti. Rossetti was a poet closely associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Rossetti's best-known poem, *Goblin Market*, is a depiction of the erotic enslavement of a young girl by monsters (goblins).

Chris Jeffries, in these articles, is a creature associated with the night. His appearance is strange and unnatural. He is solitary and he has a close interest in, or association with, a depiction of perverse eroticism. There may be an indirect claim that he is gay, a sexuality still seen by some as perverse or 'wrong'. In other words, Chris Jeffries is a monster.

Pragmatic Analysis - 'Claimed'

It is not just in the descriptions of Jeffries and his actions that a monster is created. The newspapers were not allowed to state directly that he was a murderer, but language is endlessly fluid in the way it creates meanings. Jeffries was arrested after he gave information to the police about an event he had witnessed. Both newspapers use the verb 'claimed' in relation to this statement. The Daily Mail says that Jeffries 'claimed' he had seen people leaving Joanna Yeates' flat, The Daily Telegraph said he 'claimed' newspaper accounts of his statement gave a distorted version of this. The verb 'claim' carries presuppositions as to the truth of an utterance. To say that someone 'claims' something presupposes that the truth of the utterance is, at the very least, doubtful. Compare the difference between 'He claimed he saw something' and 'He said he saw something.'

Grice's Maxim Flouted

Both newspapers flout the co-operative principle proposed by the philosopher Paul Grice. Grice suggested that, in conversation, participants will co-operate with each other when making their contributions. The co-operative principle contains four maxims. If these are openly and obviously flouted, then this adds meaning by creating implicature.

As has been discussed above, Jeffries' solitary life is repeatedly referred to, in particular his marital state. He is a 'bachelor' and 'a confirmed bachelor.' The Daily Mail describes him as a bachelor twice, and also says he 'never married.' The Telegraph describes him as a 'confirmed bachelor' twice.

Grice's co-operative principle contains the maxim of quantity: make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Both newspapers openly flout this maxim. This carries the implicature that there is something significant about Jeffries' unmarried state. This significance can then be linked to the murder of an attractive young woman, a murder that was almost certainly a sexually motivated killing.

Further implicature is contained in The Daily Mail article in quotes attributed to the current Principal of the college where Chris Jeffries used to work:

Mr Moore (the college principal) said there were no records of disciplinary proceedings against the former member of staff. 'There was nothing in his record at all and he took early retirement, which he is perfectly entitled to do,' he said.

The lack of anything discreditable in Chris Jeffries' record is repeated twice. First the newspaper reports it, then it quotes the current principal as saying it. The quote goes on to talk about Chris Jeffries' early retirement with the further comment 'which he was perfectly entitled to do.' This is further qualified by a brief outline of the circumstances.

When a new head of English came into the school he decided to bow out at that point.

There is no need to tell the reader that Jeffries was entitled to take early retirement. This is hardly an unusual or controversial act. The fact that the Principal is shown emphasising this twice flouts the maxim of quantity again. Implicature is created by the unnecessary repetition that draws the reader into inferring there was something doubtful about the way Chris Jeffries left the college.

Why it Matters

Chris Jeffries was never charged with the murder of Joanna Yeates. A few weeks later, a resident of another flat in the building was arrested, tried and convicted. Chris Jeffries was innocent.

Does it matter when newspapers create a monster? It's clearly important when an innocent person is misrepresented in this way. Eight newspapers, including The Daily Mail (but not The Daily Telegraph) had to pay damages to Chris Jeffries because of their reporting. But what about when someone is

guilty? Does it matter that men like Ian Huntley or women like Myra Hindley are depicted as monsters?

It does, because they are not monsters, they are human beings. We need to remember the actions human beings are capable of. We need to remember that in certain situations, human beings are often more likely to commit evil acts than to stand firm for good. It's easier, when reading about the massacres of the 1939-45 war, the terrorist attacks of 9-11, the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, to think these were the isolated acts of monsters. But this is not the case. They were the actions of human beings.

We need to remember: this is a human being, and sometimes, this is what human beings do.

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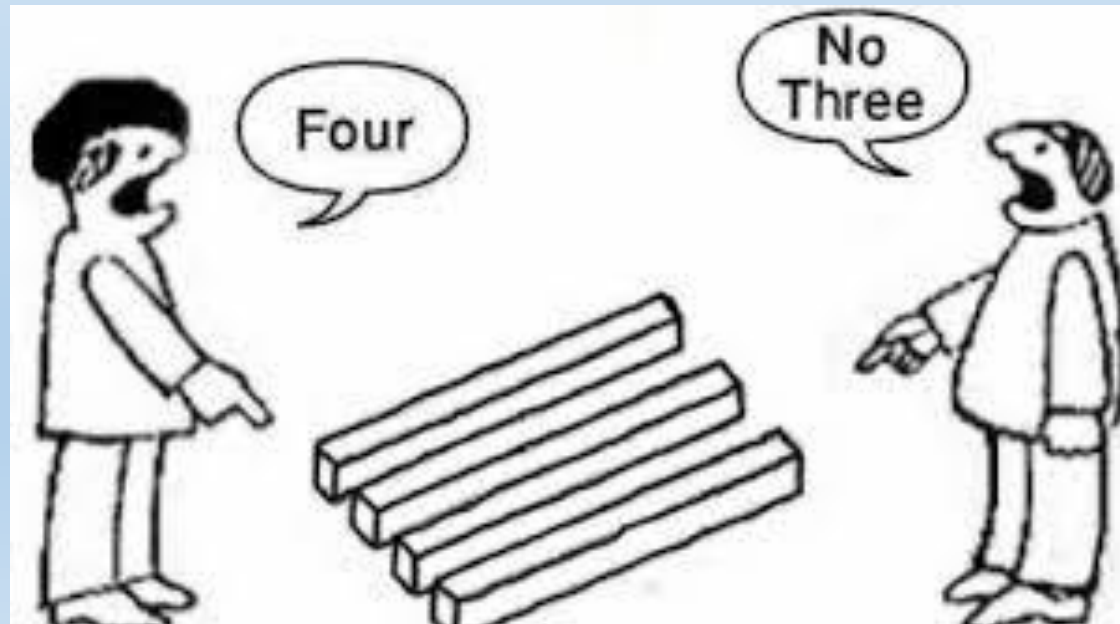
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Stuart Hall

Representation Theory

All texts are **polysemic**, which means that they can be **understood in a number of ways by different people**.

For example, when my grandad sees a picture of a female, he might think 'mother' or 'wife'. Whereas, when I see a picture of a female, I am more likely to think 'teacher' or 'professional'.



According to Stuart Hall, producers encode messages and audiences decode them. Different people are likely to decode the message in different ways.

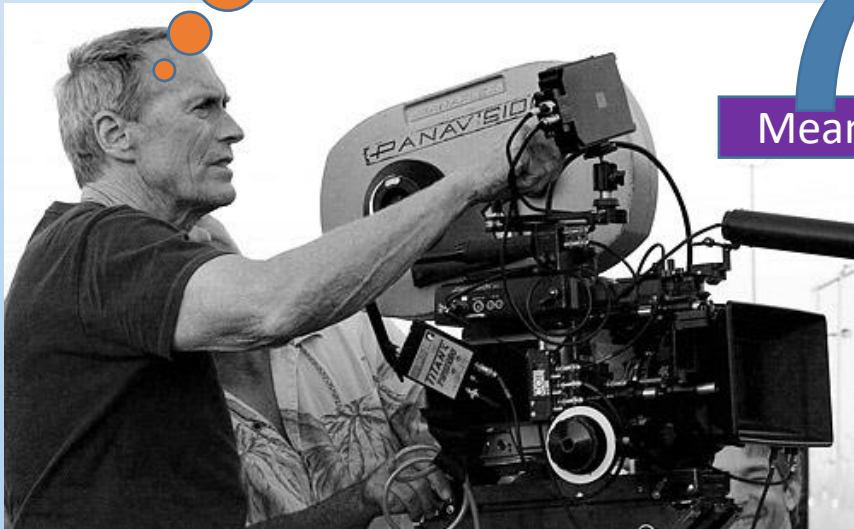
He also thinks that **stereotypes** act as a **cultural short hand** (they make things easier for us to understand).

Encoding and decoding (Stuart Hall)

What do I want audiences to think about this girl?
How do I **want** to represent her?

The encoded and decoded messages *can* be the same, but this is not always the case.

What do **we** think about this girl? Do **we** like her?
Do **we** think she is presented fairly?



Producers **ENCODE** messages. Sender.

Meaning



Meaning



The decoding process can be split into dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings.

Audiences **DECODE** messages. Receivers.

According to Stuart Hall audiences decode (understand) texts in different ways.

Dominant/preferred reading – when the audience decode the text, they **accept the intended** meaning of the text.

Negotiated reading – when audiences decode the text, they **partly reject and accept** the intended message.

Oppositional reading – when the audience decode the text, they **reject** the intended message.

Applying Hall's readings to this text

Dominant/preferred reading – audiences who have a preferred reading of this product may be attracted to the perfume and think that it can help them become more attractive.

Negotiated – audiences with a negotiated reading would recognise that this product sexualises women, but may still think it can help them become slightly more appealing.

Oppositional – audiences who have an oppositional reading may think that this product sexualises women and therefore would not want to buy the product.



Also, according to Stuart Hall audiences perceive representations in the media in different ways.

Reflective view – audiences with a reflective view would think that what we see and hear in the media reflects/**mirrors real life**.

Intentional view - audiences with the intentional view would think that what we see and hear in the media is **created by producers** and conveys their intentions and messages.

Constructionist view – audiences with a constructionist view would think that **producers alter** the representations of what we see and hear in the media, but it is **based on real life**.

Applying Hall's approaches to this product

Reflective view – audiences with a reflective view would think that men are now involved in household chores in real life.

Intentional view - audiences with the intentional view would think that producers have used a male protagonist to sell their product to attract a male audience; women still have a domestic role.

Constructionist view – audiences with a constructionist view would think that men and women do both fulfil domestic roles, but the advert has chosen a male to appeal to male audience.



Stuart Hall's Representation theory

Not only does Hall explore how audiences can respond to a text, he also looks at how people, places and things are **represented**.

He thinks that stereotypes are used as a **cultural short-hand**.

His 3 main ideas are:

Stereotypes are used (and probably created) by the media.

1. A stereotype is an **over-simplified** representation.
2. Stereotypes are caused by **power imbalances**.
3. People who are often represented as being '**other**' are **usually more stereotyped** than people in power.

Watch this video clip to help explain Hall's ideas: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxK5CXfKSCI>