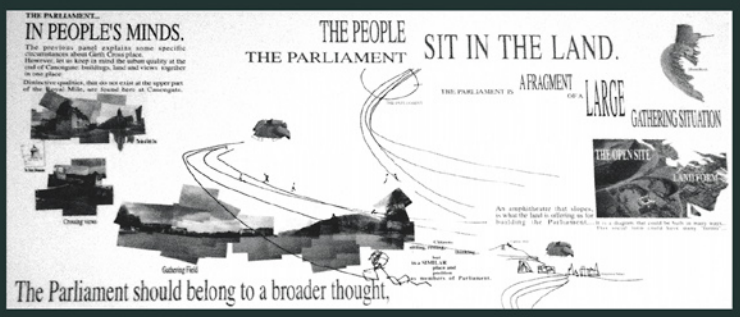
Thomas A. Markus and
Deborah Cameron

The Words Between the Spaces

Buildings and Language



Architext

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The Words Between the Spaces

Using language—speaking and understanding it—is a defining ability of human beings, woven into all human activity. It is therefore inevitable that it should be deeply implicated in the design, production and use of buildings. Building legislation, design guides, competition and other briefs, architectural criticism, teaching and scholarly material, and the media all produce their characteristic texts. When these prescribe what is to be built then, in a sense, they can be said to 'design' the eventual building. When they describe what is already built they are formative of our judgement and responses.

The authors of this book, one a linguist, the other an architect and historian, examine how such texts relate to issues of national identity, power structures, the creation of heritage, and the evaluation of projects by professional and lay critics. The role of images in these texts is crucial and is discussed in detail. The authors use texts about such projects as Berlin's new Reichstag, Scotland's new Parliament, and the Auschwitz concentration camp museum to clarify the interaction between texts, design, critical debate and response.

Texts such as Prince Charles's *A Vision of Britain* and the 1919 Tudor Walters Report on 'Housing for the Working Classes' had a wide influence on thinking, debate and, ultimately, on what was built and what was left unbuilt. Through a close reading of these and other texts, the authors examine how the underlying ideological forces worked through language. Finally, they discuss how questions about language and texts might influence both the teaching and the practice of architecture.

T**homas A.Markus** is Emeritus Professor of the University of Strathclyde and Jubilee Professor of Chalmers University of Technology, Göteborg and **Deborah Cameron** is Professor of Languages at the Institute of Education, London University.

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Foreword

The book you are about to read brings together two fields of study that are rarely combined in a systematic way and may be rather unlike other books you have read. The two fields in question are architecture, the study of buildings and the built environment and discourse analysis, a branch of linguistics which studies language as it is actually used in real-world contexts. In this book, we explore how language is used, and what it does, in the particular context of writing and talking about buildings. Our title, *The Words Between the Spaces,* is meant to draw attention to the significance of language for our understanding of the built environment.

Writing a book on this subject requires expert knowledge about both buildings and language. Few individuals are equally knowledgeable about both, and we are no exception to that generalization. One of us (Thomas Markus) is an architect, the other (Deborah Cameron) a linguist. In writing this book, we have each brought our own specialized knowledge to bear on our chosen topic. Our discussions over a long period have produced a set of ideas and arguments which 'belong' to both of us equally, and for that reason we use the pronoun 'we' throughout the book. At the same time, however, our respective contributions to the book do reflect our differing areas of expertise. It takes many years to learn the special way of looking at buildings, or language, which distinguishes the trained architect, or linguist, from the layperson. Inevitably, then, the two of us—respectively an architect and a linguist—approach questions of architecture and language from different directions, and use different analytic tools to examine those questions. The linguist does not have the architect's command of architectural theory and history, nor can she interpret a plan, say, with the same ease and insight he can. The architect, conversely, is less practised than the linguist in noticing the intricate patterns made by grammar in a text or discerning its generic structure. The two have different stores of background knowledge, and different technical terminologies. Our skills, in short, are complementary rather than identical, and that is also reflected in the way the book is written. We have not tried to produce a seamless text that reads like the product of a single mind; readers will probably be able to guess which of us was primarily responsible for which parts of the text. [1]

Another thing that will be evident to the reader of this book is its authors' cultural location. The texts and buildings we use as examples in the chapters that follow are, overall, a fairly diverse collection: our discussion deals with built structures in, for instance, China, England, France, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Poland, Scotland, Sweden and the USA. However, a rather significant proportion of our case studies come from England and Scotland, the countries where we ourselves are located. Sometimes, too, the texts we analyse were actually produced in the UK, even though they are about buildings located elsewhere. Since we are writing for an international audience, constructing

arguments which, we hope and believe, are applicable to discourse about architecture in many societies rather than just the UK, the seeming insularity of our choices requires some explanation.

To begin with, we should point out one obvious constraint on our choice of texts: language itself. Discourse analysis is not only concerned with the *content* of texts, *what* they say, but also and importantly with *how* they say it: the details of their organization, grammar and vocabulary. Since these details are often lost in translation, this kind of analysis can only be carried out on texts in a language the analyst understands well. Between them, the authors of this book are able to read several languages, but since we cannot assume all our readers share any single language other than English, we have generally avoided presenting any detailed analyses of texts that are not in English. (In Chapter 7, which is concerned with the relationship of language and images, we do discuss one French text. We also refer in Chapter 2 to various historical texts originally written in languages other than English, such as Latin and French, but we do not analyse the language of these texts closely.)

English is, of course, an international language: not all our English-language texts come from countries where English is the first language of the majority of the population, nor were they all produced specifically for an audience of native speakers of English. For example, one of the buildings we discuss in Chapter 3 is the headquarters of the Scandinavian airline company SAS, which is located outside Stockholm in Sweden. The literature we analyse relating to this building was also produced in Sweden—but in English, which is widely spoken and routinely used for a range of purposes in Scandinavia. In Chapter 6 we examine texts relating to the Auschwitz museum which now exists on the site of the former Nazi concentration camp in Poland. Again, these texts were produced in English, addressed to an international audience of visitors to the museum and/or its website. So, confining ourselves to texts in the English language does not have to mean, and in this book does not mean, confining ourselves to the textual products of a single nation or culture. On the other hand, it does prevent us from choosing examples from those parts of the world where languages other than English are dominant—China and Latin America, for example, where the relevant texts would be likely to be written in (respectively) Chinese and Spanish or Portuguese. [2]

A bias towards English-language texts is one thing, but what about our decision to make such extensive use of *British* examples, rather than, say, examples from Australia, Canada, India, Singapore and the USA? This is, in part, a question of cultural knowledge—the analysis of discourse calls for an extensive knowledge of the context in which it is produced and read—and also it is a question of access to textual data. Among the textual genres we have found it particularly illuminating to analyse are kinds of writing that do not usually circulate in the public domain (for instance, briefing documents relating to privately commissioned buildings, such as the call centre which we discuss in Chapter 4). To obtain relevant texts, we sometimes had to use professional contacts with particular institutions or architectural practices, and these on the whole were ‘local’ (i.e. British) contacts—though in some cases they reflected the involvement of the author who is an architect in European networks. In addition, it is often helpful to analyse a selection of different texts relating to a single building (e.g. the competition

brief, the jury's report, press coverage of the competition and its outcome, popular and scholarly assessments of the merits of the finished building, etc.). Again, it is far easier to collect this material systematically when the analyst is 'on the spot'.

In fact, our choice of material for this book was quite strongly influenced by circumstances specific to the time and place of its composition. When we began work on it, we both lived and worked in the city of Glasgow in the west of Scotland: at that time and for several years afterwards, it happened that public discussion in both Scotland and Britain more generally was intensely preoccupied with architectural issues. Our home city of Glasgow was preparing for a year-long festival of architecture and design, Glasgow 1999; Scotland's new Parliament building was the subject of a major architectural competition ; in the capital of the United Kingdom, London, plans were underway to mark the year 2000 with a series of new and striking built structures along the River Thames. For us, these initiatives were particularly useful, because they generated a steady stream of discourse—both expert and popular, in a range of styles and genres—about buildings and the built environment. For certain buildings, such as the Scottish Parliament and London's Millennium Dome, it was possible to compile over time a massive archive of writing about them, spanning every phase of planning and design (sometimes construction too), and representing every conceivable point of view on their merits. We were well placed to accumulate this material, and we make use of it in several chapters of this book.

There is a bias towards *written* language in the materials we have chosen to analyse, and the reader may wonder why. Was relevant spoken data not, in principle, equally available to us, and equally of interest? Certainly we can think of spoken discourse genres that would have made interesting examples for analysis, such as the deliberations of competition juries or the discussions that take place between architects and clients. But this kind of discourse is most often produced behind closed doors, in private rather than in public, and is therefore difficult for researchers to access. It is true, as we have already noted, that some of the written texts we analyse were not produced for public circulation either; but persuading people to let you see a copy of a 'private' document—so long as it is not highly confidential—is usually easier than persuading them to let you record their private spoken interactions. Apart from being difficult to negotiate, the recording and subsequent transcription of non-public speech is also very time consuming, and in the event we decided not to attempt it: our few spoken examples come from 'public' sources, mainly the broadcast media. That should not be taken to imply, however, that we consider talk about buildings unimportant. Rather, investigating it in detail has proved to be beyond the scope of this particular project.

In addition to material from our own time and place, we have made some use of historical examples, such as the brief for an early nineteenth century lunatic asylum and an official report on housing produced in the early twentieth century. The value of these examples obviously does not lie in their practical significance for architects working today. We have chosen them, rather, because they provide very clear examples of our general thesis concerning the relationship between language, social and spatial structures (in the examples just given, for instance, those associated with gender and social class). We also explore this relationship in our analyses of contemporary cases such as the

European workspaces and the Japanese housing development we discuss in Chapters 3 and 4, and some of the heritage monuments we examine in Chapter 6 (where issues of race/ ethnicity and nationality are relevant as well). But it can sometimes be easier to 'see' the kinds of structures we are concerned with when the social and spatial categories they are built around (e.g. different kinds of 'lunatics', domestic spaces like 'parlour' and 'scullery') are *not* part of your own, taken-for-granted reality. Historical examples are useful, in other words, because our distance from the past they belong to makes them seem more abstract, and so helps us to grasp general principles which we can then apply to contemporary cases. Often in this book we follow this logic by starting with a historical example and moving on to analyse present-day examples in more detail.

We recognize, of course, that even our present-day examples will not be equally familiar or 'relevant' to everyone. Something like the Scottish Parliament building is unlikely to be a major topic of discussion among readers located in Seattle or in Seoul. But the aim of this book is not to inform readers about the details of particular buildings, nor indeed do we claim that all the buildings we discuss are especially interesting or significant, socially or architecturally. Our examples are exactly that—examples. We use them to exemplify the point that buildings, and our experiences or perceptions of buildings, are shaped in important ways by the language that is used *about* buildings. It is an argument which we believe to be generally applicable, across languages, cultures and contexts. We have illustrated it with examples reflecting our own knowledge and interests, which are inevitably 'partial' in both senses of the word. However, we hope that our readers, wherever they are located, will be inspired to apply the same approach to examples reflecting their own experiences and concerns—to the textual conventions of their own languages and the architectural traditions of their own cultures. If *The Words Between the Spaces* enables readers to go beyond our specific examples and make meaningful connections between language and architecture in a range of social and cultural contexts, then we will have achieved our main purpose in writing this book.

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Before we started writing we were given the opportunity by two people to collaborate on two projects—both of which convinced us that we actually *could* work together. The first was a joint presentation we made in the Glasgow Film Theatre to staff and students of the Glasgow School of Art on the Burrell Gallery. This was the result of an invitation from Roger Palmer of the School of Art. The second was a joint article commissioned by Pat Kane of *The* (Glasgow) *Herald*, on the competition for the Scottish Parliament building. To both of these we remain grateful.

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Of course the views about these buildings, designs or briefs are entirely our own, and cannot be attributed to any of the people we have named. But their ready help is gratefully acknowledged.

Chapter 1:
Why Language Matters

Language is a neglected subject in discussions of architecture, which is conventionally regarded as a visual rather than verbal activity. 'Architects', observes theorist and practitioner Ellen Dunham-Jones, 'tend to refer to themselves as visual people' (1997:16). This professional self-image is faithfully reflected in popular representations of architects, which typically show them poring over plans, making drawings and models, or manipulating images on computer screens. But in reality, architects' work is both visual *and* verbal: language plays some part in almost everything they do.

This point is underlined by Dana Cuff's detailed study of architectural practice (Cuff 1992), for which she observed and interviewed numerous professionals and students. In training, she notes, students are encouraged to spend long hours in the studio, where they do not only draw, but also talk with instructors and each other; at regular intervals they face 'crits' delivered by architect-teachers in the medium of spoken language. In practice, the talking continues. Cuff cites findings showing that the average architect has only about half an hour a day when his or her work is uninterrupted by some kind of interaction (the architects she spoke to herself thought this an overestimate). Even the most 'creative', schematic design phase of a project rarely matches the idealized picture in which a solitary designer spends long silent hours at the drawing board. Making a building is a collaborative process which involves continual dialogue—with clients, with colleagues, with other professionals like engineers and landscapers, with building contractors. Cuff aptly describes what goes on in these interactions as 'constructing a word-and-sketch building' (1992:97). She also makes clear how much *written* language is produced in any architectural project. Meetings are recorded in memos and minutes; letters may have to be written to various authorities and community representatives; agreements and contracts must be drawn up. Other texts to which architects may refer include building and planning regulations, briefs or building programmes, design guides and handbooks. Many of these texts are linguistically dense and complex, with a high proportion of verbal to visual material.

The observation that language pervades architectural practice is in one sense very obvious and banal. Everyone knows that architects must talk to clients, hold meetings with contractors, write memos, read planning regulations, and so on. But although architects may spend a lot of time actually engaged in these activities, few would spend much time reflecting on them. Whereas architects are expected to reflect on issues of design in a way that might be called 'abstract', 'theoretical' or 'analytic', they are not expected or encouraged to reflect in the same way on issues of language and its relationship to design. Language may be all around them, but it remains very much a

background phenomenon, a part of what the ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel called the ‘seen but unnoticed’ of everyday life.

In this book, our aim is to place language in the foreground: to ‘notice’ as well as ‘see’ what role it plays in the making of buildings. We argue that the language used to speak and write about the built environment plays a significant role in shaping that environment, and our responses to it. We try to show that reflecting systematically on language can yield insight into the buildings we have now, and the ones we may create in future.

The significance we claim for language in relation to the built environment is a function of its significance in human affairs more generally. Natural languages [1] are the richest symbolic systems to which human beings have access, and the main purposes for which we use language are fundamental to the kind of creatures we are. One of those purposes is, of course, communication with other people. Humans are not telepathic, and it is mainly by way of language that we are able to get more than a rudimentary sense of what is going on in another person’s mind. But we also use language as an aid to our own thinking, whether or not we communicate our thoughts to others. [2]

Both these functions of language are relevant to the activities of designing and making buildings. True, language is not the only symbolic system involved: architects need to make mathematical calculations, and to represent form and space in drawings and models of various kinds. But they also need to use language to conceptualize what they are doing and convey it to others (given that making a building is typically a collaborative process). We say, ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’, but people rarely communicate, or think, in pictures alone; if called upon to elaborate the meaning of a picture or a mathematical formula—or, as we shall see, a building—they will use language.

Architects, like many other professionals, make use of linguistic resources developed over time for the purpose of reflecting, in speech and writing, on the phenomena which are their distinctive concerns. Architecture has its own linguistic *register* (the term used by linguists to denote a set of conventions for language-use tailored to some particular situation or institution—other examples include ‘legalese’ and ‘journalese’). One obvious feature of the register of architecture is the extensive technical vocabulary architects must learn in the course of their training. Learning what words to use is every bit as necessary as learning how to draw plans, calculate loads or use computer software for modelling; for the technical vocabulary of architecture is not merely a convenient shorthand, it is a system for thinking with. It provides the classificatory schemes which enable architects to ‘see’ as they do—and, importantly, as other architects do. Professional registers are often criticized as mystifying jargon whose main purpose is to exclude outsiders; but while that may indeed be one of their functions, they also allow a professional community’s accumulated knowledge to be codified and transmitted in precise detail. In architecture as in medicine or law, ‘learning the language’ is inseparable from mastering the craft as a whole.

But when we claim that language plays a significant part in the theory and practice of architecture, we are not thinking only about technical terminology. Architects do not interact only with other architects, nor are the buildings they create expressions of some unique inner vision which need not be discussed with anyone else. As most introductory

texts point out early on, architecture is a ‘social art’. Any practice which is social must have a verbal component too, given that language provides humans with their primary means of social interaction.

Language-using is itself a form of social practice: as such it is implicated in the reproduction of the beliefs, relationships, attitudes and values that exist in a given society—and also, of course, in attempts to challenge the status quo. In other words, language is not simply a neutral vehicle for conveying factual information. All natural languages provide their users with multiple ways to represent the same object, state, event or process; the expression of differing perspectives on reality, just as much as the communication of facts about the world, appears to be among the purposes that language evolved to serve. The linguistic choices speakers and writers make can cue hearers and readers to make certain inferences about the meaning of an utterance or text, and these go beyond its purely informational content. Often, as we will see later on, they are ideologically significant, implicitly presupposing certain values and social relations. While they remain implicit and unnoticed, these presuppositions are difficult to resist or challenge. Noticed and made explicit, however, they can become objects of critical scrutiny.

Encouraging readers to take a critical position, both on language and on buildings, is an important goal of this book. Following Markus (1993), we regard buildings as primarily social objects (i.e. not just aesthetic or technical ones) which can and should be subjected to social critique. There are a number of issues this kind of critique may focus on. For instance, it may focus on the way a building’s design reproduces particular kinds of social and power relations among its various categories of users (e.g. managers and workers in a factory building or staff and visitors in a museum). It may focus on the kinds of activities and social encounters a building design facilitates, and what other activities and encounters it makes difficult or impossible. It may also focus on the capacity of a design to endorse —overtly or covertly—certain social values (e.g. ‘privacy’ or ‘community’) at the expense of alternatives.

Various tools have been developed for thinking critically about the social workings of buildings, many involving direct analysis of their form and the way they organize space. We want to suggest that the analysis of language is also a useful tool for understanding buildings as social objects. Texts [3] about buildings often turn out to be a source for the social, political and ideological values which other critical techniques reveal by analysing buildings directly. In this book, we will treat the analysis of buildings and the analysis of texts about them as complementary approaches to the same project. By focusing on the texts, we hope to alert readers to their non-obvious or ‘hidden’ meanings. Where appropriate, we will also show how these meanings emerge in actual buildings.

Because we want readers to be able to replicate the kinds of analyses we offer, we are not going to use a highly formal and technical linguistic apparatus. But some linguistic apparatus will be necessary, because the linguistic patterns which produce certain effects are not necessarily evident from a surface reading. Identifying them requires a deeper analysis, one which is attentive to linguistic form as well as content, and to regularities which manifest themselves across whole texts and sets of texts. At this point, therefore, we must spend a little time clarifying, for the benefit of readers with no specialist

knowledge about language and linguistics, what we do and do not mean by those terms.

‘LANGUAGE’ AND ‘LINGUISTICS’: BEYOND STRUCTURALISM AND SEMIOTICS

At the beginning of this chapter we said that language is a neglected topic in discussions of architecture. Some readers may have found this claim puzzling, for it is certainly not true that the subject of language goes unmentioned in architectural writing. On the contrary, it has long been commonplace for writers and theorists to make comparisons and analogies between architecture and language. In his book *Words and Buildings*, the architectural historian Adrian Forty devotes a whole chapter to language metaphors in architectural discourse, which he subcategorizes under six main headings (Forty 2000, Ch. 4). [4] He mentions, for example, the idea that works of architecture are ‘texts’ that can be ‘read’, tracing it back as far as Quatremère de Quincy’s 1803 essay *De l’Architecture Egyptienne*. This analogy, essentially between buildings and literary works, has been reinf lected over time, but is still a familiar one. Another productive metaphor compares architecture to grammar rather than literature, suggesting that buildings, like sentences, are constructed by combining a set of formal elements according to a set of formal rules. Forty traces this idea back to 1802, when Durand published his influential teaching text, *Précis des Leçons d’Architecture;* he comments that the analogy had obvious attractions for educators charged with producing competent professionals in a relatively short time. However, the ‘grammar’ analogy has also attracted historians and critics. It is developed systematically in such works as John Summerson’s *The Classical Language of Architecture* (1963), and Charles Jencks’s *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (1977), which includes chapters actually entitled ‘Words’, ‘Syntax’ and ‘Semantics’. [5]

The ‘architecture as grammar’ metaphor prefigures, and in more recent works such as Jencks’s, overlaps with, what is probably the most important linguistic analogy of recent times: the application to architecture of ideas developed in the early twentieth century by Ferdinand de Saussure in Europe and C.S. Peirce in the USA under the headings of ‘structuralism’ (Saussure) and ‘semiotics’ (Peirce). [6] As Adrian Forty notes (2000:80), ‘Strictly speaking, semiotics and structuralism propose language not as a metaphor for architecture, but rather that architecture *is* a language.’ We want to make clear straight away that this is not our own position. But we are aware that the structuralist equation of architecture and language has been influential (as well as controversial): we recognize that many readers will find it ‘natural’ to approach a book which announces its subject as ‘buildings and language’ with the assumptions of structuralism in mind. To make our position clear, therefore, we must explain how and why it differs from the structuralist position. That entails giving some preliminary attention to what structuralism says about language, and how the principles of structuralist linguistics have been applied to the domain of architecture.

The pioneer of structuralism, Ferdinand de Saussure, was a Swiss linguist who had been trained in the comparative-historical methods of nineteenth century philology; his major achievement, however, was to develop an alternative to those methods, which

subsequently became the basis for the modern discipline of linguistics. The great work which bears his name, the *Cours de Linguistique Générale (Course in General Linguistics)*, was not written by Saussure, but reconstructed from his students' lecture notes after his death and published in 1916. The *Cours* elaborated a method for studying the structure of a single language at a single historical moment: 'synchronic' analysis, as opposed to the 'diachronic' (historical) approach that had previously prevailed. He proposed that a language could be regarded as a self-contained system of signs (it is easiest, though something of an oversimplification, to equate 'signs' with 'words' for the purpose of following Saussure's reasoning here). Signs are entities composed of a signifier (a form, like the sound sequence /kæt/, 'cat') and a signified (a concept, e.g. 'feline domestic animal'). The link between signifier and signified is not natural but arbitrary (in French the same signified is paired with the signifier *chat*, in Hungarian with *macska*, and so on). Arbitrary signs work not by corresponding directly to things in the world, but by contrasting with one another. A sign-system in other words is a system of differences, in which the individual signs acquire meaning by contrast with other signs.

The most immediately graspable illustrations of this principle are not, ironically, linguistic at all. In introductory textbooks a popular example is the sign system used for traffic signals: red means stop, green means go. Although they have become so familiar that they may seem 'natural', the meanings of red and green in this system are in fact arbitrary—designers could have reversed them, or used blue and yellow instead. [7] The point is not their substance but the difference between them. Another simple example of a sign system might be the coins in a system of currency. On its own, a nickel (say) is entirely meaningless and valueless; its value can only be determined with reference to the whole system and by contrast with other terms in that system (a nickel is worth half as much as a dime, a fifth as much as a quarter, a twentieth of a dollar…). These contrasts only operate within the relevant 'code', in this case the US monetary system.

Saussure understood that the principles he was outlining applied to systems other than languages, and he suggested that linguistics would in time come to be regarded as part of a more general 'science of signs' which he called 'semiology', though nowadays a more common term in English is 'semiotics', which was the label used by Peirce. This insight was taken up by theorists in various disciplines outside linguistics, who pointed out that many cultural phenomena can plausibly be regarded as sign systems, in which formal contrasts are productive of meaning. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss applied the structuralist approach to kinship systems; the critic Roland Barthes applied it to literary texts and to the 'fashion system'. And it has also been applied to architecture and its products (buildings, cities).

As a number of writers have pointed out, architecture is a challenging case for this approach, because, in the words of the semiotician Umberto Eco (1986:57): 'apparently most architectural objects do not *communicate* (and are not designed to communicate), but *function*'. It might seem then that the meaning these objects convey is confined to a rather simple denotation of their primary use: a roof denotes covering, a stair the possibility of movement up and down. However, Eco argues that architectural objects also have, in common with other primarily functional human artefacts (e.g. clothing, whose primary function is to cover the body), a series of secondary 'connotative' or

symbolic meanings. He gives the example of Gothic architectural styles connoting 'religiosity', a meaning which depends on associations between the vertical emphasis of a Gothic structure and the elevation of the soul towards God, and between strong contrasts of light/shadow and mysticism. These associations are part of a particular 'language' or code, which is not the only one in existence: Eco suggests that the Greek temple, though formally quite distinct from a Gothic cathedral, was intended to communicate quite similar religious meanings. The temple, however, is built in a different idiom from the cathedral: the meaning 'religiosity' is tied to different formal signifiers in the Gothic and Classical architectural codes, just as the meaning 'feline domestic animal' is tied to different sequences of sounds in the English, French and Hungarian languages.

Semiotic and structuralist approaches, Adrian Forty suggests (2000:81), are 'concerned not with what things mean, but with how meaning occurs'. One basic principle, as noted already, is that meaning works by contrast: the meaning of form A is grasped through its difference from form B in a given communication system, as with the contrast between red and green lights in the traffic signal system. Eco alludes to two significant formal contrasts in relation to the Gothic cathedral: vertical versus horizontal and light versus dark. Another scholar who has used structuralist techniques, Donald Preziosi (1979), systematically analyses plans of Minoan palaces in order to identify the formal properties of what he calls their 'architectonic code': the basic elements that are found in these buildings, and the rules that govern the combination of those elements into larger spatial structures. At the level of formal analysis, that is to say identifying the formal contrasts which make up the code, it appears that the structuralist approach is readily applicable to architectural phenomena. But complications arise with the other element of the Saussurean sign, its signified, or in plainer language, the *meaning* which is conveyed by the use of form A as opposed to form B. At this point we confront the issue of whether what Preziosi calls the 'architectonic code' is capable of communicating meaning *independently*, in its own right and on its own terms. Natural languages like English and Hungarian clearly do function in this way: if someone speaks Hungarian, utterances delivered in that language do not have to be translated into any other language before they can be understood. But can the same be said about architecture? Do buildings communicate directly, in their own semiotic codes?

In his discussion of the Gothic cathedral, Umberto Eco mentions a number of historical interpretations of its connotative or symbolic meaning, dwelling in particular on the interpretation of the light/dark contrast which is offered in Suger's De rebus *in administratione sua gestis*, a twelfth century text. 'There [Suger] lets it be understood, in prose and in verse, that the light that penetrates in streams from the windows into the dark naves…must represent the very effusiveness of the divine creative energy' (Eco 1986:67). Noting that this meaning of light is referred to in various neoplatonist texts of the middle ages, Eco concludes that 'for men of the twelfth century the Gothic windows and glazing…connoted participation [in the divine essence]' (1986:67). The point of interest here is *not* whether this is the single 'correct' interpretation—as Eco points out, meaning is subject to change, and clearly, succeeding ages imposed other meanings on Gothic cathedrals (the Romantics, for example, suggested that they represented the vaults of Celtic forests). Rather, the point of interest is the kind of evidence Eco considers

relevant to the question of what Gothic cathedrals meant at any given time: *textual evidence*. The meaning of the cathedral is explained by Suger 'in prose and in verse'—not in stone and in glass. Other texts reveal to the historian that Suger's interpretation is not idiosyncratic but part of a wider discourse, neoplatonism. Later commentators would offer different interpretations, but once again, the medium for these would be language. Buildings, it seems, do not explain themselves. While something like the contrast between light and dark in a Gothic cathedral may be apprehended directly, the *significance* of that contrast is not apprehended directly. Rather it is apprehended with the assistance of language, in the primary and literal sense of that term.

Eco reaches the conclusion that architecture is not a fully autonomous communication system: 'while the elements of architecture constitute themselves as a system, they become a code only when coupled with systems that lie outside architecture' (1986:79). [8] We take a similar view; but we would go further than Eco does in claiming that in the matter of communication or semeiosis—the making of meaning—architecture is not just different from language, it is heavily dependent on the resources of language. Treating architecture as a language has the unfortunate effect of obscuring the role played by actual language, speech and writing, in shaping our understanding of the built environment. It is that relationship between buildings and language—an interactive rather than analogical one—which is our central concern in this book.

In the last few paragraphs we have argued against one of the claims which is implicit (and is sometimes made explicit) in structuralist/semiotic approaches to architecture—that the formal codes of architecture are autonomous systems capable of communicating directly. But the question also arises whether similar claims of autonomy are warranted in relation to language itself. As we have already said, natural languages are 'autonomous' communication systems in the sense that utterances in a natural language can be understood without recourse to some other language. But from this observation it does not necessarily follow that languages mean in just the way Saussurean structuralism suggests. Indeed, there are reasons to doubt this. While Saussure's work remains influential outside the study of language, it has little currency among linguists today, for in the course of the last century it has become clear that Saussure's principles can describe only a small part of the workings of natural language systems. It is one of the ironies of intellectual history that Saussure's methods have turned out to be more illuminating about certain non-linguistic sign-systems than they are about the linguistic systems he originally developed them for.

A particular and much-discussed problem with the Saussurean approach to language is its idealism. As Gottdiener and Lagapoulos say in their introduction to *The City and the Sign* (a collection of semiotic work which includes Umberto Eco's essay): 'structural linguistics, structuralism and semiotics approach the study of structures and systems of communication by neglecting the relation between systems of signification and the non-semiotic, material processes of the social world' (1986:16). This neglect of historical, social and political considerations in the Saussurean tradition is systematic and deliberate. Saussure's aim was to abstract linguistic systems away from their users, uses and historical/ social contexts: he set out to define a 'pure' object for linguistic study, and this was precisely why his work was so revolutionary. It is a cardinal principle of Saussurean

structuralism that sign-systems are treated as self-contained: meaning is produced by contrasts which are internal to the system. This makes it difficult to raise questions about the sign as a social and historical construct, subject to influences from outside the system.

In linguistics today, the study of meaning is usually divided into two sub-disciplines, called 'semantics' and 'pragmatics'. [9] Semantics deals with those elements of meaning which are internal to the linguistic code. It describes, for instance, the meaning relationships among words (e.g. 'light' is the antonym of 'dark'; the proposition 'Pongo is a dog' entails that 'Pongo is an animal') and the logic of grammatico-semantic operations like negation (e.g. 'Elvis is dead' and 'Elvis is not dead' cannot both be true simultaneously). Pragmatics, on the other hand, is concerned with the interface between the linguistic code and the real-world situations in which that code is used. It studies the way utterances are interpreted in context—which is not, as it turns out, a simple matter of decoding the meanings of words and grammatical forms. Rather it is a question of making *inferences* about what speaker A in context C, and given facts X, Y and Z about the world more generally, might intend to convey by uttering sentence S. Decoding the meaning of the sentence is just the tip of the interpretive iceberg. (As artificial intelligence researchers have found to their chagrin, computers may be able to parse complex grammatical strings perfectly, but unless they are programmed with massive amounts of additional information and with the capacity to process it so that pieces of existing knowledge, when put together, yield new knowledge that was not in the original database, machines cannot generate an appropriate response to the simplest remark.) A purely formalist analysis of meaning fails to capture important aspects of the making of meaning in real-world social situations.

Some commentators have made similar criticisms of formalist approaches to the meaning of the built environment. Talking about certain contemporary tendencies in architectural theory and practice, Ellen Dunham-Jones suggests (1997:18):

> By focusing on form as the vehicle for meaning, Venturi and Scott Brown's decorated sheds, Rossi's typological transformations and Eisenman's deconstructions all maintain critical distance from the social and economic conditions of society itself. Issues of production and use are seen as largely irrelevant to the meaning of the building. They are dismissed as circumstantial, as outside the essence of architecture…social hierarchies and the modes of production are accepted as givens, outside the concern (or control) of the architect.

Focusing on form as the main determinant of what a building 'means' leaves out things which, in the real world, are fundamental to its meaning. For example, formalism abstracts buildings from their environment in a completely artificial way—as if the other structures with which they are juxtaposed (and which can change over time) contributed nothing to our understanding of them. Formalism glosses over meanings which derive from the social uses of buildings, and the social conditions which gave rise to those uses. It is difficult to think of any building (be it a tenement house, a shopping mall, a cathedral or a concentration camp) whose 'meaning' could be discussed in any illuminating way without fore-grounding questions like 'who built it?', 'why?', 'with what historical

events and social institutions is it associated?', 'how has its use changed over time?', and so on. Formalism, at best, pushes such questions into the background. This is not to say that the choice of architectural forms is either meaningless or analytically irrelevant, rather that form in any specific instance becomes meaningful and relevant only in relation to the whole context: social, temporal and spatial.

Our position in this book will be that *both* buildings and language are irreducibly social phenomena, so that any illuminating analysis of them must locate them in the larger social world. In accordance with that position, the main approaches to language that we have chosen to draw on in this book are *pragmatic* and *sociolinguistic:* they relate linguistic phenomena to the social context in which they arise. These approaches represent a reaction within linguistics itself against the formalist tradition inherited from Saussure. The subfield of linguistics we will be drawing on most extensively is *discourse analysis*, which specifically sets out to describe the characteristics of texts and to relate them to the social contexts in which they are produced and interpreted. At this point let us look more closely at what discourse analysis is, and what it does.

'DISCOURSE' AND 'DISCOURSE ANALYSIS'

The terms 'discourse' and 'discourse analysis' are used in a number of academic disciplines, and this generates its own problems, as the linguist Norman Fairclough has noted (1995:18):

> The term discourse is widely and sometimes confusingly used in various disciplines… It is helpful to distinguish two main senses. One is predominant in language studies: discourse as social action and interaction, people interacting together in real social situations. The other is predominant in post-structuralist social theory (e.g. in the work of Foucault[10]): a discourse as a social construction of reality, a form of knowledge.

Fairclough adds that one aim of his own work is to bring these two senses of 'discourse' together. Our aim is not dissimilar; but before we can pursue it, we need to unpack what 'discourse' means to linguists.

In linguistics it is common to conceptualize a language as a 'system of systems'. No one sets out to analyse 'English', say, in an undifferentiated way; instead linguists focus on particular 'levels' of linguistic organization, such as phonology (the level of sounds), morphology (roughly, the level of words), syntax (the level of sentences). As the linguistic units being analysed increase in size (e.g. words are bigger than sounds and sentences are bigger than words), linguists may imagine themselves moving 'up' a level in space. [11] Obviously, this is an imaginary space: language is not really organized like geological strata or the storeys of a building, but the image is helpful for some purposes. It is helpful in this discussion because 'discourse' in linguistics is often defined as the level of organization 'above the sentence'. Whereas a syntactician looks for the principles that govern the formation of grammatical sentences, a discourse analyst looks for pattern

and structure in stretches of language longer than one sentence. S/he is interested in what makes some sequence of sentences function as a text, an organized whole as opposed to a random collection of unrelated parts.

Another way linguists define ‘discourse’ is as ‘language in use’. This is the definition underlying Norman Fairclough’s assertion, quoted above, that discourse is language produced by ‘people interacting together in real social situations’. Again, there is an implied contrast here with the approach taken by syntacticians, who typically analyse decontextualized, made-up sentences (‘the cat sat on the mat’ or ‘colourless green ideas sleep furiously’). The rules which underlie the production of grammatically well-formed sentences can be specified without reference to the context or the purpose of their utterance; but the principles which underlie the production of intelligible discourse cannot. ‘Discourse’ is language used in some context, for some purpose. And although Fairclough’s formulation (‘people interacting together’) most readily suggests spoken language, it is also appropriate to apply the term ‘discourse’ to writing. Writers too are using language in a context for a purpose; and it can be argued that writing involves interaction just as speech does, albeit under different spatiotemporal conditions, [12] since written language is made meaningful only when a reader engages with a text.

If discourse is what we create when we use language in social contexts, it becomes possible to see how the linguist’s definition of discourse as ‘language in use’ might relate to the social theorist’s definition of discourse as ‘a social construction of reality, a form of knowledge’. If you take the position that ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’ are ongoingly constructed by social actors through the various practices they engage in, it is evident that speaking and writing are among those practices—indeed they are part and parcel of virtually any social practice one cares to name. Language-using is a key tool for the ‘social construction of reality’: at any given moment, language itself may be regarded both as the product or sediment of a speech community’s previous constructions of reality, and as the starting point for developing new constructs. Studying language in use, therefore, using an approach which does not remove it from the rest of social reality (and history), is a source of insight into the way in which reality has been and continues to be constructed.

We hope that the remarks just made on the social construction of reality and the role language plays in that process clarify our position on a particularly vexed theoretical issue. Scholars who make use of the ideas of Foucault and other post-structuralist theorists are sometimes accused by their critics of believing, absurdly, that nothing exists except language. We do not take that position, and in fact nor do most of the thinkers to whom the claim is attributed. A less tendentious formulation of what they are claiming might be that meaning cannot be created outside symbolic systems, and therefore that language, as our primary symbolic system, is a potentially relevant consideration in the analysis of any and all phenomena which ‘mean’ something.

An example that has nothing to do with buildings may help to make this argument clearer. When one person kills another, that is obviously not just a matter of language—in material reality someone ends up dead no matter what is or is not said and written about it—but it is through language that communities (and indeed killers) define the act, its meaning and its consequences. The same material act, depriving a person of their life,

does not always ‘mean’ the same thing: depending on the circumstances and the assumptions the community holds, it could be classified as a crime, ‘murder’, or as ‘self-defence’ or as an ‘act of war’ or as a ‘judicial execution’. Killing is not dependent on language, but the meaning we accord it is. In a somewhat similar way, we will argue that buildings are not linguistic objects, but the meaning we accord to them is heavily dependent on texts about them, texts whose medium is written or spoken language.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AS A CRITICAL TOOL

Some linguists who practise discourse analysis are interested primarily or exclusively in *describing* the workings of language in use. Others, however, adopt a self-consciously critical perspective. As well as asking the descriptivist’s question ‘how does this text work?’, critical discourse analysts pose the question, ‘what or whose interests does it serve for this text to work in this way?’

Here the linguist’s sense of ‘discourse’ starts to converge very closely with the social theorist’s sense, and especially with Foucault’s concept of ‘power/knowledge’ *(pouvoir/savoir)*. In modern societies, one very significant kind of power is the power to represent reality in a particular way, and to have your representation accepted not merely as one choice among others (for as we observed earlier in this chapter, there are always choices about how to represent a state of affairs in words) but as ‘the truth’: the ‘natural’, ‘obvious’ or ‘neutral’ version of reality. Critical discourse analysis looks for patterns of linguistic choice which contribute to a particular construction of the reality being represented. It also tries to relate these patterns to the power relations which are operative in the relevant context, and to the interests which are at stake.

Some concrete examples will help to make this clearer. Not surprisingly, many critical discourse analysts have chosen to examine the representation of reality in the mass media, from which many people now obtain most of their information about current events and politics. Analysts have looked at the way lexical and grammatical choices in newspapers and TV news reports can create varying impressions of the same real-life events. Such variations are often ideologically significant.

For example, one early study carried out in the 1970s by the Glasgow Media Group examined the reporting of industrial disputes in television news broadcasts, and found that the actions of employers and unionized workers were consistently described using different words (Eldridge 1995). Managements made ‘offers’, whereas unions made ‘demands’; workers were described as ‘threatening’ to strike whereas managers were described as ‘pleading’ with them not to. The pattern here is that words used to describe the union side’s actions have the semantic feature ‘aggressive’ whereas those used to describe the actions of employers have the feature ‘co-operative’. The Glasgow Media Group argue this conveys an overall sense that industrial conflict is caused by worker aggression (and not, for example, by capitalist exploitation or by bad management). You could in principle describe a workplace dispute by reversing the two sets of terms (e.g. ‘workers today offered to work for 5% more pay, but management demanded they work

for no increase'). This alternative account strikes most people as clearly 'biased', but the other is not more neutral, only more familiar.

On television the 'unions=aggressive, employers=co-operative' pattern was extremely consistent, and this is especially interesting given that British television companies, by contrast with newspapers, have a statutory duty not to take any political stance. Critical discourse analysts who uncover the sort of pattern just mentioned would not, however, accuse the TV companies of a conscious, anti-union conspiracy. Rather they would argue that certain ways of representing industrial disputes have become 'naturalized', so that people no longer recognize them as incorporating any political or ideological stance. The linguistic pattern is a clue to what is taken as simple common sense on this issue, and the repetition of the pattern means that, other things being equal, it will continue to be common sense.

The patterns of lexical choice identified by the Glasgow researchers created a kind of 'schema' for processing a certain class of events, namely industrial disputes. Another linguistic device which can have similar effects is the conventional use of certain metaphors in relation to particular topics. Thus for instance the critical discourse analyst Teun van Dijk has drawn attention to the prevalence of 'invasion', 'swamping' and 'flooding' metaphors in discourse on the subject of immigration in Europe (van Dijk 1987). As he points out, these metaphors represent immigration as a threat to the host community, suggesting that fear and resistance are 'natural' responses.

Grammatical patterns are also of interest to critical discourse analysts. Reality is not only constructed by the words you choose, but also by which words occupy which slots in sentence structure. Consider, for instance, the admission by a US presidential spokesperson that 'mistakes were made'. This formulation makes use of the fact that transitive verbs can be either active or passive. If you make them passive, as in this case, you have the option not to mention the agent of the action: the spokesperson chose a grammatical construction which would not require an explicit indication of who 'made mistakes'. It is an error to think that all uses of the passive are intended to conceal agency or responsibility (or that they actually succeed: arguably, 'mistakes were made' fools no one, it just makes the guilty party look evasive into the bargain), but passives can be used to do that, and it is useful to be on the look out for it.

Some critical discourse analysis has focused on the way professionals exercise power through particular uses of language. For example, in many contexts where professionals interact with laypeople (e.g. social workers or counsellors and their clients, magistrates and defendants, doctors and patients) there is an obvious asymmetry in who may ask questions and who is required to answer them. One study of questions asked in an English magistrates' court (Harris 1984) found not only that defendants were effectively prohibited from asking questions, but that the questions magistrates asked were often so 'conducive' in form (i.e. the form restricts the range of possible answers) that defendants had little or no choice about what to reply. Another 'powerful' move professionals often have the non-reciprocal right to make is to reformulate the gist of what other parties have just said ('so, what you're telling me is…'). In doing this, they may well be redefining another person's reality; and because the discourse conventions of asymmetrical encounters make challenging professionals' formulations a 'deviant' and difficult move,

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