

# DECODING INNOVATION

## INSIGHTS FROM SEMIOTICS

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### INTRODUCTION

The paper you are about to read was prepared especially for the ESOMAR *Innovate* conference of 2006. The conference was organised around a number of themes within the overall topic of innovation. One theme was the question of how to research innovation. What new approaches are there that could shed light on innovation? At the same time, the conference organisers expressed an interest in ways to do “*radical innovation research*”. So, there are two questions here: how to research innovation, and how to do innovative research. In this paper, solutions are offered for both.

Why does innovation matter? The simple observation that this conference has innovation as its expressed theme immediately tells us two things. Firstly, innovation is something desirable and aspirational. Secondly, innovation is in need of discussion and investigation. It is not a *fait accompli*. If all our businesses were perfectly innovative, we wouldn't need to have a conference about it. Innovation is both desirable and disputed. One of the aims of this paper will be to find ways of dealing with the disputes so as to attain the desirable.

The method deployed in this attempt to perform innovative research on innovation itself is *semiotics*. Readers who are familiar with semiotics will recognise that that word does not merely a reference a set of analytic techniques, but ushers in an entire philosophical perspective, one which sits firmly within the camp of postmodernism. Some of the implications of postmodernism for research are as follows:

*The researcher studies language and culture, not individual psychology.* Traditional market research methods, especially the qualitative, take the individual human respondent as the principal object of study. Through survey questionnaires and group discussions, the contents of the individual's head are excavated; privately held attitudes, beliefs, prejudices, tastes, preferences and opinions are all solicited and recorded. In contrast, post-modern methods such as semiotics and ethnography are more concerned with what is public and visible. The objects under study are the conventional codes of behaviour and forms of talk that bind consumers together. The emphasis on verbal behaviour is reflected in a favourite saying of semiologists, attributed to the French philosopher Derrida: “*there is nothing outside the text*”.

*The researcher adopts a specific view of innovation.* All the major perspectives in social science offer their own definitions or versions of innovation to aspiring researchers. Psychology notably offers one view of innovation as an internal, mental process akin to creativity, whether natural or nurtured. Psychology can also tell you something about people's attitudes *to* innovation, and how to research those. Organisational psychology takes the individual as a metaphor for the organisation, and tries to document the personality of the innovative firm. Sociology offers a view of innovation as the appearance in society of new structures and objects: new firms, new products and services. Sociology also offers a view of innovation as the product of *actors* in *innovation networks*, where actors may include businesses, investors and funding bodies, local

authorities, academics, customers and consumers. While psychology tries to dissect the internal mental process of innovation, sociology tries to measure its appearance on the social and economic landscape. Postmodernism, too, has its own view of innovation:

*Innovation is a linguistic and cultural product. It is a linguistic token with an accompanying set of social conventions that prescribe its use.* That is great news for researchers, because it renders innovation very available for research. Human social behaviour and linguistic practice is not a scarce commodity in the world, and it's not difficult to collect. A semiotic perspective means that studying verbal and social behaviour around the idea of innovation is the same as studying innovation itself. Innovation suddenly becomes very accessible if you think of it as reducible to a form of social practice. If it is a *linguistic and cultural* product, and therefore not an objectively existing property of the individual, the product or the business, except insofar as people conventionally refer to it and agree upon it *as such*, then innovation loses its status as the holy grail of human achievement and ceases to be something you have to struggle to measure. Indeed, you would probably not want to measure it at all. Rather, you would be inclined to take an almost anthropological interest in the assumption that it needed measuring.

Insights like these provide the basis for a semiotic perspective on the question of innovation. From this vantage point, it quickly becomes clear that innovation is a semiotic token with a high value attached to it. Innovation is tremendously important to the business community, considered to be at a premium. An oft-stated truism of business is that companies have to stay innovative to survive. Simon Woodroffe is the founder of Yo! Sushi, the holder of numerous awards for entrepreneurship and a spokesperson for the London Development Agency. Simon says: *"The people in businesses in this world who really succeed in this next era are going to be the ones who can reinvent themselves. I call it CAN I: Constant and Never Ending Innovation."* Another spokes-celebrity

for the LDA is Sahar Hashemi, founder of Coffee Republic. Sahar says: *"My belief is we're on an innovation treadmill. You have to innovate just to stay where you are. It's the only means of survival: innovation"*. No pressure, then. This sort of thing must be terrifying for business owners and certainly helps to explain their interest. Moreover, some companies are making a lot of money by selling innovation back to the business community, in the form of self-help management literature, 'innovation audits' and creativity training courses. One of the major benefits of taking a post-modern or semiotic perspective on innovation is that we can remain comfortably detached from emotionally charged and potentially expensive debates about the nature of innovation. Rather, we can research the debate itself, and through that come to understand how innovation is constructed, through language and social action.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. The next section introduces the method of semiotics. That is where you will find a definition of semiotics, a description of analytic procedure and an idea of what is used as materials or data. There then follows a longer section of analysis and discussion. There you will find an original and practical definition of innovation, analysis of its social function and cultural significance, and a discussion of how innovation may be a culturally specific product that varies across cultures and over time. The paper ends with a section titled Conclusions and Applications. There you will find ideas about how the analytic findings can be commercially applied, especially within research.

## METHOD

### What is semiotics?

Here is a potted definition of semiotics that includes a concise recap of some of post-modern ideas expressed in the Introduction.

- Semiotics is a formal, academic research method that sits at the borders of the humanities and the social sciences.

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- It emerged as a distinct method around 1911, out of developments in linguistics and, later, anthropology.
- Today, semiotics continues to grow and flourish, informed by insights and research findings from contemporary disciplines such as cultural studies.
- Semiotics is both a method for analysing data and a storehouse of knowledge, based on the accumulation of research over the years.
- While conventional qualitative research takes human psychology (attitudes, beliefs, motivations) as the object of study, semiotics investigates *culture*.
- In practice, this means studying *human communication*, in all its forms, from the private to the corporate. The materials semioticians analyse are pieces of language, visual images and sound.
- Materials are analysed for their use of various meaningful *signs* and *symbols* in human communication, and how these are organised into culturally meaningful *codes*.
- Semiotic analysis can therefore result in very practical recommendations about how to design communications that speak to consumers' needs and desires, in their own culturally-specific local language.

**Materials for Analysis**

Semiotics entails the study of human communication in all its forms. For the purposes of researching innovation, that means collecting examples of the semiotic sign 'innovation' being used in as many different situations, and different media, as possible. In doing the preparation for this paper, some of the following, contrasting examples of innovation found their way into our data set:

- An enormous collection of visual images that have been used in one place or another to illustrate the idea of 'innovation'. These are surprisingly thick on the ground when one comes to look. A good place to start building a collection is to type 'innovation' into Google Images and see what happens. Commercial

picture libraries are also an excellent source of data, since their stocks are large and indexed by keyword. Add to this the front covers of the top 100 books with the word 'innovation' in the title.

- An equally sizeable collection of texts in which the word 'innovation' is used. Places to begin building a collection include: newspapers, especially the business titles; business books, especially management literature; TV and radio broadcasts, especially items covering science, technology and business issues; the websites and promotional literature of companies offering services in innovation; the conversations and complaints of regular consumers.

In general, a good principle in semiotics is that there is no such thing as too much data. The larger one's data set, the more reliable analytic insights are likely to be.

**Analytic Procedure**

Potentially, there is a lot to be said on analytic procedure in semiotics. One way of describing it concisely is to articulate a difference between *top-down* and *bottom-up* analysis. Worthwhile projects in semiotics will make use of both forms of analysis; indeed, they are ultimately indivisible.

- *Top-down* analysis results in a broad-brush picture of cultures and cultural change. Performing this kind of analysis means locating the topic at hand, in this case, innovation, in its social and historical context. Doing this requires fairly thorough and up-to-date knowledge of social science. One needs to be able to find one's way around psychology, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, linguistics and contemporary philosophy. It is very rare that commercial research requires semiotic analysis of some topic that has not been extensively anticipated in the social science literature. The analyst uses his or her knowledge of social science to track the history and properties of innovation – not as an objectively existing feature of human minds or society, but as an *idea*, expressed in visual and verbal language, which is uniquely designed to serve the needs of the culture in which it is manifest. Top down analysis of

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innovation means asking questions about what sub-cultures or communities make the most use of the sign ‘innovation’, and what significance it holds for them. It means asking questions about who benefits from talk of innovation, who owns the term, and what is revealed about the cultures within which it is used. In some of the previous Lawes literature on semiotics (Lawes, *passim*.), this part of the analytic procedure is referred to as “*doing critical questioning*”.

- *Bottom-up* analysis results in finely detailed deconstruction of individual semiotic signs, be they words, phrases or visual images. Performing this kind of analysis means breaking down individual *texts* (a conference programme, say) into their constituent parts and analysing the communicative function of each one. Doing this requires good knowledge of a number of named artistic and literary *devices*, linguistic *structures* and rhetorical *techniques*, so that the analyst approaches the text systematically, with an idea of what to look for, and interpretations that are backed up by existing research. The analyst uses his or her knowledge of texts and their internal mechanics, and of the existing research literature in semiotics, to provide a fine-grained textual analysis that accounts for the smallest executional detail. Bottom-up analysis of innovation means asking questions about why it is that signs for innovation are limited to a specific and finite selection of *metaphors*, both in words and in graphical representation. It means going out of one’s way to collect texts that show the idea of innovation in dispute: texts whose fine detail of disagreement reveals much about the status of innovation in the culture of the authors. In previous Lawes writing on semiotics, this part of the analytic process is referred to as “*trainspotting*”, and use of “*the semiotic toolkit*”.

We are now ready to proceed with some analysis and discussion.

**ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

This part of the paper is divided into three sections. The first, ‘Identifying Innovation’, displays the identifying features of innovation as that sign is used

today. The second, ‘Dispute and Legitimacy’ explores common objections to innovation talk, and attempts at resolution. The third, ‘Cultural Specificity’ uses mostly top-down analysis to locate the idea of innovation in its cultural context.

**Identifying Innovation**

The purpose of this section is to form a picture of innovation as it looks today, in the culture of Western consumerism that seems to be its natural habitat. What is the conventional appearance of the sign ‘innovation’; what are its identifying marks? A quick way to kick-start analysis in response to this question is to assemble a collection of visual images which have been marked by some human on another occasion with the word ‘innovation’, perhaps as the title or keyword. (Qualitative researchers may anticipate that consumer-assembled ‘mood boards’ and other such collages can be successfully submitted to semiotic analysis.)

A key insight in semiotics is that signs never refer to objects in the external ‘real’ world (remember, there’s nothing outside the text); they only ever refer to other signs. Everything is a metaphor for everything else. This means that semiotic analysis can immediately begin by identifying the main metaphors from which the sign ‘innovation’ is constructed. This need not be complicated. See figure 1 as an example.

**FIGURE 1**  
**MACROMEDIA FLASH PRESENTATION PROMOTING THE INNOVATE CONFERENCE ON THE ESOMAR WEBSITE**



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This brightly coloured, red, yellow and blue image is taken from the page of the ESOMAR website that promotes the Innovate conference. It is one of only two images on the page, the other being a single-colour footer. This image, though, is not hidden away in the bottom margin. It is right at the top of the page, next to the title of the conference. Its placement on the page suggests that it would conventionally be regarded as an *illustration* of the idea of innovation. It is a handy semiotic sign: a picture to help readers understand the word.

Upon close inspection, this sign turns out to be a collage: a collection of other signs, one imposed on top of another. The reader is given to understand that these signs collectively amount to innovation. They include:

- A lightbulb.
- Cogs, machinery.
- The head and upper body of a man (heavy set, sporting short hair and white shirt, hand to chin).
- A group of formally dressed people gathered in a tight circle, standing.
- A large human eye.

This is not an exhaustive list, and this interesting and complex sign would bear further, more detailed analysis. Moreover, the attention of more than one analyst would quickly reveal the potential of signs to lend themselves to creative visual perception; this one is complex enough to function in much the same way as a Rorschach inkblot. However, the handful of constituent signs listed above is enough to get analysis underway.

From these signs we can quickly identify a handful of notable features of innovation, as it is constituted within the linguistic community that ESOMAR belongs to. Here is some brief interpretation of the above signs:

- The lightbulb is a well-established symbol for sudden inspiration and acuity.
- Cogs turning, machinery: an engineering metaphor that may refer to the roots of the sign 'innovation' in science and technology.

- The heavysset man is clearly a businessman, deep in thought.
- The formal attire of the group suggests that they, too, are business people. Their odd arrangement, in a tight circle standing around the light bulb, implies they are gathered for a quick, high-powered meeting.
- The eye, like the lightbulb, is a well-established sign for acuity; it communicates 'innovation' through the metaphor of sharp visual perception. The size of the eye relative to the other signs, such as the standing group, emphasises the importance of sharp acuity relative to other factors.

Examining the constituent parts of a sign in this detailed manner is an example of bottom-up analysis in action. Bottom-up analysis offers the chance to achieve thorough understanding of individual signs and texts. Relating these findings confidently to the culture at large requires an element of top-down analysis. To do this, one applies the examination of metaphors demonstrated above to entire collections of texts, such as the entire graphics collection assembled as part of the search for analytic materials. Comparison of the ESOMAR graphic to our entire image collection shows that this specific ESOMAR sign is indeed fairly representative of contemporary semiotic practice. The dynamics of our collection of visual signs for 'innovation' are broadly as follows:

- **Business.** *Visible signs:* Men and women in formal business wear, either deep in contemplation or actively doing something, such as generating ideas. *Interpretations:* The obvious explanation for the prevalence of *business* metaphors in signs for innovation is that 'innovation' is principally a concern of the business community. Consumers, and humans in general, are not desperately concerned with innovation as a sign, even if they seem to be avid consumers of new products. Rather, use of the sign 'innovation' is markedly a habit of that specific sub-culture, the business community. Innovation is something that business people are worried about. Specifically, they are worried about their ability to

come up with new ideas. The extent of their anxiety was betrayed in the quotes by Simon Woodroffe and Sahar Hashemi in the introduction. If you do not constantly come up with new ideas, your business dies.

• **Science and Engineering.** *Visible signs:* Graphs, pie charts, pyramid-shaped models, flow charts and diagrams. Use of the popular graphic devices of scientific rhetoric. *Interpretations:* This is one of the most common signs for innovation. Whether the idea of innovation *actually* has its origins in science and technology is not the relevant question in semiotic analysis. The thing to notice is that the people communicating with each other about innovation seem to have a stake in preserving that idea. Science is, in its own right, a semiotic sign for truth and objectivity; engineering is a sign for function and performance in the hard, cold world of heavy machinery. This reveals something of the value of innovation to those who use that sign: they aspire to create things that are objectively worthwhile and true, and that function reliably in harsh environments.

• **Manufacturing, Economics.** Two sub-sets of Science and Engineering. Manufacturing – images of factories, say, or humans interacting with manufacturing machines – usefully combines Engineering with elements of Creativity (discussed below). Economics – graphs and diagrams which emphasise signs for ‘economics’ in their construction – plays up the cognitive, intellectual aspects of innovation (it’s more science than engineering), but adds emphasis on the social aspects of application.

• **Art and Creativity.** *Visible signs:* Artists wielding brushes, especially working at easels. Business creativity tools such as spider charts. *Interpretations:* The latter show a notable tendency to simply invert various conventions of scientific representation (e.g., ‘diagrams and charts should be orderly, angular and preferably symmetrical’), without substantially undermining the idea that ultimately science trumps art. It’s good to be wacky and creative, but only within established parameters of business. There

is a hint here of perceived risk to any business that strays too far outside the box.

• **Inspiration and Insight.** *Visible signs:* The lightbulb is the most common sign in this category. This is also the semiotic territory where one finds images of nature, and humans in contact with nature. *Interpretations:* Water is a familiar sign for inspiration and renewal, while lightbulbs, bolts of lightning and heavenly bolts of light passing into human fingers and brains are signs for sudden flashes of insight.

• **Forethought and Prediction.** *Visible signs:* References to higher cognitive performance; intelligence (e.g., ‘IQ – Innovation Quotient’). Crystal balls. Focused contemplation and reflection. *Interpretations:* The crystal ball betrays the business community’s concern with the future. For consumers, innovation is about today, excitement in the here and now. For business, innovation is about the unknown tomorrow, in which the business may die. Innovation is a serious matter. There is also a hint of anxiety here about whose fault it is when a business does fail – will you look back with satisfaction or regret at your record of innovation?

• **Civilisation and Expansion.** *Visible signs:* Collages of signs for human civilisation and achievement especially organised in a circle or around some central sign for humanity and human ability, such as a head or a brain. Signs might include machinery, especially cogs and wheels, scientific equipment, keys, people orating, boats, factories, cars, business meetings, skyscrapers and motorways. Signs for Civilisation and Expansion are distinguished by their arrangement as a collage, not by the unique quality of their constituent signs. *Interpretations:* These signs celebrate human industrial and commercial achievement. Note that science and engineering always play a stronger part than art, creativity or inspiration. Signs for Civilisation and Expansion articulate the hopes and aspirations of the business community.

• **Technology and Modernity.** *Visible signs:* Hi-tech electronics; space technology; robots; delicate or artistically photographed machinery; recognisable

elements from existing advanced technology, e.g. Windows 'OK' and 'Home' buttons. *Interpretations:* Evidences the aspirations of business people and also the strong interest of consumers in having a continuous supply of 'new' products that bring them ever closer to their vision of the future. Shows the tendency of the business community to feel that its strongest claims to innovation are found in products offering new technology.

- **Novelty.** *Visible signs:* Representations of innovative products that additionally incorporate some element of the humorous or conventionally 'tasteless'. An example that is admired by consumers would be a men's urinal, reputedly adorned with the image of a fly at a point on the ceramic basin near the bowl where the user is supposed to direct their water. The urinal is reported to reduce messy splashing around the fixture because users pay better attention to their direction. *Interpretations:* This is the dark side of Modernity. Businesses that innovate run the risk of ridicule. There is the risk of appearing gimmicky, whimsical, of losing face in some way as a result of developing a product that is unintentionally humorous, or that no one wants.

We have now reached the end of this section, so let's quickly recap. The aim of this section was to develop a good picture of what the semiotic sign 'innovation' means to its users. To answer this question, we did some bottom-up analysis of a specific text – the ESOMAR logo – and then followed with some top-down analysis in which that logo was found to be consistent with other signs for innovation in its structure and meaning. Analysis showed that although both consumers and the business community are stimulated by the prospect of new ideas turning into new products, the business community is inhibited by anxiety that the product may fail, if not economically then socially. Businesses perceive their strengths in science and technology. They crave modernity but fear novelty: they are wary of artistry and creativity because of their social costs, even though creativity is also constructed as the service of new ideas.

### Dispute and Legitimacy

Innovation is not a *fait accompli*. As every entrepreneur who fears their new product will turn out to be another Sinclair C5 knows, innovation is a contested category. People do not necessarily agree about what is innovative, and they sometimes have reservations about whether innovation is actually a worthwhile ambition. In this section we will consider both of these problems, applying mostly bottom-up analysis to some verbal data. Evidence of dispute and tension around a topic is always revealing. A key insight in semiotics is that, since signs can never refer to any external object but only to each other, signs have no *positive* meaning at all. All their meaning is negative, residing in how they are different from other available signs. The Derridean term "*differance*" (sic.) perfectly expresses this idea. The practical implication of this is that if we want to know what innovation is, we would be very well advised to examine what it is *not*. Rather than deciding this for ourselves, the better strategy is to find texts where the legitimacy of some innovation appears to be in doubt.

I'd like to choose a topic for our text that is both contemporary and relevant to business, especially the research business: neuro-linguistic programming, or NLP. Brain science and neuroscience, also, would have made good candidates. The semiotic sign that is the three letters 'NLP' is very often found in the company of the sign 'innovative'. Claims are often made in which one is often used to support the other. These claims are, for the most part, successful. NLP is an idea at the basis of a multi-million pound industry. NLP products include extensive literature and training; applications include psychotherapy, business management and market research. NLP offers its own model of human perception and communication that trades heavily on the semiotics of science (hence 'neuro') and technology (the 'programming' is an allusion to computing). The reference to linguistics is also culturally savvy; linguistics has been at the fashionable edge of the social sciences for some time; a fact not lost on postmodernists.

The custodians of the NLP brand have unquestionably achieved economic success: the bottom line looks healthy. On that measure of innovation, they have succeeded. Moreover, the NLP brand, at first glance, appears sensibly conventional in its choice of semiotic signs: drawing on the combined language of science, linguistics and information technology is usually a reliable strategy. That being the case, why should NLP attract criticism? How can its claim to legitimate innovation be denied? A clue is found in the following text, a quote attributed to Richard Bandler, one of the founding fathers of NLP. The quote is attributed to him by the Skeptic's Dictionary, an online organ that exists to identify and critique ideas that look suspicious according to the rules of the dominant (Western, scientific) culture. The quote reads:

*I think the more you want to become more and more creative you have to not only elicit other people's (plural) strategies and replicate them yourself, but also modify others' strategies and have a strategy that creates new creativity strategies based on as many wonderful strategies as you can design for yourself. Therefore, in a way, the entire field of NLP™ is a creative tool, because I wanted you to create something new.*

Richard Bandler (<http://skepdic.com/neurolin.html>)

This quote appears under the heading 'neuro linguistic programming', at the top of a page of text. Everything that follows the quote is critique, and explicitly the work of the authors of Skeptic's Dictionary. The quote is distinguished from the following text by its different font, its italics, its colour (red) and its different margin settings. In analysing this text, the style and position of this quote at the top of the page, preceding any discussion, is just as significant as – and somewhat equivalent to – the position of the ESOMAR graphic at the top of their page, next to the title 'Innovation'. This is a smart rhetorical move on the part of SD. It serves at least two useful functions. Firstly, it helps to imply to readers that the quote is, metaphorically, an *illustration*. Not only is it separate from the rest of the text in its authorship, but that quote is in some way

representative of the author: it illustrates the sort of thing the author typically says. Secondly, whatever critique or negative evaluation of this particular quote is being made available to the reader, the reader is very likely to credit themselves with having made the evaluation independently. In Western culture, 'illustrations' are routinely taken as self-explanatory in a way that text is not. That is why pictures sometimes accompany difficult texts, to help explain what they mean. Presenting Bandler's quote as an illustration encourages readers to believe available interpretations as true, because they think they have worked it out for themselves.

Now let's consider the content of the quote. Where are the resources that an interested reader might work with, in forming an evaluation of one sort or another? Some of the more noticeable features of the text are as follows:

- Certain *logical flaws* are apparent. For example, on lines 3-4, Bandler appears to recommend "a strategy that creates new creativity strategies" which is oxymoronic. A critical reader might evaluate this as incoherent.
- There's an emotional exuberance in the text that may undermine the scientific gravitas of the author, should it be taken as representative of his speech and writing. For example, in line 4 Bandler is attributed with using the word 'wonderful'. Any readers who have encountered the method of Conversation Analysis (CA) will recognise 'wonderful' as an *extreme case formulation* (Pomerantz, 1984). Such linguistic devices are usually absent from scientific discourse, but are common in informal, lay discourse.
- There's an element of visible salesmanship and aggrandisement that reads like marketing copy, which is unusual for someone apparently making a strong claim to science. In particular, note the prevalence and use of personal pronouns: "I think"; "you want", "you can design for yourself".

Of course, there is nothing fixed or determined about

the interpretations that readers may draw. However, there are certainly conventional interpretative practices that most readers will adhere to. To know what these are, let's remember that this website is the self-nominated site for Skeptics. To be a Skeptic implies a hard science viewpoint. The reader of the Bandler quote is already primed and sensitive to the logic of a hard science critique before they begin to read. They are almost framed into drawing the critical evaluation that this unique quote supports.

There is another, more subtle bit of critique, too. While I have cited this text as an example of 'some innovation being disputed', the word innovation is not directly used in this quote. The giveaway is the repeated reference to creativity (as we saw in the previous discussion, the semiotic signs of innovation and creativity are strongly associated, by convention), and reference to 'newness'. At the end of the quote, NLP itself is cited as something 'new' that Bandler 'created'. SD presumably could have chosen any quote they wanted to introduce their critique. They could have quoted Bandler on any topic, including science. However, the one selected shows Bandler making some very strong claims about creativity and newness, and these are not explicitly under attack by SD, which prefers to concentrate on undermining his credibility as a truth-seeker and scientist. In other words, SD is willing to leave Bandler's claims about creativity and newness alone. SD can afford to do this because of the long-term, historical struggle or *ideological dilemma* between the principles of art and science. Both make some claim on innovation, but science is currently winning the argument, which makes art and creativity look bad. In other words, SD can afford to let Bandler have his creativity, because the rhetoric of science mistrusts individual auteur-ship, and ultimately, science trumps art.

We are about to move on from this text, so here is the upshot of our analysis so far. NLP is interesting because it is fantastically commercially successful, is frequently promoted as innovative and appears at first glance to offer a good case – yet it is also the subject of ongoing dispute and active attempts on the part of

individuals and publications such as SD to undermine it. This undermining takes a particular form. It does not deny that NLP is commercially successful, nor that it has lots of applications, nor is it interested in whether or not NLP actually works. The focus and direction of the criticism is to *discredit* NLP's spokespeople by displaying them as incoherent, emotionally unrestrained and willing to obscure the truth with persuasive rhetoric. That is, the nature of the criticism is to suggest that NLP falls short on measures such as Science. This is a problem for business people using the philosophy of Western capitalism, because if an innovation is seriously unscientific, then its reliability in related areas such as Forethought and Prediction may be in doubt. What's more, analysis so far has suggested that there are problems with Creativity as a route to innovation. It suggests that, when other aspects of an innovation are lacking, Creativity may not save it from incurring the same social costs as Novelty (e.g., the brand becomes unintentionally amusing and demand falls).

The Bandler quote is a text included here for the purpose of displaying a little of how dispute over innovation takes place; how the dynamics of dispute are structured. Following all this critique, you may be wondering what semiotic signs would be associated with a legitimate, undisputed innovation. For that reason, before leaving this section, I would like to briefly discuss a contrasting text.

The text that interests me comes not from SD but from a BBC news item. Like the SD text, it takes the form of the author – here, a BBC correspondent – commenting on some third-party brand or organisation – in this case, a small British company called Demand. Unlike the SD text, the author seems keen to promote the idea that the company is, in fact, innovative. Let's quickly review the evidence that the BBC offers.

The full text can be found at the BBC News website, at the address <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4690784.stm>. The text takes the form of a typical BBC printed news feature; it has a headline,

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concisely written body text and a couple of photos. The headline is *“Innovative designs tackle disability”*. The very first paragraph of the story reads as follows:

*When six-year old Tilly Griffiths from Staffordshire wanted to join her elder sister’s ballet class, her parents turned for help to a little-known charity that designs and manufactures one-off pieces of equipment for disabled people*

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4690784.stm>

The story continues over several paragraphs, reporting that Demand designs and manufactures equipment to enhance the lives of people with disabilities. It includes a link to a captioned photo series of about eight of Demand’s products, each very different. Tilly Griffiths is ultimately provided with a lightweight, pink metal ‘ballet frame’ which enables her to enjoy an upright position and enough independent mobility to join a ballet class of able-bodied girls. A few analytic highlights of the main story are as follows:

- ‘Innovative’ appears in the headline. It modifies and qualifies the word ‘designs’. In other words, the designs are able to tackle disability *because* they are innovative.
- The expression ‘one-off’ (line 3) captures the idea that something original and unique is happening. This is a stronger claim to innovation than merely saying that products are new or different. For businesses where continually making one-offs is not feasible, visible diversification of the brand (e.g., the Easy brand, Virgin) is an alternative strategy.
- The same effect as ‘one-off’ is achieved later in the story by the word ‘bespoke’.
- The expression ‘state of the art’ is used, as in *“Demand has produced state of the art skiing frames”*, implying not only modernity but also rapid change, an ability to keep up with, or even lead, the latest industry developments.
- Near the end of the story, the owner of the business is quoted as being reluctant to advertise; so desirable is the product that the firm would be simply unable to meet demand.

The format of this text – that of a correspondent or commentator offering a reasoned evaluation of some brand or organisation is very similar to the format of the first, from SD, so comparison is facilitated. It is interesting to observe what is different about this story, and also what is held constant.

One of the constant factors in this positive story of innovation is the obsession with newness and modernity. Demand’s USP is that its products are rather unlike each other; each is invented afresh according to the unique requirements of the disabled consumer. The BBC correspondent, Geoff Adams-Spink, makes much of this in his choice of language. It’s interesting to note that, while SD is openly critical of NLP and quotes the owner enthusing wildly about his own brand, the BBC is visibly supportive of Demand and quotes the owner modestly down-playing his achievements (e.g., in being afraid to advertise, too small to meet demand, and so on). The dynamics of enthusiasm and impartiality are reversed.

Where the stories differ is that NLP is shown as trading on newness as the result of creativity. As we saw, the implication of SD’s critique was that creativity and new ideas are somehow worth less than hard science and its technological products. In contrast to NLP, Demand is shown as engaging with both science and engineering. In other words, it looks as though Demand is doing the very thing that NLP was criticised for not doing: it uses conventional scientific knowledge to engineer real-world, high-tech products, made out of metal. Note that Demand is *not* criticised for being insufficiently creative. If your company turns out a tangible object with evidence of either scientific reasoning or hi-tech ‘Modernity’ cues among its features, then you can be acknowledged as innovative without particularly distinguishing yourself on counts of creativity or imagination.

**Cultural Specificity**

This final section of analysis explores the cultural specificity of the semiotic sign ‘innovation’. Signs can never be permanently fixed to any one meaning, so it

is clear that the meaning of the word ‘innovation’ may be prone to change over time, and that what counts as innovation may vary across cultures, or within sub-cultures. This is potentially a huge subject, so we will settle on just one or two interesting features, within the space available here.

I have already suggested that ‘innovation’ is a semiotic sign which is principally used by the Western business community, in its internal discussions. The conventional logic of innovation trades on all the traditional values of Western capitalism and Western rationalism. It is no wonder, then, that in disputes about innovation, science is usually found to be winning the dispute with art – it has been winning that same argument in countries that use Western philosophy since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. When we set out to study the semiotic sign ‘innovation’, we are effectively studying a Western phenomenon. This is not intended to imply that innovative activity does not happen in non-Western cultures – clearly, it does. The point is that non-Western cultures have their own signs for innovation, creativity, forethought, and the rest, and their own systems of interpretation. Direct or objective translation from one culture to another may be inadvisable.

However, this does not mean we have to reserve consideration of cross-cultural issues pending a more in-depth analysis of the world’s languages. In fact, the discourse of people in the Western world, from scientists to business journalists to regular consumers, turns out to be a rich source of insight into *their own constructions* of innovation in cultures other than their own. The speech and writing of Western people, in which they generalise about other cultures so as to make some point about innovation, or vice versa, is as revealing analytically as disputes and arguments.

Inspection of our collection of mostly Western texts reveals that cross-cultural issues raised in connection with innovation are common, and that this routinely

happens in a limited number of ways. A psychologist would say that Western people deploy a limited range of cultural stereotypes. These clichéd semiotic signs are introduced into speech and writing because they help writers achieve certain useful effects, depending on what they want to be the outcome of the situation they encounter at the time. Here is an introduction to the major ways in which Western ‘innovation talk’ tackles cross-cultural matters.

The major cultural difference has been introduced already: it hinges on a simple contrast between ‘East’ and ‘West’. Western speakers and writers are very fond of making this distinction. One of the fathers of semiotics, linguist Ferdinand Saussure, offered the insight that human language (and hence thought) is organised into *binary structures*. The nature of semiotic signs, you’ll remember, is that they have no positive value. Their meaning resides only in their ability to be distinguished from something else. It is day because it is not night. People seem to find things easier to understand and discuss if they are organised into contrasting pairs rather than more complex sets and collections. Thus, although a simple binary opposition such as East-West may be visibly ‘stereotypical’ and rudely gloss over the diverse countries and cultures that make up that vague category ‘the East’, it is one that persists in Western languages as a way of understanding innovation, among other aspects of the world.

The other cultural difference that is most commonly attended to in Western ‘innovation talk’ is that between Western rationalism and ‘New-Ageism’ – the latter being a semiotic sign that is strongly associated with Eastern culture and philosophy, in the hands of Western users. There are no prizes for guessing which, of rationalism and New-Ageism, is usually presented as arguing the better case, in the average Western conversation or text. We will shortly review an example.

In the meantime, consider the following snippet of discourse, authored by a consumer – a player of

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console games. The context is a bulletin-board discussion. Enthusiastic game-playing consumers make use of a comprehensive chat board facility, where users can participate in publicly accessible conversations, grouped according to the kind of hardware they use. The present speaker favours the Microsoft Xbox. In this extract, the author offers their opinion on the world of gaming. The full text can be found at [http://ve3dboards.ign.com/nintendo\\_gamecube/b10526/14582862/p1/](http://ve3dboards.ign.com/nintendo_gamecube/b10526/14582862/p1/)

*Honestly though if Microsoft wants to catch the mature hardcore market then they're going to have to get a lot more Japanese and European developers in on this. [ ]*

*Microsoft apparently listened to the gamers when they told them what sort of controller they were looking for [ ] but they should have listened when we asked for games. Enough of these shitty football games no one cares about... let's see some original content that doesn't suck. [ ]*

*It's pretty sad when a Japanese company comes in your OWN HOUSE and cleans up. How's Microsoft doing on the Japanese turf? Not so great*

This fascinating text shows a third binary opposition in play: a distinction is made between the dominant culture of big business and an oppositional culture of gaming consumers whose needs are being ignored or misunderstood. From a semiotic perspective, we treat the question of how consumer culture differs from business culture in just the same way that we approach the question of cross-cultural difference, and even historical change. We want to avoid making *a priori* assumptions about the *nature* or *personality* of consumers, for example; to do so would be equivalent to simply translating 'innovation' into Mandarin Chinese and expecting to the transplanted sign to behave as normal. However, we can learn a lot by studying how Western speakers *themselves* draw distinctions between the world of consumers and the business community. Indeed, native speakers' *own* distinctions, categorisations and conventional descriptions are the most reliable source we could hope for if semiotic insight into culture is to be achieved.

Now, a few analytic highlights in respect of the above extract of text.

- The nationality of the author cannot be instantly identified from the above extract of text, although clues elsewhere in the conversation suggest that he (for it is a he) may be Canadian.
- The Xbox console is a Microsoft product, and Microsoft is an American brand. Indeed, the MS brand is one of the most conspicuous and dominant *metonyms* (a type of metaphor) for American achievement in business and technology. The iconography of Microsoft has even made it into conventional signs for 'innovation', in the category earlier named 'Technology and Modernity'.
- In the extract presented here, the author creates a semiotic binary opposition, with Microsoft as a metonym for American culture on the one hand, and "Japanese and European developers" (line 2) on the other. In lines 8-9 this cross-cultural distinction is repeated, and this time the European part of "Japanese and European" has been dropped. There is now a tidier, more streamlined binary pair in use: America versus Japan. In lines 8-9, the author adopts a tone that is provocative; challenging. Note the *rhetorical question* on line 9 ("*How's Microsoft doing on the japanese turf?*"), a device that helps the author to dramatise an imaginary response from his audience. There is, of course, what amounts to a powerful stereotype in Western cultures which says that the Japanese, of all nations, are talented at innovation. Where this stereotype appears in the form of actual semiotic signs, the message is usually a mixture of admiration and fear. Western culture both glamorises and mistrusts the innovations of Japan. Drawing on this cultural knowledge, the author of this extract of data can be seen to be launching a culturally and emotionally charged argument. It is no casual matter for a North American/Canadian MS customer to suggest that America needs to get 'the Japanese' in to 'clean up its own house'.

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- Innovation is referenced on line 7: note the demand for “original content”. In this text, the speaker appears to deploy the sign ‘original’ strategically; it references ‘innovation’, and the author trades on his audience’s shared cultural knowledge that ‘the Japanese are good at innovation’ to *bolster* the strong binary contrast between Microsoft/America and Japanese developers/the East that forms the foundation of his critique.

The present section of analysis is reaching its end; before then, let’s take the opportunity for a very quick look at a contrasting distinction between East and West – one that incorporates ideas of historical change as well as geography. For this purpose, we shall return to the Skeptic’s Dictionary. As you will recall, SD exists to offer a sceptical view of those aspects of Western culture which appear to need it. Typical of its critical essays is its discussion of NLP, where creativity and the ability to imagine new things are deemed less valuable than a rational, broadly scientific approach to invention. In the NLP essay, the phrase “New Age” is used twice. In the opening lines of the essay, immediately below the Bandler quote, NLP is defined as “*one of many New Age Large Group Awareness Training Programs*”. Later, deep within the discussion of the history, influences and origins of NLP, SD refers to Bandler’s promotion of various concepts and key words from early 20th century psychology, which are heavily relied on by the commercial self-help market today. According to SD, loaded semiotic signs such as the words ‘self-esteem’ and ‘self-realisation’:

*serve as beacons to New Age transformational psychology. No neuroscientist or anyone who has studied the brain is mentioned as having had any influence on NLP*

<http://skepdic.com/neurolin.html>

In these few words, a binary opposition is set up, as though between two competing forces. One the one hand, New Age transformational psychology. On

the other hand, neuroscience (a semiotically hi-tech version of regular ‘science’). The direction of SD’s critique is obvious. The point is to create a visible distinction between Science (indeed a branch of science that implicitly owns the term ‘neuro’ which is used in the name of NLP), and a trendy (new age) psychology of dubious claims (transformation) which is drawn to marketable-sounding phrases like ‘self-realisation’ like moths to a flame. Just as the semiotic sign ‘Microsoft’ connotes something like ‘American business’, the sign ‘New Age’ conventionally makes available to readers ideas to do with the East, especially Eastern philosophy. The standard sceptic’s critique of Eastern philosophy as a feature of New Ageism is to characterise it as no more than a Western brand, one which reveals little about the actual ‘East’ (whatever that may be), but offers the pampered Western consumer a chance to buy his or her philosophical system, yoga mat and scented candles at a one-stop shop.

Where does this leave our analysis of the cultural specificity of innovation? Western discussion of cross-cultural issues is often marked by elements of xenophobia, or the deployment of unfortunate stereotypes. This happens to the extent that the semiotic signs and binary pairs *work* in the sense of helping speakers and writers stake claims and win arguments. In this case, we have noted that the semiotic landscape of Western culture includes fear of (commercially invasive) Japanese innovation, and profound suspicion of easily-acquired innovative ‘insights’ imported from non-Western, non-rationalist systems, because of the risk that they may turn out to be nothing more than a fad: *merely* ‘new age’ therapy-babble. We here observe something similar to speakers’ reservations about Creativity as a route to innovation. At stake is loss of face. Those who most want to be innovative – those speakers and writers who use that sign the most, such as the business community – are wary of Creativity, and they are equally wary of the East because, as well as being a potential business threat, it may turn out not to be, not legitimate innovation, but merely New Ageism.

## CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

The preceding section of Analysis and Discussion entailed a little data, a lot of analysis, and resulted in a picture of the semiotics of 'innovation' that is both broad in scope and detailed in the brushwork. This final section of the paper is given to relating the analysis to the questions that originally prompted this research. The key questions are as follows:

- How can researchers investigate 'innovation'?
- What new or even radical research approaches are there, and what do they reveal about innovation?
- What are the implications for brands or organisations that want to be recognised as legitimately innovative?

In light of the research conducted in preparation for this paper, including the analysis presented herein, here are some suggestions.

First, let's review the findings and implications of the above semiotic analysis. In the largely Western data sample examined for this study, the semiotic sign 'innovation' is principally used by the business community. Their culture tells them that innovation is essential to business survival; therefore it is to be both craved and feared. Businesses fear direct economic threat, but they also fear social costs such as 'loss of face' as a result of unsuccessful attempts at innovation. Disputes and debates over innovation reveal that in the culture of Western business people, metaphors of science, engineering and manufacturing offer a brand or organisation a stronger defence against criticism than do claims to be imaginative or creative. Suspicion extends to innovations which are claimed to be 'inspired'. Making a study of cases of legitimate or uncontested innovation back up these findings. The ultimate conclusion has to be that the semiotics of 'innovation' in this community betrays a cautious, conservative culture. It is very clear that a firm wanting to be seen as legitimately innovative in this climate would be well advised to emphasise the

following aspects of their brand or organisation:

- Logic and rationality. Grounding in 'genuine' science is a bonus. Show evidence of having 'done the math'.
- Tangibility and contact with the material world (the 'real' world of engineering, not the 'airy fairy' world of creative ideas). Firms that do not turn out a product should market their services as socially relevant.
- Willingness to break the rules, but only within limited parameters. Think of the spider chart as the businessman's version of creativity.
- Acuity. Make use of metaphors of sharp, clear vision.
- Thoughtfulness. Meaningful connections between the brand or organisation and its history or cultural heritage (protects against being thought faddish or flash in the pan).
- Technology. The enthusiastic use and production of hi-tech systems and equipment. In market research, eye tracking would be a good example.

Art, radical creativity, short cuts to inspiration, fads (which risk creating 'novelty' innovations), New Ageism and Eastern philosophy are all to be used sparingly and treated with caution.

As for the question of how to do research, one of the benefits of choosing semiotics is that it enjoys high *validity* relative to other qualitative methods: it sticks to the visible and public aspects of cultural life and offers a systematic procedure for examining samples of cultural data. In turn, this renders topics such as 'innovation' very *accessible* for researchers. There is less need to create elaborate experiments and research instruments (sophisticated attitude inventories, for example) so as to elicit more and more specific respondent behaviour. There is less of a struggle to divine the internal mental processes of the creative genius, or to define exactly what innovation is as a measurable phenomenon in society. Rather, the researcher is free to turn his

or her attention to the cultural data at hand, in the knowledge that there are no secret psychological or societal processes lurking invisibly outside the text.

This paper has offered the view that *semiotics* and related *post-modern* research approaches offer modernity (they are comparatively 'new'), they are certainly radical in their reduction of the world to signs or text, and they helpfully elucidate the idea and meaning of 'innovation' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a way that more traditional market research methods are less able to do. These are the appropriate research tools for the task of decoding innovation.

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