Legitimation and multimodality

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Legitimation, language and multimodality

The legitimations by means of which individuals or groups ‘seek to secure consent to their power from at least the most important among their subordinates’ (Beetham 1991, p. 3), has for some time been an important area in the study of language and politics (e.g. Rojo & van Dijk 1997; van Leeuwen & Wodak 1999) and more recently, also in organisation and management studies (e.g. Vaara & Tienar 2008). Such studies consider how language is used to legitimate the power of individuals or groups, and also, more broadly, how social practices are legitimated in all their aspects; not only the individuals and groups that have agentive power in them, but also the actions that constitute them, the ways in which these actions are undertaken, the places where – and the times when – they are undertaken, and the resources that are used to do so (van Leeuwen 2008, pp. 8–12). The legitimacy of the law, for instance, is not only realised linguistically, through the written and spoken language of the law, but also through the layout of courtrooms, the dress (and in some countries, wigs) of lawyers, and so on. The same applies to the legitimacy of the practices that constitute politics. In studying legitimation, attention must therefore be paid, not only to language, but also to the other forms of expression that combine with language in many forms of contemporary political discourse, in short, to multimodality.

The change from power as invested in individuals and groups to power as invested in social practices was strongly influenced by the work of Michel Foucault (e.g. 1977) for whom power is enacted in the practices of institutions such as schools and prisons. Habermas (1976, pp. 71–2) also points out the importance of everyday practices, but with a greater emphasis on agency, viewing practices as planned and implemented through administrative interventions in schooling, city planning, health planning, family and marriage planning, and so on, and stressing that they are not always legitimated through formal legislation, but may also be legitimated through the personalisation of substantive issues, symbolic hearings, expert judgements, expert discourses, advertising techniques and the ‘strategic employment of cultural traditions’ (ibidem, p. 70).

In short, all aspects of practices need legitimation, especially when practices are in the process of being established or changed. This can take many different forms, and is closely
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connected to the different kinds of normative discourses that regulate practices. Above all, legitimations seek to give meaning to social practices, linking practices to the ‘human craving for meaning that appears to have the force of instinct’ and the human ‘compulsion to impose a meaningful order upon reality’ (Habermas 1976, p. 118). Finally, the inclusion of all the various elements of social practices – actions, participants and their roles, manner, times, places and resources – points to the need for a multimodal approach to the analysis of legitimation (or of de-legitimation, critique), which includes the behavioural style and dress and grooming of powerful (and less powerful) actors, the way power is expressed by spatial arrangements, the multimodal technological resources involved, and so on.

An account of the meanings people attach to the practices they engage in is, by nature, descriptive – such meanings vary historically and contextually. In a fragmented and heterogeneous society, the same practices may be legitimated differently in different social contexts, or by different groups of people. Kress (1985) described how Helen Caldicott, in a speech at an anti-nuclear rally in Sydney, legitimated the action of taking part in the protest in many different, sometimes even contradictory ways: ‘medical, Christian, populist, (Jungian) psychiatric, patriotic, sentimental/parental, romantic, patriarchal, technological, prophetic, feminist’ (Kress 1985, p. 17). In other words, Caldicott showed she was aware that the participants in the rally were united in what they did, participating in a protest, but divided in the meanings they attached to it. But if meaning is fragmented, if it is doing rather than meaning that provides social cohesion, what replaces legitimation? Is meaning, as Habermas said, ‘a scarce resource becoming scarcer’ (1976, p. 73), reduced to clichés and superseded by function (Zijderveld 1979)? Has the separation of instrumental functions from expressive symbols released an ‘unspecific readiness to follow’ (Habermas 1976, p. 70), stimulated by advertising techniques that appeal to unconscious and emotive – rather than rational and moral – motives, and underpinned by anti-humanist theories that seek to explain human behaviour by analogy to animal behaviour? If so, attention to multimodality is crucial for a critical analysis of these phenomena, given the role of visual and musical communication in many important domains of communication, and their ability to link aesthetics and affect to functional purposes. And attention to advertising, which has pioneered this kind of multimodality and which, in the age of the ‘marketization of discourse’ (Fairclough 1993), has deeply influenced many other forms of discourse, including politics, is equally crucial.

A few further points need to be made. First, legitimation will take different forms, depending on whether it is persuasive or confirmatory. The persuasive role of legitimation comes to the fore when new or changed practices are proposed. This involves the de-legitimation of existing practices, as well as the legitimation of the proposed changes – or, when changes are being opposed, the de-legitimation of the proposed changes and the re-legitimation of the established practices. All this must be done with the kind of strategies that will be discussed below. Once a practice is established, however, critique is likely to be disempowered or isolated from the mainstream, institutionalised in ways that remove its power to mount effective challenges. The values that underlie the persuasive arguments are now objectivated, given ‘cognitive validity’ (Berger & Luckmann 1966, p. 111). Here, language plays a crucial role, described by Berger and Luckmann as ‘incipient legitimation’ (ibidem, p. 112):

Incipient legitimation is present as soon as a system of linguistic objectifications of human experience is transmitted. For example, the transmission of a kinship vocabulary
ipso facto legitimates the kinship structure. The fundamental legitimating ‘explanations’ are, so to speak, built into the vocabulary.

(Berger & Luckmann 1966, p. 111)

However, incipient legitimation can also be realised visually or musically. Visual stereotypes, though usually originating in explicit scientific and other discourses, can communicate social relations of class, gender, race and ethnicity (van Leeuwen 2008), and stereotypes also exist in music: the ‘representative style’ of Western music, for instance, originally developed in seventeenth-century Italian opera, created musical motifs to signify gender stereotypes, which have continued into contemporary film music and are recognised and understood by audiences who may not consciously be aware of what it is they respond to (McClary 1991). Discourse analysts should therefore not only focus on the analysis of texts, but also on the analysis of vocabularies of this kind, especially now they have become readily available through digital image banks and music libraries for use, not just by specialists, but also by ordinary people creating multimodal messages on social media, such as Instagram. This should include tracing such stereotypes back to the more explicit discourses that originated them. Nederveen Pieterse (1992) has, for instance, described how racist stereotypes of black people were developed (and linked to negative character traits) by late eighteenth and early nineteenth century scientists, thus legitimating slavery and colonisation – but while these explicit discourses have been forgotten, the visual stereotypes they gave rise to continue, especially in comic strips, advertisements, computer games and other entertainment media.

In sum, the critical analysis of meaning-making should attend to multimodality for a number of reasons:

- Legitimation is not just realised linguistically, but also visually and musically. Just as in the Middle Ages, visual art and church music expressed the theological ideas that legitimated the power of the Church, so today visual art and music express many of the neo-liberal values that underlie contemporary society, especially in advertising and entertainment media.
- At the same time, de-legitimation plays a crucial role in critiquing oppositional values (and of course also in oppositional discourses themselves). De-legitimation, too, can be multimodally realised. Terms like ‘flood’ and ‘influx’ have their visual equivalents in the current ‘refugee crisis’, in the images of large groups of dishevelled refugees that can legitimate the closing of borders and the erection of walls, while shots of a single refugee looking dismally at the tents of the Calais camp and the sea beyond, can legitimate helping refugees – through the kind of personalisation and emotivisation that Habermas noted.
- Finally, discourse analysts should also analyse the digital ‘vocabularies’ of images and music that provide the resources for expressing the dominant legitimation discourses.

This chapter will therefore attempt to show in some detail how legitimation may be realised multimodally and outline an approach to analysing it. It is based on an earlier framework for analysing linguistic realisations of legitimation (van Leeuwen & Wodak 1999; van Leeuwen 2008), and will discuss three types of legitimation, which can of course occur in various combinations: (1) authority legitimation based on the authority of people who can exercise power, or of documents that bestow that power (p. 221); (2) moral evaluation legitimation, legitimation based on moral values (p. 226); (3) rationalisation legitimation, legitimation based on theories of reality (p. 229).
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Authority legitimation

I will distinguish three kinds of authority legitimation. The first is authority properly speaking. In this case, a practice, or some element or part of it, is legitimate because someone in whom authority is vested says so (personal authority), or because it says so in a document or other artefact with normative power, for instance a legal document or a set of rules. The second I will refer to as commendation legitimation. In this case, a practice, or some element or part of it, is legitimate because it is recommended by an acknowledged expert or engaged in by a role model, whether a peer leader, or a distant celebrity, hero or saint. The third is legitimation by custom, which may either be a matter of conformity, in which case a practice is legitimate ‘because everyone does it’, or a matter of tradition, in which case it is legitimate because ‘it has always been done this way’. In what follows, I will discuss how each of these may be realised linguistically, visually and musically, and hence multimodally, when such realisations are combined in a single text or communicative event.

Personal authority

In the case of personal authority, legitimate authority is vested in a person because their status or role in a particular institution affords them agentive power in the relevant social practice, for example, parents and teachers in the case of children. Such authorities then do not need to justify what they do to others – or require others to do – other than by a mere ‘because I say so’ – although in practice, they may provide reasons and arguments, and although their authority may ultimately be based on impersonal grounds, for example, on religious ideas about the role of the father in a family, or the king in a monarchy, or on the job description of a manager. Bernstein (1971, p. 154) saw personal authority as one of the hallmarks of the ‘positional family’ in which ‘judgements are a function of the status of the member’ and ‘disputes are settled by the relative power inhering in the respective statuses’. It is therefore not surprising that many examples of personal authority can be found in children’s books, usually taking the form of a verbal process clause in which the authority’s utterance contains some form of obligation modality, linking the mandatory nature of the action to its legitimacy, as in these quotes from children’s books:

Magnus sat down. Because the teacher said they had to.
(van Leeuwen 1981, author translation)

‘It’s time to go home’, she said [i.e. the Mother].
(Leete-Hodge ND)

But personal authority may also be expressed in other ways, as in the opening sentence of former US President George W. Bush’s declaration of war:

On my orders, coalition forces have begun striking selected targets of military importance.
(Bush 2003)

Or as in this quote from the CEO of Rank Xerox, London, taken from an in-house staff magazine:
I want to see leadership deeper in the organization. I want to extend the management of our company beyond the first line. I want all 143 senior managers to take ownership of the business.

(Rank Xerox 1996a)

Visual personal authority legitimation can be realised by visual signifiers of rank and status. On the famous First World War recruitment poster (‘Your Country Needs You’) Lord Kitchener is not only shown in military uniform, but also sports an intimidating Prussian moustache as he imperiously points his finger at the viewer. As Bush declared war on Iraq, the camera showed the US flag and the presidential seal, to lend authority to his words. Judges, ministers of religion and police officers wear uniforms to signify their powers. In short, the visual realisation of personal authority rests on dress, grooming and accessories of authority.

**Impersonal authority**

Impersonal authority legitimation rests on the authority of laws, rules and regulations. It, too, often takes the form of verbal process clauses, with the carrier of the impersonal authority (‘policy’, ‘regulation’, ‘law’, etc) as the ‘sayer’ of statements (‘The rules state…’, ‘The law says…’, ‘The Bible says…’), or the doer of actions for which power is required, as in the following quotes, again from the Rank Xerox staff magazine, relating to an obligatory training programme (despite the term ‘encourage’), and a *Guardian* newspaper column on the refugee crisis:

The 3D Programme – Define, Decide and Develop – encourages every individual to take control of his/her own career.

(Rank Xerox 1996b)

The international law of refugees (including the 1951 convention) bars the forced return of refugees

(Sachs 2015)

Visually, impersonal authority legitimation may be realised by visual elements of documents – seals, coats of arms, signatures, certain forms of typography, and so on, and ‘Jihad’ is often legitimated by showing a copy of *The Quran* (Figure 14.1).

Authority can also be realised through musical signifiers associated with authoritative institutions such as the Church or the nation-state, and the emotive power of music plays a key role in creating and sustaining emotive allegiance to such institutions. After the French Revolution, a National Institute of Music was created to ‘support and bestir by its accents, the energy of the defenders of equality, and to prohibit the music which softens the soul of the French with effeminate sounds’ (quoted in Attali 1985, p. 55), and music played an equally important role in legitimating and supporting power in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia (van Leeuwen 1999).

A key function of authority music is the *heraldic* function of music, its function of announcing authoritative statements and actions, for instance, the arrival of an authority at an official event, or the national news bulletin. Heraldic music of this kind tends to use energetic ascending melodies in major key, martial tempos, dotted rhythms, and brass instruments in musical motifs, which musicologists have also called ‘masculine’ and ‘heroic’
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Figure 14.1  Impersonal authority as a legitimation for jihad

(van Leeuwen 1999). Such music is to be listened to with the same deference also accorded to powerful people – standing up, and listening silently and solemnly. The audio-visual logos of many major corporations use similar heraldic motifs, but with different timbres. IT companies, such as Microsoft, Intel and others, for instance, combine the electronic sounds that signify technological excellence with warmer instrumental sounds that add a human touch.

Expert authority

Expert authority legitimation rests on expertise rather than status. Such expertise is often stated explicitly, by mentioning the expert’s credentials, but if the expert is well known, this can be omitted. Expert authority is not as binding as personal or impersonal authority, but expertise is nevertheless a powerful force in society, frequently used in the media, which play a key role in translating science (especially psychology) into legitimate practices, especially in areas that are not formally regulated and yet play a significant role in social life – health, beauty, relationships, and so on. Typically, it takes the form of verbal process clauses with the well-credentialed expert as subject, as in these quotes from *Cosmopolitan* magazine and from a *Guardian* report criticising the UK Government’s foreign policy:

‘We know that the combination of a healthy diet, regular exercise and positive visualization yields optimal results’, says Robert Wolff, PhD, author of *Home Body Building* and creator of greatbodygreatlife.com

*Cosmopolitan*

Authors of the report prepared by a commission convened by the London School of Economics include the former head of intelligence Sir Richard Dearlove, the prime minister’s former adviser in international affairs Jonathan Luff and HSBC’s chief economist Stephen King. The report claims that ‘successive prime ministers and foreign secretaries have shied away from significant foreign policy engagements’

*Wintour & Sparrow 2015*
In the age of professionalism, expertise gradually acquired authority in many domains of practice including child rearing, nutrition, and eventually even sexuality. ‘In any area where a human need can be imagined’, wrote Ivan Illich (1977, p. 19) ‘the new professions, dominant, authoritative, monopolistic, legalised – and at the same time debilitating and effectively disabling the individual – have become the exclusive experts of the public good’. Today, however, experts increasingly have to surrender their professional autonomy to management structures, while the public is increasingly made aware that most problems have more than one expert solution, as instantiated, for instance, by the replacement of expert columns in magazines with the ‘hot tips’ genre (cf. Machin & van Leeuwen 2008b), which positions readers as consumers of advice, rather than, for instance, as ‘patients’ or ‘counsellees’.

Visually, expertise will be signified by laboratory paraphernalia, books, stethoscopes or other professional attributes – in other words, by the superficial badges of expertise, rather than by a visualisation of their expert judgements. Advertisements freely make use of such signifiers to support claims for products no actual expert would endorse.

Role model authority

Role models legitimate practices by engaging in them or endorsing them. Role model authority plays a particularly important role in advertising and lifestyle media. Home decoration magazines, for instance, legitimate ways of decorating private homes by presenting stories of the way media personalities renovate and decorate their homes, and magazine celebrity profiles often describe their diets, health and exercise routines, and so on in enough detail for readers to adopt them. But it can play a role in politics too, as when stars of stage and screen endorse US presidential candidates. After the Second World War, American popular culture spread the idea of the role model, encouraging young people across the world to take their cues from their peers and from popular culture, rather than from their elders and from tradition. This in turn facilitated the rapid turnover of consumer preferences that has become so vital to the contemporary economy and to the ‘lifestyle identities’ it has fostered. The linguistic examples below are from a teacher-training textbook and a Cosmopolitan magazine feature, illustrating role modelling by exemplary peers and distant celebrities:

Experienced teachers involve the whole class in supporting the newcomer

(Cleave, Jowett & Bate 1982)

Halle Berry is wearing Revlon LipGlide Colour Gloss in Cherry Ice

(Cosmopolitan)

Visually, celebrities are often instantly recognisable, so that role model authority can be conveyed simply by showing celebrities engaged in the to-be-legitimated actions or with to-be-legitimated actors. In a video of Obama’s second election campaign, Robert de Niro is instantly recognised, standing to the right of Obama, and strategically positioned behind a lectern that carries the slogan ‘Change we can believe in’.

In a study of advertisements for contraception (van Leeuwen et al., forthcoming), many of the ads show women or couples talking together and exchanging experiences, for instance, about contraceptive implants, complete with lines of dialogue (‘No scars and a fast recovery made our decision easy’). Even though these ads are directed at general practitioners,
because most countries do not allow direct advertising of pharmaceuticals products to consumers, they show no discussions between women and their doctors, as if peers are a more reliable source of information than experts.

Insofar as singers are role models, and they often are, music can play a significant role in legitimating practices. Songs provide, for instance, scenarios for dating and relationships of different kinds, and although these are formulated linguistically in the lyrics, the music can add value to this, using principles, which will be discussed under the heading of ‘moral evaluation’ (p. 226). Another musical realisation is the ‘call and response’ song structure in which a leader sings a line or a whole verse and is then responded to by a choir. In television commercials aimed at children, for instance, the leader tends to be either another child, the ‘opinion leader’ of the peer group, as it were, or an adult who sings in a funny ‘clown’ voice, that is, an adult who is definitely not a parent or a teacher and acts out a kind of funny-uncle-who-always-brings-a-present role. These, so advertisers apparently think, are the types of ‘leaders’ who children will follow (van Leeuwen 1999).

The authority of tradition

Although the authority of tradition has been declining in many domains, tradition legitimation is still common, linguistically realised through key words such as ‘tradition’, ‘practice’, ‘custom’, ‘habit’, as for instance, in this example:

Tony Abbott defended the canvassing of political donations from big business as a time-honoured practice which prevents taxpayers from being forced to subsidise election campaigns.

(Owens 2014)

The term ‘time-honoured’ is the key in this example, suggesting the practice ‘has always been done this way’. In fact, many traditions are much more recent than is often assumed (Hobsbawn & Ranger 1983). A mythical origin, further back in time, may then be invoked. Recently, for instance, politicians everywhere have celebrated the Magna Carta (which dates from 1215) as the origin of practices such as habeas corpus, jury trial, equality before the law, the independence of the judiciary, and representative government – all of which did not in fact emerge until much later (Krygier 2015). Thus, David Cameron could say:

The great charter shapes the world for the best part of a millennium to promote arguments for justice and freedom.

(Cameron cited in Krygier 2015, p. 1)

Tradition lends itself well to visual and musical realisations, simply by relating past practices and products and past forms of music to contemporary practices and products. Advertisements for certain products often stress tradition, for instance, by showing traditional craft workers in commercials for mass-produced products, or using classical music to accompany commercials for cars. The past still holds considerable value, especially in contexts where past glory is revered.
The authority of conformity

The implied message of conformity legitimation is that if everyone else does it, so should you. It is used to legitimate practices for which no formal regulation exists, but it can nevertheless have mandatory force because of the social pressure it invokes. Linguistically, it often manifests itself in statements that include high-frequency modality, whether through words like ‘many’ or ‘most’ or through fine-grained statistics, as in this example from the *Guardian*, which repeats the large number of protestors to de-legitimate bull-fighting:

Hundreds of thousands of Spaniards have lodged their opposition to plans by the conservative government to introduce a two-year bull-fighting course in state schools. More than 430,000 people have signed a petition against the idea.

*The Guardian*

Even in practices such as city planning, practices may be legitimated by ‘what the others do’, as in this example, quoted from the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

Madrid is now following the example of other European cities by building a new light rail system.

*Sydney Morning Herald*

Conformity can also be realised visually. Advertisements often show a range of users of the advertised product or service to indicate that it has something to offer to all: ‘Something is provided for all, so that none may escape’ (Horkheimer & Adorno 1982, p. 123). There may then be subtle differences between the users to signify that using the same products as everyone else can combine with unique individuality.

Musically, conformity can be realised by unison singing, which is a feature of many practices – from church services to soccer matches. Here, too, a measure of individuality can be retained through differences in ‘vocal blend’, the degree to which individual timbres blend or can still be discerned. The male choirs in beer commercials are often rough, with individual voices standing out clearly, while the female choirs in many other commercials tend to be well blended. This constructs men as being more individuated than women – and less orientated towards values of solidarity (cf. van Leeuwen 1999)

Moral evaluation

Moral evaluation legitimation is based on moral values rather than on authority. In some cases it is simply asserted by troublesome words such as ‘good’ and ‘bad’, which freely travel between moral, aesthetic and hedonistic territories, and this may of course be combined with authority legitimation, as when George W. Bush legitimised the War on Terror by calling his enemies an ‘axis of evil’. But in most cases, moral evaluation is linked to specific discourses of moral value. However, these values are not explicitly asserted, and hence not opened up to debate. They are only hinted at, by means of adjectives such as ‘healthy’, ‘normal’, ‘natural’, ‘useful’, and so on. These then form the top of a submerged iceberg of moral values, which is never explicated. They trigger a moral concept, but are detached from the system of interpretation they derive from. In other words, they transmute moral discourses into the kind of ‘generalized motives’, which Habermas said ‘are now widely used to ensure mass loyalty’ (1976, p. 36).
As a result, moral evaluations, whether linguistically or multimodally expressed, cannot be identified on the basis of explicit signifiers. We can only recognise them – without fully knowing what it is we recognise. John Berger described this well in relation to advertising:

> Vague historical or poetic or moral references are always present. The fact that they are imprecise and ultimately meaningless is an advantage: they should not be understandable, they should merely be reminiscent of cultural lessons half-learnt.

(Berger 1972, p. 140)

Only the discourse historian can explain the moral status of these expressions, by tracing them back to the moral discourses that underlie them and making explicit what was lost over time.

Three types of moral evaluation can be discerned: ‘evaluation’, ‘analogy’ and ‘abstraction’.

**Evaluation**

Evaluative adjectives play a key role in moral evaluation. Here are some linguistic examples from my study of the legitimation of schooling:

> It is perfectly normal to be anxious about starting school.

> Showing signs of stress about starting school is a natural and healthy response.

(van Leeuwen 2008)

‘Naturalisation’ (‘it is only natural’) is a specific form of moral evaluation that legitimates social practices, in principle on the basis of (socio-)biological arguments, but here, no detailed arguments are given. ‘Normalisation’ suggests norms, but what these norms are and where they come from, we do not learn. And few would stop to ask themselves in which ways stress might be healthy. Here are some further examples, from a recent Guardian commentary on the refugee crisis:

> Asserting that Europe’s door is open to migrants and refugees without limit is reckless, not compassionate.

> Wide-open doors are unfeasible and unmanageable.

(Sachs 2015)

Here, a commentator rejects compassion and asserts ‘good management’ as acceptable legitimations for a European refugee policy and, indirectly, recommends adopting ‘risk aversion’ instead – as well as, throughout the column, refusing to distinguish between migrants and refugees.

**Analogy**

Another way of expressing moral evaluations is by analogy – comparisons in discourse almost always have a legitimating or critical function. In other words, they say ‘this is legitimate because it is like something else which we all agree is legitimate’, or ‘this is not legitimate because it is like something which we all agree is not legitimate’. Sometimes,
the comparison is implicit. An activity that belongs to one social practice is described in terms which, literally speaking, belong to another social practice.

Visual analogy is quite common, for instance in political cartoons. In a Gulf War cartoon by the Australian cartoonist Moir, a nurse shouting ‘Emergency!’ rushes a patient on a stretcher labelled ‘Arab goodwill’ into an operating theatre, towards a surgeon labelled ‘The West’. Here, the operation of emergency diplomacy is compared to surgery – a comparison that is often used to legitimate practices, for instance, military operations, as being effective and precise (Moir 1991).

**Abstraction**

In the case of abstraction, the terms that are used to refer to social practices, or to their component actions, are abstract in the sense that they represent not the actions themselves, but some quality of them that can be linked to discourses of moral value. To again, give some examples from my study of the legitimation of schooling, instead of ‘the child goes to school for the first time’, we say ‘the child takes up independence’, so that the practice of schooling is legitimised in terms of a discourse of ‘independence’. Instead of ‘playing in the playground’, we get ‘co-operate’, which legitimises playing in terms of a discourse of sociability, in other words, as an activity from which something is to be learnt. Instead of attending parents’ nights, we say ‘build up a relationship with the school’ or ‘be involved with the school’, abstractions which foreground desired and legitimate qualities of co-operation, engagement and commitment. In the following example, practices supported by international aid are legitimated on economic grounds, as ‘building stable economic futures’, without any indication of what they would actually consist of:

Europe’s aid budgets are being swallowed in caring for refugees on European soil, when that money should be used to build stable economic futures in the source countries. (Sachs 2015)

The visual and musical representation of moral values is becoming increasingly important and dominant. Just as there was, in Medieval and Renaissance art, a vocabulary of emblems to visualise virtues and vices, so, today, vocabularies are developing for the visualisation of contemporary neo-liberal values. Machin (2004) has researched one of these, the Getty Image Bank. It allows images to be searched with keywords that are every bit as vague as ‘building stable economic futures’, but also every bit as indicative of neo-liberal values, for instance ‘exploration’, ‘curiosity’, ‘innovation’, ‘growth’, ‘spirituality’, ‘balance’, ‘satisfaction’, ‘freedom’, ‘fun’, ‘creativity’, ‘learning’, ‘expertise’, and so on. When ‘freedom’ is searched, tens of thousands of images of freedom can be inspected – for the most part women jumping, on the beach, or in a wide-open field where there are no other people in sight (Figure 14.2). The only political images in this category are a few images of US jet fighters and of the Statue of Liberty, with or without war planes overhead. As Machin comments, freedom here ‘is not ideological, not something that needs to be protected or fought for, it is a mood, a passing feeling, and drawing on individualistic new age concepts such as serenity and spirituality’ (ibidem, p. 332). These images are well produced, and Getty provides them cheaply, with all rights pre-paid. As a result, they are ubiquitous across the globe – in advertisements, in magazines, in health brochures, and even in news magazines.

Music, too, can express moral values. Anyone who is at all exposed to contemporary media can recognise the musical signifiers of love, nature, technology, innocence and many
other highly valued notions – without necessarily knowing what it is they recognise. And here, too, music libraries classify music in terms that include such values (cf Tagg 1983). Different kinds of music can also be associated with periods, countries, social classes, age groups, and so on, and hence with the values, or ‘myths’, in Barthes’ terms (1973) which, in the given cultural context, are associated with these periods, countries, classes and age groups.

Rationalisation

In the case of moral evaluation, rationality has gone underground. In the case of rationalisation, morality remains oblique and submerged, even though no rationalisation can function without it. The following, for instance, is, on the surface, a carefully worded rational argument, but it cannot serve to de-legitimate ‘opening Europe’s doors’ without value-laden terms like ‘unviable’, ‘catastrophe’ and ‘crisis’, as in this sentence from a Guardian commentary:

> If conditions abroad are unviable, the wars, migrations and environmental catastrophes driving today’s crisis will continue to be replicated and expanded.

(Sachs 2015)

I have distinguished two main types of rationalisation. Instrumental rationality legitimates practices by reference to their goals, uses and effects. Theoretical rationality legitimates practices by reference to a theory of ‘how things are’.

Figure 14.2 ‘Freedom’ according to Getty Images
**Instrumental rationalisation**

Like legitimations, purposes are constructed in discourse in order to explain why social practices exist, and why they take the form they do. In order to serve as legitimations, purpose constructions must contain an element of moralisation, in the sense in which I have described it in the previous section. Only this can turn purposes and purposiveness into what Habermas has called (1976, p. 22) a strategic-utilitarian morality. Here is the purpose of ‘honest reflection’ (by means of which the *Guardian* commentator both reflects back to the argument against ‘opening Europe’s doors’ and legitimates that argument), complete with moral evaluations (‘clear thinking’ and ‘least bad options’):

Such honest reflection could, by itself, help our societies think more clearly about the least bad options

*(Sachs 2015)*

**Theoretical rationalisation**

In the case of theoretical rationalisation, legitimation is grounded, not in whether the action is morally justified or not, nor in whether it is purposeful or effective, but in whether it is founded in some kind of truth, some account of ‘the way things are’, for instance through definitions, in which one activity is defined in terms of another, moralised activity; for example, school signals that the child is growing up.

In the case of explanations, it is not the practice that is defined or characterised, but one of the actors involved. The action is legitimate because it is considered appropriate to the nature of the actors, their general attributes or habitual activities.

Berger and Luckmann distinguished between ‘experiential’ and ‘scientific’ rationalisations. Experiential rationalisations they described as ‘various explanatory schemes relating sets of objective meanings’, and they added that ‘these schemes are highly pragmatic, directly related to concrete actions’, typically taking the form of ‘proverbs, moral maxims and wise sayings’ (Berger & Luckmann 1966, p. 112). Scientific rationalisations are ‘differentiated bodies of knowledge’ that are developed to legitimate specific institutions, as we have seen. Psychology, for instance, produces discourses that can be used to legitimise social practices, through the way they inform ‘the changing popular syntheses of isolated items of scientific information’ (Habermas 1976, p. 80). In this example, a psychological study legitimises sex between older people (read ‘re-legitimise’ instead of ‘rediscover’):

A study in the journal *Psychology and Aging* surveyed 5,500 people aged 20–95 and found that desire was just as important as companionship for those aged 60 and over. What’s interesting is that this has to be rediscovered again and again, as though it so contradicts the dominant narratives around ageing and sex that we can’t believe it.

*(Karpf 2015)*

Images and music, and even typography, can of course express the characteristics of social actors. Erving Goffman (1976) brilliantly analysed the gendered poses that express gender characteristics in advertisements. Again, certain kinds of irregular and multi-coloured fonts immediately suggest children’s books, or invitations to children’s parties, but also express a view of what children are like – unruly, not yet able to produce neat, ordered writing, but also joyful and exuberant. Such traits also rest on theories. But these are not made explicit
in the way that definitions are. They are moral evaluations rather than rationalisations. Images can also display the trappings of rational discourses – graphs, tables, and so on. But as in the case of visual expert authority legitimation, these only connote rationality, and do not provide actual rationalisations.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to show that most forms of legitimation can be expressed visually and musically, and I have tried to indicate how this can be done.

I have argued that visual and musical legitimation, as they are currently used, and in contradistinction to written texts, can legitimate only with reference to the outward manifestations of authority, rather than to any arguments that actually ground such authority, and that moral evaluations, whether linguistically or multimodally expressed, are detached from the discourses that underlie them and make them explicit.

Finally, I have argued that these forms of legitimation originated in the practices of advertising, and have now permeated many other domains, including digital technologies such as image banks and music libraries that now play such an important role in communication.

For discourse analysts, it is therefore important to mount a critique of these forms of legitimation and to recognise that, as a result, meaningful legitimation, legitimation that can be seen as valid across fragmented and heterogeneous societies, is indeed becoming scarcer, so that legitimation can indeed be said to be in crisis. Just as the discourse historian needs to rediscover where today’s moral buzzwords come from, the critical analyst needs to rediscover sources of legitimation that can be meaningful in complex and diverse societies. And finally, in all this, it should be remembered that the visual and music are not restricted to the legitimating uses to which today’s strategic-functional communication puts them. A rescue operation may be in order.

Note


References

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