CHAPTER TWO

THE STRUCTURE OF NEWS FROM A SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

2.0.0 The interface between the discourse and the semiotics of the newspaper is quite revealing. While discourse analysis makes an attempt to characterize the linguistic and non-linguistic features in a particular context, semiotics tries to find meanings or 'significations' in the system established in the discourse. In this chapter, I wish to elucidate the structure of the newspaper from a semiotic perspective, and by so doing I wish to establish that the newspaper also functions as a semiotic system. To explain the semiotics of the newspaper, I have made use of the terminologies of Dijk, particularly his 1986 article on news schemata. Dijk uses the terms in his works to explain the socio-cognitive processes in the news. I use the same terms to explain the dynamics of the semiotic system in the newspaper. There is, of course, some similarity between the two, but at the same time the two approaches to the newspaper discourse are different. Socio-cognitive processes, as envisaged in the theories of Artificial Intelligence, are socially determined. But they are recognised as a set of processes which could be predicted systematically at any given context whereas semiotics tries to explain the existing system as 'meaning.
potential generating meanings at different levels. The concern of this study is to find meanings in the existing structures of news rather than find how the consumers of the news perceive the news item. The concern is more with the institutional processes which make the news dynamic.

2.1.0 THE CONCEPT OF SEMIOTICS

Barthes (1967) speaks about the degrees of combinative freedom enjoyed by speakers of a language as follows:

the freedom to construct paradigms of phonemes is nil, since the code is here established by the language; the freedom to group phonemes into morphemes is limited, for there are 'laws' ... governing the creation of words; the freedom to combine several 'words' into a sentence is real, although circumscribed by syntax and ... certain stereotypes, the freedom to combine sentences is the greatest of all, for it no longer admits of constraints at the level of syntax (the constraints regarding the mental coherence of the discourse are no longer of a linguistic order) (p.70).

All social interaction is basically communicative. Barthes seems to say that there is greater amount of freedom when sentences are combined into discourse. The problem starts from
this point when we combine sentences into a discourse. The resultant discourse may have a 'meaning' of its own which is different from that of the individual 'meanings' of sentences. The 'meaning' of the discourse is transmitted by a different 'code' than that of the language itself. Some semioticians claim that we have here the interaction of different semiotic systems. This claim may be illustrated by reference to the example of literature. Not everyone in possession of the natural language 'English' can 'read' an English novel, even though the 'meaning' of each sentence or even paragraph may, in isolation, be clear to that reader. Semioticians would claim that this results from the fact that 'literature' involves the combination of natural language with a further sign-system, what might be called the 'language of literature'. The narratology of Greimas is an example of such an approach. For him, natural languages 'develop within themselves secondary semiotic systems' (1982, p.301). The newspaper is an example of such a 'secondary semiotic system'. The newspaper does not just have linguistic signs but also visuals which would make it a more semiotically viable text for analysis.

2.1.1 THE STRUCTURE OF SEMIOSIS

Before I discuss the structure of semiosis in this section, I need to offer a small clarification about the two concepts that are being used in this chapter again and again, *semiotics* and *semiosis*. I make use of these concepts in the way Hodge and Kress
(1988) describe them. They say - "Semiotics is the general body of semiosis, that is, the processes and effects of the production and reproduction, reception and circulation of meaning in all forms, used by all kinds of agent of communication. ('Semiotic' as an adjective thus refers to the objects of this study while 'semiosis' refers specifically to the process itself.)" (p.261).

While discussing the structure of semiosis in this section, let me describe a few insights offered by some of the European semioticians. The European tradition envisages the Saussurian signifiant and signifie, sometimes translated as 'sound-image' and 'mental-image' respectively. European semiotics hold both the signifiant and the signifie to be structured. In the case of language, Jakobson sets forth the oppositional structures involved in phonology; Saussure laid the foundation for a comparable view of the signifie, wherein meanings were defined in terms of syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes -- the relations between the words in the sequence of words actually uttered, and the choice of each word from within a linguistic structure defining those words which could be substituted for it. European tradition of Semiotics believes that the outside world and utterer's intentions form part of the semiotic function, which is conceptually distinct from the sense of that which is uttered. Ducrot and Todorov (1979) comment on the Saussurean concept of sign thus:
This narrow definition of the sign obliged us to introduce other concepts in order to describe relationships that are similar and nonetheless different, customarily undifferentiated under the name 'signification' or 'sign'. Thus we will make a careful distinction (as almost all sign theorists have done) between signification and the referential function (sometimes called denotation) ... denotation takes place not between a signifier and signified but between the sign and the referent, that is, in the case that is the easiest to imagine, the real object: it is no longer the phonic or graphic sequence apple that is linked to the meaning 'apple'; rather the word (that is, the sign itself) apple is linked to real apples. (p.101)

They go on to argue that denotation is in fact less frequent than one might imagine, and to suggest that both Saussure and Peirce insisted on the marginal role of the denotation in the definition of the sign.

2.1.2 TYPES OF SIGN: 'SIGNS' AND 'SYMBOLS'

Within semiotics, we encounter a variety of classifications of sign. Saussure preferred to reserve the term 'symbol' for the case where "there is the rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and the signified" (1966, p.68). He gave as an example
the use of a pair of scales as a symbol of justice. The scales could not be replaced by just any other symbol, such as a chariot. There was a reason for the choice of the scales, presumably that of representing objectivity and even-handedness. Not all signs were of this character. In particular, Saussure stressed the 'arbitrary' (unmotivated) character of linguistic sign. With the exception of cases of onomatopoeia, there exists no connection whatsoever between the sound-image and the mental-image which by convention it evokes. (Hodge and Kress (1988) oppose this view vehemently.) We can illustrate this through cross-linguistic comparison. The sound-image of d-o-g evokes the mental-image of 'dog' in English but the same sound-image evokes the mental-image of 'fish' in Hebrew.

2.1.3 SEMIOTIC PROCESSES AND FUNCTIONS: INTERPRETATION/DECODING AND CONNOTATION/DENOTATION

For Saussure the connection between the sound-image and mental-image in the linguistic sign was arbitrary. Today it is widely held that it is the very arbitrariness of the linguistic sign that explains its power to convey its message in a demonstratable fashion, and which at the same time shows the necessity of the presence of a system of differences with respect to other signs. This is what is implied in the process of semiotics involved in 'decoding'.
Barthes (1967) defines 'connotation' as a system of second-order meanings, which are so to speak parasitic on the language proper. Whereas 'denotation' arises from the referential level of language, 'connotation' belongs to the expressive sphere. For Barthes, connotation is especially associated with 'complex systems of which language forms the first system'. Barthes expresses the relationship between the systems thus: the first system made up of linguistic signs, is a denotative system, but its signs may be grouped together in order to form connotators, or signifiers of connotation. Each such connotator, which may comprise large fragments of the discourse of denotation, refers to a signified in the same connotative system. But just as the signifier in this system is diffuse by comparison with the signifiers of the first (linguistic, denotative) system, so the signified of connotation may be 'at once general, global and diffuse'. Barthes draws a close connection between the signifiers of connotation and 'rhetoric', and between the signifieds of connotation and 'ideology' (Barthes 1967, pp.89-92).

It is, perhaps, the rationalist tradition which inclines us to regard the denotative, linguistic model of communication, as primary, and the connotative model as supplementary. For Barthes' own account indicates that, in terms of efficiency of communication (the maximum communicative effect for the minimum communicative effort), denotation is immensely superior to connotation. Denotation may, through the instrumentality of a
single word or a small group of words, convey a very specific meaning; connotation is apt to rely upon a larger combination of words or sentences, perhaps extending to 'the tone of a text, which is made up of numerous words, but which nevertheless refers to a single signified' (Barthes 1967, p.91) and the message thereby conveyed is likely to be less specific. That is one reason why structuralist analyses are often regarded as trivial or banal: whereas a surface analysis relies upon the full significatory power of the language, and is capable of extracting meaning from the multiplicity of small units to be identified within it, a deep 'structural' analysis appears to reduce this specific detail to a few general themes. But Barthes would reject the type of rationalist value thereby assumed. He would claim that the communication of moods, affective states and value judgements is at least as powerful as the communication of specific messages. Frequently, he would argue, the connotations of a text operate at the subconscious level (both of author and reader) but they are no less powerful for that, much as we would like to view communication in an extreme rationalist mode, as limited to those messages which an individual human being consciously intends to transmit to another individual human being.

Newspaper discourse, of course, would fit into such a Barthesian framework. Newspaper discourse contains not only a linguistic system but also the visuals combined to form a
semiotic system. But there are serious shortcomings in traditional semiotics mentioned above as pointed out by Hodge and Kress (1988). While questioning the validity of several claims made by semioticians, like Saussure and Barthes, they think that the traditional semiotics

emphasises structures and codes, at the expense of functions and social uses of semiotic systems, the complex interrelations of semiotic in social practice, all of the factors which provide their motivation, their origins and destinations, their form and substance. It stresses system and product, rather than speakers and writers or other participants in semiotic activity as connected and interacting in a variety of ways in concrete social contexts. It attributes power to meaning, instead of meaning to power. It dissolves boundaries within the field of semiotics, but tacitly accepts an impenetrable wall cutting off semiosis from society, and semiotics from social and political thought (pp.1-2).

So they bring in the notion of 'Social Semiotics' which incorporates the insights of traditional semiotics with the social dimension of meaning. They suggest an analytical method wherein the ideological complexes and logonomic systems available
in the sign system in relation to society are brought out. This is discussed in Section 3.1.2 of the next chapter.

2.2.0 SEMIOTICS OF THE NEWSPAPER

Though newspapers, as the name indicates, are meant to give news to their readers, the news is given along with ever so many other items like photographs, advertisements, comics and literature. When we are making a 'structural' analysis of the newspaper from a semiotic perspective, it is perhaps imperative that we look into all these 'other items' also. Newspapers themselves occupy a special 'significance' in the socio-political context of this country. Unlike the other mass media like AIR and DD, newspapers operate at different levels of significations. In our context, reading of the newspaper itself signifies an 'elitist' activity restricted to a minority of the literates among the majority of illiterates. Newspapers, as news producing agencies, are also catering to the needs of a middle class elite, the class which is under the deep influence of capitalist consumerism, the class whose political identities are quite questionable -- 'they talk of left, but behave right'-- whose views about news are already determined. In other words, because the consumers of newspapers are middle class literates, the newspapers cannot function as a 'significance' to the illiterate majority. What is needed for the printed newspaper is people who can decode the messages in them. Hence, the sign system of a
newspaper is highly restrictive unlike the television and the radio that use visuals and spoken language.

2.2.1 SYSTEM OF SIGNIFIERS IN THE NEWSPAPER

The system of signifiers in the newspaper consists of a set of items that are presented to the readers as news and 'other things'. They could be classified as follows:

A. NEWS ITEMS

1. News Categories
2. Summary
3. Main Events
4. Background: Context and History
5. Consequences
6. Comments
7. Photograph

B. OTHER ITEMS

1. Editorials
2. Letters to the Editor
3. Sports news
4. Political essays
5. Advertisements
6. Financial and Commercial notions
7. Comics
8. Cross-word Puzzle
9. Book Reviews
Let us take a few of them for an examination.

2.2.1.1 NEWS CATEGORIES

News categories, both in terms of 'content' and format of printing are different from those of the other discourse genres within the same newspaper. News reports are about past events of a public nature and often feature well known political and social actors who represent certain set of values and ideologies. News reports are neatly categorised in the newspaper as headlines, box items, sometimes category labels such as 'Regional', 'State News in Parliament', 'Foreign News' etc., on the top of the pages or columns. The semiological system of the newspaper is so unconsciously absorbed in the reader that the reader is able to respond to the 'signification process' without difficulty. The response of the reader is also oriented by a particular ideology and he/she seeks to read such items as are acceptable to them ideologically. Even if certain ideologically not-so-acceptable news items are read, they are consumed as per the ideological desires of the reader. Even while selecting a newspaper to read, the reader makes a choice depending upon his own value system which is largely dependent on the socio-political contexts he/she lives in. It is true that all discourse genres in the newspaper may not have fixed and well known semiotic organization freely accessible to the reader. But it also seems to be a fact that
those genres that are frequently used in a particular society tend to develop specific semiotic categories. Similarly, from a production point of view, most forms of discourse that result from professional and institutional processing exhibit fixed semiotic categorical properties, which allow the routine production of such texts. Thus the signification of discourse would be routinely received by the reader without his/her being aware of what he/she is receiving.

2.2.1.2 SUMMARY

Dijk (1986) says "Summaries are the verbalization of the underlying semantic macrostructure of a text" (p.160). These summaries are intended to give a hint about the actual text. Even here certain features are foregrounded as important to the reader and the reader is supposed to take them accordingly. This is also called headline. The headline is typographically marked by large bold letter type, and when the item is printed in several columns, the main headline is often printed across the columns. The headline is literally 'on top' of the news report, and its size and position are therefore important semiotic cues for perception and attention processes. By means of headlines, the reader is able to identify, separate, attend to, begin and end the reading of a news report. These he/she would be doing strictly as per the outline given by the newspaper. Semiotically, headlines can be considered as the highest levels of macrosyntagms. The headline thus focusses the subsidiary
syntagms by foregrounding what is most 'relevant' or 'important'. Cognitively, it is the information in the headline that monitors the further processes of reading and comprehension. Since each signifier can have multiple significations, particularly in the case of a linguistic sign, the reader may well construct a macrosyntagm by assigning different significations to one or more signifiers not available in the headline. If the headline does not signify in part the highest macroproposition of the news report, but rather some trivial detail, the reader would conclude that the headline is biased. Headlines are often stylistically marked as incomplete sentences with articles and verbs or auxiliary verbs deleted. This stylistic change has ideological significance which we would be taking up for discussion a little later.

The Lead Category (Dijk 1986) features the fuller expression of the semiotic structure of the news report and often repeats the highest level macroproposition as it is expressed in the headline(s). Leads have initial position under the headlines and are often also printed in larger or bolder type than the rest of the news story. In news formats where there is no special marking of the lead, the lead is expressed by the first sentence or paragraph of the news report. The semiotic function of the lead is not only to summarise, and introduce the item, but also to position the reader to an ideological setting of the news. Newspapers use certain conventions to show the relationship among
the news items in leads like who, what, where, when, how and so on. However these conventions are not consistently used. The lead signifies the important actors, event and location involved in the news item. It seems to be the point that most readers only read the summary part of the news report when they are skimming the paper. They decode the various messages in the lead after which they may decide to continue or to stop reading the rest of the news report. Experiments have shown that readers after several days hardly recall much more than these main topics, even when they have read the whole news report. As the headline and lead play such a crucial role in the decoding process, they are obligatory and crucial categories of the meaning making process of the newspaper.

2.2.1.3 MAIN EVENTS

After the summary in the headline and lead, the body of a news report should minimally feature what we may call a 'Main Events Category'. This category organizes all the information, 'a set of messages', about the recent event that has given rise to a news report. The message (information) in the main events category forms the basis for news values such as 'elite nation', 'elite actor', 'negativity' and 'geographical and ideological proximity' (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). There are strict constraints upon what count as main events. The events in this category must have taken place (or have been discovered) within
the limits of one or two previous days. As Hodge and Kress (1988) put it -- "All semiotic activity takes place in time: all semiotic phenomena are diachronic whether on a small scale... or a larger scale..." (p.35). If there are several events that are each worth attention and that together form one macro-event or episode, in principle it is the last important event and is given most prominence (the recency principle). This is especially the case if the earlier event(s) had been covered by other papers or media, primary attention had already been given to them in their news for the readers. For example the Indian newspapers which reported the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi on 1 November 1984, had to relegate the news as a subsidiary item, as Mrs. Gandhi's assassination took place during the mid-day of 31 October 1984, and all the other media had already given all the details of the news the same evening. Rather the opinion of world leaders about the assassination and the killings of the Sikhs became the primary concern of the newspapers on 1 November 1984. (It may also be due to the fact that some newspapers brought out a special issue on the 31st evening).

2.2.1.4 BACKGROUND: CONTEXT AND HISTORY

The context of semiosis of newspapers is organised as a series of texts, with meanings assigned to categories of participants and relationships. Journalists while preparing the report have to rely on the context, the history, or the background data. This is to enable them to place the reader in a
particular semiotic plane. This background may be supplied by news agencies like PTI, UNI, etc., by reporters or correspondents who simply know such background from their experience, by other media or by documentations of various kinds. There are specific newsmaking routines like interviews and phone calls to collect messages for the background category of the news report. The presence of background messages is often considered a criterion for the quality of news. Background messages are necessary for the reader to activate his inbuilt semiotic system and get the new messages right. For example, the assassination of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi has to be reported in the light of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord, LTTE, IPKF operations etc., to pipe proper messages through the semiotic system. Note that there is a distinction between the present and past backgrounds. The present backgrounds of a news event will be called the context. The context covers all the messages in the news report about the actual situation in which the main news event takes place. These are in general socio-political states of affairs, or current events during which the specific event takes place. Mr. Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated in the context of his seeking election to the Parliament. In the same way, the stepped up violence in Kashmir, Punjab and Assam are also reported by the Press. There are some structural differences between the contexts wherein certain events are reported like the kidnapping of a Rumanian diplomat on the one hand and Anti-Mandal agitation in northern
India on the other. The content is marked by textual indicators of temporal or local cooccurrence. Certain verbal signs like 'during', 'while', 'at the same time' etc., might be available within the text to denote this. Main events that have little to do with each other, but which occur in the same context, are sometimes reported in the same news report.

Sometimes the present news item is a continuation of something that has happened in the past, or a knowledge of the past news might be relevant to the present. That category of events can be called past events which are main event category of earlier news reports. Temporally, previous events belong to events that precede the actual events by a few days to a few weeks. Together with context, such a previous events category forms what may be called 'circumstances category' for the main news events. The importance and relevance of events are often measured by their consequences. The assassination of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi on 22 May 1991 was in itself a very important event, but the political consequences were even more serious. The Congress Party was without a leader, the absence of an immediate successor sent the whole electorate into a jolt (the general elections were in the offing). Sometimes the consequences may become so important that they downgrade the actual main events within the same news story, or they receive attention in a separate article.

Verbal Reactions is another subcategory of consequences. This category contains information about routinely gathered and quoted
declarations of immediate participants and in particular of politicians of some standing who have opinions or comments on news events. The significance of such comments/opinions is that they acquire some credibility for some of the points of view of the newspaper itself while assessing the changed political environment. It is often the case that the Indian press quotes the official reactions of the Indian Prime Minister on international events. About the domestic news, intellectuals, technocrats, scientists, academicians and other elite news actors that are either involved or found knowledgeable are routinely asked for their reactions and sometimes extensively quoted.

2.3.0 IDEOLOGICAL COMPLEXES AND THE SEMIOTICS OF THE NEWSPAPER

Hodge and Kress (1988) point out that ideological complexes are constructed in order to constrain behaviour by structuring the versions of reality on which social action is based. Ideological complexes exploit contradictory semiotic systems in order to resolve contradictions in attitudes and behaviour. Therefore semiotic systems cannot function effectively on their own. The contradictions of ideological complexes cancel the contradictions in the semiotic system which paves the way for an opaque and highly naturalised semiotic system which cannot reflect the struggle within the social reality. There is an inherent relationship between social struggle and the semiotic
system existing in the society. Therefore, we need to invoke a second level of messages which regulates the functioning of ideological complexes, a level which is directly concerned with the production and reception of meanings. Take for instance some of the things we said about the organization of the News items in the newspaper. The 'surface level' of layout and presentation does not simply reflect the strategic pre-organization of the reading process, such as attention, macrostructure (topic) formation, and model building. It also signals the prominence, relevance and importance of the news events, issues and actors. Front page, size, headlining, use of large or bold type, photographs, cartoons and several other properties of news presentation express second level significations, which in turn are instrumental in model formation by the readers. As a general strategy, then, more newsworthy actors and their activities are presented more prominently, that is, on the front page, on the top of the page, in the headline and leads, in the main events category and as speakers in the verbal reactions category of the news. Since most newsworthy actors are also 'powerful', we obtain an interesting relation between social prominence and textual prominence. Obviously, the form of this reproduction is also communicated to the readers, who will tend to pick up these signals of prominence in their reading process, and therefore in the construction of models (Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). Dominant news actors thus tend to become structurally dominant in models also, and this again favours recall, and later uses of
information in conversation or other forms of social information processing based on the news. In the discursive strategies of the reproduction and indirect legitimation of power in the news text, we see the first stages of "influence", that is, of the socio-cognitive basis of the process of ideological reproduction by the [reading] public (Dijk, 1989).

Somewhat less directly, these structures and strategies may also be witnessed at the level of sentence syntax, another feature of the second level signification. Some of these structures, to be sure, are not subject to variation, and hence cannot be monitored by the construction of power by the journalist. Yet, in many subtle ways, there is a link between power, ideology and form (Kress and Hodge 1979). First, complex syntax may both express and signal the symbolic power of higher education (Bourdieu, 1984). Indeed, much of the news is only fully understandable by the better educated, so that they can take more advantage of public information through the news media. The ordering of syntactic categories, or the placement of clauses, may also express the prominence of news actors, whether as agents or as patients. Fowler et al. (1979) have shown, for instance, that powerful actors, such as the authorities, tend to appear in first subject (and semantic agent) position, especially when they perform neutral or positive actions. As agents of negative actions, they tend to be downgraded by a passive construction, or to remain implicit altogether. The reverse is
true of non-dominant news actors.

Presentation, syntactic and lexical style, are manifestations of second level significations. They serve the interpretative strategies of the reader in the construction of semiotic features. At the macrosyntagmatic level, headlines and leads are seen to express second level significations, the topical organization of the news discourse. It is not surprising to find that newsworthy, powerful actors tend to be prominent also through their occurrences in macropropositions. The same is true of their actions.

At the microsyntagmatic level, for instance, in the coherence links between propositions, we find another set of rules and strategies that subtly convey dominant or preferred interpretations and signals by the journalist. Much of the textual strategy of ideological production does not operate by what is actually said, but rather by what is not said, what is ignored, or left out, but nevertheless implied -- that which is present and absent at the same time. In this way, presuppositions play a prominent role in discourse. They are crucial in the interpretation and the establishment of coherence, but are only signalled indirectly in the text. The journalists may indirectly state the relevance, if not the truth, of such presupposed propositions. The reader is invited to make the relevant inferences, but is not explicitly confronted with them.
Clearly, this is a very subtle and therefore powerful strategy of meaning production. This is also the case of other forms of implication and indirectness, such as allusions, associations and suggestions. To avoid libel, and in order to respect the ideological goal of not giving explicit opinions in news reports, the journalist thus takes recourse to these strategies but scores a point all the same.

Finally, along the rhetorical dimension of news discourse, which cuts across all other textual levels (from presentation to second level signification) we also find complex and subtle means of expression, description, and hence the reproduction of power. The primary function of news discourse is to inform, not persuade. Therefore, news reports have different rhetorical structures from editorial articles, background or opinion articles or advertising. Yet, it is precisely the ideological truth claim of news reports that needs to be backed up. First of all, journalists prefer to mention 'reliable' sources and these 'sources' are mostly middle class, anglicised and powerful. The same is true of 'eye-witnesses'. Next, truth may be signalled by exactness tactics, such as the use of numbers, whether correct or not, relevant or otherwise. Since they are seldom corrected later by the newspaper, their major function is not exactness per se but a rhetorical ploy to connote precision, and hence truthfulness. Numbers, however, are mostly derived from official documents, declarations, and other sources such as the police,
the government, the scholars, and the social organizations. This is typically the case with serious events such as disasters, accidents, demonstrations, unemployment, inflation, etc. The number game of the press, in other words, signals the assumed expertise of the powerful institutions.

To conclude, at all levels and along all dimensions of the newspaper, we find elements in their communicative contexts, that is, textual expressions, manifestations or signals of the conditions of production, as well as strategic preparation of the reading process. Semiotic analysis, therefore, should not be limited to an explicit and systematic analysis of text, but must establish links with these properties of the context. Power and ideologies are not "in" the text, but expressed, signalled, constructed or legitimated by the text. Hence it is important to analyse the relationships between textual and contextual structures, between actors and represented actors, between textual prominence and socio-political prominence, between style and writers/journalists, and between topics and who is assumed to define the social, cultural, or economic situation (Dijk 1989, p.118).