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Bertha Means

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Introduction

As defined by Worth and Gross (1974:30), a communication event is the production and transmission of signs that are perceived and treated as messages from which meaning can be inferred. The term "sign" refers to some element of articulation that is used by the receiver in the interpretation of meaning. Fundamentally, the problem of understanding communication events is the problem of understanding the encoding and interpretation of meaning.

Human communication encompasses the implication and inference of meaning in many different modes. On any given day, the member of a modern culture infers meaning from, and responds to, a variety of communication sources from the surrounding environment. From the perspective of the anthropologist, these sources may be viewed as cultural artifacts, whose social meanings and uses reflect various characteristics of social structure. From the perspective of the communication researcher, they may be viewed as communication events—manifestations of encoding systems that can be analyzed to further our understanding of the communication process in various modes.

The study reported here is a 1976 analysis of women's clothing store windows as cultural artifacts and as communication events—examples of communication through visual display. Store windows were selected as the subject for study primarily because of their banality and their utilitarian nature. In a consumer society such as ours, the individual consumer may be judged according to his/her selection and use of goods, whether clothing or other items, based on what those goods seem to imply about the individual's socioeconomic status, "taste," values, lifestyle, or even political orientation. Thus, considerations of image, in conjunction with more direct constraints (e.g., functional needs and financial limitations), make choices concerning the purchase and use of various goods important decisions for the consumer. Recognition of this apparently underlies the use of "positioning" strategies by manufacturers and retailers.

All this suggests that the primary function of clothing store window displays is not aesthetic, nor simply a matter of showing the products that the stores have to offer. Rather, it suggests that such displays *communicate* specific social orientations through their *style*. In their case, as in the arts, "styles are *significations*; they impose meaning on visual experience" (Malraux 1970: 268). Thus, style is not thought of as the result of the creator's personal whimsy; it is based on conventions so common and so strong that they become communication *codes*.

It is the conceptualization of a class of mundane cultural products (e.g., the women's clothing store window class) as a culturally conventionalized communication system that enables us to apply systematic methods of analysis to that class of products for the purpose of elucidating social structure and communication process. There exists a rich tradition of relevant methodology rooted in the disciplines of linguistics and anthropology, but thus far the application of these methods has been limited to a fairly narrow range of code systems (e.g., verbal language, kinship systems, myths)—most often within "exotic" cultures far from home. The research reported here was an attempt to extend the general analytical framework inherent in this tradition to a quite different subject of research—a form of commercial visual display within our own culture.

The Linguistic-Anthropological Model

If understanding communications events is fundamentally a matter of understanding the implication and inference of meaning, understanding the implication/inference process is in large part a matter of determining how people make distinctions—how they decide that certain things are alike or not alike. The systematic investigation of communicative distinctions can be traced to the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's formulation of "distinctive features" analysis, a concept that was subsequently extended and popularized in the theory of structural linguistics promulgated by Roman Jakobson (Saussure 1966; Jakobson and Halle 1956). According to this tradition, the distinctive features paradigm refers to the method of phonological analysis whereby the linguist identifies features of *articulation* by which native speakers of a language distinguish one phoneme from another.

The applicability of the distinctive features concept to the elucidation of social structure and the organization of social meaning was first recognized by anthropologists Claude Lévi-Strauss and Ward H. Goodenough, although their respective extrapolations of the linguistic model were substantially different. Goodenough (1967) developed componential analysis, a procedure designed to reveal salient semantic categories within a given culture by pinpointing the "definitive attributes" that define kinship terms within the culture's language. Lévi-Strauss (1967) identified a variety of cultural "systems," such as kinship relations, food, myth, political ideology, art, and so on, each of which might be subjected to a contrastive analysis loosely comparable to Saussure's distinctive features approach. Unlike Goodenough, he insisted that the proper focus of analysis was *relations* among constituent elements within the system (rather than terms), and suggested that the structures of linguistic and other cultural systems might be pro-

Bertha Means is a doctoral student at the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania.

Lewis

The Blum Store

jections of universal semantic structures of the human unconscious.¹

The Saussurian legacy is also evident in certain academic areas concerned with patterns of visual perception and interpretation within Western societies today. Psychologist E. J. Gibson (1969), for example, has utilized Jakobsen's formulation of the distinctive features concept and attempted to discover a hierarchy of visual features according to which we learn to discriminate and identify objects visually. Her research does not deal directly with issues of social meaning, however. In contrast, the semioticians, who acknowledge Lévi-Strauss as a forebearer, treat virtually every class of human activity or artifact as a code system (for example, the garment, food, furniture, and architecture systems described by Barthes, 1968), and are interested only in those differences among constituent elements and their relationships within a given system that have social significance. Yet, for the most part, semiotics has remained a fairly abstract field of scholarship that has not sought to identify or confirm socially significant differences at the emic level, among ordinary "native speakers" of the code.

The store window research was an exploratory study designed to determine whether American store window displays of women's clothing might in fact be fruitfully examined as a code system that communicates social distinctions through style to "native speakers" of the general culture.² The research approach is based on the definition of style as a set of constancies of distinctive features; in the case of store windows, these would be visual features of window construction and display that have sign value for the native speaker—that are, in other words, inferred to be sufficiently meaningful within that culture to serve as criteria for categorization. If clothing store windows do function as

a code system with practical social implications, native informants should evince a tendency to discriminate among windows according to the windows' perceived social orientations as communicated by distinctive visual features. Moreover, one would expect similarities of inference, categorization, and ascriptions of sign value across informants.

The general paradigm for this research included two components which might be described loosely as etic and emic. In the former phase, I developed an etic typology of store-window styles, based on my own prior observations and visual analyses of the subject, and obtained photographs of windows that to me exemplified the various categories of the typology. In the latter phase, I compared that typology with the distinctions made by other (more "naive") native speakers of the culture, who lacked my explicit knowledge of the store behind each window. The methods of research are detailed below.

Description of Research Procedures

The sample of 9 Philadelphia store windows was selected on the basis of two primary criteria—socioeconomic orientation (relative price range) and what might be called (perhaps for lack of better terms) the "mainstream"/"nonmainstream" distinction.

Store Window Sample—Etic Typology

As Table 1 shows, 6 of the 9 stores (Lewis, the Blum Store, Bonwit Teller, Marianne, W. T. Grant, and F. W. Woolworth) were classified as "mainstream."³ Because of the relatively traditional/"conservative" quality of

merchandise and display design (see illustrations), the information that these windows provided seemed primarily to reflect demographic targeting (i.e., socioeconomic or, less prevalently, age orientation), rather than some culturally salient characteristics of customer personality, lifestyle, or philosophy. (Of course, such characteristics are commonly related to demographic variables, but this relationship is not necessarily predictive; young and old, affluent and nonaffluent may choose to dress more or less "mainstream," for example. The point is that "nonmainstream" style in general appears to carry more information of a nondemographic nature about its consumers because of its deviation from the older, or more prevalent, mainstream norm.)

Counterculture trends that had arisen in the politically and socially volatile sixties presented a much clearer and more forceful alternative to mainstream ideology and lifestyle in 1976 than they do now. The range of counterculture alternative philosophies and forms was considerable at the time, but two of the most visible themes were the "back-to-basics" movement and an interest in Far Eastern philosophy, religion, and culture. Within the nonmainstream window category, the former theme was evidenced by the utilitarian jeans, flannel shirts, and workboots shown in the Free People's Store, and the latter was obvious in the Indian clothing in Ajanta's display.

The concept of counterculture style is less potent today than previously in part because certain stylistic elements of the counterculture were eventually co-opted by the mainstream. The third store in the nonmainstream category (the 3606 Shop) showed some evidence of having adopted some of the forms, but not necessarily the spirit, of counterculture fashion. In its product selection, the 3606 Shop combined denims and workshirts with loose, lightweight cotton and gauze imports from India, in addition to more mainstream items such as polyester blouses and knit dresses for street wear.

On the basis of a gross dichotomy of pricing patterns, the typology also classifies 3 of the 6 mainstream stores—Lewis, Blum's, and Bonwit's—and 2 of the 3 nonmainstream stores—3606 and Ajanta—as oriented toward a higher socioeconomic stratum than the others. Like the mainstream/nonmainstream categories, however, these two SES groupings encompass internal variation: Lewis has the highest baseline prices of any store, whereas 3606 and Ajanta offered a few "bargain" items compared with the other upscale stores; at the lower extreme, Grant's and Woolworth's were the most consistent in offering exceptionally low prices.

There were other contrasts among the 9 stores. In terms of size and variety of merchandise, Blum's, Bonwit's, Grant's, and Woolworth's might be categorized as "department stores" (or, more commonly, "five-and-tens" in the case of Grant's and Wool-

Bonwit Teller

worth's), while the others would be termed "shops." Distinguishing by age orientation, the three nonmainstream stores and Marianne's appear especially youth-oriented, and Lewis, at the other extreme, has a matronly aspect. Still, it was expected that socioeconomic and mainstream/nonmainstream (or "lifestyle") orientation would be the most salient criteria for discrimination among most native informants. In addition, the store-window sample allowed for the possible establishment of one or the other of these two criteria as dominant: two reasonable solutions to the problem of classifying the three mainstream stores would be (1) the formation of an exclusively nonmainstream group comprising 3606, Ajanta, and Free People's only, or (2) characterizing the three nonmainstream stores as higher or lower stratum and merging each type with mainstream stores of the same stratum.

Informant Interviews

In order to examine the processes of discrimination and inference among other native observers of American store windows, open-ended interviews were conducted with 14 young women concerning their responses to photographs of the 9 store windows in the etic typology. All had been born and raised in the United States and were currently attending college in the Philadelphia area.⁴ All lived in campus housing, and were obtained as informants as a result of canvassing and inquiries within their residences. Ethnicity, race, SES, and geographic or residential background were uncontrolled in this exploratory study. Still, all 14 were white Euro-Americans and most likely securely middle-class (based on the schools they attended and their living accommodations). Most were from the Northeast; one woman was from the

The 3606 Shop

Ajanta

Table 1
Etic Typology of Sample Stores

	Mainstream	Nonmainstream
Higher Socioeconomic Stratum	Lewis The Blum Store Bonwit Teller	The 3606 Shop Ajanta
Lower Socioeconomic Stratum	Marianne W. T. Grant Company F. W. Woolworth Company	The Free People's Store

Southeast. The laissez-faire approach to demographic variables was based, of course, on the premise that the code system in question is sufficiently available to the general population to enable demographically dissimilar members of the population to employ similar strategies of general interpretation. (Although the results of this study seemed consistent with that premise, possible variations in interpretation related to demography would be an interesting subject for further research.)

Each interview was conducted individually at the informant's residence. Since the focus of the study was the communication content of the windows themselves, the informants were given a photograph of each window with the area surrounding the window frame masked by black construction paper.

The interview format actually included several questions, ranging from the solicitation of first reactions to each photograph to very directed questions concerning price discriminations. This discussion, however, will

address only the following two questions:

1. Stylistic distinctions: "Tell me which stores go together or are like each other, and give each group a label."
2. Distinctive features: "How do you know that those stores go together or are like each other?" (or, in the case of single-store categories: "How do you know that that store is different from the others?")

Each interview was tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Criteria for discrimination and distinctive features were then extracted from the transcripts. Analytical procedures primarily focused on the individual emic category (whether a group or a one-store "isolate") as the unit of analysis. For any category designated by an informant, every criterion for discrimination cited (in the informant's labeling of the category) and every distinctive feature mentioned in support of the categorization were noted. Reports below of the most common criteria for discrimination refer to the types of characteri-

The Free People's Store

Marianne

zations that were used in the largest number of window classifications by all informants, while the most common distinctive features are the types of specific visual features most frequently mentioned to support a certain type of emic category. (The larger framework for the distinctive features analysis was partly based on the findings concerning emic classification tendencies, and will be explained below, following a discussion of those findings.)

Summary of Major Findings

Question 1: "Tell me which stores go together...."

As is evident from Table 2, the most common informant categories by far were separate groupings of (1) Lewis, Blum's, and Bonwit's, the three upper-stratum mainstream stores, together (used by 10 informants); (2) 3606, Ajanta, and Free People's, the three nonmainstream stores of both strata, inclusive (7 informants); and (3) Marianne's, Grant's, and Woolworth's, the 3 lower-stratum mainstream stores, combined (6 informants).

Informants sometimes made more detailed discriminations than my etic typology had anticipated; for example, an informant might characterize all three lower-stratum mainstream stores as relatively inexpensive, but segregate Grant's as slightly less so than the other two. Or one might label Ajanta and 3606 the "casual clothes" set, but isolate Free People's as more "outdoorsy." Yet, out of a total of 50 emic store groups and isolates, only 7 categories mixed mainstream with nonmainstream stores or mainstream upper-stratum with mainstream lower-stratum (6 and 3 instances, respectively). Such mixtures usually included Marianne's, the "youngest" of the

mainstream stores, and 3606, the most tentative of the nonmainstream.

Informant classification schemes can only be very briefly summarized here. However, the results of the emic categorization and labeling tasks very strongly indicate that a store's socioeconomic orientation was the primary criterion used to classify the mainstream stores but *not* nonmainstream stores. Every exclusive lower-stratum mainstream category (i.e., one-store isolate or combination of lower-stratum mainstream stores excluding other types) involved considerations of "inexpensive" or relatively "moderate" price orientation; with the exception of one Lewis isolate, every exclusive upper-stratum mainstream category was labeled as relatively high in price, class, or quality. In contrast, only 3 of the 14 exclusive nonmainstream categories involved SES considerations. Instead, these stores were most likely (in half of all 14 exclusive categories) to be distinguished with respect to their specialized appeal for groups with distinctive tastes or lifestyles: the "hip," "casual," "outdoorsy," "sporty," "earthy," "exotic," "artsy-fartsy," "people who dress to fit their moods," etc. Also fairly frequently mentioned in defining such categories were the stores' "boutique" aspect and youth orientation (5 and 4 references, respectively).

Question 2: "How do you know that...?"

In response to the patterns of informant classification, the distinctive features analysis focused individually on the visual features used to distinguish (1) exclusive upper-stratum mainstream categories; (2) exclusive lower-stratum mainstream categories; and (3) exclusive nonmainstream categories. This analytical framework is rather general since it admits features that were used to define one- and two-store as well as three-store categories. Yet, in any case, it indicates the kinds of features

Table 2
Emic Typologies of Sample Stores

Informant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	Totals
Lewis/Blum/Bonwit	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x			x	x	10
Blum/Bonwit					x		x				x				3
Lewis							x				x				2
3606/Ajanta/Free People			x			x		x	x		x	x		x	7
Ajanta				x			x								2
Free People	x						x								2
3606/Ajanta	x														1
Ajanta/Free People					x								x		2
Marianne/Grant/Woolworth			x			x		x	x		x			x	6
Grant	x														1
Woolworth		x			x										2
Marianne/Woolworth		x										x			2
Grant/Woolworth					x					x			x		3
Lewis/Blum/Bonwit/Grant												x			1
3606/Marianne														x	1
3606/Free People/Marianne				x											1
3606/Ajanta/Free People/Marianne										x					1
3606/Marianne/Grant/Woolworth							x								1
Lewis/3606/Marianne/Grant					x										1
3606/Ajanta/Free People/ Marianne/Grant		x													1

that informants deemed most salient and meaningful in each of these three general stylistic types in contrast to the other two.

Regardless of the type of classification, most features cited had to do with some aspect of display "structure" rather than merchandise "content." Most important of the structural features in exclusive classifications of higher-stratum mainstream, lower-stratum mainstream, or non-mainstream windows was the use of space within the window—the extent of crowding or clutter. ("Clutter"

seemed to imply the crowding of incongruous items together.) There were, however, some important differences among these three groups in terms of feature definition, as illustrated below.

Simplicity or lack of crowding was the primary (most frequently cited) cue for distinguishing upscale mainstream windows. Decorative elements were the second most cited indicators of upscale mainstream style (e.g., the pictures in Bonwit's, the swan in Blum's, and Lewis's gilt door molding, statuette, "antique table," "fine porcelain,"

and "dried flowers"). The merchandise itself ranked third (mentioned 8 times, versus 53 display form features). Generally, the clothing was merely said to "look" expensive, although formality of design (Lewis) and suitability for evening wear (Blum's and Bonwit's) were specifically inferred to suggest costliness. Other features used to distinguish upper-stratum mainstream style included soft lighting, obstruction of store interiors, "chic" or "quality" mannequins, and the use of French ("melange") in the Bonwit window.

Not surprisingly, crowding or clutter was the single most frequently reported indication of lower price range in exclusive classifications of the lower-stratum mainstream type. The clothing itself—commonly said to resemble cheap or ill-made copies of more expensive clothes—ranked second, but still accounted for only 7 features out of a total of 51. Other distinctive features included: large window size; lack of partitioning from store interiors; general display ("parallel line-up," clothes on and off mannequins, or "scattered all over the floor"); stiff, cheap, or old-fashioned mannequins; lack of or "cheap-looking" decorations; "barnlike" store interiors; and bright inside lighting.

Although content features were outnumbered by structural features in the exclusive nonmainstream classifications, as in classifications of every other type, merchandise was more often cited than any other *single* aspect of nonmainstream window style. And, in fact, half the features of nonmainstream style (20 out of 36) pertained to content rather than structure. The clothing in these windows was generally described as unusual, or designed for a select group of consumers—characterized as casual, youthful, or simply interested in the unique. In particular, the rugged, all-purpose clothing and "camping" gear in the Free People's Store suggested "earthiness" and fashion independence. Ajanta's clothing (typified by the embroidered vest) also implied independent consumers, but consumers who actually sought the unusual instead of forsaking fashion for utility. The "exotic" and "flowy" designs of Ajanta's apparel, in combination with the waterpipe and "bronze vases," were said to give the store an air of mysticism.

Another interesting difference between mainstream and nonmainstream features lay in the interpretation of the second most common type feature of the unconventional categories—crowding and clutter. In this context, crowding and clutter were not related to lower price at all, but simply mentioned as a common feature between stores, criticized, or even termed "interesting" or "casual," as if intentionally designed to set an informal tone for the store.

W. T. Grant Company

Discussion

These research results suggest that women's clothing store windows in our own culture *are* communication events involving a visual code system. Despite variations, informants displayed substantial similarities in categorization and criteria for discrimination; a relatively low incidence of grouping across certain etic lines (i.e., combining mainstream and nonmainstream stores, or mainstream stores of different strata); commonalities in feature interpretation and use; and general accuracy of socioeconomic inferences. In short, it seems that store windows communicate (and, indeed, probably contribute to) cultural stereotypes of socioeconomic strata and lifestyle-value segments remarkably well.

For the native American consumer, store-window style evidently is more social than aesthetic; almost every category in informants' typologies was based primarily on inferred socioeconomic, lifestyle, or age-group orientations. SES apparently counts the most, except when it comes to nonmainstream windows. But informant tendencies to separate mainstream windows on the basis of lifestyle considerations instead imply that socially significant deviation from cultural norms in taste, values, and activities (as in the case of counterculture style) is more salient.

Generally speaking, the informants indicated that clothing-store windows communicate more through display structure than through their actual merchandise content. The most potent structural feature appears to be the use of space—crowding or noncrowding—as a mainstream price convention.

Yet responses to the nonmainstream windows indicate an unusually important role for the merchandise itself in that particular context. There appear to be two basic reasons for this. First, the "content" of these windows simply carries greater lifestyle information than does the

F. W. Woolworth Company

mainstream content, because it represents a socially significant (i.e., intentional) departure from "normal" fashion. Second, there is probably greater dependence on content because nonmainstream displays break the traditional conventions of display structure that normally provide important clues of price.⁵

The research reported here is admittedly rudimentary. More sophisticated and larger-scale versions of this general research approach might be used to examine finer stylistic distinctions (e.g., within each of the three major emic categories described here), determine the relative contributions of different types of features more exactly by varying them systematically, and look for possible differences in discrimination across informant groups.

In addition, the approach might be applied to a wide variety of other cultural artifacts. The findings reported here indicate that both commercial products and modes of presentation may be viewed as rather potent communicators of major sociological distinctions—reflecting, and most likely helping to define, those distinctions daily. By attending to such mundane and utilitarian artifacts we can hope to learn much more about both cultural groups and systems of communication—according to what such groups deem important to know, and how they know it.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

- 1 See Hymes (1970) for a more detailed comparison of these two anthropological approaches.
- 2 See Mead (1953) for a fuller discussion of the use of the "native speaker" concept in anthropology.
- 3 The bases for my etic classifications, including merchandise and display-form features as well as price comparisons, are discussed at some length in my M.A. thesis, in which this research was originally reported ("Stylistic Conventions of Women's Clothing Store Windows," Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, 1977).
- 4 The sample included 7 women with academic majors related to fashion or commercial presentation (marketing, fashion illustration, advertising, and design), and 7 with unrelated majors. The two groups proved to be so similar in their responses, however, that they will not be discussed separately here.
- 5 As reported in my thesis, more explicit questioning about price inferences indicated that the reluctance to group nonmainstream store windows by stratum orientation may have been partly related to difficulties in inferring stratum orientation from those windows. When respondents attempted to organize all 9 stores strictly on the basis of price, 12 percent of all relative placements of nonmainstream stores were unquestionably incorrect—versus only 2 percent of all mainstream placements.

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