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# Video, Politics, and Applied Semiotics: Constructing Meaning from Broadcast News

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the relationship between verbal and visual semiotic cues by analyzing how semiotic cues position speakers interactionally and communicate implicit evaluative messages in one television news story. The paper summarizes an analysis of this news story that my collaborator and I have done based solely on verbal cues (Wortham & Locher, 1996). Then the paper analyzes the visual cues that accompany this television news report. The research question is: Do the visual cues contribute to the interactional positioning accomplished by the verbal cues? The analysis shows that visual cues in this case both reinforce the interactional positioning that gets done by verbal cues and create a pattern of interactional positioning that is independent of the verbal cues.

## **Comments**

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# Video, Politics, and Applied Semiotics: Constructing Meaning from Broadcast News

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the relationship between verbal and visual semiotic cues by analyzing how semiotic cues position speakers interactionally and communicate implicit evaluative messages in one television news story. The paper summarizes an analysis of this news story that my collaborator and I have done based solely on verbal cues (Wortham & Locher, 1996). Then the paper analyzes the visual cues that accompany this television news report. The research question is: Do the visual cues contribute to the interactional positioning accomplished by the verbal cues? The analysis shows that visual cues in this case both reinforce the interactional positioning that gets done by verbal cues and create a pattern of interactional positioning that is independent of the verbal cues.

## Introduction

This paper examines the relationship between verbal and visual semiotic cues by analyzing how semiotic cues position speakers interactionally, and thus communicate implicit evaluative messages, in one television news story. First, the paper summarizes an analysis of this news story that my collaborator and I have done based solely on verbal cues (Wortham & Locher, 1996). This analysis of verbal cues argues that the newscasters' speech simultaneously accomplishes two functions: it denotes the political events being reported, and it positions the reporters, in evaluative ways, with respect to the political candidates they are covering. In summarizing this earlier analysis, the paper sketches how one can systematically analyze the interactional positioning accomplished through speech. Second, the paper analyzes the visual cues that accompany this television news report. The research questions are: Do the visual cues contribute to the interactional positioning accomplished by the verbal cues? Do the visual cues complement and reinforce the interactional positioning that gets accomplished by the verbal cues? Or do the visual cues contribute to some other — either unrelated or divergent — interactional positioning that the reporters may be doing?

## Verbal Positioning

Speech communicates more than denotational content. As Goffman (1959, 1974) and many others have shown, speakers inevitably adopt interactional positions with even the most mundane utterances. Knowingly or not, speakers position themselves with respect to others in the interaction and with respect to implicit moral standards from the culture at large. This holds for newscasters as well. Despite attempts at objectivity, newscasters adopt interactional positions toward and at least implicitly evaluate those they cover (Verschuere, 1985; Waugh, 1995).

Wortham and Locher (1996) use concepts from Bakhtin (1935/1981, 1953/1986) to analyze the interactional positioning accomplished by newscasters during television coverage of political candidates. This article draws on two central Bakhtinian concepts. In his theory of the novel, Bakhtin defines voice as an identifiable social role or position that a character enacts. Novelists portray characters as “speaking with different voices” by describing them and putting certain words into their mouths — the words of a longshoreman, a butler, a politician, etc. Novelists also ventriloquate their characters when an “authorial voice” enters and takes a position with respect to a character. Ventriloquation is an author “speaking through” a character by aligning or distancing himself or herself from that character. Bakhtin claims that, whenever an author presents the voice of another, he or she inevitably takes some evaluative position on it.

Any speaker talking about others occupies a position partly analogous to a novelist’s. Like novelists, speakers present others as if those others speak with certain voices. Especially when they represent others’ speech, speakers cast others in specific social positions. Speakers also ventriloquate those they talk about. By giving them particular voices and placing them in types of social events, speakers evaluate those they describe (Besnier, 1992; Parmentier, 1993).

Like other speakers, newscasters portray their subjects as people who speak with identifiable voices. And they themselves ventriloquate these voices and thereby evaluate those they cover. Previous work on media discourse and media bias has established that “news is determined by values, and the kind of language in which that news is told reflects and expresses those values” (Bell, 1991, p. 2). Bell describes how news texts are multilayered products, and he thus makes clear that most implicit values expressed in newscasts are complex and not fully intentional. Nonetheless, as Davis and Walton (1983) and others have shown, newscasts do often express coherent evaluative positions that can be uncovered by systematic analysis of semiotic cues.

In order to analyze the interactional positioning and evaluative messages in television news discourse, we need a more systematic semiotic framework. Describing a verbal interaction relates two events of language use, the narrating and the narrated (Jakobson, 1957/1971). Many contemporary analyses of language use have shown the utility of this distinction (e.g., Schiffrin, 1996; Silverstein, 1976; Verschuere, 1985). A news broadcast is a narrating event. The anchor and correspondents speak among

themselves and to the audience. The events discussed as the news story — e.g., political candidates' statements — are narrated events. Bakhtin's claims, put into this terminology, are that a speaker's descriptions of a narrated event inevitably (a) attribute social positions to those described, and (b) express, in the narrating event, the speaker's own social position and attitude with respect to those described.

In other work, I have laid out a systematic technique for identifying such attributions and evaluations in discourse (Wortham, 1996; 2001; Wortham & Locher, 1996). First, the analyst identifies all tokens of certain textual devices that speakers commonly use to voice and to evaluate their subjects (for a list of cues, cf. Wortham, 1996; 2001; Wortham & Locher, 1996). Then the analyst identifies patterns in the use of these devices or cues. As we will see, for instance, a newscaster might use several metapragmatic verbs (Silverstein, 1976) to quote a given speaker, verbs that characterize or "voice" that speaker as like a criminal — e.g., saying that Bush "denied," "claimed," "changed his story," "appeared to admit," etc. From these patterns in the cues, the analyst goes on to infer the evaluative message or interactional positioning that the speaker is doing. In this case, the reporters may be presenting Bush as a liar and setting themselves up as the guardians of the truth.

This approach is not a mechanical method for identifying voicing and ventriloquation. An analyst cannot simply compute the voicing and ventriloquation after identifying particular devices. Instead, tokens of the devices provide clues, from which the analyst must infer an interpretation of the voicing and ventriloquation. As in any hermeneutic process, all such interpretations are open to challenge and revision. To summarize, this interpretive process involves asking three questions: Given the devices or cues used by the speaker, what voices are being attributed to the characters? Given these tokens, what type of interactional event is the speaker establishing for the narrating event? (In the CBS newscast analyzed below, for instance, the narrating event is a mock trial.) What role is the speaker playing in this narrating event, and what is his or her position with respect to the various characters?

## Verbally Cued Positioning on the News

The newscast data analyzed in this paper come from a larger study of network news coverage from the 1992 U.S. presidential campaign (Locher & Wortham, 1994; Wortham & Locher, 1996, 1999). My colleague and I recorded virtually every network news broadcast between Labor Day and Election Day on ABC, CBS, PBS, and the CNN Spanish-language broadcast (called Telemundo/CNN at the time), and we have done various analyses of these data. I focus here on one particular news story.

On October 30, 1992 — four days before the presidential election between then President George Bush and then Governor Bill Clinton — a special prosecutor released notes written in 1986 by Caspar Weinberger (Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Defense). The notes were released as part of a grand jury indictment that alleged Weinberger had lied to Congress while

attempting to hide the fact that both Reagan and Bush knew beforehand and had approved of the illegal 1986 U.S. government sale of missiles to Iran. The notes were a lead story for television news that evening because they contradicted Bush's repeated statements that he did not know of the arms sale ahead of time.

CBS's coverage of this incident differs dramatically from that of both CNN and ABC, both in structure and in voicing and ventriloquation. CBS gives the story much more space — almost 1300 words, which is more than twice as much as ABC and four times as much as CNN. The structure of the report is also different. Instead of the anchor reporting the issue and then going directly to the campaign correspondents for responses, another correspondent reports the bulk of the story before they get to the individual campaign responses. This initial correspondent is the CBS news "law correspondent" — which tells us something important about the frame CBS places on the story. The newscast is organized as follows:

- Anchor introduction
- Law correspondent report of the facts, including clips from journalists and Bush's own past claims
- Anchor introduces campaign correspondents
- Bush campaign correspondent, including clips from Bush and his campaign staff
- Clinton campaign correspondent, including clips from Clinton and his campaign staff
- Perot campaign correspondent, including clip from Perot
- Report of poll on whether public trusts Bush or Clinton more

The analysis developed in Wortham and Locher (1996) shows that the selection of the law correspondent is no accident. This newscast enacts a definite trope: George Bush is put on trial. The law correspondent, Rita Braver, acts like a prosecutor, and she calls "expert witnesses" to make her case against Bush. The anchor himself (Dan Rather) enters as a sort of witness and warns us about Bush's lies. The Bush campaign correspondent then provides an unconvincing rebuttal. Next, Clinton and Perot get to "testify" against Bush. The segment ends with a vote from the "jury," a poll that shows the public distrusts Bush far more than it distrusts Clinton. Thus, the "trial" ends and Bush is "convicted."

In this paper I will focus only on the first two sections of the story, Rather's introduction and Braver's report. From the beginning, Rather presents this story as a legal matter. In the introductory segment, which briefly summarizes the top stories of the day, Rather's first words are: "A secret arms deal with Iran. A grand jury sees evidence contrary to what President Bush repeatedly has said ... " (an underline here indicates stress). So already we have "grand jury" involvement that indexes a legal frame. As Rather presents it here, it even sounds as if the grand jury might be indicting Bush himself. We do not learn until the third sentence of the law correspondent's report (120 words into the story) that the grand jury is indicting Weinberger and not Bush.

After the titles, Rather begins the newscast as follows:

Dan Rather reporting. There is new written evidence tonight concerning what President Bush knew and when he knew about the secret deal that sent some of America's best missiles to the Ayatollah Khomeini. The grand jury evidence raises new questions about whether Mr. Bush is telling the truth. CBS News law correspondent Rita Braver has details on this dramatic turn of events.

Note first the emphasis on "new" evidence. Rather uses this word twice, and other correspondents pick up on it later. And at the end of this passage, Rather labels the Weinberger notes a "dramatic turn of events." Later on, other CBS correspondents use the terms "bombshell" and "revelation" to describe the notes as well. So CBS frames the story as very serious new questions about whether Bush has been telling the truth.

Rather makes these questions even more serious by using terms that index the terrible mistake that was made: it was a "secret deal," the sort of arrangement criminals make; it sent our "best missiles," not just generic armaments; and it sent them to the hated "Ayatollah Khomeini" (Americans particularly detested Khomeini for his role in kidnaping U.S. hostages in 1980, so much so that "Nuke the Ayatollah" was a common bumper-sticker slogan until his death). Rather further reinforces the seriousness of Bush's predicament by paraphrasing the legal question as "what President Bush knew and when he knew." These same words were used in the investigation of Nixon during Watergate, and Nixon was forced to resign because of the charges against him. All of this makes the questions about Bush seem extremely serious.

The genre CBS uses to investigate such questions is legal. Rita Braver, the law correspondent, presents the evidence against Bush. (In her report she cites Anthony Lewis, a New York Times journalist who followed the Iran missile scandal closely.)

Braver: An embarrassing revelation for George Bush. Evidence released for the first time today contradicts his previous statements that he was out of the loop on the Reagan administration's deal to ship arms to Iran in exchange for American hostages. New charges returned in the ongoing case against former defense secretary Casper Weinberger detail Weinberger's handwritten notes of a meeting George Bush attended January 7, 1986. Weinberger writes that President Reagan decided to approve a scheme to release hostages in return for the sale of 4,000 TOW missiles to Iran by Israel. Weinberger opposed. Others, including Vice President Bush, avored the deal.

Lewis: This is further, very strong evidence that George Bush knew all about the trading of arms for hostages, which he has consistently denied.

Braver: For years, over and over again, Mr. Bush claimed neither he nor President Reagan knew the details.

- Bush [12/3/86]: The President is absolutely convinced that he did not swap arms for hostages.
- Braver: President Bush has changed his story several times, and in fact earlier this month appeared to admit that he knew something about the deal.
- Interviewer [10/13/92]: You knew about the arms for hostages.
- Bush [10/13/92]: Yes. And I've said so all along.

Braver here picks up Rather's use of the term "deal" to refer to the arms sale, and she also uses "scheme." Both of these words often index criminal acts. She uses the metapragmatic verb "contradict" to emphasize the new evidence that Bush has been lying. She also presents details of the notes, and thus reinforces their objectivity: the notes are "handwritten," they describe a meeting on a specific date, and they specifically mention 4,000 missiles. She leaves no doubt that Bush attended the meeting Weinberger's notes describe.

Braver then proceeds to call a "witness" and present evidence. Anthony Lewis indicts Bush bluntly, as one would expect a prosecution witness to do — by putting the verb deny in Bush's mouth, and by claiming that Bush really "knew all about" the deal. Then Braver illustrates Bush's "claims" with his own words (like "deny," "claim" is a metapragmatic verb often associated with legal defendants). She produces, as an exhibit, a tape of Bush denying that Reagan knew of the swap. Like a good prosecutor, she then produces more evidence — again an exhibit in Bush's own words — that he "has changed his story" (along with "admit," this is another type of predication associated with legal defendants). The contradiction between the two Bush quotes is blunt, and it leaves the clear impression that Bush must have been lying at some point.

Braver continues her case by calling on Lewis once more:

- Braver: But in that same interview the president also denied being at key meetings, including the one in the note released today, where Weinberger opposed the trade. New York Times columnist Anthony Lewis, who's been tracking the president's Iran-Contra connection, says it's ironic George Bush is trying to make Bill Clinton's truthfulness an issue.
- Lewis: It's the president of the United States deliberately, knowingly, forcefully telling you an untruth, year after year, month after month, that's going to destroy our faith in our political system.
- Braver: The independent counsel insists the release of the note was timed to meet the schedule for Caspar Weinberger's trial, not to embarrass the president in the final days of the campaign. Rita Braver, CBS News, Washington.

Note that, in introducing Lewis, Braver uses the phrase "the president's Iran-Contra connection." The term "connection" is yet another



associated with criminal activity, and thus she reinforces her voicing of Bush as a criminal defendant facing serious charges. Lewis continues along these lines by claiming that Bush has been repeatedly lying. He also identifies the victim of the crime: our political system is losing credibility because of Bush's lies.

As described more extensively in Wortham and Locher (1996), I argue that Rather and Braver are staging a mock trial of Bush in this report. They characterize him as being like a criminal defendant — the kind of person who lies, changes his story, and struggles to cover it up. And Braver positions herself interactionally as a mock prosecutor who is pressing the case against Bush. This sort of interactional positioning conveys implicit evaluative messages about the protagonist in the story — in this case, a message that Bush is not to be trusted.

### Visual Cues

The analysis so far, and the more comprehensive analysis in Wortham and Locher (1996), relies exclusively on verbal cues. As a television news story, however, this report contained both the verbal text and accompanying visuals. The visual information contains semiotic cues just as the speech does, and these visual cues might contribute to the interactional positioning that Rather and Braver enact and the implicit evaluative messages that they send. In the rest of this paper I will consider the relationship between messages communicated by the visual cues and the verbal cues. It might be that the visual cues cohere with and reinforce the interactional message that we have found in analyzing the verbal cues. It might be that the visual cues present a separate message, orthogonal and unrelated to the interactional message communicated verbally. Or it might be that the visual cues present a divergent message, one that contradicts the one communicated verbally.

Space limitations make a comprehensive analysis of the visual cues impossible. But even a brief look at the pictures shows that more than one message seems to be communicated through the visual cues in this case. In places, the visuals seem to reinforce the interactional positioning that Rather and Braver do through verbal cues. At the beginning of the newscast, for instance, several visual cues seem to accomplish epistemic modalization (Silverstein, 1993). That is, these visual cues establish the differential epistemic access enjoyed by the reporters Rather and Braver and their subject George Bush. By showing visuals that index their own greater access to hard evidence, Rather and Braver position themselves as warranted in their claims and as more trustworthy than Bush.

At the beginning of Braver's story, for instance, when she describes the contents of Weinberger's note, the picture shows an illegible page of typed text. As Braver quotes pieces of the Weinberger note, different pieces of the text move into the foreground and become legible — each time a piece with the direct quote given in quotation marks. We know from Braver's own story that the notes were handwritten, so this visual representation does not accurately represent the notes themselves. But the visual, nonetheless, indexes Braver's epistemic authority and trustworthiness because it seems

as if she is reading directly from the evidence itself. In another visual, shown as Braver presents a video clip of Bush's past statements, CBS superimposes the exact dates these clips were recorded. This reinforces Braver's point that Bush must be lying because we see him saying apparently contradictory things only a couple of weeks apart. The visual text containing the date does not in itself suffice to position Bush as a liar, but it does reinforce the verbal cues reviewed in the last section.

In some respects, then, the visual cues presented in this news story reinforce the interactional positioning and evaluative messages that Rather and Braver communicate through verbal cues. In other aspects, however, the visual cues seem to communicate a more autonomous message — one that works alongside but does not simply reinforce the messages communicated verbally. We can see this pattern by looking at Table 1.

Throughout this whole news story, the visual images alternate in a striking way. At least six different times, CBS presents an image of Bush smiling and looking self-assured while campaigning or doing his official duties. Then, immediately following each of these more positive images, comes a more ominous image that reminds viewers of the serious threat the Weinberger notes pose to Bush's presidential campaign. Five of these positive-then-ominous visual pairs are represented in Table 1 — in segments 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 7 and 8, 9 and 10, and 14 and 15.

When Braver begins her report (at segment 3), for instance, the visual shows Bush smiling on the campaign trail. This visual seems to conflict with her voiceover, which discusses "an embarrassing revelation" and new evidence that "contradicts" his repeated claims. A few seconds into her report, however, the visual shifts to a grim-faced Caspar Weinberger, flanked by his lawyers, exiting a limousine and ascending the courthouse steps. This two-part sequence of visual cues — going from an apparently happy, confident Bush to an ominous, threatening image — occurs four times during Braver's report alone. It also occurs two or three times more in other parts of the news story.

I interpret this sequence as an icon of Bush's political fortunes at the moment of the newscast. The sequence reminds one of the famous scenes in the movie *Jaws*, where the camera placed above the water shows happy swimmers splashing and playing, then the film cuts to the underwater camera that shows the shark about to eat their legs. The visual sequence with Bush communicates that Bush is heading for a fall. At the time of the newscast we did not know whether the Weinberger notes would be important. Bush had been gaining in the polls, but there were only four days left before the election. The message I get from CBS's repeated sequence of positive-then-ominous images is that Bush's campaign will be derailed by the Weinberger evidence.

This pattern is congruent with the messages communicated by the verbal cues. If Rather and Braver are staging a mock trial and voicing Bush as being like a criminal defendant, it makes sense that his campaign might be derailed by the Weinberger evidence. But the visually communicated pattern adds something distinct to the overall message here by giving the audience a sense of Bush's impending demise.

Speaker and Topic	Visual Image
Rather: A secret arms deal with Iran ...	George Bush smiling at a meeting. Caption: "OUT OF THE LOOP?"
Dan Rather reporting. There is new written evidence tonight concerning what President Bush knew and when he knew ...	Rather talking head.
Braver: An embarrassing revelation for George Bush.	Bush smiling on the campaign trail.
... New charges returned in the ongoing case against former defense secretary Caspar Weinberger ...	Weinberger exiting limousine with grim expression, surrounded by lawyers, going to arraignment.
... Weinberger writes that President Reagan decided to approve a scheme...	Illegible page of typed text. Legible excerpts brought into foreground: "to release our hostages in return for sale of 4000 TOWs to Iran," "I opposed," "VP favored."
Lewis: This is further, very strong evidence that George Bush knew all about ...	Lewis talking head. Caption: "Anthony Lewis New York Times."
Braver: For years, over and over again, Mr. Bush claimed ...	Bush smiling at a meeting.
Bush [12/3/86]: The President is absolutely convinced ...	Bush talking at a press conference. Caption: "December 3, 1986."
Braver: President Bush has changed his story several times, ...	Bush campaigning on a train, with self-assured facial expression.
... and in fact, earlier this month appeared to admit ...	Bush being interviewed by another reporter.
Braver: But, in that same interview, the President also denied...	Bush being interviewed by another reporter.
... being at key meetings, including the one ...	Weinberger in an office, walking out with a folder of papers.
New York Times columnist, Anthony Lewis, ...	Lewis talking head.
... who's been tracking the President's Iran-Contra connection ...	Bush smiling on the campaign trail, audience cheering him.
Lewis: It's the President of the United States deliberately, knowingly, forcefully telling you an untruth ...	Lewis talking head.
Braver: The independent counsel insists the release of the note was timed...	Braver talking head.

Table 1: Verbal and visual cues in the newscast

## Conclusion

The brief analysis presented in this article has promise in two different ways. First, it draws on Bakhtin (1935/1981) and more systematic contemporary work in linguistic anthropology (Parmentier, 1997; Silverstein, 1993; Wortham, 2001) to analyze interactional positioning and implicit evaluation in media discourse. By focusing on the interactional as well as the denotational messages communicated by verbal signs, this approach can provide systematic evidence about the types of identities speakers adopt and the types of interactional events they enact in various kinds of discourse. The approach can also provide a semiotic account of media bias (Locher & Wortham, 1994; Wortham & Locher, 1996, 1999).

Second, the analysis has begun to explore the interrelations between visual and verbal semiotic cues. From this analysis of verbal and visual cues in one television news story, of course, we cannot make any general conclusions about multimedia semiotics. Undoubtedly, the relationship between messages communicated verbally and messages communicated visually varies, depending on the genre involved and on the particular context. Nonetheless, this case illustrates how visual cues can reinforce interactional or evaluative messages that are communicated verbally. And it illustrates how visual cues can communicate messages distinct from those communicated verbally — even if the visual and verbal messages ultimately complement each other. Using this methodological approach, future research on multimedia semiotics should be able to explore how verbal and visual semiotic cues complement and perhaps contradict each other in different contexts.

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