



Stefan Schreiboeck

# Generating Functional Multimodal Sign Systems

A Case Study of the International  
VW Polo Advertising Campaign



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Tectum Verlag

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*To my beloved mother  
in heaven*



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# PART 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Characterising the object and the goal of this study

Paramount examples of multimodal texts can be found in the advertising genre. This genre<sup>1</sup> more than any other has to undertake painstaking efforts in order to capture the public attention in the face of the omnipresent phenomenon of information overload (cf. Held 1999:176). It is exactly these efforts and their underlying textual mechanisms which have placed advertisements at the junction of various interdisciplinary approaches: sociology (e.g. Leiss et al. 1992), social(ist) philosophy (Williamson 1978, Goldman 1992), critical linguistics and social semiotics (Hodge & Kress 1988, Kress & van Leeuwen 1996), cultural studies, and marketing (Myers 1992, 1999), discourse analysis (Cook 2001) and many more.

The present case study sees its practical goal in extending the procedures known from critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough 1992, 1995a, 1995b, van Dijk 1997a,b) and functional linguistics (e.g. Halliday 1978, 1985, 1994) to multimodal semiosis. It will be shown that as a consequence of the phenomenon of globalisation, vacillation in the multimodal meaning of advertisements can be attributed to diachronic rather than synchronic cultural factors. In concrete terms, it will be shown that from a semantic point of view there is little difference in the meanings created by the Polo ads in France, Germany and Great Britain.

On the theoretical level, the objective is however to create a metatheoretical classification of modes on the basis of the observations of the data in connection with some important additional concepts and implications. The stance has been adopted that it is only through the meaningful interaction of these two fundamental theoretical and practical goals that a holistic picture of multimodal semiosis can be drawn.

Accordingly, the theoretical constructum of a macro sign system, which coordinates meanings from many different modes, will be presented. The aim of such a system is to orchestrate multimodal semiosis. The need for such a system was emphasised as early as by Saussure himself in his *Cours*, by Barthes (1964) and finally by Thibault (1997:343) who claims that “Language is strongly cross-coupled with other, non-verbal semiotic modalities” and that non-linguistic semiotic modes must be analysed to establish a “more comprehensive theory of social meaning making [...]”.

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of *genre* will be defined in § 2

In such a comprehensive system, the coordinated modes cohere at a higher contextual level, which will be demonstrated by means of generic analysis as commonly practised within the current of systemic functional linguistics (hereafter SFL).

## **1.2 The nature of the present case study**

This dissertation generally subscribes to a qualitative research paradigm. It is not at first based on the observation of a particular variable within a large corpus. The goal it pursues is a more abstract one, namely (i) the metatheoretical classification of multimodal communicative events. This classification has however practical implications inasmuch as it forms the systematic theoretical basis for (ii) the denaturalisation of multimodal ideologies, whereby it contributes to a more fundamental understanding of this text type. This enterprise is undertaken on the basis of quantitative strategies. The effective combination of the two paradigms, allows the data to be exploited twice and be cross-coupled with the two main goals (*i + ii*) of this dissertation.

## **1.3 The tools**

In order to understand and classify multimodal events it is intended to make use of two as yet distinct approaches to social communication: social semiotics (which is usually supported and complemented by SFL) and Relevance theory. In the following chapters it will be point out that the Relevance model, as proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995) is a model of social communication (Sperber & Wilson 1997) rather than an abstract cognitive-psychological model. It will be the interaction of these two approaches that constitutes the basis of complex semiological systems. In my attempt to work out a synthesis of or compromise between these two approaches to communication, an attempt will be made at bridging the gap between rational and empirical models of communication.

## **1.4 The data**

The corpus underlying the present study consists of materials from the VW Polo campaign of the last 17 years:

### **(a) Diachronic comparison of print ads**

- one Polo ad from 1986
- one Polo ad from 1998
- the current Polo ads (~January 2003)

**(b)Synchronic comparison of print ads**

- three British ads
- three French ads
- four German ads

**(c) Radio commercials**

one British radio commercial (Length: 30 sec.)

**(d)Synchronic comparison of TV spots**

- three British spots

Title	Length
Chip	41 secs
Breakdown	42 secs
Surfer	32 secs

- one Italian spot

Title	Length
Camping	46 secs

**1.5 Looking ahead**

As can be deduced from the above tables, this study is primarily concerned with a diachronic and synchronic (multimodal-) analysis of the Discourse of Advertising (hereafter DA). Central to this topic are concepts such as multimodality, multimediality and semiosis, which have increasingly impacted the study of modern linguistics and communication.

It will be shown that the multimodal design of an ad is determined by (i) the three micro-contextual variables of Field, Mode and Tenor as well as by (ii) the context of culture at (iii) a particular point in time.

A diachronic analysis will take record of the changes in (multi-)modality that have taken place within printed ads from 1986, 1998 and January 2003. Modern advertising generates much of its semiosis by non-linguistic means (images, music, etc) – at the expense of exactly the language code. This is the state of the art of the scientific literature, and further motivated by the analysis of the present corpus. Thus, the logocentric worldview seems to have undergone a metamorphosis, which

has resulted in a special focus on the multimodal character of the semioses currently produced.

It seems clear that different means and strategies have to be deployed in order to gear the advertisement for a particular product or service to a particular target group. However, the whole situation is rendered much more complex for a multinational company, like VW, when it is faced with the task of addressing people from different countries and/or cultural groups. The main problem in this respect, resides more in finding a way of encapsulating the right concepts, rather than in overcoming the language barrier(s). Thus, it is important to strike a balance between global market strategies and culturally conditioned world-views. This study also intends to show what solutions generally – and in the concrete case of the VW Polo campaign – look like.

If one desires to ‘get’ the whole multimodal picture of an advertising campaign at a synchronic level, it is ineluctable that, apart from printed ads, there be analysed also TV commercials and radio spots. The first offers a juxtaposition of the written and the spoken mode, still and motion picture and much more; while the latter works exclusively with language (and noise), but in a very elaborate manner. In this respect, it often happens that the DA uses every-day-discourses as ‘templates’ in order to achieve a high degree of authenticity and immediacy (cf. Cook 2001, Stöckl 1999). Using this form of inter-textuality, the DA quite overtly displays its parasitic nature. Authenticity and immediacy are, of course, ingredients which are necessitated to capture the public’s attention.

The Internet – which is not dealt with as a medium in this dissertation – in its semiosis, activates almost all means of which we, modern human beings that we pretend to be, can think of. The role of the recipient is upgraded with regard to other media insofar as s/he takes a much more active role in his or her ‘consumption’. Indeed, the process of ‘decoding’ cannot be perceived as such anymore: given the fact that through navigating, the recipient of an Internet ad is in power to individually ‘adapt’ the ad to his or her personal preferences, it is justified to think of the result of such procedures as co-creation of meaning, rather than mere decoding. A traditional term which emphasises co-creation is *Lesart*, and consequently *Sympraxis*. The latter term characterises multimodal communication more than logocentric texts where the quest for meaning requires less intellectual effort.

All these aspects (and many more) are important and have to be considered prior to embarking on the venturesome project of multimodal text analysis. Pivotal in this respect are the selections made at the levels of mode and medium:

The multimodal character of contemporarily produced texts testifies to our modern longing to make meanings sprawl beyond their mode-specific boundaries to produce 'instable', flexible meanings.

In the light of the idea that the 'same' meanings can often be expressed in different semiotic modes (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001), the selection of a specific mode has taken on a semantic rather than merely practically oriented perspective.

## 1.6 Organisation and structure

This dissertation consists of five main parts. This **first** introductory part has the function of a signpost inasmuch as it is intended to orient the reader both towards the subject matter in general as well as to the specific intentions and procedures of this study in particular. In addition to that, it will be within the scope of the introductory part that a general overview of the discursive genre of advertising will be provided. The **second**, theoretical part is meant to develop the theory into a direction as to form a solid contextual basis for the more specific analyses to follow later. Theoretical points will however be illustrated by means of actual data from the corpus wherever possible and necessary. The **third** part will be concerned with the more specific aspect of the theory. It will be at this point that the basic observations and hypotheses will be presented. The **fourth** part is reserved for the creation of a methodological and analytical procedure, which will then be applied in the form of a detailed analysis of the data (compare section above). Finally, in part **five** the results will be evaluated and a state of the art *ex postfacto* will be presented.

## 1.7 A general characterisation of the DA

Analysing advertisements is, and has always been, quite a hard task, for a variety of reasons. First of all, some people instinctively feel that there is no justification for advertisements, or advertisers' discourse, to count as a *genre* of its own. Swales (1990:58) defines *genre* as "a class of communicative events which share some set of communicative purposes [... and that] exemplars of genre exhibit various patterns of similarity". This is in line with Martin (1984:25) who views "genre as a staged goal-oriented purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture". However, it makes sense to propose two important amendments to Martin's definition which will have important implications for the ideas developed in later chapters. Firstly, a dynamic genre, such as advertising, can be relatively constant across cultures. Secondly, the term 'speaker' confines the analysis to the linguistic code and should hence be superseded by 'sign makers' or 'communicators'.



The difficulty that we are faced with when trying to allocate a genre-label of its own to the DA may be due to two major factors: (i) ads usually occur accompanying other forms of discourse, such as, for example, an ad in a newspaper, which is situated between an editorial and a news article; (ii) advertisements<sup>2</sup> seem to contain many elements which interact to make an ad be(come) an ad. In doing so, no single element can be said to be 'the most salient':

An ad is not a tangible or stable entity; it is the dynamic synthesis of many components [participant, medium, function, pictures, music, society, paralanguage, language, a situation, other ads], and comes into being through them (Cook 2001:6).

(iii) there is no clear-cut decision as to what the social function of an advertisement, or advertising in general, actually is. If you consult a dictionary, you are most likely to get a superficial answer somewhat similar to this one: "advertising is the promotion of goods and services for sale through impersonal media" (The *Collins Concise Dictionary* quoted in Leiss et al. 1992:1). The *Petit Robert*, however, defines advertising (fr. *publicité*) like this: "Le fait, l'art d'exercer une action psychologique sur le public à des fins commerciales". The second definition indicates a smooth transition in the direction of *infotainment*. This notion attributes to advertising the feature [+ amusing], and it can be argued that there are at least three more *basic* features to be taken into consideration. Thus, we could spell out the functions of advertising like this: advertising { [+ amuse] [+ inform] [+ misinform] [+ worry] [+ warn] [+ [make someone move to action<sup>3</sup>] (etc.)}.

However, despite this probably endless list of functions, the overriding defining factor is nevertheless (the function of) persuading to buy (cf. Cook 2001:12).

The DA is also enticing on the theoretical level, as testified by the vast literature that there is on the subject. Yet, this literature cannot be seen as a homogeneous mass of writings on advertising. It must be differentiated according to the goals of the author. On the one hand, some authors subscribing to media studies tell you how to proceed if you wish to design an advertisement. On the other hand, the DA is also of interest to discourse studies, where ads are analysed from a communicative point of view. The present study is on the other hand, where advertising is considered a system of social communication. However, it differentiates

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<sup>2</sup> N.B. There are, of course, many other genres which combine a variety of elements, such as an opera, for example.

<sup>3</sup> It has intentionally been avoided to use a formulation such as [+ (make s.o. buy sth.)], because of the existence of non-product ads, as dispersed by charity organisations, for example.

itself by its intentions. The advertisements used here, all part of the VW Polo campaign from 1986 to January 2003, are intended to form a basis for the execution of generic structure analysis in a multimodal context.

The brief characterisation of the DA presented above has the nature of a wanted poster. It is aimed at conveying some impressions of relevant problematics in connection with this particular discourse type. The reader is referred to Myers (1994, 1999), Cook (2001) and Goddard (1998) for more general input. The present case study, however, will now proceed to its underlying theoretical approaches and concepts.



## PART 2: THEORY

In this chapter the theory will be developed to a point where the adapted or synthesised versions of the social semiotic approach and the Relevance model can be viewed as complementary aspects of human semiosis. This involves the important distinction between simple and complex sign systems and consequently between simple and complex meanings which emanate from these systems.

### 2.1 The Semiotic Model

Semiotics is the theory of signs and sign systems. Its existence can be traced back as far as to Antiquity, when Plato wrote his *Cratylus*. The basic idea of semiotics, a term which came into being only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is that *aliquid stat pro aliquo* (something stands for something else).

In broad terms, a sign system (or semiotic system) can be defined as a “finite collection of discrete signs” (Eggins 1994:15). A sign thus consists of a meaning (content) which is arbitrarily realised through a representation (expression).

In the case of the linguistic sign, the *aliquid* is represented primarily by a succession of phonemes and secondarily by one of graphemes. The function of phonemes or graphemes, respectively is to associate their material form with a particular meaning. In short, something is meant (signified) by something which means (signifies):

$$\frac{\text{content} = \text{signified (signifié)}}{\text{expression} = \text{signifier (signifiant)}}$$

Fig. 1: *Content and Expression in a Simplified Two-Strata Semiotic System.*

The merits for having established the model presented in figure 1 go to Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, who first overtly introduced the theory of semiotic systems in his Geneva lectures. The notes taken by his students were published under the title *Cours Général de Linguistique* (1915) and reprinted in 1959 (*Course in General Linguistics*). His semiological model, which received several important impetuses from structural linguistics, can be applied to a device which most of us are intimately familiar with from our every-day-life: the traffic light (cf. Eggins 1994:14). Before a junction we have three options: [STOP], [PREPARE TO STOP] or [GO]. Each option is associated with a colour code – red, amber or green – to which the driver or pedestrian should stick to avoid law infringements. According to this model, each colour signifies a particular behaviour. It does so, however, only to a certain extent. ‘Red’, for exam-

ple, means 'stop'; but it does not tell you whether you should do that abruptly or not. The same is also true for language. A certain content, such as 'raft' /rɑ:ft/ imposes a particular realisation, but it will make no more specialisations than necessary. For example, it will not matter whether you pronounce a uvular *r* in 'raft' or a post-alveolar retroflex approximant; although only the second is standard, both versions will be understood. If you wish to make your system sensitive to more individual details, you will need to enhance its *delicacy*. For example, you could, if you had the power, change the traffic light system in a way that when the red light blinks one time before remaining, this means that the driver must break abruptly. The level of *delicacy* is an important notion in connection with the present thesis to which we will return in subsequent sections.

However, not all signs are as random as the traffic code. The notion of 'sign' came to be specified under the American philosopher Charles Peirce. He distinguishes between iconic, indexical and symbolic signs, all of which are very important to an understanding of the semiosis, i.e. the act of sign-making, of the DA. Iconic signs directly represent the concept to which they refer. Instances of iconic signs can be found if you look at, for example, your own shadow, or your Windows (or Macintosh) desktop.

Ad # 8 shows such a 'shadow': the Polo driver leaning out of his car window sees a passing-by couple who have his picture printed on their T-shirts.

Indexical signs indicate a relationship of cause-effect, as in the case of smoke and fire or, vapour and water. The case of the traffic light, discussed above, has already illustrated the intrinsic qualities of the symbolic sign: it is abstract, arbitrary, constant, and conventionalised. There is no natural connection between the red colour, and the allocation of red to a certain behaviour is completely random. It is a mere convention by which we usually abide. Imagine what would happen on our roads if there were no conventionalised code, and everyone went at a junction at the display of the colour that he has chosen means 'go' on this particular day.

In a sense, every sign can be assessed in terms of the four intrinsic qualities displayed above. Thus they are all abstract, constant and conventionalised. The degree of arbitrariness varies of course in a continuum between symbols to icons.

There is still an important amendment to make to the theory as yet presented. Remember our raft, the one that was used to illustrate the level of delicacy. Now, this versatile raft will help to illustrate another point to make in connection with the semiotic model: we have stipulated that

there be some sounds or print (if classified phonemes or graphemes) which express a content. Yet, semioticians have soon acknowledged that there is a difference between the ‘raft’ I think of after having heard /rɑ:ft/, and the object of the real world referred to by this sound sequence. This ‘object of the real world’ is called the *referent* of the sign. A classical example to illustrate this point is the fact that the planet *Venus* /'vi:.nəs/ can be called ‘morning’ or ‘evening star’; in both cases we denote the same (unique) referent. In the light of this, the *semiotic triangle* has been introduced:

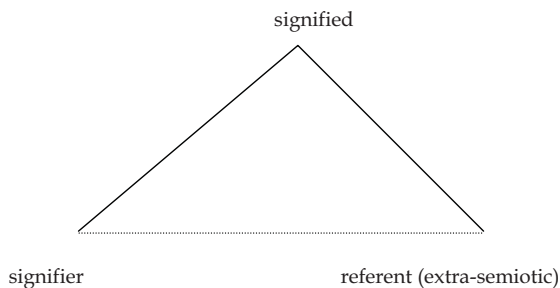


Fig. 2: *The Semiotic Triangle.*

N.B. It has intentionally been avoided to call the referent ‘extra-linguistic’, as it is most often done in the literature. This is due to the author’s conviction that a sign model with a claim to universality should take into account more than just the *linguistic* sign. This assertion reflects the semiotic nature of this study.

In a certain sense, the whole process of sign-making, or semiosis, is a cultural transformation of natural<sup>4</sup> objects. This process by which we give natural objects cultural forms is called ‘cooking’ by Lévi Strauss:

Society requires food to be cooked and not raw for it to be acceptable. In cooking, nature, in the form of raw material (e.g. meat) enters a complex system whereby it is differentiated culturally (for example, it may be roasted or grilled). In just the same way images of nature [e.g. Venus] are ‘cooked’ in culture so that they may be used as part of a symbolic system (Williamson 1978:103).

There are advertisements which display both sides of the ‘cooking’ process simultaneously within the product (which is, of course, a sign), so that it carries the charge of transformation in itself. This is the case, for example, in the ad shown in figure 3, taken from Williamson (1978:103). It shows the merging of the raw (‘natural’) thing, here an orange, with

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<sup>4</sup> At this point it is worthwhile pointing out that the notion of something being ‘natural’ is also a social-semiological construct.

the product (marmalade). In a sense nature has thus been transformed into the 'natural'. It can become a symbol once it has been 'cooked'. The content of the ad in figure 3 is thus tantamount to flying to Venus and fixing three signposts there, one reading 'Venus', the other one 'morning star' and the last one 'evening star'.



Fig. 3: *Cooking Nature* (Williamson 1978:103).

In § 3.1.2 we will pursue the semiotic analysis of advertisements sketched above. Subsequent sections will assess the contribution that semiotics has made to more recent trends of textual analysis. In the next chapter, we will see how the semiotic model applies to the study of communication, while § 3.2 presents a different approach to this study, that is, it offers a critical counter-approach to the ideas and concepts outlined in the following chapter.

### 2.1.1 Simple vs Complex Sign Systems

How is communication achieved in terms of the semiotic model?

In the preceding section we have already seen an instance of how 'semiotic' communication may take place. In the case of the traffic light, a particular colour code is associated with a particular meaning which in turn is to trigger a particular behaviour. The message 'stop' for example, is encoded by the red colour of the traffic light.

In general terms, "a *code* is a system which pairs messages with signals [...]. A *message* is a representation internal to the communicating devices. A *signal* is a modification of the external environment which can be produced by one device and recognised by the other" (Sperber and Wilson 1995:3f, emphasis in original). In terms of the traffic light, one communicating device (the source), is the traffic light itself. When encoding the 'stop' message by means of the red colour, the traffic light changes

the external environment (by means of a colour stimulus) so that the receiving device in your brain is able to decode the message 'stop'.

A widely quoted diagram is that by Shannon and Weaver (1949). Figure 4, which shows a slightly adapted version, illustrates how communication can be achieved by the use of a code:

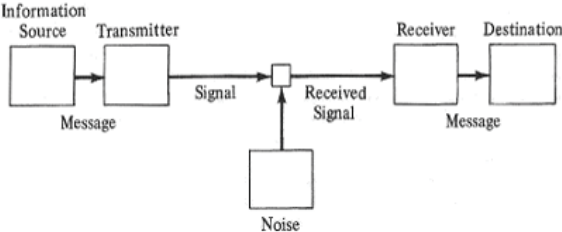
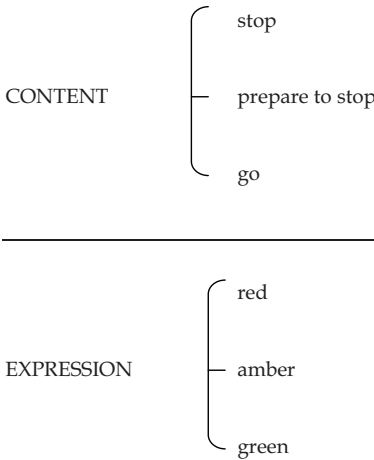


Fig. 4: A Communication Model.

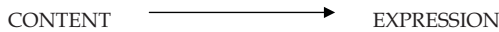
The point here is that language, quite obviously, functions differently: the present study rejects the notion that language is simply a *code* in the sense depicted above.

The traffic light in its semiosis differentiates three different contents (signifieds), namely 'stop', 'prepare to stop' and 'go'. This content is directly realised by means of the respective colour code. Graphically this simple content-expression system can be shown like this:





*Fig. 5a: The Simple Semiotic Traffic Light System*

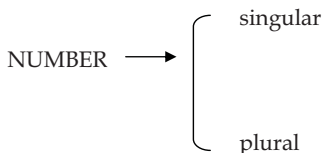


*Fig. 5b: A Simple Semiotic System*

What figure 5 tells us is that in the case of simple sign systems the content is directly associated with some expression. That is, there is no intermediary level which organises the content before it is finally expressed. Such an intermediary level of content organisation is however characteristic of complex sign systems. One such complex sign system is that of language which is generally said to combine (i) the unstructured flux of thought with (ii) some unstructured flux of sound. It is by means of the underlying sign system that both *i* and *ii* acquire meaning in the form of (i) concepts and (ii) classified sounds. A phoneme, for example, is nothing but a sound (phone) which is abstractly integrated into a system of meaning making oppositions. It is this system of meaning making oppositions which constitutes the signifier (or expression) stratum of language. The linguistic 'code' has however a 'secondary' alternative to phonemic primary expression, namely graphology.

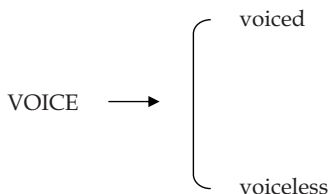
By now we have specified the way the complex language system specifies a presemiotic sound mass. This still leaves us with the question as to what structural operations presemiotic thoughts undergo. The idea is that in language the realisation of meaning (content) is mediated through systems and structures at a second content level referred to as *Lexico-*

*grammar*. At this level conceptual differences “are interpreted as typical syntagmatic and associative relations” (Thibault 1997:55), in the same way as the phonic differences at the expression level. An associative group consists of terms, which are “purely negatively defined and rational” (Thibault 1997:55):



*Fig. 6: A sample associative group at the second content stratum.*

In this way ‘plural’ is defined as [NOT SINGULAR] and the opposite is true for ‘singular’. To show that there is an equal mechanism at work on the expression plane, take the following associative group (Thibault 1997:55):



*Fig. 7: A sample associative group at the expression level.*

These figures illustrate the fact that in a complex sign system as language a meaning is not directly realised by some expression. The meaning is organised at a second content plane into associative groups or systems. These systems consist of terms. The ‘outcome’ of such a system is called *value*. For example, the phoneme /z/ has the value [VOICED] whereas /s/ has not.

In the case of the traffic light the outcome or value of such system corresponds to or conflates with the expressed entity, for example the value ‘green’ is expressed by itself (see also Fawcett 1982). This is the underlying idea of a simple sign system: the value is directly realised by itself. However, the observation made above, viz, the language code, if a code

at all, is different from the traffic light code has a further important motivation. In complex sign systems, the signs, which are the result of termic oppositions in their underlying systems, combine to form syntagmatic groups. These groups are also referred to as 'structures' in the literature on SFL. Let me illustrate this with an example: The sentence *Can I speak to Mr Jackson please?* is a complex sign. It is one of the signs produced in the radio ad, which will be analysed at length in the fifth part. It is the result of the following underlying system:

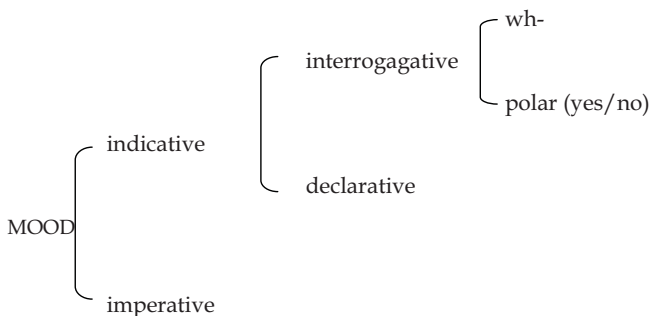


Fig. 8: The system of 'mood' in English.

The values of the sign at issue are [INDICATIVE], [INTERROGATIVE] and [POLAR]. The structure (or syntagm) that the system associates with such a valoric constellation is Finite^Subject^Predicator^Complement:

Can	I	speak	to Mr Jackson [please]?
Finite	Subject	Predicator	Complement

The point is that for every complex meaning produced, the level of delicacy can be enhanced in terms of oppositions until one arrives at the desired form. This is the basic principle according to which complex meanings are produced.

With the knowledge gained so far we can contrast the simple meanings engendered by the traffic light with the complex meanings by the language system in the following way: