



Breaking Stereotypes Using the Semiotics of Dress

by [Timothy Foran](#)

As an English learner (EL) instructor who primarily focuses on college-level composition, I am always on the hunt for new and creative ways to make writing engaging. This is often no easy task, and I am continuously searching for such activities so that my classroom does not get stale. My goal here is to share a unique and engaging writing activity that uses the semiotics of dress to teach ELs description and analysis writing, while also teaching them about cultural differences, so they can appreciate diversity in the classroom. Although there are different approaches to semiotics, such as in structuralism or social semiotics, for the purpose of this brief article, I refer to the general notion of semiotics—a way to examine signs and symbols and the construction of meaning.

Dress as a Form of Complex Communication

When most people think of the word *dress*, not much comes to mind other than the clothes they are wearing. However, dress means more than just clothes. Dress scholars Johnson and Lennon (2015) unravel the complexity of the term by detailing that dress consists of body modifications (items used to change the body, e.g., cosmetics and deodorant) and body supplements (items added to the body, e.g., clothing and jewelry).

Johnson and Lennon (2015) further claim that one of the functions of dress is to serve as a means of communication; however, for this function to work, meaning must be attached to the items of dress, which allows people to communicate and make inferences about others. Not only does dress serve as a means of communication, but also students are naturally drawn to it as everyone and every society participates in dress; it is universal. Dress, subsequently, serves as a uniting force in the classroom, but it can also simultaneously separate those from diverse sociocultural backgrounds because items of dress may carry different meanings across cultures and countries.


Connecting Semiotics

Although this article will not discuss semiotics in detail, it is not hard to discern how items of dress serve as signs. Most, if not all, people utilize items of dress to convey a message, and others make inferences about that message based on the items of dress. In fact, it might not be possible to escape this action because even when individuals want to convey that they are not

interested in fashion, they have to do so by choosing items of dress considered unfashionable by society.

Berger (1999) even connects the act of dress to Saussure's (1966) discussion on speech and language. As Saussure explains, language is a social institution, and speech refers to people's utterances within that institution as people select words in a language to construct meaning. Similarly, fashion is a social institution, and the act of choosing items of dress is people's behavior within that institution. Berger also explains how dialects—a particular type of language—are similar to clothing styles—particular ways to arrange items of dress. Additionally, because people use dress to both communicate and make inferences about others, dress can also be misunderstood or misinterpreted, just like speech, especially between members of different sociocultural communities.

Let's take a quick look at a person's hair to see the various interpretations that can be made.

Signifier		
Signified	<i>Denotation</i>	<i>Connotation</i>
	Red spiky hair with shaved sides	Punk, counter culture, rebel, individual, tough, fights, criminal

Most people will agree that this hair style is called a mohawk, and this particular one is composed of red spiky hair of medium length. Depending on their level of vocabulary, ELs will likely have little difficulty in describing the appearance of this person's hair; we can all agree with the denotation.

The miscommunication, however, might occur when students describe what this mohawk means to them—the connotation or unpacking of the cultural baggage. When I look at this picture, I recall fond memories of my youth listening to the Misfits and going to punk shows with my

friends. As such, the mohawk, to me, has positive connotations of people not conforming to mainstream society and jock culture. Nevertheless, students can have vastly conflicting thoughts of who this person is and what he is like based on his mohawk. Students, for example, could argue that the man's mohawk suggests that he is a criminal, and students from collective cultures might see his individualism and rebelliousness as negative traits.

Why Use the Semiotics of Dress?

EL writing instructors should incorporate the semiotics of dress into the classroom not only because dress is universal but also because they can capitalize on using the denotation and connotation to teach descriptive and analysis writing as well as raising cultural awareness. Additionally, many English language textbooks tend to focus on denotational meanings, disregard cultural connotations, and reinforce mainstream cultural ideologies and stereotypes (Weninger & Kiss, 2013). Instructors, therefore, can use the abundance of cultural content embedded in the connotations of dress to teach students about other cultures and subcultures by having them discuss the items people wear, why they wear them, and what they mean to them.

What follows is a brief example of how I incorporate the semiotics of dress to teach writing and cultural awareness. Please note that this particular example is geared towards ELs in college composition or precomposition/developmental classes; however, this example can be modified to teach ELs at various levels, including those who are developing their sentence and paragraph writing skills. As I teach in a fashion college, my ELs are well versed in fashion and dress lexicon. If needed, instructors may preteach certain ideas and vocabulary to prepare their students for this activity, although most of this lesson requires the students to recall familiar items of dress, analyze them, and teach other students about them.

Classroom Activity

Step 1: Starting the Discussion

Have a class discussion asking the students to describe their favorite clothes, styles, and brands. Encourage them to explain the why: Why is this their favorite?

Ask students to describe the trends in their countries:

- What is popular and what is not?
- Why are certain looks “better” than others?
- Are certain trends popular in one country and unpopular in another?
- How do they individualize themselves through dress?
- What does their style say about them?

Step 2: Describing (Denotation)

Distribute the handout (see Appendix). Direct students to select a picture of a person from their country or of themselves wearing a popular/favorite clothing style.

Tell the students to list all of the individual items of dress in the left column, titled “Items of Dress.”

Focus students on composing an objective and detailed description of each item of dress in the middle column, titled “Description.”

Step 3: Unpacking the Cultural Baggage (Connotation)

Ask students to fill out the right column, titled “Meaning,” by thinking about the following questions:

- What does each item of dress mean?
- What does each item of dress say about the person?
- What would other people in your country assume about this person based on the items of dress?
- Was this look always popular? When and why?

Step 4: Writing the Essay

Inform students that they will use the handout to write an essay analyzing the picture they selected. (Review how to conduct an analysis as required.) Use the following questions to help guide their analysis and form a thesis:

- What does the entire outfit or style (all of the items of dress) say about the person?
- How does each item of dress contribute to that meaning?

Have the students use the handout to guide their writing as they support their thesis statement.

- Each item of dress can form a paragraph or similar items of dress can be grouped together to form a paragraph.
- Students can use information in the description column to help them thoroughly describe the items to the audience.
- They can use the information in the meaning column to explain what each item means and how it supports the overall analysis stated in the thesis.

Step 5: Increasing Cultural Awareness

After students complete the essay, they will present their analysis to the class. Have the students display their selected picture. Allow the class to discuss the picture, explaining what they think of the clothes and what the clothes mean. Have each student explain their analysis of the picture and interpretation of the clothing.

To increase cultural awareness and break stereotypes, facilitate a class discussion around the differences or similarities noted between the presenter’s analysis and the students’ impressions of the pictures.

Conclusion

People construct meaning in various ways, and one of the main ways people do so is by using dress. Although people perform these personalized acts of dress, the meaning of these acts is connected to the social institutions within which they are situated. This can create miscommunication when people, such as ELs, from varying sociocultural backgrounds attempt to understand dress but do not understand the connotations attached to the items. Because of sociocultural differences, students may unknowingly apply stereotypes as they strive to understand what others are communicating through dress. Rather than being divisive, teachers, however, can utilize the semiotics of dress to develop ELs' understandings of people from other sociocultural backgrounds, which will subsequently break stereotypes.

References

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Timothy Foran is the assistant director of the Writing Center at LIM College in New York City, where he specializes in English language education. He earned his MA in TESOL at the University of Mississippi and is currently working on his PhD in literacy at the University at Albany.