

1.8 How we read: stereotypes – schemata

Experiment 1: Let's start with a simple experiment of dimensional allocation. You have four pictures. You have four dimensions. Allocate the pictures to the dimensions:



I don't suppose you had a problem in allocating pictures to dimensions. My students all end up with the following allocation:

Picture 1: individuality; Picture 2: nature; Picture 3: society; Picture 4: metaphysics

And yet, when I tell them to look a second time, they start coming out with things like these:

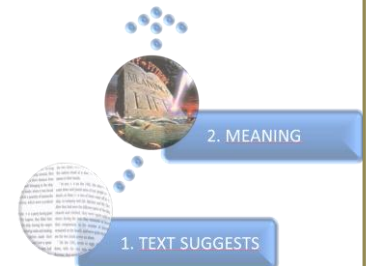
- ✓ Picture 2 shows a certain peace and quiet which gives you a whiff of the eternal; thus students associate this picture with **metaphysics**.
- ✓ Picture 3 shows a crowd celebrating and thus expressing emotion, and so students also read **nature** into the picture.
- ✓ In picture 1 the man (or is it a woman?) on the grand piano does things nobody else could do and is thus unique (**individuality**), but he is doing them with his body (**nature**?), and possibly he could not do that from birth, but has probably had to train very hard, and training is a part of what we associate to the socializing process of a human being (**society**?)

Results: When we interpret we expect certain results which are part of the way in which we structure the world: thus we expect a landscape to mean nature, a cross to suggest metaphysics, or that people together form society. Other aspects of reality may, however, also be present, although they are more hidden and therefore force us to think.

Want to know more?

Psycholinguistics & reading

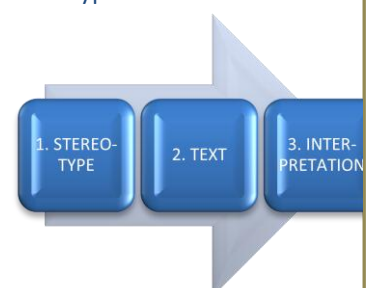
We believe that when we read, meaning is in the text, and so meaning suggests itself if we just pay attention:



In fact, when my students think about how to improve their interpretive skill, they say "Next time I will pay more attention to what the text says".

But reading is also a "psycholinguistic guessing game" (Goodman 1967), where "schemata, or knowledge already stored in memory" are brought into "the process of interpreting new information and allowing it to enter and become part of the knowledge store" (Anderson & Pearson 1988).

This means that when we read, we necessarily bring into the text our pre-knowledge (our stereotypes) of the world. Reading is an encounter between our stereotypes and the meaning of the text. Texts will either confirm or contradict our stereotypes.



Experiment 2:

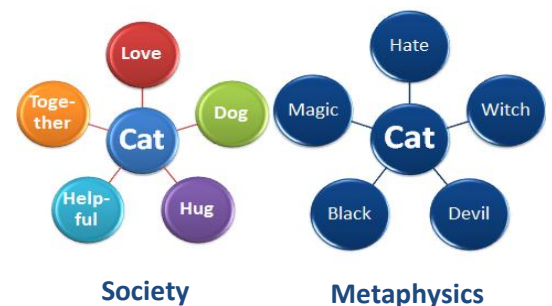
Task	Picture	Explanation
Assign a dimension to this picture		My students all say that the cat represents nature . This is the cultural stereotype of Western societies about animals. Quite simply, animals represent nature
Assign a dimension to this picture		Here the cat represents metaphysics rather than nature. We usually think cats represent nature, but we are ready to revise our judgement here because the objects the cat is surrounded by suggest an Egyptian environment, and we know Egyptians held some animals (among them cats) sacred
Do dogs come when you call them? And cats? Does your assessment coincide with the story the two pictures tell?		We believe that dogs are more sociable than cats, who do as they please (very often this is also true). The pictures coincide with our assumptions: cats suggest individualism (the cat in the picture is lying in a strange, 'individualistic position'), and dogs suggest society (the dog in the picture is acting in socially 'responsible' ways rescuing people)
		
Assign a dimension to this picture		Although cats tend to be individualistic (and great dog-haters), in this picture we find that the cat actually cuddles the dog, so we could say the cat is " socialising ". Again we are ready to revise our pre-judgement of cats because of the evidence offered

Results: This experiment shows that

- Often our stereotyped pre-judgement of objects is **culturally conditioned**: We interpret cats as natural, while Egyptians thought of them as metaphysical.
- The object we are looking at can confirm the stereotype (see cat-pictures 1, 3, 4), but depending on its composition, it can also reject our stereotype and reverse our initial association (see pictures 2 & 5). In the present example, this is done through the elements accompanying the object we analyse (e.g. in picture 2 the pictograms, the beetle, and the upright, serene attitude of the cat)

In the case of texts, it is the words that accompany the central element which ascribe an object to this or that dimension. In the "What's a cat I" and "What's a cat II" diagrams the meaning of the word cat depends very much on the words it is surrounded by.

What's a cat I?



What's a cat II?

