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Årskortnr.: 20051459

Opgavens titel: Semiotics, Fashion and Cognition

Aflevering: Sommer/~~Vinter~~

årstal: 2008

SÆT KRYDS

**Suppleringsudd.**

Alment teoretisk emne

Bachelorprojekt

**Kandidatudd.**

Kognition og semiotik

Kognitiv æstetik

Kognitiv lingvistik

Kognitionsteori

Opgaven må udlånes

ja

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# Semiotics, Fashion and Cognition

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*From fashion semiotics to fashion cognition*

## Abstract

This paper outlines Roland Barthes' early semiologically inspired theory of fashion and discusses how this theory can be revised to fit later cognitive theories of language and semiotics. Departing from a dialectic influence between dress (as a shared system of meaning) and (the act of) dressing this paper proposes the hypothesis that fashion can be seen as an act of communication based on cognitive associations of frames and that fashion language is based on image schematic distinctions.

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38.000 units excluding TOC, references and footnotes.

## Introduction

We all have an idea about what fashion is. We use the term in our daily language, and in the recent decades it has received an increasing amount of academic attention as well. Serious historical studies of dress have been conducted (Wilson, 2007), Roland Barthes's semiotic analyses of the language of fashion has been translated to English (1990), very specific visual aesthetic analyses of fashion photography have been (Andersen, 2006) and some have tried to integrate all these studies into an overall "fashion-ology" (Kawamura, 2006). Yet, there is no single focal point of attention that can capture the entire complexity of the fashion phenomenon. Additionally, there are many different and inconsistent definitions of what fashion really is. It is often confused with clothing in general or the concept of individual style, probably as a result of changing times, and the fact that fashion has evolved and changed.

This paper focuses on fashion in the context of language. In addition to the examination of fashion and language this paper is also an attempt to open up a broader discussion about fashion in the cognitive tradition.

## Statement of intent

*How does the early Roland Barthes describe the language of fashion? How can Roland Barthes's theory be revised to suit a cognitive semiotic language framework, including image schemas and mental models? What are the roles of fashion magazines and the actual clothing items?*

## Method

In order to satisfy the statement of intent, this paper has been divided into three sections. Section A describes Roland Barthes's earliest semiologically inspired view on the language of fashion. Taking the Saussurian distinction between 'langue' and 'parole' he examines fashion and especially the act of dressing. Also, he tries to establish the role of fashion magazines, and how they contribute in the production of fashion signs. Section B describes the basic foundations and premises for a cognitive semiotic framework for language, including frames, image schemas and cognitive mental models, thus providing the necessary background knowledge for a reexamination of Barthes's fashion theory. Section C develops a hypothesis based on a fusion of sections A and B, integrating fashion as understood by the early Barthes into the cognitive framework of section B.

## Terminology

When dealing with a complex and multifaceted subject as fashion, it is important to clarify what the term actually refers to in the given context. No coherent terminology has yet been established, and there are serious divergences to be found among authors. This list briefly shows the differences between the terms, as I will be using them in this paper.

Fashion can be seen in both a broad and narrow sense. In the broad sense, fashion is the aggregated sum of all the different aspects of clothing, dressing, general consumption, economics, sociology, psychology, history, communication etc. This is the definition found in Lipovetsky (1994). In a narrower sense, fashion is an ever changing, and yet somewhat specific subset of the public taste (for clothing, food, furniture etc.). Defined partly by the fashion institutions' own proclamation, and partly by the fact that this taste usually spreads out to the broader public, while

the fashion changes itself. This system of constant renewal and spreading of taste is more abstract but still coherent with Barthes' view, when he proposes that there is a shared system of rules for dressing – what he terms 'dress'.

Clothing is a physical thing. Knitted yarns and woven fabrics sewed together and trimmed with bands, broderie or buttons, forming actual pieces of wearable clothing. The act of putting on clothes is the act of 'dressing'. A garment is a single piece of clothing. An outfit is a composition of several garments into a whole.

Style or 'personal style' is often closely linked to fashion, and the terms are often used almost interchangeably, but style is more of a continuous personal project, whereas fashion is the shared agreement of taste.

Language will be defined broadly as a system of communication.

## **Section A. Barthes's clothing and fashion theory**

Roland Barthes's theory of fashion developed throughout his career, however, in this section only the early semiotically inspired view on clothing, as he describes it in the essays 'History and sociology of clothing : some methodological observations' (2006, pp. 3-20), 'Language and clothing' (2006, pp.21-32) and 'Towards sociology of dress' (2006, pp. 33-40) will be taken into account. Inspired by Ferdinand de Saussure's language theory, and the distinction between 'langue' and 'parole' (language system and language use), Barthes transfers this distinction to clothing by separating 'dress' and 'dressing'. Dress is the system of shared meaning evoked by elements of clothing and the rules governing the allowed combinations, while dressing is the actual act of putting on and wearing specific material items of clothing. (Barthes, 2006, pp. 8-10)

Dress and dressing affect each other in what Barthes calls "a dialectical exchange" (Barthes, 2006, p. 9). For example, tradition (i.e. dress) dictates that you wear either white-tie or a dark suit to a church wedding, with a few exceptions: never dress more formal than the groom, and if the ceremony takes place in the morning, white-tie is substituted with a special morning suit. You can never wear a tuxedo/black-tie in the church – this is explicitly reserved for the late hours. Regardless of tradition and the conventional rules for appropriate dress, one guy might choose to wear jeans to the church. His act of dressing is therefore seen as unconventional and remarkable, and he might have done it for reasons of provocative attention. However, what is important to note, is that the conventions shift gradually if more people start bending the rules, and suddenly the whole system of dress might have changed. Now it is the guy in the strict and formal attire, who is somewhat in opposition to the rules of dress. In this way dress and dressing always affect each other. Everyone is affected by the rules of dress, but their individual acts of dressing also gradually affect the rules.

As Barthes is explicitly aware of, such a transfer from one domain (language) to another (clothing) should not just be readily accepted, but as he shows, the distinction proves useful when analyzing historical developments and changes in dress. Previously, most histories of dress had been written based on a simple trickle-down-theory of clothing, where the aristocracy and ruling class always dictated fashion (in the narrow sense of 'the correct taste') and then from the top the pyramid it

simply trickled down to the lower classes. (Barthes, 2006, p. 5) In this view, fashion and clothing is merely a symbol of a strict hierarchical system, and the only communicative value attributed to the system is that of social status. Thus, by wearing the right clothes, the upper class could show others how superior they were. With Barthes's distinction between dress and dressing, and the acknowledgement that as in language, the two parts mutually affect each other, clothing can suddenly become a transmitter of much more complex signs. When dealing with these, Barthes uses the Saussurian sign, consisting of signifier and signified, to distinguish between the signifying item of clothing and the signified. (Barthes, 2006, pp. 11-15)

Consider sportswear for example: Originally sportswear was developed to allow for freer movement and tough wear (Barthes, 2006, p. 13).<sup>1</sup> The first time athletes put on this new type of clothing it was out of practical reasons. What is significant for Barthes, is the relation between the signifier (the tweed jacket) and the signified (performing sport activities), since the tweed jacket had the physical attributes that enabled this activity. However, as we saw in the earlier example of formal wedding wear, the act of dressing (this time in a tweed jacket) will in turn affect the system of dress, and so sportswear became a signifier, not just for sports and athletes, but for the general concept of leisure – a product of modern industrialized factory work. Putting on sportswear is then no longer an act of pure dressing (for a purpose of performing sport activities), but is also related to the system of meaning that is dress, and wearing sportswear thus signifies the wearer's freedom to enjoy leisure time.

### Barthes and fashion

Barthes's early writing does not really deal with fashion in the narrow sense but is more concerned with the overall framework of clothing, history and communication in clothing. In later essays 'Blue is in fashion this year' (2006, pp. 41-58), 'From gemstones to jewellery' (2006, pp. 59-64) and 'Dandyism and fashion' (2006, pp. 65-69), he gradually moves away from dealing with material clothing, and focuses instead on what he calls written clothing or written fashion. This leads up to his 1967 *The Fashion System* (1990), where he in great detail analyses the language of fashion magazines in France. His purpose is to derive the linguistic system that fashion utterances are organized within, since he believes that fashion is constructed through this inscription of fashion meaning. Thus, for Barthes, clothing only becomes fashion when it is written, and material clothing exists independent of fashion.

He notes, that when reading in a fashion magazine that "the accessory makes springtime" that "this women's suit has a young and slinky look" and that "blue is in fashion this year", he sees a semantic structure: a link between a concept (spring, youth, fashion this year) and a form (the accessory, this suit and the color blue) – between a signified and a signifier. The link here, between signifier and signified, is neither obligatory nor sufficiently motivated, but it is nevertheless implied in the sentences. (Barthes, 2006, p. 41) Barthes is not concerned with the study of the signifieds and the utopian world of 'teatime romances', 'Normandy lunches' and 'cocktail parties' that they try to create through language. For Barthes this is part of a general mythology of fashion. The signifiers however, belong to a strict semiological system of interrelated parts, and this is what Barthes is interested in uncovering. (Barthes, 2006, pp. 42-43)

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<sup>1</sup> Barthes does not mention the exact year, but back then 'sportswear' was a tweed jacket – thus far from what we know as sportswear today. Two examples of sportswear from 1887 and 1920 can be found in appendix A.

His approach then, is to set up the structural system by analyzing each sentence. If 'blue is in fashion', then what is the opposite that will negate it? red? white? and if 'camellia has an optimistic look about it' then what is the structural opposite here? a rose? a brooch? As he notes, this is much easier when the signifier is mentioned in the written form. When a sentence uses 'this suit' or 'this sweater', referring to accompanying photographs, it becomes much more difficult to decide what features of the suit and the sweater makes them 'fashionable' or 'smart'. Is it the cut, the color, the material etc. or is it the combination of all the features together? Yet, Barthes believes that by analyzing enough material within the same fashion year, looking for patterns of repetition, it will be possible to construct this structural schema.<sup>2</sup> (Barthes, 2006, pp. 43-45)

He also notes that in many cases, the signified is not mentioned explicitly, but there is always a general signified implied in fashion writings, that is fashion itself. When a magazine describes something, without commenting on whether the outfit is 'smart', 'sexy' or 'simple', it is always implied that it signifies fashion. (Barthes, 2006, pp. 53-54)

## Section B. Cognition and language

Since Barthes wrote his theories on clothing and fashion as based on language in the 60's and 70's, a new view on language has been proposed by the cognitive semiotic tradition. Authors like George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, Gilles Fauconnier, Mark Turner, William Croft, Michael Tomasello, Ronald W. Langacker, Charles Fillmore and others, have all contributed to an emerging view of language based on cognitive structures in our minds and embodied experiences in our daily lives. In this section I will briefly introduce some of the basic premises and concepts for a cognitive view on language, in order to provide a framework for reexamining the fashion theories of Roland Barthes.

### Embodiment

One of the most basic assumptions of the cognitive tradition is to recognize the importance of our bodies, and the fact that our mind will always experience the world through our bodies. Since our bodies are similar (bones, muscles, skin etc.), our perceptual systems are similar (eyes, senses, brains, etc.) and the environments in which we live are similar (e.g. feel of gravity, day/night, weather changes) the assumption is that our basic conceptual understanding is also similar. Thus it is neither totally relative nor totally shared. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 6) "[...] human concepts are not just reflections of an external reality, but they are crucially shaped by our bodies and brains, especially by our sensorimotor system." (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 22)

There is no Cartesian dualistic person, with a mind separate from and independent of the body, sharing the same disembodied transcendent reason with everyone else, and capable of knowing everything about his mind simply by self reflection. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 5) To put it simply: we live and experience our lives through our bodies, and although we are all different, we still have some degree of shared experience of the world, due to the many similarities in our bodily perceptual system.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Barthes fashion is stable throughout the year, before it changes abruptly as the new collections are shown, thus providing the analyst what language in general denies the linguist: pure synchrony. (Barthes, 1990, p. 8.) This cannot be said to be true today, where so-called high-street fashion labels as H&M, TopShop and the Danish Bestseller group distributes new collections 8-20 times a year, responding immediately to changes in demand.

It seems evident that the idea of lexical word meaning, as in the Saussurian language system where each word has a defined meaning in relation only to other words, does not fit this idea of embodiment. Cognitive scientists seem to agree that word meaning is encyclopedic (Croft, 2006, p. 270) – that the meaning of “bird” is not just defined in relation to other words like “animal”, “dog” and “insect” but that it involves all our knowledge and all our experiences with birds. This is just one major shift in the cognitive understanding of language.

### **Categorization and prototypes**

Every living being must be able to categorize. We must be able to identify food from poison, friends from enemies. If we had not evolved to categorize, we would not have survived. How we categorize depends upon our sensing apparatus and our ability to move ourselves and to manipulate objects – our embodied experience. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 18) A good example of categorization is color concepts. Cognitive science tells us that colors do not exist in the external world, that they are not inherent in things. Color concepts are a consequence of interacting factors: lighting conditions, wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation, color cones and neural processing. “Color concepts are ‘interactional’: they arise from the interactions of our bodies, brains, the reflective properties of objects, and electromagnetic radiation” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 24).

Cognitive research in categorization has shown us that there are many different ways of explaining the nature of the categories in our perception. The view I will use in this paper, is what we call prototype theory, which was developed in the 70’s by Eleanor Rosch and her associates. In the classical view on categories, all members of a category must share the same set of features, e.g. all birds have feathers, lay eggs and are able to fly.<sup>3</sup> Thus all birds have the same status as being birds. What Rosch showed, was that there are important asymmetries within a category: some members are more characteristic of the category than others, and this in turn developed into the theory of category prototypes. Although all birds are birds, Rosch used empirical tests to show that a robin and a sparrow are generally considered better examples of birds, than an owl or a penguin. Other categories, she showed, have fuzzy boundaries, e.g. there is no clearly defined height constituting “a tall man”, and yet we are able to use this category. (Lakoff, 1987, pp. 39-57)

### **Frames and framing**

As discussed in the section about embodiment, all word meaning is encyclopedic, but in addition to this many words are also to be understood within a certain conceptual frame. For instance words like ‘buy’ and ‘sell’ are very difficult to define without explaining the idea of commerce, e.g. that people can exchange goods, and thus become “happier” because they value entities differently. Thus, words like buy and sell must be understood within a commerce frame.

Taking the definitions from Charles Fillmore, a frame is “any system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any one of them you have to understand the whole structure in which fits; when one of the things in such a structure is introduced into a text, or into a conversation, all of the others are automatically made available.” (Fillmore, 2006, p. 373) When we speak of one part of a larger frame, all the other elements are automatically made available. (Fillmore, 2006, p. 391) It is important to note that frames and word meaning are mutually affective: “We can say that the frame structures the word-meaning, and that the word evokes the frame.” (Fillmore, 2006, p. 378) By using specific words to evoke certain frames, it is possible to alter the meaning of other words. This

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<sup>3</sup> This is obviously not true for all birds, e.g. ostriches cannot fly and penguins does not even have feathers. Yet, this view of categorization had been dominant since Aristotle.

is very clear in politics, where “war on terror” evokes a certain frame of war and use of military force, and thus altering the meaning of terror (which is normally considered a crime, investigated by the police and/or secret intelligence). (Lakoff, 2004, pp. 52-68)

But where do these frames come from? According to Fillmore, frames are derived from our general background knowledge. (Fillmore, 2006, p. 391) This background knowledge is organized prototypically; very often the frame or background against which the meaning of a word is defined and understood is a prototype, rather than a genuine body of assumptions about what the world is like. (Fillmore, 2006, p. 379) Returning to the commerce frame, the prototypical example might be the situation seen at a flea market: buyer and seller meet face to face. They agree on a price, and the goods and monetary units are exchanged immediately after. A less prototypical example is buying stuff online. In this case the purchase is mediated through technology, no physical monetary units are moved, and the goods are delivered through the mail some days after the actual purchase.

What is important here is that when we communicate, our utterances activate certain frames. When we talk about shopping online, the commerce frame is automatically associated and activated. Thus we only have to communicate a small part of the meaning we want to convey. In order to state that we just found “a great deal for buying shoes online”, we do not have to explain the whole concept of commerce and what actually constitutes “a great deal”, since this frame is already in the head of the receiver.

### Image Schemas

One of the most basic elements in the theory of conceptual metaphors is the concept of image schemas. “[...] image schemata are not rich, concrete images or mental pictures [...]. They are structures that organize our mental representations at a level more general and abstract than that at which we form particular mental images.” (Johnson, 1990, p. 23) A good example of an image schematic structure is seen in our use of prepositions. Something can be “over” or “under” or “next to” something else. We also seem to have a general system for containment and we can state that something is “inside” or “outside”. *“A schema is a recurrent pattern, shape, and regularity in, or of, these ongoing ordering activities.”* (Johnson, 1990, p. 29 – original emphasis)

The existence of these abstract, mental image schemas can be proved experientially. (Johnson, 1990, pp. 24-25) In order to show that image schemas can exist universally, Jean M. Mandler has conducted a series of cognitive experiments on babies. Because the babies are so young that they have not yet learned a language and are less biased by the particularities of culture, it is possible to find some universal schematic structures. (Mandler, 2005, p. 138) In Korean language, the distinction between tight-fit (e.g. water in a glass, a candle in a candle stick) and loose-fit (e.g. a ball on the floor, a pen on a table) is important for the language user, whereas in English we rely on prepositions like “in” and “on” to describe the examples above. Mandler found that preverbal babies from both English- and Korean-speaking homes were able to make the distinction between tight and loose fit, but since this distinction does not matter in English, only the Korean-speaking adults would make the same distinction intuitively (Mandler, 2005, pp. 153-156). Her conclusion is that the preverbal mind seems to have a rich inventory of image schemas which can be used to distinguish various elements from each other, e.g. ‘animate/inanimate’ and ‘tight-fit/loose-fit’. A language utilizes only a subset of these schemas, and different languages use different subsets. Due to the use of different languages, some of these schemas are used more than others, and for



instance the schematic distinction between tight-fit and loose-fit, is often ignored by native English speakers because this distinction is not used in the language.

## Section C. Cognitive fashion theory

As we have seen in the previous section, the cognitive language tradition provides a new view on language, focusing on embodiment and the bodily experience, framing and images schemas. In this section we will explore the consequences of this emerging view, with regards to fashion as a language.

In this paper I presented Barthes' theory in two parts: first his overall view on historical developments of signs in clothing communication, second his view on how fashion magazines through written garments, create fashion in the narrow sense. To revise Barthes's first view I will look at how communication in physical clothing might work in a cognitive perspective. To revise his second view, I will first examine the overall constitution of what creates the experience of fashion (in the narrow sense) and later explore the language of fashion magazines and fashion language in general.

### Communication in clothing

In the cognitive tradition, Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* is no longer of much interest. It should be evident from the previous section that the focus here is on language use. An abstract idea of a shared system of meaning can only be seen as a structure emerging from the use, but it does not hold any normative power over future utterances. Similarly we might have to abandon Barthes' distinction between dress and dressing. But what will take its place?

As we saw in the previous section, even our simplest utterances ("a great deal on buying shoes online") require vast amounts of background knowledge (of commerce) organized in frames and activated by the words, in order to arrive at a suitable interpretation. Looking at clothing from a communicative point of view, it should be evident that physical garments have a relatively low semantic meaning in and by itself. A white t-shirt – independent of the experiences one might have had with white t-shirts – does not hold much meaning by itself, except that it is probably clean (and if it is not, it shows immediately). In this sense, a garment or an outfit is an even simpler utterance.

My proposal is that the same principle of activated background knowledge through framing, as discussed in language, also governs clothing communication. When we see a particular garment, someone in a certain outfit, or a certain way of wearing a garment, we automatically activate the relevant background knowledge as frames. This does not give us any clear or concise message – there is no agreed interpretation that blue jeans are equal to "I'm off from work", or that a pair of cowboy boots means "I can ride a horse and throw a lasso". Instead we get an incongruent mix of ideas and experiences, since many frames might be activated by the same outfit. A guy in blue jeans and a white t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up might remind us of a cover from a Bruce Springsteen album or a guy from the "Beverly Hills 90210" TV-show, similarly a trench coat might remind us of Sherlock Homes or Eastern Germany Stasi-employees (depending on how the coat is buttoned). Frames compete, and needless to say, it is highly variable between individuals which frames will

dominate the interpretation. Far from everyone listened to Bruce Springsteen or watched Beverly Hills, although both are extremely popular.<sup>4</sup>

Does this mean that there is actually no communicative value in clothing, except for the individually activated frames? Although the actual experiences people have are individual, the theory of embodiment tells us that there are many resemblances in our cognitive conceptualizations and categorizations, usually structured prototypically.

I will argue that it is possible to find several basic ensembles, that is: easily recognizable prototypes of outfits from which most of our individual experiences can be categorized in relation to. To mention a few, and their most important features: the male military uniform is very masculine, with heavy boots. It can be either for the battlefield, e.g. utilitarian and camouflaged or for an officer or commander, with symbolic decorations of the chest and/or shoulders. In the same vein, we find the male business suit, which is dark and without anything distracting decoration. The purpose is to make everyone look the same. A third outfit could be the outdoor/nature/hunter outfit, which more than anything is constituted by the dark green color. A beach/leisure outfit will have light, white materials, loose fit and short sleeves. This can be both masculine and feminine. In the specifically female group, we find the ball gown – long, elegant, with bare shoulders – sensually shaped around the female body. Other basic outfits could be hippie, bohemian, tribal, gothic/vampire and robot/technology.

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<sup>4</sup> To see the visual resemblance, two examples are included in appendix B.

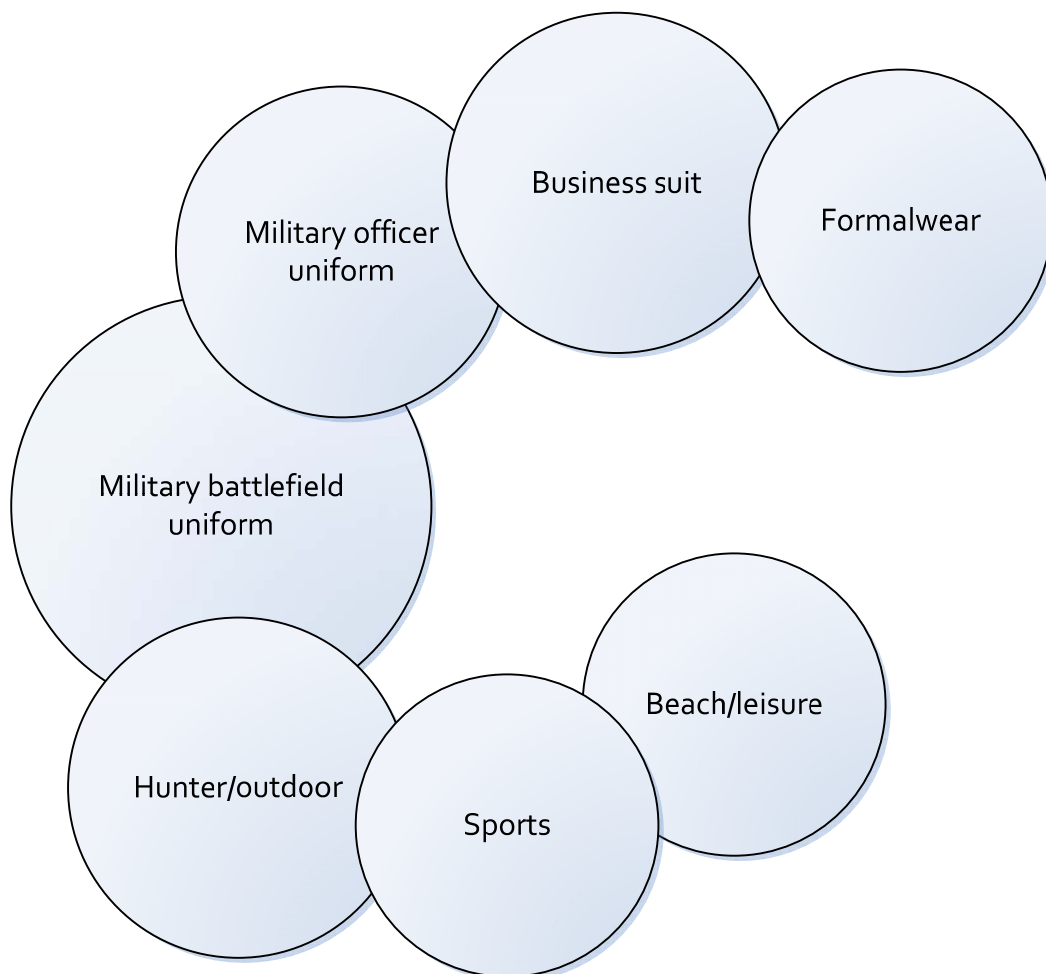


Figure C1: overlapping prototypes in menswear.

This is by no means intended to be an exhaustive list, and as with any kind of prototype, there are significant overlaps between the specific features of each concept (e.g. laying eggs is both a prototypical features of fish, reptiles and birds). It should be evident however, that compared to the infinite small variations you can find in physical clothing, it is still possible to create a relatively limited list of prototypes or basic frames that most of us have at least some experience with. This background knowledge is the basic foundation for clothing communication.

Elements from these prototypes can then be taken out of context – e.g. a shoulder strap from the prototypical male uniform – and placed into another. What is important is that a single element from a frame will be recognized because of its visual iconic resemblance to the prototype, and thus activate the whole frame of a uniform. If the shoulder strap is in a female dress, the viewer will most likely interpret it in frame of a masculine male soldier. Depending on many other factors (e.g. make-up, light, other items of clothing etc.) the viewer might see the dress as a masculine dress because of the background frame of the uniform. Alternately, the dress might also seem even more feminine (compared to a similar dress without the shoulder strap) because the shoulder strap adds

a masculine contrast.<sup>5</sup> In any case, the perception of the dress is not just affected by the shoulder strap itself, but through the entire corpus of experiences activated by it.

Returning to Barthes's example of sportswear we now see it as an activation of a background frame of sports and leisure, due to the iconic visual resemblance with the sportswear seen on athletes. This becomes even clearer when we look at sportswear today. Sportswear has been split into two overall categories: sportswear intended for sports and sportswear intended for looking like sports. For instance the international sportswear brand Nike launched a series of running shoes called Shox, however, these shoes are far from ideal for running, or performing any sport activity at all.<sup>6</sup> Yet they signify sportiness by the iconic likeness – they simply look like sport-shoes, and so they activate a sport frame. Similar examples can be found in the high-end fashion market where the Belgian designer Raf Simons made a collection with backpacker-looking jackets and hiking shorts (Spring/summer 2008). No backpacker would ever go on a hike in one of those jackets. Not because of the €1.000 price tag (real adventure gear is expensive too!) but because it all just “looks like” hiking gear. When you walk down the sidewalk in New York, nobody will know if the outfit you are wearing is good for a hike or climbing a mountain, but they might recognize the iconic resemblance, and the outdoor activity frame is activated, and in clothing communication, that is all that matters.

### **From clothing to fashion – the double function of magazines**

The first important observation is that everyone in the modern western civilization is somehow affected by fashion. Watching a movie or a TV-show will always imply a certain fashion in clothing. Advertisements on billboards and in newspapers convey fashion. Just walking down the street. There seems to be no escape. Anyone who tries to avoid fashion only negates it, and thus the active anti-fashion also acknowledges the existence of a fashion.

What actually constitutes, defines and regulates the current fashion, e.g. how you must look in order to be fashionable, seems to be an extremely complex social ordering system which cannot be explained in this paper, however, there seems to be a relatively simple cognitive explanation for how we perceive something as fashionable. Because we all have experiences with fashion from TV, movies, magazines, advertisements, stores and other people, we all have a rich set of background knowledge. My hypothesis then, is that an outfit is seen as fashionable when it activates mental structures related to fashion. Thus it is the mental process of recognizing and associating elements of dress with a larger fashionable prototype. Just as an outfit can activate masculinity through elements of the male uniform or the male business suit, an outfit or garment can also activate an abstract frame of fashionableness. One of the most intuitive examples is the tall and thin model, with long legs, high heeled shoes and some kind of dress that looks a bit weird at first. Everyone who has ever seen a photo or video clip from a runway show will recognize this stereotype and even if the dress was fashionable ten years ago, it will still be associated with fashion and activate the frame of fashionableness.

My former roommate once asked me about advice before going on a date. He shoved me several pairs of shoes, and pointed to a pair of sporty-looking trainers while explaining that he wanted to

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to stress that my distinction between masculine and feminine in this example is just one out of many distinctions that can be perceived in an outfit.

<sup>6</sup> For a non-scientific review, check out

[http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/259007/shoe\\_review\\_nike\\_shox\\_and\\_sports\\_performance.htm?cat=50](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/259007/shoe_review_nike_shox_and_sports_performance.htm?cat=50)

wear those, to show that he was working out. Clearly, my roommate was composing a message by combining clothing elements like shoes, pants and sweaters, in order to convey a certain image, e.g. "I'm fashionable, young and I exercise to keep my body fit". What is interesting about this example is that my roommate was consciously aware of the communicative effect of clothing, but arguably, his careful composition, indicates that his understanding was more in tune with Barthes's semiological view, in which he could rely on a simple link between signifier (trainers) and signified (working out). When he showed me the trainers they activated several competing frames in my mind, mainly: the sports-frame and the general fashion frame. In my mind the fashion frame dominated, and I found the shoes to be aesthetically horrifying and unfashionable (features that would not have mattered if the sports frame had been dominant), so I advised him to wear a pair of black leather boots instead, and suggested that he relied on the actual fitness of his body to signify his working out (a somewhat more indexical sign).

Contrary to Barthes' view, that fashion signifiers constitute a strict semiological system, and that all signifiers in the system indirectly also signify "fashion", a cognitive view would have that the magazine writings merely create a mental context of fashion and glamour.<sup>7</sup> Then, when a physical garment in a shop or an outfit on the runway or on the street activates this general frame of fashionableness, it is automatically interpreted as fashion. Of course readers of fashion magazines will be more in tune with the specific details of the current fashion, e.g. colors, patterns, shapes etc. Thus a reader of fashion magazines will be able to distinguish an outfit that was fashionable three years ago from one that is fashionable now, while non-readers might classify them both as being fashionable.

In any case, the fashionableness frame might dominate the other communicative frames, and instead of thinking of medieval armor, a Jean Paul Gaultier bustier (although plated with plates of bronze metal) will primarily be interpreted as some kind of fashion gimmick.

### **Image schematic distinctions and categorization in fashion language**

Fashion magazines contribute to our collective experience with fashion and the existence of a general frame of fashionableness. But fashion magazines have, as Barthes notice, a certain language worthy of analysis.

In my cognitive hypothesis, fashion magazines work as a conveyer of image schematic distinctions. Within the context of fashion, an extension of the language is required in order for participants to communicate about fashion concepts. Basic, image schematic distinctions like propositions are always in use, for instance when layering a shirt under a sweater. What magazines also do is to introduce to the reader certain concepts, e.g. a "skinny silhouette", or to point out that the material is a woolen fabric (in opposition to a cotton or linen fabric) or to highlight certain features, e.g. a shiny surface. If the text says "Leather-trimmed canvas trunk (\$4,790)..." we must inspect the picture and note how this feature can be seen, since it must be of some importance.<sup>8</sup> If our friend has a leather-trimmed canvas trunk, we might be able to recognize it. Some of these distinctions are easy to perceive and categorize, and requires only the attachment of the correct label (e.g.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that Barthes actually seems to be unconsciously in tune with the cognitive tradition when discussing the link between signifier and signified. For instance he states that "one term *calls* for the other, the link is like a quotation." (Barthes, 2006, p. 41 – original emphasis)

<sup>8</sup> Example taken from July 2008 issue of Esquire, published by Hearst Magazines

shiny) while others require a bit more technical skill, but even if the language user is actually not able to distinguish wool from cotton, the magazine has still influenced her by pointing to the importance of making the distinction.

Fashion magazines thus create an extension of the language, allowing for more precise categorizations than just “hat” and “sweater” – we learn that it is a “cashmere v-neck” and a “fedora” – just as a carpenter must be able to correctly categorize and label different kinds of screwdrivers and screws.

Many of these distinctions seem to be image schematic in nature: they are recurrent patterns in our ordering activities (e.g. colors, surfaces, the slimness of a silhouette, the level of transparency in a fabric, the type of buttons) and they can be schematized. However, as the example with the Korean and English speaking babies showed, the fact that our daily language does not make use of these distinctions makes us forget them. And, since the fashion community language is (usually) learned at a much later stage of development than the acquisition of everyday language, these distinctions might seem less natural compared to over/under or tight-fit/loose-fit. However, once they have been learned, they are so readily available that most speakers find it natural. Reading that “Aviator sunglasses are the Learjets of style.” tells us that it is the shape of the sunglasses that matters (implicitly in opposition to an exact brand name or particular model).<sup>9</sup>

When perceiving an outfit or a single garment, the schematic distinctions in the fashion language extension, allows the perceiver to analyze the details, and in turn evoke many extra frames of experience. This also explains why someone with an interest in fashion and the distinctions available might find one outfit exceptional and another horrible, while someone else cannot really see the difference.

## Conclusion

In his early essays Roland Barthes’s view on fashion is described in terms of language. He treats the human use of clothing as an act of dressing both shaped by and shaping the shared system of how to dress. His later essays and *The Fashion System*, leaves the material clothing behind and focuses on the construction of fashion in the narrower sense. His point is that fashion is constructed through magazines as a semiological system of signifiers, and that these signifiers also point to the fashion itself as a universal signified.

Reexamining Barthes’s theory in the light of a cognitive language tradition provides a fresh view. Clothing and fashion can still be seen as special type of language. Material clothing can incorporate elements from different prototypical outfits, e.g. a shoulder strap points to the male military uniform, whereas pink tulle points to the princess skirt. By mixing these elements in different ways, either by the designer in the sewn garment or by the wearer’s combination of different garments, the outfit will evoke certain cognitive frames in the viewer’s mind. Arguably, since the semantic meaning of the clothes is poor, most of the communication relies on the mental frames available in mind of the viewer.

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<sup>9</sup> Example taken from July 2008 issue of Esquire, published by Hearst Magazines. Note also the simple metaphoric language linking pilot sunglasses to expensive private jet planes.

In addition to the frames activated by associations with prototypical outfits, I also argue for the existence of a general frame of fashionableness, which in some cases dominates the other frames. This general frame is built up by experiences with fashion in TV, newspapers, people in the street, magazines, runway shows etc.

Finally I argue that fashion magazines create an extension of language. Just as being a carpenter requires knowledge of different types of tools, screws and wood, and the ability to categorize these differences correctly, so does the fashion language require the ability to name certain distinctions of the garment or outfit in question. Many of these distinctions seem to be image schematic in nature: they are recurrent patterns in our ordering activities.

Proving that these hypotheses are in fact correct will require experimental and empirically based studies reaching far beyond the aim of this paper. However, the hypotheses are clearly congruent with recent theories of cognitive semiotics.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

Illustrations of sportswear in 1887 and 1920 from Wilson, 2007, pp. 159-161



### Appendix B

Examples of white t-shirt and blue jeans in popular culture:



The cover of "Sounds From The Peach Pit" (1996) showing the characters from the Beverly Hills 90210 television show, and the cover of legendary rock star Bruce Springsteen "Born In The USA" (1984).