

WHEN MICKEY LOSES FACE: RECONTEXTUALIZATION, SEMANTIC FIT, AND THE SEMIOTICS OF FOREIGNNESS

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Foreignness is generally viewed as a liability for the multinational enterprise, negatively affecting strategic fit and the successful transfer of firm assets abroad. Using semiotics—the study of how language systems convey meaning—and the Walt Disney Company’s experiences in internationalization, I develop the notion of semantic fit as a necessary complement to strategic fit and formalize a conceptual model of recontextualization—the process by which firm assets take on new meanings in distinct cultural environments.

One of the biggest concerns multinational enterprises (MNEs) face regarding internationalization is assessing the fit of what they wish to transfer abroad with the new host environment (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989, 1997; Kogut, 1989; Kogut & Zander, 1992, 1993; Prahalad & Doz, 1987). If the parent company is significantly foreign from its subsidiary, the transferred firm assets may not fit the receiving context in the host country (Hymer, 1976; Kostova, 1999; Kostova & Roth, 2002). This liability of foreignness has been a fundamental assumption in the MNE literature and, as such, has become a central focus for theory building (Buckley & Casson, 1976; Caves, 1982; Dunning, 1977; Hennart, 1982; Mezas, 2001; Miller & Parkhe, 2001; Zaheer, 1995; Zaheer & Mosakowski, 1997).

Problems resulting from the liability of foreignness in MNEs abound. These range from simple technology oversights, such as Wal-Mart’s transfer of 110-volt appliances to its first supercenter in Argentina, where 220 volts is the market standard (Doz, Santos, & Williamson, 2001), to complex cultural misalignments when entire systems of organizations are transferred, resulting, for example, in Walt Disney Company’s suffering law suits in France, at Disneyland Paris, because of the lack of fit between its transferred personnel policies

and the French employees charged to enact them (Brannen & Wilson, 1996; Van Maanen, 1992; Van Maanen & Laurent, 1992).

The MNE literature suggests a variety of conditions that can mitigate the negative effects of foreignness. Foremost among these is previous experience in internationalization (Barkema, Bell, & Pennings, 1996; Delios & Beamish, 2001; Mitchel, Shaver, & Yeung, 1992) and in the host country itself (Barkema, Shenkar, Vermeulen, & Bell, 1997; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Luo & Peng, 1999).

Walt Disney Company’s well-known experiences in internationalization present some curious paradoxes regarding what we know about foreignness. First, foreignness was an asset, not a liability, in Disney’s initial attempt at theme park internationalization, into Tokyo, Japan. The Oriental Land Company, Disney’s preliminary venture partner and now whole owner of Tokyo Disneyland, proposed the park and asked that it be an exact replica of the original Disneyland in Anaheim, California, because “we wanted the Japanese visitors to feel they were taking a foreign vacation by coming here, and to us Disneyland represents the best that America has to offer” (Toshiharu Akiba, Tokyo Disneyland spokesperson; originally quoted in Brannen, 1992). Tokyo Disneyland opened in 1983 and is now the most attended amusement park in the world (Parkes, 1997), with the Oriental Land Company enjoying most of the proceeds.¹

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¹ The Walt Disney Company receives 10 percent of Tokyo Disneyland’s profits from admissions, food, and merchandise sales.

Second, the role of experience in internationalization and in the host country context did little to mitigate the liability of foreignness in the case of Disney's consequent attempt at internationalization in Paris, France. Although Disney's success in Tokyo was the catalyst for further internationalization, Disney drew the wrong conclusions from the apparently problem-free "copy-exactly" strategy it used in its initial experience. In the case of Disneyland Paris, Disney concentrated its entry efforts on negotiating a more favorable venture contract, leaving the theme park design, management style, and corporate philosophy relatively untouched.² Euro Disney (its original name) opened in 1992 and was met with incredible resistance by the press, local farmers, and potential guests, leaving the enterprise bankrupt in its first year. Even though the French were (and remain) the largest consumers of Disney products, particularly in the area of publications such as comic books (Dobbs, 1986), such host country experience did not help.

Finally, cultural distance, considered a key indicator of firm foreignness (Barkema et al., 1996; Child & Markoczy, 1993; Gomez-Mejia & Palich, 1997), had a reverse effect in Disney's cases of internationalization, there being greater cultural distance between the United States and Japan than between the United States and France. Many U.S. citizens have European roots and share the cultural attribute of individualism—a trait embodied in the Statue of Liberty. This statue also represents a shared symbol of independence for the United States and France, and a replica of it is prominently displayed, with accompanying audioanimated narration historicizing our shared roots, in the Liberty Arcade just to the left of Disneyland Paris's Main Street. This cultural affinity is further marked by the fact that many of Disney's fairy tale themes, such as *Sleeping Beauty* (whose castle is the theme park's centerpiece), originated in France.

² Even though the general copy-exactly entry strategy was used in both cases, local adaptations of the park itself and a few practices such as languages spoken and type of food offered were made in each instance of internationalization. These are discussed in detail later in the article and in Van Maanen (1992), Van Maanen and Laurent (1992), and Brannen and Wilson (1996).

There is also quantitative support for this difference in degree of foreignness in Geert Hofstede's national cultural classification indexes: the United States measures 91 on the individualism index, compared to 71 for France and 46 for Japan—the latter a strong collectivist result (Hofstede, 1980: 158). In addition, the United States and France have closer scores on the masculinity index (62 and 43, respectively, versus 93 for Japan).³ However, despite such cultural proximity and host country experience in France, in the final analysis, Disney was far less successful there than in Japan. Ironically, Mickey loses face in Paris, rather than in Tokyo, where face-saving is a more common cultural issue.

These paradoxes suggest that although we know a lot about foreignness, strategic fit, and differences in host country environments, there is something about the role of the cultural context in the transnational transfer of firm assets that we are missing.⁴ Disney's unexpected success in Japan and equally unexpected lack of success in France illustrate that, somehow, in the transfer process, the transferred organizational assets, as well as the notion of foreignness itself, take on unanticipated meanings that directly affect internationalization outcomes. Our knowledge base to date does not help us completely comprehend what happened.

Further, understanding what happened is an especially pressing concern, because Disney's experience is particularly indicative of the current upward trend in internationalization of transferring increasingly complex firm assets abroad. Now, more than ever, firms are not just transferring products, technology, and operational procedures but whole organizations, including business models, steeped in image-based, ideological, people-dependent processes that are even more closely related to context and the

³ The other two dimensions, uncertainty avoidance and power distance, are inconclusive. However, many comparative management scholars have argued that the individualism-collectivism dimension of cultural variation is the major distinguishing factor in the ways different cultural groups analyze social behavior and process information (Baghat, Kedia, Harveston, & Triandis, 2002; Earley & Gibson, 1998; Erez & Earley, 1993; Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Triandis, 1990, 1995).

⁴ Baghat et al. (2002) make a similar claim: they point out the paucity of knowledge regarding the role of cultural variations in the transfer of organizational knowledge across cultures.

sociocultural environment in which they are enacted (Kostova & Roth, 2003; Zaheer, 2002). Moreover, in today's post 9/11 era, understanding what might be called the "politics of reception" and assessing the liability of foreignness based on the image of the transferring culture and power relations between transferor and transferee have become even more critical.

Consequently, what I ask in this paper is whether we can add to the literature on foreignness and internationalization by bringing in a different perspective more closely related to context and the dynamics of transferring whole organizational systems. I posit that what is missing in our knowledge base is an understanding of the process of recontextualization—how transferred organizational assets, including the notion of foreignness, take on new meanings in distinct cultural contexts. In order to understand recontextualization, we need to not only examine the process of transnational transmission but also develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics of host country reception. Organizations carry out both of these processes—transmission and reception—through the vehicle of language. As the linguist Norman Fairclough aptly states:

It is [currently] an age in which the production and reproduction of the social order depend increasingly upon practices and processes of a broadly cultural nature. Part of this development is an enhanced role for language in the exercise of power: it is mainly in discourse that consent is achieved, ideologies are transmitted, and practices, meanings, values and identities are taught and learnt (1995: 219).

I therefore focus on language as a key aspect of the cultural context that directly affects how foreignness and firm assets are both perceived and received in their new environments. I do this by bringing into the discussion of foreignness and transnational transfer the perspective of semiotics—the study of how language produces meaning in situated contexts. Language, to a semiotician, goes beyond spoken words to include objects, behaviors, practices, images, symbols, etc.—all of which are called "signs" (Martin & Ringham, 2000). Taken in this more comprehensive sense, language is a conduit for gaining deep contextual knowledge, enabling us to go beyond comparative, functionalist, or structuralist approaches to explore the dynamic, interactive, intertextual (following Boje, 2001,

and Kristeva, 1980), and often contested nature of the transfer process.

Using semiotics and the Walt Disney Company's two attempts at internationalization as cases in point, I make the following contributions to the literature. First, I develop the notion of semantic fit as a necessary complement to strategic fit. I show how semantic fit, or the lack thereof, can be critical to successful internationalization and the transfer of firm assets abroad. Second, I formalize a conceptual model of recontextualization, diagramming the process by which new meanings are attached to transferred firm assets in host country contexts and distinguishing among three distinct triggers of recontextualization: initial, ongoing, and reflexive semiosis.

The paper begins with an introduction to the main streams of literature I bring together in this article. Next, I discuss semiotics as a new perspective uncovering the socially embedded, intertextual nature of the processes of transmission and reception of firm assets to further an understanding of the context-dependent power dynamic relationship between language and meaning. I then use semiotics as the analytical basis for developing the notion of semantic fit and the conceptual model of recontextualization. These theoretical developments are then applied to the Walt Disney Company's two instances of internationalization to demonstrate their efficacy in explaining the paradoxes presented above, to show how recontextualization can result in both positive and negative organizational outcomes, and, more generally, to further establish the need for MNEs to assess semantic fit and to anticipate and monitor recontextualization in the transfer of firm assets abroad. Finally, I discuss the implications of semantic fit and recontextualization for organizational theory and management.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The development of the notions of semantic fit and recontextualization is motivated by the perception of a lacuna in the international management literature on foreignness and fit regarding language as a critical part of the cultural context that significantly affects the transnational transfer of firm assets. I therefore begin by discussing the MNE literature on foreignness and fit, focusing on recent work that has explicated

the role of context in transnational transfer. I then summarize what we know about the role of language from cross-cultural communication in comparative management and the study of pragmatics in linguistics—the two bodies of literature that deal most explicitly with contextual issues in communication—and show how semiotic analysis enhances this understanding and provides the basis for the development of the notions of semantic fit and recontextualization.

Foreignness and Fit

Foreignness is broadly taken to mean the dissimilarity—or lack of fit—in operating contexts of an MNE's home and host environments (Hymer, 1976; Kindleberger, 1969). As mentioned previously, foreignness is generally understood to be a liability: internationalization adds to the uncertainty of doing business and translates into certain costs that domestic firms do not have to worry about (Hymer, 1976; Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Zaheer, 1995; Zaheer & Mosaikowski, 1997). These costs arise for a plethora of reasons and include costs associated with distance from home, such as transportation, coordination, and control over time and space; firm-specific costs due to host country inexperience; and costs resulting from host country reception, such as economic nationalism and lack of legitimacy of foreign firms (Zaheer, 1995).

A few organizational scholars have tentatively suggested that there may be some circumstances in which foreignness might be an asset to the MNE (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Meziyas, 2001; Zaheer, 1995). Kostova and Zaheer (1999) have speculated further that there could exist specific situations where being an MNE brings with it an initial level of legitimacy, rather than illegitimacy. They suggest that such situations might arise in environments in which local firms have lost their legitimacy from being overprotected by the government, as well as in countries where a long-standing sense of inferiority and xenophilia exists (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999: 75). The latter possibility helps to explain Disney's initial market entry success in Japan (see Nakane, 1970, on Japan's inferiority complex).

There is also a stream of literature on international marketing in which researchers have examined country of origin effects on the image and marketing of products in different host countries (for comprehensive reviews, see Belk,

2002, and Chao, 1995). This work generally states that foreignness is an asset in the case of luxury goods with inimitable and highly recognized brand names. Coca-Cola, Levi Jeans, and McDonald's are such exemplar MNEs whose products have been successfully marketed with a global marketing strategy capitalizing, in part, on their foreignness.⁵

Neither of these bodies of work, in organizational theory or in international marketing, that consider the possibility of foreignness as an asset provides an explanation of the process by which MNEs are or are not awarded legitimacy on initial market entry. Building on these understandings of foreignness, and drawing from semiotic analysis (Barthes, 1957; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kristeva, 1980) and critical discourse analysis (Boje, 2001; Fairclough, 1995), I propose that the issues of legitimacy and how foreignness is construed are dependent on the signification and evolution of the power dynamics and concomitant ideological complexes associated with the transferred firm assets in the host country context. For example, note that the signification of foreignness as an asset is not only limited to globally recognized brand name luxury items but also extends to a plethora of commonplace transferred items, such as candy, toiletries, and ordinary clothing items, so long as they are transferred from a country having a higher economic status than that of the recipient.

In other words, it is less the brand than the economic power dynamics between the home and host cultures. These ordinary items are often legitimated by prominent displays of home country language, such as T-shirts with English phrases (often nonsensical in the country of origin, like "Let's play sports to keep sweating" or "El Paso University-California") and candy bars with English names (often absurd and even unsavory in the original context, like "Colon" chocolate bars or "Crap" candied popcorn)⁶ found in Japan and other Asian countries. The phrases

⁵ In some cases, products and market entities that are commonplace in the home culture take on new meaning as luxury goods in host cultures, owing to the exoticness associated with foreignness (Belk, 2002). This is an example of positive recontextualization. See the section on recontextualization for further discussion.

⁶ These are my own observations of English language use on Japanese consumer products. See Tobin (1992) for more examples.

themselves are recontextualized to the extent that their original meanings drop off entirely, leaving the empty words as legitimization—a type of foreign symbolic capital—in the new cultural context. Looking at language as a contextually determined signification process, as I propose in this paper, allows us to understand what Boje terms *intertextuality* or the “dynamic, moving generation of power structures in relation to changing social and historical contexts and networks of distribution and consumption” (2001: 78) associated with firm assets and the MNE itself in the process of transnational transfer.

Foreignness is determined by three dimensions: level of internationalization, host country experience, and institutional distance. Internationalization is the degree to which a firm is involved in international activities (Mitchell et al., 1992). The assumption in the literature is that the greater the degree of internationalization, the more capable an MNE will be at correctly assessing strategic fit in new host environments (Prahalad & Doz, 1987). As a firm gains experience in internationalizing, it builds capabilities in learning about and operating in new and multiple country environments so that it can better manipulate and gauge the fit between home and host contexts (Barkema et al., 1996; Delios & Beamish, 1999; Mitchell et al., 1992). Although not proven in Disney’s case, the research has shown that firms with higher levels of internationalization are more successful in entering additional new markets because of generalizable aspects of their knowledge of the internationalization experience.

This paradox might be understood by the fact that, until recently, research on internationalization has focused primarily on the transfer of what Winter (1990) calls “hard” technologies—products and processes encoded into the technologies themselves. However, as internationalization increasingly includes the transfer of whole systems of organization, such as Disney’s entire theme park operation, transnational success is based more and more on transferring “soft”—what Hall (1993) calls “people-dependent”—technologies. These softer types of firm assets are much more vulnerable to misalignment, because they are more closely embedded in the sociocultural context of the recipient culture and, therefore, more likely to lack semantic fit, resulting in misconstrued meanings associated with the transferred firm assets.

Whether higher levels of internationalization will mitigate the negative effects of foreignness regarding the transfer of soft technologies is yet to be theorized or shown empirically. Baghat et al. (2002) demonstrate that cultural variations have a significant effect on the transfer of organizational knowledge across cultures. Their work suggests that there are idiosyncratic aspects of host cultural contexts that may not be generalizable through the internationalization experience. I propose that language as a cultural system of signification is one of them.⁷ Indeed, Disney’s learning from its initial internationalization experience in Japan did not translate into successfully generalizable knowledge in France. As further discussed below, whereas Disney experienced semantic fit in transferring each of its products and processes to Japan, these same firm assets experienced a significant lack of semantic fit in France. Semantic fit depends on how the transferred firm assets are understood in each new cultural context. As such, semantic fit is distinctive to particular country contexts. Further, owing to the interactive dynamics between and within the home and host contexts, recontextualizations are ongoing intertextual processes. Thus, because of the idiosyncratic aspect of semantic fit and the ongoing nature of recontextualization, it is unlikely that “soft” or people-dependent firm assets can be transferred intact.

Host country experience is the understanding a firm has gained in a specific country context. This includes time spent in the country, as well as the range of activities in which it has engaged, such as sales, distribution, manufacturing, and service. Firms that have host country experience are expected to suffer less negative effects from foreignness and a greater amount of strategic fit as they continue to expand internationalization activities in that same locale (Hymer, 1976; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Zaheer & Mosakowski, 1997). As I

⁷ Baghat et al. (2002) offer a framework for understanding four transacting cultural patterns that affect cross-cultural knowledge transfer. Interestingly, their framework predicts that Disney’s transfer of firm assets from the United States (a vertical individualist culture) to France (also a vertical individualist culture) should be easier than to Japan (a vertical collectivist culture), creating yet another paradox.

have discussed, such host country experience did not help Disney in internationalizing its theme park to France. I propose that a different kind of host country experience—one showing understanding and comprehension of the notions of semantic fit and recontextualization idiosyncratic to the particular context—needs to be added as a complement to strategic fit in order to more effectively mitigate the negative effects of foreignness.

Institutional distance is the difference in specific institutional profiles between two national cultural environments (Kostova, 1999). The institutional profile is characterized by the convergence of the regulatory, cognitive, and normative institutions established in a country (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). Cultural distance is generally considered one important aspect of this third dimension of foreignness (see Kostova, 1999).⁸ The assumption in the literature is that the greater the institutional distance, the less strategic fit there will be (Brannen, Liker, & Fruin, 1999; Szulanski, 1996; Zaheer, 1995). Again, this work has focused primarily on “hard” organizational resources (Winter, 1990)—what Kedia and Baghat (1988) call “product-embodied technologies.” However, in the transnational transfer of whole systems of organization, along with “people-embodied,” “soft” technologies such as strategic organizational practices (as defined by Kostova, 1999) that are value and meaning based, success of transfer is predicated on the diffusion of a set of organizational rules along with the transmission of the *meaning* of these rules among individuals of the recipient organization (Kostova, 1999). The transmission of meaning of organizational practices and other firm assets across cultures is done through cross-cultural communication. Communication is achieved through the use of language. Language as a signifying system is one of the more important aspects of a country’s institutional profile that directly affects the process of firm transfer. It is at once the vehicle of transfer of the transferor as well as the vehicle of sensemaking of the transferee (Searle, 1979).

⁸Cultural distance as defined by Hofstede (2001) has been established as a key indicator of firm foreignness (Barkema et al., 1996; Child & Markoczy, 1993; Gomez-Meija & Palich, 1997).

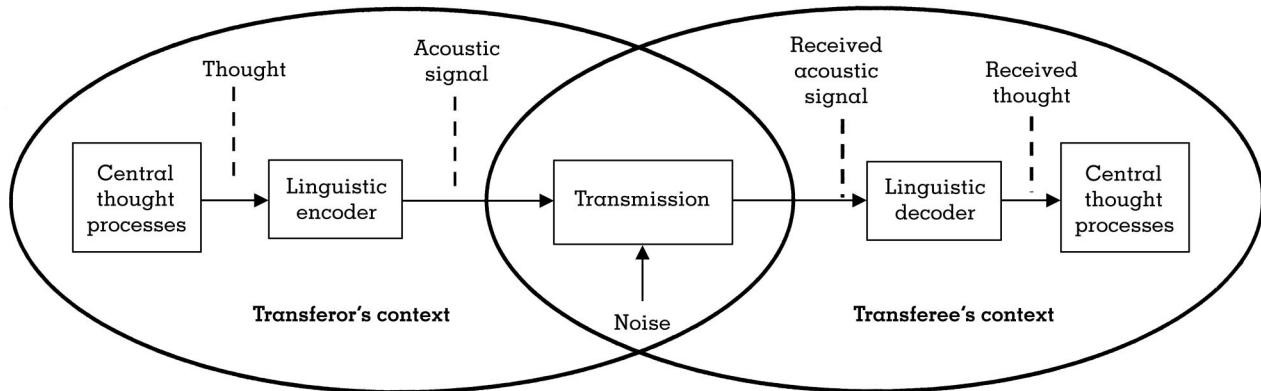
Language, Communication, and Transnational Transfer

Various theories of communication have been offered in diverse disciplines, including but not limited to anthropology, cross-cultural communication, philosophy, pragmatics, and linguistics. These theories, dating from Aristotle to modern structural linguistics, are based on a common model that Sperber and Wilson (1986: 5) term the *code model of communication*. The basic code model of communication is presented in Figure 1, adapted for analysis of transnational transfer following Ronen (1986: 92).

According to the code model, communication is achieved by encoding and decoding messages between transferor and transferee. The source and target of reception are the central thought processes that register meaning for the transferor and transferee, respectively. The encoder and decoder are linguistic capabilities, and the message is a thought, channeled through the noise of time and space associated with the transmission of the acoustic signal. The basic assumptions underlying the code model are (1) human languages are codes, (2) these codes associate thoughts with acoustic signals or sounds, and (3) the acoustic signals are encoded and decoded in the specific contexts of transferor and transferee.

In the study of pragmatics—the field of linguistics that directly examines how context affects meaning—context is defined as a psychological construct that is “a subset of the hearer’s (or transferee’s in the case of transnational transfer) assumption about the world” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986: 16). That is to say, contextualization is the process by which the hearer/transferee makes sense of his or her world. The cross-cultural communication literature underscores the importance of this third assumption, placing heavy emphasis on the cultural context of the transferor and transferee as the basis of the encoded and decoded meaning (Adler, 1995; Ronen, 1986; Schneider, 1986). The overlap between the transferor and transferee’s contexts represents what Ronen (1986) calls “modality” or the “channel of verbal and nonverbal communication”—the area where cross-cultural communication is possible. On the relationship of communication to culture, Ronen reminds us that anthropolo-

FIGURE 1
Code Model of Communication



Adapted from Sperber and Wilson (1986) and Ronen (1986).

gists essentially consider communication and culture synonymously, because

cultures dictate not only who talks with whom, about what and how the communication proceeds, but also help to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted (Samovar, Porter, & Jain, 1981; quoted in Ronen, 1986: 91).

The assumption is that the more the communicators' cultural worlds overlap, the more effective their communication is.⁹ The lack of overlap is one source of noise (see Figure 1) stemming from noncongruence of symbolic systems in the cultural contexts of the transferor and transferee. Another source of noise is in the transmission itself, from lack of congruence between the system of signs used to encode meaning by the transferor and the codes used to decode or interpret the meaning by the transferee. Although two communicators' immediate fields of experience may overlap (such as in the case of transnational transfer between home and subsidiary of a particular MNE), the system of signs and

symbols utilized to encode and transmit meaning, as well as the rules and conventions used to decode the symbols, may differ. In sum, the message (or acoustic signal in Figure 1) is sent in the language system of one culture and decoded in the context of the other (Samovar et al., 1981).

Sperber and Wilson (1986: 6) caution that the view of linguistic communication as achieved by encoding thoughts into sounds is so ingrained in Western thought that it has become a basic assumption rather than a hypothesis with merits and limitations. Linguists as well as cross-cultural management scholars, as cited above, claim the main merit of this model to be explanatory of the communication process: verbal utterances (or acoustic signals as they are called in Figure 1) indeed do succeed in communicating thoughts, and the hypothesis that they encode and decode thoughts offers an explanation as to how this is done. However, a significant general limitation of this basic code model of communication is that it is descriptively insufficient regarding the process of comprehension—comprehension entails much more than the decoding of a linguistic signal.

Further, and more specific to understanding the role of language in transnational transfer, the model is deficient because such transfer involves much more than the transfer of linguistic signals. Moreover, transferring the linguistic signals alone does not ensure that the meanings attached to them are transferred. More often than not there are shifts in meaning as the transferred offerings are interpreted and even appropriated by various stakeholders with dis-

⁹ Of course, what is meant by "overlap" needs to be refined. In the wake of globalization, many cultural worlds have come to overlap. This overlap does not mean, however, that the world views and systems of symbolic signification used in encoding and decoding messages are the same. This point is elaborated further in my discussion on recontextualization and how overlapping worlds due to globalization are often a source of unanticipated "pre-existing meanings" for firm assets that may or may not fit the strategic intent of the MNE.

tinct agendas in the new cultural contexts. Linguists such as Gumperz (1982) note that the ability to generate grammatical sentences is not enough to successfully communicate a message even within one's own culture, much less in cross-cultural situations.¹⁰ Similarly, in international business, strategic fit is not enough to mitigate the negative effects of foreignness and to ensure success in the transnational transfer of firm assets. In sum, for theory building on transnational transfer, the basic model falls short in describing both the content and process of transmission.

SEMIOTICS, SEMANTIC FIT, AND RECONTEXTUALIZATION

The semiotic approach can be understood as a generalization of the code model of verbal communication to all forms of communication (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). As such, semiotics provides the necessary breadth and depth for expanding communication theory to allow for a fuller understanding of the role of language in the transnational transfer of the sometimes tacit, sometimes explicit, sometimes "hard," and sometimes "soft" products, as well as the sometimes accepted and sometimes contested technologies and processes, that make up firm assets. In this section I show how semiotics adds necessary insights into our understanding of the code model and paves the way for the development of the notions of semantic fit and recontextualization.

Semiotics

There are two main branches of semiotics: the American branch, led by C. S. Peirce (1940, 1965), focusing on logic and meaning and the development of categories of signs that have become central in linguistics linked to philosophy, and the European branch, represented by the Paris School (École de Paris) founded by A. J. Greimas (1966), following the early work of social linguists Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) and Luis Hjelmslev (1953), that is primarily concerned with the relationship between signs and the

manner in which they produce meaning within a given social context. This latter school has been central in the work of structural anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958, 1968) and Edmund Leach (1976); in the post-Saussurean textual analysis of Roland Barthes (1957, 1970), Julia Kristeva (1980), Umberto Eco (1979, 1984), and Kaja Silverman (1983); and in the critical discourse analysis of Norman Fairclough (1995) and David Boje (2001), and it has provided the theoretical foundation for the new field of social semiotics (see Hodge & Kress, 1988, and Martin & Ringham, 2000). The Paris School attaches importance not only to the elaboration of theories of signification but also to their application as methodological tools for textual analysis; as such, it is wider reaching and of greater practical use for theory building in a variety of fields.

In the field of organization studies, Barley (1983) has said that semiotics is ultimately the study of how communication is possible, since all communication is based on shared codes. Such shared codes, as discussed above, are context dependent—the encoding and decoding of which are shaped by the particular sociocultural environments of the transferor and transferee. The main contribution of semiotics to the basic code model is that it provides a more sophisticated understanding of language regarding both the nature of the message that is sent and received and the process by which signs communicate meaning in shared social contexts. In particular, the more recent post-Saussurean work in textual analysis (Barthes, 1957, 1970; Kristeva, 1980) and critical discourse analysis (Boje, 2001; Fairclough, 1995) can be used to expand the code model, beyond a functionalist or structuralist approach, to include a deeper understanding of the dynamic, power-laden, intertextual relationship between and within home and host contexts particular to transfer.

Further, whereas the basic code model (Figure 1) limits the analysis of the message that is sent and received to the form of an acoustic signal, semiotics provides a more comprehensive notion of language to include any system of signification, be it verbal, textual, visual, gestural, symbolic, ideological, etc. (Martin & Ringham, 2000). As such, in semiotic terms, the acoustic signal of the basic model takes on this fuller meaning of language and is formally called a

¹⁰ I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this and many other insights regarding linguistics and cross-cultural communication.

"sign."¹¹ A sign can be a word, object, behavior, event, image, philosophy, or any other offering from transferor to transferee.

The starting point for understanding how signs convey meaning is the basic taxonomy of linguistic sign systems originally offered by Saussure (1916). Saussure developed this taxonomy to identify and make explicit the rules governing the process of signification. According to Saussure, words (such as the "acoustic signals" in the basic model) are not symbols with one-on-one correspondence to specific thought referents but, rather, signs made up of two components: (1) an image or "signifier" and (2) a concept or "signified." The relationship among sign, signifier, and signified is shown in Figure 2.

The significance of signs is based solely on a system of relationships between signifiers and signifieds. In this taxonomy signifier and signified represent the two fundamental levels of language. The term *signifier* refers principally to the material world of sound and vision. The term *signified*, however, relates to the concept or idea expressed by the sound or icon. Of course, there can be various signifiers of a signified. For example, Mickey Mouse ears, the words "Mickey Mouse," and the Mickey Mouse song all signify Disney's cherubic mascot. In addition, a particular signifier can connote more than one signified. A signifier of Mickey Mouse might specifically connote Disneyland or any combination of general associations such as fun, safety, or happiness.

Saussure describes the relationship of the signifier to the signified as that between the front and back of a piece of paper—the two levels of language are in a relationship of reciprocal presupposition, and, as such, there is no disassociation between form and content (Saussure, 1916; expanded on in Martin & Ringham, 2000: 123). Consider the following example, as outlined in Figure 2. In the Japanese context, when one sees

a person wearing a black-and-white formal kimono with black-knotted obi-sash (the signifier), the concomitant assumption (signified) is that the wearer is going to (or has just come from) a funeral. The sign is at once the representation (the particular type of kimono) and the understanding (funeral).

Whereas semiotics has been applied in a few instances to organizational studies specifically regarding researching organizational culture (Barley, 1983; Manning, 1987) and analyzing corporate language use (Fiol, 1989), to my knowledge it has not yet been employed in the field of international management.¹² There are several critical ways in which semiotics adds to international management theory and research, specifically in the area of cross-cultural communication, providing essential insights into our understanding of foreignness and transnational transfer. In the following sections I underscore these contributions and trace their role in developing the notions of semantic fit and recontextualization.

Semantic Fit

The first significant contribution of semiotics to international management is the view of language as a signifying whole that yields a fuller understanding of the nature of what is transferred in internationalization. Understanding transnational transfer as the exchange of organizational signs enables researchers and practitioners to break down firm assets into two essential components: signifier and signified. Awareness of the contextual basis of systems of signification makes patent the cultural relativity of the association between signifier and signified. This underscores the notion that transferring content (the signifier) alone—as is often the case when transfer is guided predominantly by the principles of strategic fit—is not enough.

Revisiting the example in Figure 2, what happens when the same sign (the Japanese funeral kimono) is displaced from its country of origin?

¹¹ The semiotic definition of language as a signifying whole needs to be understood distinctly from spoken language. The former is meant broadly, in the sense in which we speak of the language of architecture, cooking, or transnational transfer, in the context of this article. Spoken language is broken down by Saussure (1916) into *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* denotes the abstract conventions underlying a given language. *Parole* refers to the concrete usage of the system by individual speakers.

¹² Semiotic analysis has been used more widely in the field of international marketing, both by scholars and practitioners in advertising, predominantly for understanding how products are perceived and received in different cultures. For a current review of the international use of semiotics in marketing, see Mick, Burroughs, Hetzel, and Brannen (in press).

FIGURE 2
System of Signification

Signifier	Signified
Sign	

Signifier: Acoustic or mental image, representation
sound of a word, script of a text
Example: *black-and-white formal kimono with black-knotted obi-sash*

Signified: Concept or meaning, understanding
Example: *funeral*

Sign: Associative total of the image (*signifier*) and its meaning (*signified*),
the concrete entity

From Saussure (1916).

Consider the same black-and-white kimono worn by a Western woman as an outer wrap to a party in the United States. Severed from its complex chain of signification particular to Japan, in this new context the signifier might simply connote a certain cosmopolitan chicness (or eccentricity). Further, a Japanese observer attending the party might make erroneous assumptions about the Western woman wearing the kimono, if he or she were to use the traditional Japanese system of signification associated with kimono protocol.

Such mistaken assumptions about the signified connotations of a sign are due to a lack of what I term *semantic fit*. Semantics is the field of linguistics studying the systematic ways in which languages structure meaning (Finegan, Blair, & Collins, 1997: 157). In the language of semiotic grammar, "semantics" concerns itself with discerning the signified in language. Semiotics identifies three levels of semantic meaning: conceptual, narrative, and discursive (Martin & Ringham, 2000).

The conceptual level refers to meaning at the deepest level of core values and assumptions—in other words, at the source of signification—and is thereby the most abstract. Disney's pantheon of characters is abundant with examples of conceptual semantics: Mickey as the ideal American boy, Malificent as the embodiment of evil, and so forth.

The narrative level refers to meaning that is actualized through value-laden stories.¹³ As Boje aptly puts it, Disney is the "modernist story machine" (1995: 1011), and any of Disney's fairy tales that put forth certain life-value goals, such as goodness and wealth in the case of Cinderella, are examples of narrative semantics.

Last, the discursive level refers to meaning that is generated figuratively by attaching values to words, and generally does so by appealing to the five senses. Examples of discursive semantics, again from Disney's Cinderella, are happiness, as expressed in capturing the love of a handsome prince, and wealth, as expressed in grand balls, lavish attire, and elaborate coaches.

Lack of semantic fit might occur at any one or a combination of these three semantic levels of signification. Considering again the transnational example of the case of the displaced kimono, the lack of semantic fit takes place at the conceptual level—the basic association between the signifier of the black-and-white formal kimono to the abstract signified of the funeral in the U.S. context has been lost.

¹³ A handful of organizational researchers have focused on narrative and the role of storytelling in organizations (Boje, 1991, 1995; Browning, 1991; Gephart, 1991; Hawes, 1991; Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983; Wilkins & Thompson, 1991).

Organizational instances of semantic shifts leading to lack of fit abound. For example, the English word "bonus" exists in Japan, but it is used to connote a very different understanding of the employee pay package. Whereas in the U.S. context a bonus is seen as a reward for exceptional performance, in the Japanese context a *bonasu* (as it is called) is a standard, substantial, and expected portion of an employee's annual compensation, roughly equal to two months' worth of salary, paid biannually at New Year's and in midsummer (Rohlen, 1974). Likewise, examples of lack of semantic fit around the notion of "team" and "teamwork" in overseas subsidiaries of MNEs abound, as these words take on distinct meanings in their new cultural contexts (Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2001, 2002). Such shifts in semantic fit occur because signs transferred into new contexts reconnote as they enter into new systems of signification.

In his book *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes helps us understand such shifts in semantic meaning by expanding on Saussure's taxonomy of sign systems to include a description of the chain relationship between language and myth. Barthes identifies myth as a second-order system of signification wherein the sign in the first-order system (that of language and denotation, as shown in Figure 2) becomes the signifier in a new system of signification (that of myth and connotation), in which the sign acquires a new signified meaning.

The construct of strategic fit goes beyond technological efficiency to encompass knowledge base and institutional requirements, as previously discussed, but because in the work that generated the construct researchers looked predominantly at hard technologies and product innovations, their work does not express an understanding of the symbolic and value-laden aspects of transfer. As Kostova (1999) has shown, strategic organizational practices—the key objects of transnational transfer—are value impregnated and, thus, acquire symbolic and normative meaning for organizational members—that is, meaning that goes beyond technological efficiency. As such, the notion of semantic fit is a necessary complement to strategic fit in understanding success or failure in transnational transfer. Whether a firm wishes to transfer personnel policies, standard operating procedures (SOPs), teamwork concepts, production methods such as quality control, continuous improvement

(*kaizen*), or just-in-time delivery, language is the communicative vehicle, and semantic fit is often the determinant of success of transmission.

Organizational assets such as these have been developed, understood, and reinforced in particular organizational, social, and cultural contexts over time. As a result of this process, much of the knowledge base associated with these resources is tacit. As Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) have pointed out, to facilitate transfer, knowledge must be made explicit. Language, whether written (as in translated SOP manuals, philosophies, etc.) or oral (as in on-the-job training), is the medium for making explicit what is otherwise implicit. However, because such shared understandings are context dependent, even after rendering them explicit by language (and in some cases translating them into functional equivalents in yet another language), moving them from one location to another will always be problematic—that is, unless the new location duplicates or simulates the original context. Further, as Weick and Van Orden (1990) note, as the complexity of what is being transferred increases, how it is received becomes even more critical, because a new environment offers greater opportunity for equivocality in sensemaking. In other words, it is not just the mechanics of articulation that are problematic; it is that sensemaking occurs in context, and when context is not shared, meanings often shift in transfer.

Recontextualization

The second critical contribution of semiotics to international management is the understanding of the process by which signs evolve in social contexts. Semioticians term this phenomenon *semiosis* and define it as the processes and effects of the production and reproduction, reception and circulation of meaning in all forms, used by all agents of communication (Hodge & Kress, 1988). The notion of intertextuality introduced by Kristeva (1980) and expanded on by Fairclough (1995) and Boje (2001) is critical in helping us understand both the process and direction of semiosis. By underscoring the hegemonic nature of the relationship between language (transferred text) and context, intertextuality reveals the dynamic, embedded, and ongoing nature of the

power dynamics between transferor and transferee. It also helps to explain whose narrative becomes orthodoxy in particular transfer contexts. This emphasis on the role of the historical, political, and cultural contexts of the society at large in attributing meaning to signs provides an important foundation for understanding the process by which firm assets take on distinct meanings in new cultural contexts—what I term *recontextualization*.

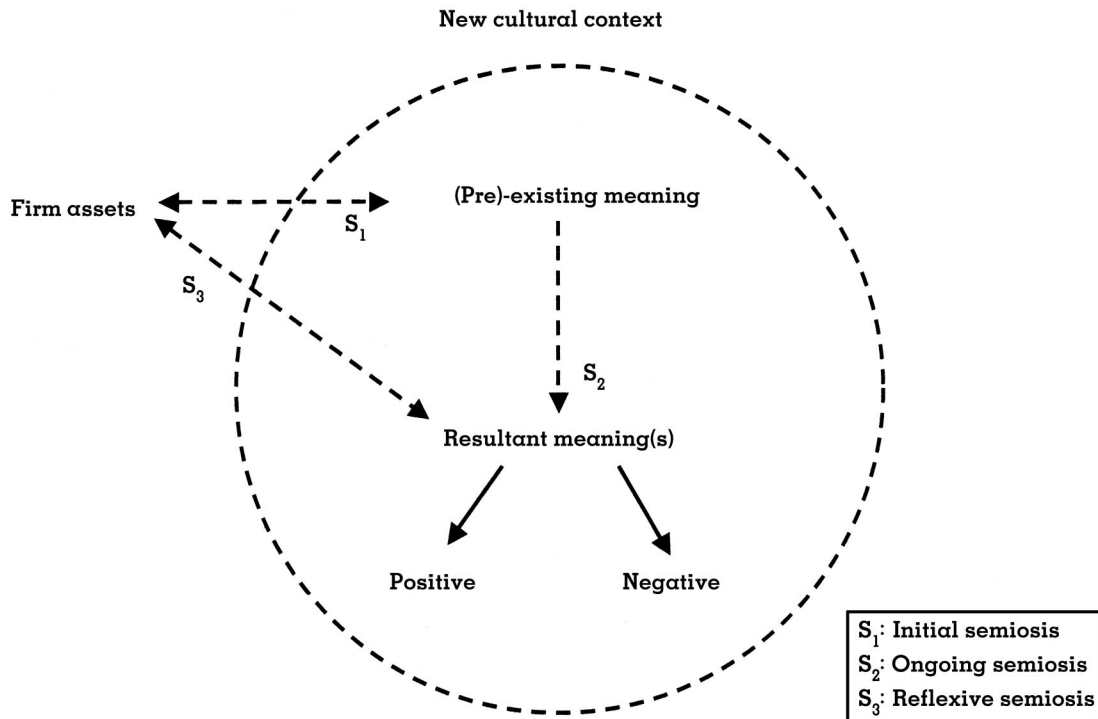
Recontextualization is a notion derived from anthropology that tackles the semantic dimension of internationalization by examining how meanings shift and change in differing cultural contexts (Bohanan, 1995; Brannen, 1992). As the term suggests, recontextualization focuses on the context that gives meaning to language, objects, and systems. Just as knowledge of contextualization conventions and semantics is important in communication, recontextualization and semantic fit need to be considered in international business (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, as discussed above). As semiotics teaches us, people create meanings through systems of signification.

The concept of recontextualization allows us to track such shifts in meanings attached to objects and processes as they move from one culture to another. Figure 3 is a graphic representation of the rudimentary aspects of recontextualization identifying three key triggers of semiosis in transnational transfer.

First, there is initial semiosis (S_1), as local existing meanings or pre-existing meanings are attached to the assets. Firm assets are transferred into new environments that are not blank slates but, rather, have ample interconnections with the home culture and often have pre-existing knowledge of the firm's assets. This is part of the aftermath of globalization—cultures can hardly be found that have been unaffected by internationalization. Thus, the transferred firm assets go through recipient cultural sensemaking filters that attach pre-existing meanings to them as they enter the new environment.

An example of this type of initial semiosis is the foreign understanding of sushi as raw fish. In the Japanese context sushi is understood as pickled rice—an historical invention of conve-

FIGURE 3
Recontextualization of Firm Assets



nience, much like the sandwich in the West, whereby the pickling agents in the rice act as preservatives so that food can be taken into the field or on long trips. *Sashimi* is the term used for raw fish in Japan. In the West, where fish generally is served cooked, the strangeness of eating raw fish fixed recipient attention on the fish rather than the rice, thereby giving way to the recontextualized understanding of sushi as raw fish.

Second, there is ongoing semiosis (S_2), in which the meanings of firm assets evolve as they are utilized and made sense of in the new context. As the firm assets are implemented and then intermixed within the new host environment, they continue to undergo recontextualization. An example of this second type of semiosis is the evolution of the "California roll"—sushi made with cooked crab and avocado—an innovation more palatable to most Americans.

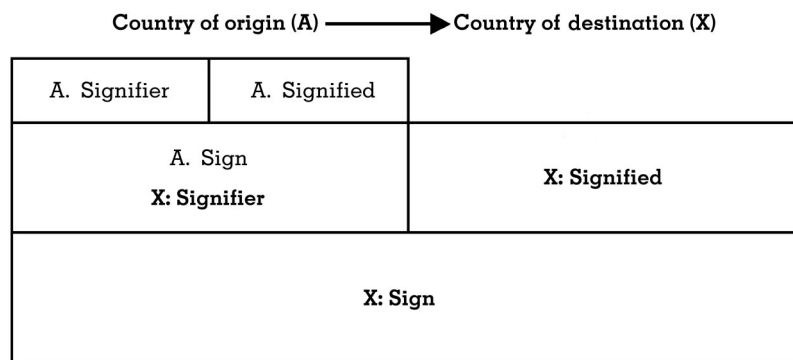
Third, there is reflexive semiosis (S_3), as the new meanings associated with the firm assets are repatriated to the home context. An obvious example of this is having the California roll becoming a standard sushi offering in Japan. Thus, shifts in meaning due to recontextualization can occur at the onset (S_1); over time, as the firm assets receive unexpected and emergent signification in their new cultural contexts (S_2); and reflexively, as cross-cultural innovations of the firm assets are repatriated into the original home context (S_3). As the analysis of Disney's two attempts at internationalization will show, these shifts in

meaning can be positive or negative. That is to say, the recontextualization can either be favorable to or at odds with a firm's strategic intent and, thus, lead to innovation and opportunities for learning, on the one hand, or threats to the successful transfer of firm assets, on the other.

In sum, recontextualization is the process by which the consumer or transferee makes sense of the product, practice, or service transferred from abroad into his or her own culture. In order to formalize a method for tracking how shifts of semantic fit occur as signs are recontextualized in new environments, I adapted the general semiotic model—Saussure's first level of denotation (Figure 2)—to accommodate transnational transfer following Barthe's addition of the second level of connotation—the level of myth creation. Figure 4 therefore provides a framework for analyzing recontextualization as semiotic patterns in cross-national shifts in systems of signification.

Figure 4 shows two country contexts with two distinct systems of signification: (1) the country of origin (here, for theory-building purposes, I have used the United States, designated context "A," since I will directly apply the model to Disney's theme park internationalization from its home in the United States) to (2) an arbitrary host country, designated "X." Each system of signification contains two parts: (1) a formal pairing between signifier and signified, composing the sign as it is understood at a particular historical moment in the distinct cultural context, and (2) a paren-

FIGURE 4
Process Model of Recontextualization in Transnational Transfer



Semiosis at each level is ongoing ($t_{a,x} \rightarrow t_n$)

Adapted from Barthes (1957).

thetical time dimension denoting semiosis—the dynamic aspect of the semiotic indicators. As discussed, signifiers and their signifieds change over time, consistent with historical and social changes in the local environment. As such, a particular signified is the collective understanding or metanarrative that has become orthodoxy for a certain period of time in a given cultural context.¹⁴ For example, Mickey Mouse's meaning has gone through recontextualizations in its own home context, evolving from the flamboyant, quasi-trickster, ratlike figure of the late 1920s in "Plane Crazy" and "Steam Boat Willy" to the childlike, wholesome, cherub-faced mouse of "Mickey's Christmas Carol" (Finch, 1973; Gould, 1979). Likewise, firm assets can take on an initial signification in a certain host environment upon transfer, which can evolve into something quite different over time.

In the new context, Country X, the original sign (A) becomes the signifier (X: Signifier) in a distinct system of signification, resulting in a new, recontextualized signified (X: Signified). The original signified (A) under most circumstances will be left behind, because in order for the sign to be transferred with both the original signifier and signified intact, the recontextual information must be mutually known between transferor and transferee—a possible, yet unlikely, proposition. Similarly, Sperber and Wilson (1986) point out that in order to guarantee successful communication, all items of contextual information used in interpreting utterances must not only be known by the speaker and hearer but mutually known. Without an understanding of semantic fit or how firm assets are recontextualized into new host environments, managers expect that, with some care in translation and training, they will be able to transfer organizational resources relatively intact. This is because they are confusing the sign with the signifier (e.g., knowledge with SOPs) and transferring the latter without its accompanying signified.

¹⁴ As one anonymous reviewer put it, citing Barthes, custom and usage naturalize connotation so that some connotations are given preference to others, with the effect that "denotation is the last of connotation."

APPLYING THE ANALYTICAL MODEL TO THE CASE OF WALT DISNEY¹⁵

Transferring whole organizational systems abroad, as in the case of Disney's theme park internationalization into Japan and France, is no small task, since it involves all aspects of management, including finance, marketing, human resource management, and strategy, which exponentially add to a firm's vulnerability to foreignness. Research on the liability of foreignness suggests that firm-specific advantages embodied in successfully transferred organizational practices effectively mitigate the liability of foreignness (Mezias, 2001; Zaheer, 1995). However, rationalizing exactly which organizational practices to transfer is also a difficult task. Some organizations give up trying to decide and transfer their entire organizational system, as the Toyota Motor Company did when it chose to transfer its entire Toyota Production System (TPS) to its first greenfield plant in the United States (Liker, Fruin, & Adler, 1999). More often, firms try to identify their organization's core competencies and focus on transferring at least these aspects intact (Brannen et al., 1999).

Kostova (1999) defines such practices that reflect the core competencies of the MNE as "strategic organizational practices." The transfer of these key practices is particularly critical to MNEs, because a primary advantage that such firms have in foreign markets is their superior knowledge, which can be utilized by subsidiaries worldwide (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1997; Kogut, 1991). These practices provide a distinct source of competitive advantage that differentiates the firm from its competitors.

I use this logic to focus my analysis of the Walt Disney Company's cases of internationalization. Peters and Watterman (1982), Fjellman (1989, 1992), and Van Maanen (1991, 1992) have identified Disney's core competencies and strategic organizational practices as a combination

¹⁵ The signifieds reported herein are meanings attributed to the signifiers collected in a larger ethnographic study, published separately. The observations were collected in the United States, Japan, and France over a period of five years, from 1987–1992, combining repeated site visits; archival research at the Disney Archives in Burbank and at the Anaheim Public Library in California; and in-depth interviews with Disney executives, Disney demographers, ride operators, and theme park customers in the United States (Anaheim and Orlando), Tokyo, and Paris.

of its globally recognized products, "excellent" human resource management practices, and superior narrative prowess in creating the "Happiest Place on Earth."

This division among products, practices, and ideology, as it were, is particularly useful for semiotic theory building, since these span the range of semantic levels, from conceptual to narrative and discursive. I have therefore divided my analysis among products, processes, and ideologies. For products, I focus on two of the most pervasive Disney themes—Mickey Mouse and the American Cowboy—and on souvenirs, since point-of-purchase sales are among the most important sources of revenue at the theme parks. For practices, I focus on four aspects of the Disney corporate formula for theme park success (see Van Maanen, 1992): service orientation, personnel management, training, and crowd control. For ideologies, following Boje's (1995) deconstruction of Disney as a storytelling organization, as well as his (2001) and Fairclough's (1995) insights into critical discourse analysis and the new capitalism, I focus on cross-cultural semantic shifts in Disney's narrative and language use to show how foreignness is perceived and enacted in each context.

Table 1 summarizes how each of these core competencies is recontextualized when trans-

ferred into its new host environment: as displaced signifiers, each takes on new signification in Japan and France. The observations that follow explain the semantic evolution of these core competences within the semiotic framework described in Figure 4.

Products

Japan and France were no strangers to the Disney pantheon of characters—Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Goofy, and others. Disney characters, shows, and other paraphernalia had been a part of the experience of growing up in these cultures long before the entry of the Disney theme parks. In other words, there was ample pre-existing context for Disney.

Mickey Mouse. Most Japanese under the age of fifty watched the Mickey Mouse Club on television as children and, when prompted, will readily join in a Japanese version of the Mickey Mouse song. Mickey Mouse is everywhere in Japan and is not just for kids—there are Mickey Mouse sheets for double futons, Mickey Mouse bean cakes, and even Mickey or Minnie Mouse masks for sale at religious festivals at local shrines. In fact, Mickey and Minnie are applauded as the "best couple" at Tokyo Disneyland—an example of their many positive con-

TABLE 1
Recontextualizations of Walt Disney Strategic Firm Assets

Signifier	Signified		
	United States	Japan	France
Products			
Mickey Mouse	All-American boy	Safe, reliable	<i>Le Journal Mickey</i>
Cowboy	Rugged individualist	Quintessential team player	Carefree individualist
Souvenirs	Fun, part of the experience	<i>Senbetsu</i> , legitimating memento	Tacky, waste of money
Practices			
Service orientation	Hypernormal	Cultural norm	Abnormal
Personnel management	Hypernormal	Cultural norm	Invasive/illegal
Training	Hypernormal	Cultural norm	Totalitarian
Ideologies			
Disneyland	Modernist theme— fun, clean, wholesome family entertainment	Recontextualized modernist theme—fun, clean, safe foreign vacation	Postmodernist theme— resistance to Disney's metanarrative
Foreignness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fantasized European roots ● Marginalized native and minority others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Keeping the United States exotic ● Marginalizing the Asian other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Politicized repatriation ● Schizophrenic relationship with United States

ceptual semantic shifts in meaning in the Japanese context.

What the Japanese like about Mickey and Minnie is that they are cute (*kawaii*), and cuteness is a highly valued attribute in Japan (Branen, 1992).¹⁶ Witness the plethora of cute products that Japan exports from companies such as Sanrio, the maker of Hello Kitty, Kero Keroppe, and Batz-Maru. Cuteness is associated with childhood and evokes a certain nostalgia for a time when life was uncomplicated, safe, and reliable. Thus, in one of his many Japanese recontextualizations, Mickey Mouse, hardly a symbol of reliability in the United States but having a trustworthy Japanese image, is used to sell money market accounts in Japan.¹⁷

Although the Mickey Mouse Club typically has not played such a big role in the experience of the French (although this may change in the future, with the introduction of the Disney Channel to France), Mickey Mouse has another profile. Most French children's experience with Mickey stems from reading *Le Journal Mickey*—a detective-style comic book series where Mickey is represented more cunningly and with a bit more smarts than he has in the United States, as the wholesome and cheerful master of ceremonies of the Mickey Mouse Club. The current squeaky-clean version of Mickey is perceived as uninteresting in France. In other words, there is a negative semantic fit at a conceptual level; consequently, Mickey has a low profile at Disneyland Paris. Minnie, however, has her own "can-can" review, reminiscent of the chanteuses of the Moulin Rouge, complete with flashy dresses and garters.

The American Cowboy. As is the case with Mickey, the Japanese have grown up watching cowboy shows such as "Rawhide" and "Bonanza" on the television. When interviewed as to what they think about a cowboy, Japanese at a cowboy theme bar in downtown Tokyo said,

When you boil it all down, what's the most important thing in a cowboy's life? Pride in his work. Even though my life is comfortable in Japan—I'm a dentist you know—working in my office, I've got to rely on myself just like cowboys do, and I've got pride in my work too. We all grew up watching those TV shows like "Rawhide" and "Laramy." What we saw was everyone getting together around the campfire. You guys have it all wrong. It's not about being an individual, it's about working together. Whenever those guys had a problem, they'd get together and figure out how to solve it. That's why the shows were so popular in Japan. They used teamwork. We see the cowboy as a team player. What do you think cowboys did around the campfire at night? They came together to sing songs and discuss the day's cattle drive (translated from Nathan, 1992).

In Japan, then, the narrative semantics surrounding what a cowboy symbolizes are that he is, in essence, the quintessential team player. The campfire is the site of quality control for the cowboy's cattle drive—the equivalent of the modern karaoke bar, where Japanese businessmen engage in male bonding to let off steam from the day's difficulties.

The cowboy is also a popular character in France. There, children are introduced to the construct through the popular comic book series *Lucky Luke*. Lucky Luke is a skinny-legged cowboy clad in tight-fitting blue jeans with a red bandana around his neck. He is noted more for his carefree, antiestablishment (*je m'en fou*) attitude. Not particularly rugged, he is often outwitted by his horse.¹⁸ Whereas Mickey Mouse loses face in France, the cowboy and various accompanying Western themes, such as those provided at the attractions of Westernland (renamed from the original Frontierland, reportedly because of the ambivalence the French feel regarding their colonial past) and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Review in Festival Disney right outside the theme park, are quite popular.

Souvenirs. Tokyo Disneyland has the highest per capita revenues from souvenir merchandise of all the Disney theme parks. Tokyo Disneyland souvenirs fit into the well-developed and formalized system of gift giving (*sembetsu*) in Ja-

¹⁶ The main source of information concerning Japanese society's relationship with cuteness comes from my interviews with Toshihiko Fukuda, an ad executive at Dentsu Advertising Company. He has also published in this area (Fukuda, 1990, 1994). For more information on Japan and its relationship with modern American artifacts, see a collection of articles in Tobin (1992).

¹⁷ The Sumitomo Bank, capitalizing on the convenient aliteration, used Mickey Mouse as a mascot to sell money market accounts during the period 1990–1992.

¹⁸ *Lucky Luke* is one of the three most popular comic books read by youngsters in France. *Asterix et Obelix* (a cartoon narrative on the life of the Gauls) and *Tin-Tin* (a narrative on the ups and downs of a mischievous dog) are the other two. Lucky Luke was cited as the image of a cowboy that most came to mind in the French context by interviewees at Disneyland Paris.

pan. The Disney company recognized this aspect of Japanese buying habits prior to building the theme park and purposefully designed Tokyo Disneyland's Main Street distinctly from its prototype in California. Rather than appealing to nostalgic sentiment, as Main Street, U.S.A. does for Americans, Tokyo Disneyland's version is the "World Bazaar," which is set up as a large shopping mall serving the gift-giving needs of the Japanese.

What Disney did not know, but learned relatively quickly, is that for the souvenirs to sell, they had to satisfy two important aspects of the system of *sembetsu* (Befu, 1986; Hendry, 1993): (1) the gifts purchased must be a specialty of the locale visited—a *meibutsu*—and (2) the gifts must have a legitimating mark—a *kinen* tag or wrapper proving that they were purchased on site. So, while at the beginning Disney paraphernalia at Tokyo Disneyland were no different from those that could be purchased at the Orlando or Anaheim theme parks, Disney soon learned that, in order for mementos to sell at the World Bazaar in Tokyo, they would have to have "TOKYO DISNEYLAND" marked on them to serve both the functions of *meibutsu* (local specialties) and *kinen* (legitimating mementos). In addition, Disney has innovated regarding entry options to accommodate this buying need in Japan by making available an option in admission tickets that allows for entry into the theme park only, with no rides or attractions included, for those visitors who simply want to shop.

Not having a similar context of gift giving to fit into, at Disneyland Paris souvenirs are much less popular. In fact, the Paris park has the lowest sales of souvenirs of all Disney's theme parks. In interviews of parents visiting Disneyland Paris with their children, parents explained that such items are considered tacky and a waste of money.

Practices: Service Orientation, Personnel Management, Training, and Crowd Control

Disney's key strategic organizational practice has been summed up by Peters and Watterman (1982) as the capability to create the "Happiest Place on Earth." This intangible asset depends on Disney's ability to provide a clean, safe, orderly, and, most important, friendly environment, which comes from a strong and successful human resource competence. While this compe-

tence is not at all the cultural norm for service industries in the United States, Disney is able to deliver this formula by employing a two-part system of initial personnel screening for cultural fit and consequent training of employees to deliver impeccable service, by means of its rigorous forty-day Disney University program (Fjellman, 1992; Van Maanen, 1992).

Van Maanen, a graduate of the Disney University, has given it the sobriquet of the "Smile Factory" (Van Maanen, 1991). He further attributes Disney's success in pulling off the "Happiest Place on Earth" to a series of semiotic contrasts—work/play, adult/child, bad/good, dirty/clean, dangerous/safe, rude/civil, etc. (Gottdiener, 1982; cited in Van Maanen, 1992). This view is consistent with that of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, who deconstructs the opposition between "real" America and "imaginary" Disneyland and gives Disney the epithet of the "hyper-real" of America, referring to the theme park's multiple layers of narrative and discursive simulations that make up its false reality (Baudrillard, 1983, 1988). In cultural terms, in the context of the American culture at large, Disneyland embodies values and behaviors that are "hypernormal" (Brannen & Salk, 1999)—something that Walt Disney himself, as well as guests at his theme parks, could only wish for regarding life experiences outside the park. Disney's two attempts at reproducing this human resource competence abroad has produced disparate results, raising questions about the company's assumptions regarding the global quality of its competency.

In the case of Tokyo Disneyland, Disney had no trouble reproducing its core competence in providing friendly service and a clean, safe, and orderly environment. Such a service orientation fits smoothly into the Japanese cultural norms of harmony, cleanliness, and order. Indeed, careful attention to service is the cultural norm in Japan. After all, service is so customer oriented and hygienic in Japan that taxi drivers wear pristine white gloves in cabs bedecked with white lace-covered seats, gas station attendants serve tea (hot in winter, cold in summer) and ask for customers' trash, and neatly dressed department store service women welcome customers onto escalators with a bow and a wipe of the handrail so that they don't have to suffer other customers' germs. In fact, customer-friendly service is so highly evolved in Japan that the Japanese have devel-

oped a special service voice, as it were—a pitch an octave higher than normal speech, to show deference to customers. This and other customer-oriented techniques are a part of the normal training regimen (lasting six months to one year) for new hires at Japanese companies (Rohlen, 1974). There is such a match between Disney's core competence in human resource management and the Japanese cultural environment that Tokyo Disneyland has emerged as the cleanest, safest, and most orderly of all the Disney theme parks (Brannen, 1992; Van Maanen, 1992; Van Maanen & Laurent, 1992).

Disney's human resource policies have not been as easy to replicate at Disneyland Paris. In France, where freedom of dress and personal expression are highly valued, Disney's human resource policies dictating such constraints as length of dress, hair, and fingernails are seen as invasive. In a country where waiters do not hesitate to advise (and take pride in doing so) customers if their choice of dishes is gastronomically unfit, the idea that the "customer is always right" does not come as second nature.

This lack of fit between Disney's service competence and its apprehension within the French cultural environment is so pronounced it has evolved into a number of lawsuits and relentless negative press coverage, finally resulting in Disneyland Paris being charged with violating French labor laws in its attempts to force the U.S. dress code onto French workers in January 1995. The U.S. dress code dictates that women employees must wear "appropriate undergarments"—specifically, such items as transparent pantyhose (no colors or designs). Skirts need to be four centimeters above the knee, fingernails cannot be longer than the fingertips, and hair must be naturally colored. The requirements are no less stringent for men, who must be clean shaven, have short haircuts, and should not wear earrings. Disney defends this "wholesome American look" as an integral part of the roles the Disney "cast" (employees) must play in order to help set the stage for the "Happiest Place on Earth," along with providing "service with a smile."

Disney has also been unsuccessful at getting its cast members at Disneyland Paris to smile to the Disney University standard (Doz et al., 2001). These difficulties Disney has suffered in transferring its human resource competence to France have contributed to making Disneyland Paris a less friendly, less orderly, and less clean

environment. Researchers have noticed untidy bathrooms with a high frequency of broken stall doors, littered grounds with few sidewalk sweepers in sight (a notable fixture at other Disney parks), a scarcity of smiles from service people on the park premises, and, in one instance, an altercation between a food server and a guest over the bill (Brannen & Wilson, 1996; Van Maanen, 1992; Van Maanen & Laurent, 1992).

Ideologies

As with all signification systems, the symbolic ideologies of the original Disneyland work only within the greater context of Disneyland's relationship with the American society. Only by maintaining the contextual distinction between the imaginary (Disneyland) and the real (America) is Disneyland able to reproduce the hegemonic ideology of Middle America (Baudrillard, 1983). From social semiotics, Hodge and Kress define ideological complexes as follows:

[Ideological complexes are] a functionally related set of contradictory versions of the world, coercively imposed by one social group on another on behalf of its own distinctive interest or subversively offered by another social group in attempts at resistance in its own interests (1988: 3).

Indeed, one of the more critical social concerns regarding globalization is that it brings people from all over the world into its political discourse, marginalizing the voices of large groups of both rural and urban indigenous communities in favor of the dominant Western capitalist discourse (Banerjee & Linstead, 2001).

Boje has made a strong case for Disney as the "modernist story machine." He describes Disney's narrative prowess as follows:

The Disney storytelling machine consumes all forms of popular premodern stories, homogenizes them to camouflage and mask their local and regional authorship, and packages the stories and their characters and themes as merchandising and entertainment commodities. The Disney story machine used science and technology to simplify stories (e.g., "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" and "Pinocchio") from Germany and other European countries to conform to Walt's vision of Middle America as expressed in Fantasyland, Frontierland, and Adventureland, and, posthumously, Toontown (1995: 1111).

Thus, foreignness is used as a narrative trope in the U.S. versions of Disneyland to fantasize our European roots—not only masking author-

ship but also changing the central messages conveyed in the stories. For example, the original Danish version of "The Little Mermaid" ends with the protagonist committing suicide, faced with the excruciating choice either to kill her prince or kill herself—a resolution quite unlike the Disney version, in which, of course, she marries her prince. In addition to the plethora of Disney's recontextualized European stories, Van Maanen (1991) and Fjellman (1992) provide accounts replete with examples of marginalized native and minority voices at the two U.S. Disney theme parks. By carefully crafting the narratives of its cultural "others"—sometimes emphasizing commonality, sometimes difference—Disney is able to maintain the hypernormal theme of wholesome Middle America it wishes to convey. Whether foreignness is seen as a liability or an asset at Disney's theme parks greatly depends on whether the dominant narrative around foreignness is legitimating or marginalizing the particular cultural other in question.

The original signified meanings of Disney's themes and cultural simulacra begin to break down in Japan, because Tokyo Disneyland is decontextualized, surrounded by a people whose cultural logic is different from that of the park's originally intended audience. Some scholars have seen this discursive collapse as a classic example of postmodern "decentering" of the "transcendental signified" or Disney "metanarrative" (as per Lyotard, 1984) into a collection of floating signifiers without origin or closure (Fjellman, 1989; Yoshimoto, 1989). Rather, in contrast to these views, I have argued (Brannen, 1992) that although the Western metanarrative does break down, the cultural artifacts and themes are recontextualized and function as new mininarratives at Tokyo Disneyland, serving to advance a particularly unique ideological discourse regarding Japan's relationship with its Western and Asian others. The Japanese form of ideological hegemony or new capitalism (following Fairclough, 1995) operates by continually reinforcing the separation between Japan and its cultural others by keeping the exotic exotic. For example, by maintaining the image of Tokyo Disneyland as a "foreign vacation," the Oriental Land Company successfully wards off any threat from the West to its national identity.

There are many examples of Japanese language use at Tokyo Disneyland separating Ja-

pan from both the West and its Asian others. For instance, many of the improvised jokes made by ride operators and other Disney hosts feature a type of Asian orientalism particular to Japanese humor. Westernland features an outdoor show where a confidence man, Dr. Barker, and his two sidekicks trick guests into buying magical healing potions. The interchanges among Dr. Barker, his sidekicks, and the audience provide ample room for impromptu cajoling. On one occasion the confidence man began a hard sell routine to coerce a Native American plant in the audience to come up on stage to buy a potion. Whereas the doctor and his assistants spoke in the standard Japanese dialect (*hyojungo*), the Native American spoke in a southern Japanese dialect that immediately categorized him as a country bumpkin. The doctor ridiculed him by saying, "What are you, an Indian or a Chinese?" The comment was met with a round of laughter from the crowd. This is an example of one of Disney's cultural attractions being appropriated to advance an idiosyncratic type of power dynamic particular to Disneyland's new context.

Cinderella's Castle is another venue for resisting the foreign other. This focal edifice of Tokyo Disneyland is a repository of all the sinister themes and characters from Walt Disney's stories. What is curious about the attraction is that all of the evil characters—Malificent, Scar, Ursula, even the Mirror on the Wall—speak Japanese with a foreign (*gaijin*) accent. Evil is represented as foreign. This is, of course, not unlike Disney's (and Hollywood's) own custom of giving evil characters in U.S. spy movies German or Russian accents; however, in Tokyo Disneyland's case, evil is re-recontextualized back into the persona of a Western other. Other examples of keeping the exotic exotic at Tokyo Disneyland range from a marginalized treatment of Japan's Korean other in the originally conceived attraction "Meet the World" to the structural separation of the park's Western cast members in their limited roles as Disney characters on parade and crafts persons put on display (Brannen, 1992). In all these ways, foreignness as an asset is carefully managed at Tokyo Disneyland.

Whereas in Tokyo Disney's metanarrative is successfully recontextualized by turning it on its head, as it were, to advance a particularly Japanese ideological discourse, in Paris the metanarrative breaks down altogether, in a "cultural Chernobyl," as its modernist revisionist themes

are resisted by European recipients. In part this is due to the fact that the European guests are knowledgeable of the original narrative sources of the Disney themes. Although Disney makes an effort to repatriate these themes by giving them back their native voices, allowing Snow White to speak her native German, Sleeping Beauty her native French, and Pinocchio his native Italian (Brannen & Wilson, 1996; Van Maanen, 1992), this re-recontextualization has not been successful in pulling in guests at Disneyland Paris. Rather, the pure American signs, such as the Cowboy previously mentioned, the "screamer" rides of Discoveryland, and the Los Angeles Bar and Grill in Festival Disney, enjoy a fair amount of success (Fleming, 1999).

However, an historical, intertextual analysis might suggest that the political and economic climate of the early 1990s was particularly unfavorable to a positive reception of Disney's offerings. In 1992 France and most of Europe were in a long-standing recession, and trade negotiations between France and the United States were not going well, particularly regarding agriculture and technology (Van Maanen & Laurent, 1992). In other words, Disney was coming into a situation ripe with negative home country image challenges.

In sum, in the case of Tokyo Disneyland, while unexpected responses emerged, there was semantic fit with Disney's initial objectives, and recontextualizations evolved in complementary ways. In France, however, many of the unexpected responses that emerged were negative. From this we can see that recontextualization does not always conform to strategic "intent." A positive recontextualization can be a source of competitive advantage and can take on an unanticipated positive trajectory in the new country context. As such, positive recontextualizations may be a source of sustainable competitive advantage previously accounted for as good luck (Barney, 1986). Negative recontextualizations have hitherto been seen as bad luck. Whether good luck or bad, both types of recontextualization have remained opaque to analysis and strategic alignment.

DISCUSSION

In this article I have examined an important organizational phenomenon—the role of language in the transnational transfer of firm as-

sets—and have presented a process model demonstrating the effects of the social semiotic context on foreignness and strategic fit. In previous studies researchers have looked at the determinants of liability of foreignness, the transfer of knowledge in general, and transfers of technological and product innovations, as well as the transfer of organizational practices. This study contributes to each of these by showing how language as an important dimension of the cultural context affects success in the transfer of products, processes, and practices. Whether it is knowledge in general, products, practices, or ideologies, recontextualization affects each of these. Implications of these contributions include recognizing and managing foreignness as an asset in cases of positive recontextualization and as a liability in cases of negative recontextualization, understanding that firm experience in one cultural context does not always mitigate liability of foreignness in another, and realizing new directions for managing the international transfer of firm assets.

The construct of semantic fit serves as a necessary counterbalance to the work on transnational transmission and strategic fit by utilizing semiotic analysis to build theory on the recipient culture's role in influencing the success of internationalization strategies. As the analysis of the Walt Disney Company's two foreign theme parks shows, shifts in semantic fit, resulting in recontextualizations of many of its core competencies, played significant roles in Disney's attempts at internationalization. In Tokyo the recontextualizations were predominantly positive; in France they were predominantly negative, at least in the early years. Could the Walt Disney Company have reduced the uncertainty around semantic fit prior to internationalization?

The notion of semantic fit presented here suggests that while initial recontextualizations might be anticipated with deeper contextual knowledge of the target cultures, including their intertextual historicities with the home culture, because of the dynamic aspect of semiosis, much semantic fit must be monitored and managed in situ. This is because as the firm assets are implemented and then interacted with in the new user environments, they continue to undergo recontextualizations. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the MNE to anticipate recontextualizations, recognize them as they occur, and

manage them to sustain competitive advantage (in the case of positive recontextualizations) or use them as opportunities for organizational learning and strategic realignment (in the case of negative recontextualizations).

The conceptual model of recontextualization offers several contributions to theory. First, it delineates the process by which the signification of firm assets changes not only in distinct cultural contexts but also over time—implying that recontextualization is an ongoing process that needs to be monitored and managed, rather than subjected to one-shot analyses for market entry. Second, it underscores three distinct types of semiosis that serve as triggers for recontextualization: initial, ongoing, and reflexive. Third, the model posits that, unlike many of the other dimensions of liability of foreignness that scholars have theorized eventually diminish (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977; Ohmae, 1990), because of the ongoing nature of semiosis, recontextualization presents a new dimension of liability that is not likely to lessen over time. Fourth, recontextualization provides an explanation for how and when foreignness might be seen as an asset and, thus, be better utilized as a strategic advantage. Fifth, the model contributes a dynamic, interactive, intertextual approach to the otherwise functionalist and structuralist code model of cross-cultural communication. Sixth, it distinguishes between hard and soft technologies and posits that the latter are significantly more vulnerable to recontextualization. This is an especially important contribution, since the trend in internationalization is toward transferring whole, complex organizational systems that are even more dependent on soft, socially embedded processes and technologies. Finally, the conceptual model of recontextualization contributes to method by providing an analytical framework for applying semiotic analysis to interpretive research on internationalization, organizational transfer, and the general body of cross-cultural organizational research.

If you live in one context, there is a cost advantage of not having to worry about such things as signifiers, signifieds, and signs. However, as discussed, even at home, signification systems evolve, and firms that fail to realign their firm assets with environmental changes lose out. With internationalization, what might be a source of efficiency at home may become an inefficiency abroad, with negative recontextualizations rendering powerless the MNE's greatest potential strength in foreign markets.

Managing and monitoring semantic fit are therefore necessary when a firm changes contexts. This is especially true when the change is discontinuous and large.

Understanding and monitoring semantic fit are projection challenges. The difficulty is finding a balance between blindly applying rules developed at home to the new environment (but failing by underadaptation) and unquestioningly adjusting to the rules of the local environment (but failing by not projecting into it enough of its original strengths). Such a balance can rarely be set *ex ante*, since it usually involves discovering "what you don't know you don't know"—a process necessarily blending cognitive and experiential learning (Burgelman, 1991). Being aware of recontextualization—that it happens and how it happens—and monitoring it over time will enable a firm to realize the full potential of internationalization.

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