

Taking a Knee in American Football: A Semiotic Case Study

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Abstract

As an athlete whose actions receive enormous amounts of media attention, Colin Kaepernick chose to use his powerful position to bring worldwide attention to the unjust murders of innocent black men at the hands of American police officers by kneeling silently during the national anthem before football games. Kaepernick was soon joined by other players in the NFL who shared his view that the anthem and the flag, both symbols of the nation, do not represent Americans as they should (Miller, 2017, para. 3), since the police officers who killed Alton Sterling and Philando Castile—to name a couple—were given paid leave instead of being found guilty of murder. The movement, “taking a knee”, is an example of how non-verbal communication can have indexical meanings founded in cultural ideologies. Following Silverstein (2003), this paper traces the semiotic trajectory of kneeling, from its traditional, first-order index of respect and humility, to its second-order index of protesting police brutality, its third-order index of disrespect for the nation, and, finally its fourth-order index of solidarity and retaliation to insult, ending with a discussion of the role of patriotism in the ordered indexes. The aim is to show that even gestures can have indexical ordering.

Keywords: non-verbal language, semiotics, indexicality, ideology, American football

In August, 2016, Colin Kaepernick, former quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers and now free agent (Miller, 2017) kneeled during the playing of “The Star-Spangled Banner”, the American national anthem, in protest of a justice system that repeatedly exonerates police officers who unjustly kill black men (Siegel, 2017). Citing the recent murders of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile (Frisk, 2017) as motivation for his protest, Kaepernick explained,

People are given paid leave for killing people. That's not right. That's not right by anyone's standards. When there's significant change and I feel like that flag represents what it's supposed to represent, this country is representing people the way that it's supposed to, I'll stand. (Miller 2017, para. 3)

Kaepernick's protest fits into a legacy of activism by athletes, including non-violent protests. For example, Muhammad Ali repeatedly criticized the Vietnam War, and John Carlos and Tommie Smith raised their fists in keeping with the Black Power salute at the 1968 Mexico Olympics (Miller, 2017). Kaepernick's stand against police brutality represents a re-awakening of this activism by athletes, which had become dormant when corporations began to sponsor athletes and discourage behaviour that may be seen as controversial (Miller, 2017). However, part of what sets Kaepernick's activism apart from that of Ali, Carlos, and Smith is that the backlash he (and other players who later joined him) received for it was strongly perpetuated online, especially through social media, which, as Bonilla and Rosa explain, has become "a site of both political activism and social analysis" (2015, p. 5).

Critics of Kaepernick's protest, including U.S. President Donald Trump, believe that by kneeling during the national anthem, the players are "disrespecting a growing list of American institutions [including] the flag, fallen service members [and] even the perceived line between playing professional sports and speaking out on issues of national importance" (Siegel, 2017, para. 4). Using Twitter, President Trump even called for protesting NFL players to be fired (Stapleton, 2017). Still, players continued to kneel, both for the original cause and also in protest of President Trump's remarks (Stapleton, 2017).

While these events raise important questions regarding the nature of protesting and patriotism, we can also ask how it is that a silent gesture like kneeling came to cause such an uproar and divide so many. Certainly, cultural ideologies are at play, but this paper will attempt to show that so too are language ideologies, despite kneeling in protest being non-verbal. To do so, I first show that gestures do have indexical potential just like oral linguistic variables. Then, following Silverstein (2003), I outline the indexical ordering of kneeling—from what kneeling indexes cross-culturally to Kaepernick's protest, the backlash, and the subsequent continuation of it—in order to explain the semiotic processes by which Kaepernick's "taking a knee" movement acquired meaning, or, its semiotic trajectory.

1. Kneeling and Its Traditional Meaning

Cross-culturally, kneeling is a marker of respect, deference, and humility. Physically lowering one's body demonstrates "the kneeler's insignificance in the presence of a more worthy or powerful figure" (Grovier, 2017, para. 3), who, presumably, is standing or sitting, but still situated above the kneeler in space. This figure may be a religious

one¹, but could also be a monarch or even a significant other to whom one is proposing marriage. Certainly, there is vulnerability for the kneeler at the moment of kneeling. For instance, this vulnerability is well illustrated in images that show begging, an act where the person who needs something is often shown on their knees, signalling that they see themselves as being at the mercy of the person whose favour they are seeking.

Although kneeling may occur simultaneously with speech as in the case of praying or asking for something, the act of kneeling need not always be accompanied by words. For example, when the Queen of England knights a man, he does not speak *as* he kneels (The Royal Family via YouTube, 0:13-0:20). Therefore, since speech is not always required during kneeling, it seems to be the case that kneeling alone is meaningful.

Indeed, in cultures where kneeling shows respect, deference, or humility, the need to do so is likely rooted in cultural ideologies surrounding asking favours, worshipping, and being the subject of a powerful political figure. So, although kneeling is not a form of verbal communication, it does seem to accomplish communication. Furthermore, because of its ideological roots, I argue that, like verbal linguistic phenomena, kneeling has indexical meaning. By extension, as Silverstein (2003) described, it follows that these meanings can be ordered. In light of this, I consider respect, deference, and humility the first-order indexes of kneeling.

1.1 Kneeling in football before Kaepernick's protest

Kneeling during football games was already practiced before Colin Kaepernick kneeled during the national anthem, though for different reasons. According to Mayer (2014, para. 8), there is a longstanding tradition that players on both teams should take a knee following another player being seriously injured as a sign of “solidarity, respect, and concern for their fallen teammate”. It is also noteworthy that, while the player is being treated, the game is put on hold and no coaching occurs. This ensures that no team can use the time taken to treat the player's injuries to gain an advantage over their opponents, which would be considered unfair and dishonourable.

These practices are part of a widespread belief that playing sports helps develop the athletes' characters, including teaching “the virtues of honesty, honour, and fair play” (Mayer, 2014, para. 34). Thus, it could be said that kneeling out of respect for a fallen player indexes precisely honesty and honour, which includes commitment to fair play. The question now becomes whether these should be considered the second-order indexes of kneeling or whether they are too similar to respect, deference, and humility to be differentiated from the first-order indexes.

Certainly, there are elements of respect, deference, and humility in kneeling for a player who has been injured. I have already mentioned that the players kneel out of respect, but they could also be humbled by their injured teammate's sacrifice to the game so much so that they choose to pay homage or defer to them by kneeling. As Siegel (2017, para. 2) writes, kneeling when another player is hurt is “an acknowledgment of the vulnerable humanity that, for the moment, has been obscured by the intense competition

of the game. [L]ike a religious genuflection, [it is] a gesture of self-surrender before the greater reality of human suffering.” In that case, by being injured during and because of the game, the player becomes “a more worthy figure”, to use Grovier’s words from above, and by kneeling for them, the other players place themselves in a similar position of vulnerability. This likens kneeling for a fallen teammate in football even more to kneeling in general, which, by extension, conflates their indexes. Nevertheless, kneeling does have a second-order index related to Kaepernick’s protest, which the next section will explore.

2. “Taking a Knee”

According to his teammate at the time, Eric Reid, Kaepernick initially chose to protest police brutality towards black men by remaining seated during the playing of the national anthem rather than kneeling. However, the sitting went unnoticed by the media and even by Reid himself several times (Reid, 2017). Shortly after the backlash against Kaepernick began on August 26, 2016, Reid approached Kaepernick about getting involved in the protest, and together they decided to kneel during the national anthem, assuming a posture that Reid describes as resembling “a flag flown at half-mast to mark a tragedy” (Reid, 2017, para. 5).

What is noteworthy about Reid’s comparison for the study of semiotics is that it marks the point where kneeling in protest became *iconic*². In other words, from that moment on, kneeling was no longer just a sign of protest against police brutality towards black men, but it also became directly related to that index by *looking like* what it aimed to represent. Visually, a flag being lowered to half-mast is similar to a football player kneeling in that both are usually standing upright, and so lowering them is marked because it is done rarely and only for specific occasions, i.e. misfortunes. On the metaphorical side, by comparing their posture when kneeling to the lowering of the flag after a tragedy, Reid also appropriates the meaning of the flag at half-mast, such that the meaning of football players kneeling during the national anthem now becomes, like the lowered flag, a sign of mourning. This is in keeping with the protest because, presumably, part of showing opposition to unnecessary police brutality resulting in death is mourning the loss of innocent lives.

Furthermore, as more players joined Kaepernick and Reid in taking a knee during the anthem, kneeling became even more iconic by representing “a collective contribution to the realization of communication [about change]” (Kourdis, 2013, p. 14). That is, multiple players kneeling together visually mirrors the way in which change to the justice system that the players are seeking is only possible if numerous people work collectively.

In addition to being laden with meaning because of its iconicity, taking a knee during the national anthem acquired additional markedness by signalling defiance from the norm (i.e. standing) in a greater way than sitting did. This may be because there are socially agreed-upon reasons to sit during the anthem, which makes doing so less marked. For example, one might be injured and unable to stand up, in which case, sitting during the anthem is not a

choice not to stand. However, Kaepernick, who was physically capable of standing during the national anthem, made a deliberate choice to kneel instead. Following Danesi (2010, p. 135), Kaepernick and Reid's decision to take a knee was an instance of taking a certain signifying resource—i.e. one's physical position during something as socially significant as the playing of the national anthem—and using it to construct a new meaning.

Kneeling in this way is different enough from the kneeling described in Section 1 to warrant being called a second-order index. For one, it is a sign of protest, which kneeling does not usually index. Secondly, it is specific to a unique cultural context because it takes place during the playing of the American national anthem before American football games, both of which are emblematic of the United States, whereas the first-order index of kneeling applies cross-culturally. Therefore, I call “taking a knee”, that is, kneeling in protest of police brutality towards black men, the second-order index of kneeling. Interestingly, the markedness of this second-order index quickly triggered the rise of a third-order index, which the next section will explain.

3. Reactions to “Taking a knee”

As discussed in Section 2, kneeling during the national anthem is heavily marked because it indicates that the kneeler is deliberately choosing *not* to stand, or, more generally, *not* to do what is expected of them when the national anthem plays. In semiotics, this is an example of Saussure's concept of opposition, that is, perceiving meaning-bearing differences not in absolute ways, but rather in relational terms (Danesi, 2010, p. 142), i.e. opposites. So, just as we cannot think about darkness without thinking that it is the absence of its opposite, i.e. light, we cannot think of what it means to follow expectations without also thinking of what it means to defy them.

This binary way of thinking can have strong implications when it is extended past the concrete, like, for example, when not obeying rules is immediately associated with notoriety and following them is conflated with integrity. Irvine and Gal (2000) call this erroneous semiotic process *fractal recursivity*. Specifically, fractal recursivity involves “the projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level” (Irvine & Gal, 2000, p. 38).

It is precisely due to this semiotic process that Kaepernick received backlash for his protest, or, following Eckert (2008, p. 463), what his kneeling indexed was reinterpreted such that it acquired a third-order index of disrespecting the United States and its institutions. Because standing for the American national anthem is normally associated with respect for the nation, the flag, and for those who fought for the freedom of its citizens, the players who did not stand were accused of *disrespecting* the nation, the flag, and the armed forces. In other words, the opposition between standing and not standing was projected onto respecting versus disrespecting the country and its institutions, regardless of the original reasons behind kneeling that Reid explained.

This interpretation of taking a knee was shared by many, including U.S. President

Donald Trump, who, during a speech, said: “Wouldn’t you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag [...] ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out! He’s fired!’” (Campbell, 2017, para. 17). Trump also tweeted “If NFL fans refuse to go to games until players stop disrespecting our Flag & Country³ (sic), you will see change take place fast. Fire or suspend!” and (author’s emphasis) “...NFL attendance and ratings are WAY DOWN. Boring games yes, but many stay away because they love our country. League should back U.S” (Campbell, 2017, para. 18). Trump’s comments extended the fractal recursivity discussed above by projecting the initial opposition between standing and not standing even further, onto matters like supporting and loving versus opposing and hating the country, as well as agreeing versus disagreeing with its leader. The next section will discuss the reactions of the football players to the president’s remarks and the third-order index of kneeling in general.

4. The Aftermath of Being Told Not to Kneel

Perhaps somewhat expectedly, Trump’s public outcry against taking a knee actually contributed to the growth of the protest. During the game between the Jaguars and the Ravens the Sunday immediately following Trump’s speech (where he called the protesting football players “sons of bitches”), 27 players took a knee during the national anthem (Campbell, 2017), whereas only six had knelt at the game the week prior to Trump’s remarks (Stapleton, 2017). The Ravens’ linebacker Terrell Suggs explained his decision to kneel, stating:

We stand with our brothers [...] They have the right, and we knelt with them today. To protest, non-violent protest, is as American as it gets, so we knelt with them today to let them know that we’re a unified front. There ain’t no dividing us. I guess we’re all son-of-a-bitches (sic). (Stapleton, 2017, para. 12)

By alluding directly to Trump calling the players who kneel “sons of bitches”, Suggs’ explanation suggests that the president’s remarks may have convinced players who were initially reluctant about kneeling to do so in opposition to his words *and* in solidarity with their kneeling teammates. That way, they presented “a unified front” against police brutality and against being called “sons of bitches” by the president⁴. Similarly to Suggs, DeShone Kizer, the quarterback for the Browns, said, “I know for a fact that I’m no son of a bitch, and I plan on continuing forward and doing whatever I can from my position to promote the equality that’s needed in this country” (Stapleton, 2017, para. 8), which presumably means taking part in Kaepernick’s protest and kneeling during the national anthem. From Suggs and Kizer’s remarks, it seems that, rather than discouraging players from kneeling during the national anthem, Trump’s verbal attack on them may have pushed even more players to join the protest, though partly in retaliation to being insulted. As Borçun and Cheregi put it, the change in social context of the protest triggered the

change in the constructed meaning of the protest (2017, p. 18). After Trump's comments, kneeling was no longer taking place solely within the social context of an unnecessarily brutal police force and a justice system that exonerates the perpetrators of unwarranted violence towards black men, but also within an environment where the very act of taking a knee makes one a "son of a bitch" in the eyes of the country's president. From that moment on, kneeling acquired its fourth-order index: solidarity with kneeling teammates and resistance to being insulted for protesting police brutality.

5. Patriotism in the Indexes of Kneeling

As sections 2-4 have shown, "taking a knee" is a protest that is not only protested, but whose protest is also protested, all in relation to what it means to be American and to respect the U.S. This suggests that patriotism has a role to play in the second-, third-, and fourth-order indexes of kneeling. Although Kaepernick was accused of being unpatriotic and disrespecting his country by kneeling during the national anthem—i.e. the third-order index of kneeling—Miller (2017, para. 11) suggests that Kaepernick's actions may in fact embody what it truly means to be a patriot, that is, doing what one can to help their country live up to its own vision, rather than showing "blind deference to a flag or an anthem". Equally, as Suggs' comments suggested, protesting peacefully can be considered "as American as it gets" embodying the nation's ideologies of free speech and the right to protest peacefully. In fact, in response to the backlash against taking a knee, Reid (2017, para. 6) wrote:

It baffles me that our protest is still being misconstrued as disrespectful to the country, flag and military personnel. We chose it because it's exactly the opposite. It has always been my understanding that the brave men and women who fought and died for our country did so to ensure that we could live in a fair and free society, which includes the right to speak out in protest.

Thus, the patriotism in pushing one's nation to act in accordance with its own standards can be combined with the second-order index of kneeling. Indeed, this seems to be a common theme in protests, even if it means defying the wishes of the nation's leader, as we saw in the fourth-order index of kneeling⁵. Therefore, just like the indexicality of socially meaningful linguistic variables can be used to construct social identities (see Eckert, 2000, for example), perhaps the second-, third-, and fourth-order indexes of kneeling, which is also socially meaningful, can contribute to one's identity as a patriot, though in varying ways.

6. Conclusion

Kaepernick's semiotically multi-faceted protest is a clear example of how non-verbal

communication can be ideologically rooted and have indexical ordering despite not containing any oral linguistic features. While kneeling initially and traditionally indexed respect, deference, and humility, both in football as a response to a player being seriously injured and generally, “taking a knee” during the national anthem came to index a protest against police brutality towards black men as well as the mourning of innocent lives lost though its iconic relationship to the flag at half-mast. Yet, at the same time, because it took place during the playing of America’s national anthem, a symbol of the flag, the nation, and the armed forces, and the fact that it is a defiance of the expectation to stand, “taking a knee” was also seen as blatantly disrespectful towards the country and its institutions. This viewpoint was held and wildly perpetuated on Twitter by President Donald Trump, who called the protesting players “sons of bitches” and encouraged the NFL to fire them if they continued to kneel during the national anthem. However, rather than discouraging football players from taking a knee, these remarks encouraged more of them to join the protest, as doing so had acquired an additional meaning, or a fourth-order index: solidarity with one’s teammates and retaliation against being insulted for protesting, especially by somebody like the president, who has the power to exact the change that was being fought for.

The semiotic trajectory of taking a knee raised important questions regarding not only what the duty of a country is towards its people, but also what the duty of the people is towards their country. These questions are rooted in cultural ideologies surrounding patriotism and protesting, but, like taking a knee, the answers to them need not manifest themselves in verbal communication.

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Notes

- 1 For example, in many religions like Catholicism and Islam, one kneels during prayers (Ben-fayed et al., 2017).
- 2 Following Saussure, at that point, the signifier resembled the signified (Chandler, 2017, para. 4).
- 3 Interestingly, it was only *kneeling* during the national anthem that Trump opposed, not Kaepernick’s protest against the American justice system in general. This is evidenced by the fact that when some players chose to remain standing and lock arms during the anthem as another way of supporting Kaepernick’s protest, Trump responded “Great solidarity for our National Anthem and for our Country (sic). Standing with locked arms is good, kneeling is not acceptable. Bad ratings!” (Campbell, 2017)
- 4 It is noteworthy that the President of the United States made these remarks, as opposed to somebody who does not hold such a powerful position. Trump’s power and authority, as well as his large number of followers on Twitter, meant that his views were not only more widely circulated but also held in higher regard than those of a person with less authority. Likewise,

had the comments been made by somebody with less of a leadership role in the nation and with less power to exact the change that was being fought for, the football players would likely have felt less insulted.

- 5 For example, in early 2017, in response to the Romanian government passing the Emergency Ordinance bill (OUG13) that decriminalized many forms of corruption by members of parliament, protestors took to the streets in what Adi and Lilleker call “another step [towards] being a full democracy” (2017, p. 6). Like the protestors who take a knee, the protestors in Romania were pushing the nation to live up to its own standards, which in this case is being a democratic country.

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