

## READING A: Extracts from 'Signs and myths'

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Semiotics originates mainly in the work of two people, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Charles Peirce. Their ideas are quite closely related, but exhibit some differences. [...] Saussure showed that language is made up of signs (like words) which communicate meanings, and he expected that all kinds of other things which communicate meanings could potentially be studied in the same way as linguistic signs, using the same methods of analysis.

Semiotics or semiology, then, is the study of signs in society, and while the study of linguistic signs is one branch of it, it encompasses every use of a system where something (the sign) carries a meaning for someone. [...] Since language is the most fundamental and pervasive medium for human communication, semiotics takes the way that language works as the model for all other media of communication, all other sign systems. [...]

### Sign systems

Saussure's first move was to set limits to the variety of tasks which his study of language might involve. Instead of considering language from a psychological, sociological, or physiological point of view, he decided to focus on a clearly defined object of study: the linguistic sign. He showed that the linguistic sign is arbitrary. The linguistic sign 'cat' is arbitrary in that it has no connection either in its sound, or its visual shape, with what cats are really like. In another language, the sign for cat will be different from the linguistic sign in English (e.g. French uses *chat*). Clearly, there must be a kind of agreement among the users of our language that the sign 'cat' shall refer to a particular group of furry four-legged animals. But this agreement about signs is not consciously entered into, since we learn how to use language so early in our lives that there can be no deliberate choice available to us. Language has always been there before we arrived on the scene. Even if I perversely decided to adopt another sign for what we call a cat, like 'yarup' for instance, this sign would be entirely useless since no-one else would understand me. The capacity of linguistic signs to be meaningful depends on their existence in a social context, and on their conventionally accepted use in that social context.

[...] The systems in which signs are organised into groups are called codes. This is a familiar term, for instance in the phrase 'dress codes'. In our society, the dress code that governs what men should wear when going to a formal wedding includes items like a top hat and a tail jacket. [...] By contrast, a man might select jogging shorts, training shoes and a baseball cap to go to the local gym. These clothing signs belong to a different dress code, and communicate a message of 'informality'. In the case of dress codes, it is possible to select the clothing signs which we use in order to communicate particular messages about ourselves. Even when clothes perform practical

functions (like the loose and light clothes worn to play sports) codes still give social meanings to our choices, like codes of fashionableness and codes governing what men may wear versus what women may wear. [...]

## Components of the sign

[...] In his analysis of linguistic signs, Saussure showed that there are two components to every sign. One is the vehicle which expresses the sign, like a pattern of sound which makes up a word, or the marks on paper which we read as words, or the pattern of shapes and colours which photographs use to represent an object or person. This vehicle which exists in the material world is called the 'signifier'. The other part of the sign is called the 'signified'. The signified is the concept which the signifier calls forth when we perceive it. So when you perceive the sign 'cat' written on this page, you perceive a group of marks, the letters c, a, and t, which are the signifier. This signifier is the vehicle which immediately calls up the signified or concept of cat in your mind. The sign is the inseparable unity of the signifier with the signified, since in fact we never have one without the other. [...]

## Sequences of linguistic signs

[...] When signs are spread out in a sequence over time, or have an order in their spatial arrangement, their order is obviously important. In a sentence like 'The dog bites the man', meaning unfolds from left to right along the line of the sentence, as we read the words in sequence one after another. This horizontal movement is called the 'syntagmatic' aspect of the sentence. If we reverse the order into 'The man bites the dog', the meaning is obviously different. Each linguistic sign in the syntagm could also be replaced by another sign which is related to it, having perhaps the same grammatical function, a similar sound, or relating to a similar signified. It is as if there are vertical lists of signs intersecting the horizontal line of the sentence, where our sentence has used one of the signs in each vertical list.

These lists of signs are called 'paradigms'. We could replace 'dog' with 'cat' or 'tiger', and replace 'bites' with 'licks' or 'kicks' or 'chews'. Each different selection from these paradigms would alter the meaning of the syntagm, our horizontal sentence of words.

[...] As a general principle, every sign that is present must be considered in relation to other signs present in the structure of the articulation, and every sign present has meaning by virtue of the other signs which have been excluded and are not present in the text.

## Visual signs

Most of the account of linguistic signs above comes directly from Saussure, but some of the principles and terms [...] derive from the semiotic work of the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce (1958). In particular, the semiotic analysis of images and other nonverbal signs is made much more effective by

See also the discussion of syntagm and paradigm in Chapter 2.

some of Peirce's distinctions. Although language is the most striking form of human sign production, the whole of our social world is pervaded by messages which contain visual as well as linguistic signs, or which are exclusively visual. Gestures, dress codes, traffic signs, advertising images, newspapers, television programmes and so on are all kinds of media which use visual signs. The same principles underlie the semiotic study of visual signs and linguistic signs. In each case, there is a material signifier, which expresses the sign, and a mental concept, a signified, which immediately accompanies it. Visual signs also belong to codes, are arranged in syntagms, and selected from paradigms. [...]

We have already seen how linguistic signs are arbitrary, since there is no necessary connection between the signifier 'cat' on this page and the signified concept of cat in our minds. [...] The relationship of signifier to signified, and of sign to referent, is entirely a matter of the conventions established [...] in this case by the English language in particular. This type of sign, characterised by arbitrariness, Peirce calls the 'symbolic' sign.

But a photograph of a cat looks recognisably like a specific cat. The arrangement of shape and colour in the photograph, the signifier which expresses the signified 'cat', has a close resemblance to its referent, the real cat which the photograph represents. In a photograph, the signifier is the colour and shape on the flat surface of the picture. The signified is the concept of a cat which this signifier immediately calls up. The referent is the cat which was photographed. Just as my cat is white with some black and orange patches, so a photograph of my cat will faithfully record these different shapes and colours. This kind of sign, where the signifier resembles the referent, Peirce calls an 'iconic' sign. [...] Unlike the case of linguistic signs, iconic signs have the property of merging the signifier, signified and referent together. It is much more difficult to realise that the two components of the photographic sign plus their referent are three different things. It is for this reason that photographic media seem to be more realistic than linguistic media [...].

When a cat is hungry and miaows to gain our attention, the sound made by the cat is pointing to its presence nearby, asking us to notice it, and this kind of sign Peirce calls 'indexical'. Indexical signs have a concrete and often causal relationship to their signified. The shadow cast on a sundial tells us the time, it is an indexical sign which is directly caused by the position of the sun, and similarly smoke is an index of fire, a sign caused by the thing which it signifies. Certain signs have mixed symbolic, indexical and iconic features. For instance, a traffic light showing red has both indexical and symbolic components. It is an indexical sign pointing to a traffic situation (that cars here must wait), and using an arbitrary symbolic system to do this (red arbitrarily signifies danger and prohibition in this context).

## Connotation and myth

[...] Because we use signs to describe and interpret the world, it often seems that their function is simply to ‘denote’ something, to label it. The linguistic sign ‘Rolls-Royce’ denotes a particular make of car, or a photographic sign showing Buckingham Palace denotes a building in London. But along with the denotative, or labelling function of these signs to communicate a fact, come some extra associations which are called ‘connotations’. Because Rolls-Royce cars are expensive and luxurious, they can be used to connote signifieds of wealth and luxury. The linguistic sign ‘Rolls-Royce’ is no longer simply denoting a particular type of car, but generating a whole set of connotations which come from our social experience. The photograph of Buckingham Palace not only denotes a particular building, but also connotes signifieds of royalty, tradition, wealth and power.

When we consider advertising, news, and TV or film texts, it will become clear that linguistic, visual, and other kinds of sign are used not simply to denote something, but also to trigger a range of connotations attached to the sign. [The French critic, Roland] Barthes calls this social phenomenon, the bringing-together of signs and their connotations to shape a particular message, the making of ‘myth’. Myth here does not refer to mythology in the usual sense of traditional stories, but to ways of thinking about people, products, places, or ideas which are structured to send particular messages to the reader or viewer of the text. So an advertisement for shoes which contains a photograph of someone stepping out of a Rolls Royce is not only denoting the shoes and a car, but attaching the connotations of luxury which are available through the sign ‘Rolls-Royce’ to the shoes, suggesting a mythic meaning in which the shoes are part of a privileged way of life. [...]

Myth takes hold of an existing sign, and makes it function as a signifier on another level. The sign ‘Rolls-Royce’ becomes the signifier attached to the signified ‘luxury’, for example. It is as if myth were a special form of language, which takes up existing signs and makes a new sign system out of them. [...M]yth is not an innocent language, but one that picks up existing signs and their connotations, and orders them purposefully to play a particular social role.

## Reference

PEIRCE, C.S. (1958) *Selected Writings (Values in a Universe of Chance)*, ed. P. WIENER, New York, Dover Press.

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