

# SEMIOTICS - SEMIOLOGY



# WHAT IS SEMIOTICS?

Semiotics (from the Greek 'semeion') is the study of signs and texts, which is to say that it is the study of meanings, communication, interpretation and significance.

Semiotics is less interested in what something means than in how it means anything at all to anybody.

# WHAT IS A SIGN?

- The basic unit of semiotics is the sign. A sign is a unit of meaning.
- 'Aliquid pro aliquo': a sign is 'something that stands for something else.'
- A sign is something that 'tells'.
- It is for this reason that Umberto Eco ('The Name of the Rose') defines semiotics as the discipline that studies lying. Signs are always pretending they are something else.



# SEMIOSIS

- Semiosis' means 'sign-activity'. It is what signs do.
  - Semiosis is not always communication
- 

# SIGN AND TEXT

Signs combine to form Texts. A text can be thought of as a message recorded in some medium so that it is independent of a sender or a receiver.

Semioticians analyse texts to reveal their hidden meanings - what's really going on.



# CODES

- Signs and Texts are governed by codes.
- Codes are the rules and conventions for making a text in a given genre or medium. They are also the environment/context in which signs exist.
- Codes are what help us understand and interpret signs. They are the rules of the game.
- These rules change over time.



# SEMIOLOGY-Saussure

Semiology - a *'science which studies the role of signs as part of social life.'*

Saussure believed that his linguistic theories could be applied to all communication events. Semiology assumes that all culture on some level is 'like a language'.

# SAUSSURE-SIGN

Saussure's sign has 2 parts; a sound-image (signifier/Sr) and a concept (signified/Sd). The formal association of these two parts makes a sign. (eg: /tree/ - 'concept of a tree')

The relationship between the two is formal and psychological. Signification is something that goes on in our heads.





SIGNIFIED:  
What is evoked in the mind  
- mental concept

Anything that conveys  
meaning

----- = SIGN

i'm lovin' it™



SIGNIFIER:  
Things that give meaning  
word/ image

# THE ARBITRARY SIGN

The relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary.

Lots of languages have different signifiers for the same concepts. As long as everyone agrees what the signifier is then we can understand each other.



Casa, house,  
maison, das haus.



# A SYSTEM OF DIFFERENCES

As a sign is made up of this arbitrary relationship, it can only have a meaning to the extent that it is different from other signs. Language is a system of differences.

What something means is dependent on how much it differs from other signifiers and signifieds. Language is a system of formal relationships.

SIGNIFIER

**"ROSE"**

SIGNIFIED #1



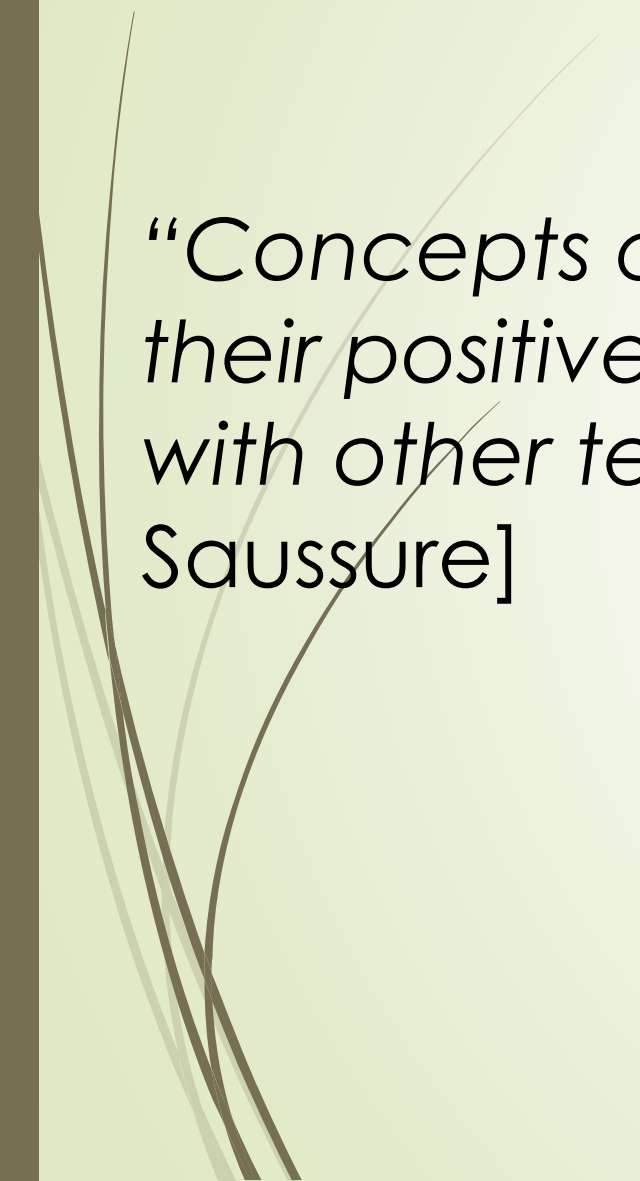
SIGNIFIED #2

**PASSION**



# A SYSTEM OF DIFFERENCES

*“Concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with other terms in the system.” [Ferdinand de Saussure]*





# LANGUAGE AND EXPRESSIONS

One consequence of this for semiology is that language is not just a vehicle for meaning and thought, but is meaning and thought. Different languages... different thoughts.

E.M. Forster: *“How can I tell what I think until I see what I say?”*

# PEIRCEAN SEMIOTICS

- Unlike Saussure, Peirce didn't focus on language. He was interested in all kinds of signs, and his system applies equally to bacteria as to humans.
- Peirce believed that all thinking and interpretation was the work of signs. (eg: 'I' is the sign through which people represent themselves to the world.)
- As a logician he wanted to find out not only how signs happen to behave, but the rules to govern how they must behave.



# PEIRCEAN SEMIOTICS

- For Peirce logic and semiotics are exactly the same thing.
- Like Saussure, Peirce believed that signs allow coded access to an object, but in Peircean semiotics signs can be material as well as mental/psychological.

# PEIRCE'S SIGN

Peirce defined the sign as *'something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.'*

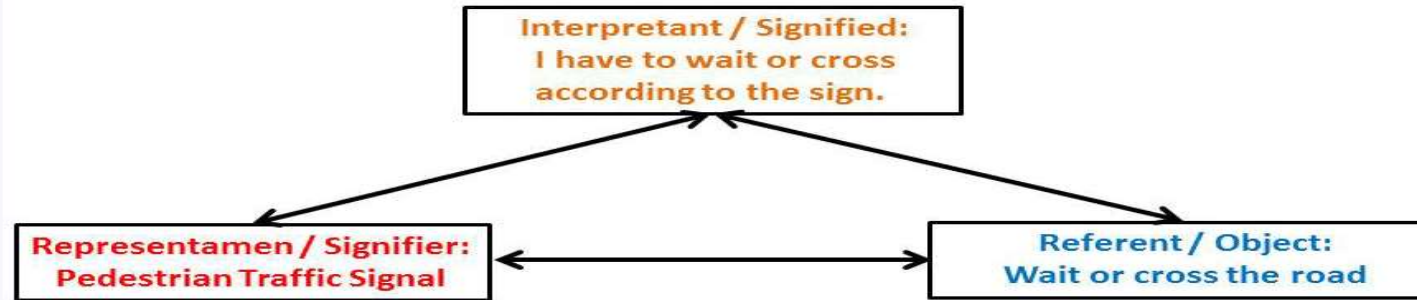
The Peircean sign has 3 parts:

Sign/Representamen (S/R)

Object (O)

Interpretant (I)

## The Semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce – Symbols



# PEIRCE'S SIGN

- The Sign/Representamen is very much like Saussure's signifier. It stands for something and is interpreted.
- This produces the Interpretant, which is close to Saussure's signified. It is what is represented or meant by a sign.
- Both the Sign/Representamen and the interpretant together stand for something else: the Object.

# ICON, INDEX AND SYMBOL

ICON: *'relation of reason'*

An iconic sign resembles its object (eg: a photograph)

INDEX: *'relation of fact'*

An indexical sign has some natural/causal connection with its object. (eg: smoke & fire)

SYMBOL: *'relation of cognition'*

A symbolic sign relates to its object in a conventional and arbitrary manner only (eg: language)

# ICONS

**Preferences:**



**Search:**



**Help/FAQ:**



**Reports:**



**Print:**



**Log out/in:**



**News:**



**System Admin:**



**Add:**



**Delete:**



**Hourly:**



**Daily:**



**Contact:**



# INDICES



# SYMBOLS





# UNLIMITED SEMIOTICS

- *“The meaning of a sign is always another sign.”*
- The Interpretant of any Sign can become the Sign for another Interpretant and so on and so on. (eg: 2 people and another comes along to witness the fight.)
- This is Unlimited Semiosis.
- The Peircean sign is open, dynamic, and no meaning is ever final.

# WHAT'S THE POINT OF SEMIOTICS?

- Allows us to see what is hidden in texts.
- Gives us an understanding of the *polysemy* of communication.
- Reveals just how much of culture we take for granted as natural and necessary.
- Unifies the study of communication, and makes legitimate the study of things like pop-culture

# EXERCISE

Classify the sign. Icon, index and symbol.



