

Semiotics for Beginners

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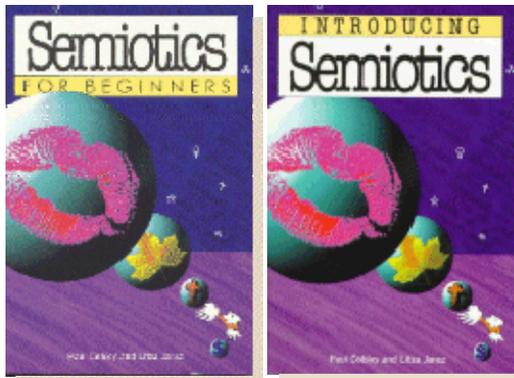
'Something of a classic. An absolute must for those looking for either an introduction to the topic or an inspiring and insightful reader.' - Glyn Winter, Educational and Qualitative Research Archive

Preface

I have been asked on a number of occasions how I came to write this text, and for whom. I wrote it initially in 1994 for myself and for my students in preparation for [a course I teach on Media Education](#) for 3rd year undergraduates at the [University of Wales, Aberystwyth](#). In my opinion, an understanding of semiotics is essential for anyone studying the mass media - or communication or cultural studies. No comparable text on the subject existed at the time so I rashly attempted to create one which suited my own purposes and those of my students. It was partly a way of advancing and clarifying my own understanding of the subject. Like many other readers my forays into semiotics had been frustrated by many of the existing books on the subject which frequently seemed almost impossible to understand. As an educationalist, I felt that the authors of such books should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves. The subject of meaning-making is of understandable fascination for a very wide readership, but most of the existing books seemed to seek to make it confusing, dull and deeply obscure.

The academic priorities which led me to write this text had consequences for its evolution. However, since I wrote the original text I have broadened its scope considerably, so that there are now frequent references not only to the mass media but also to other subjects, such as literature, art and mythology. One of the things that attracted me to semiotics was the way in which it supports my own enjoyment of crossing the 'boundaries' of academic disciplines, and of making connections between apparently disparate phenomena. I have grown with the text: its easily revisable online form has allowed me not to feel that I have 'outgrown' it. However, I am not a polymath, so there are inevitably many subjects which are neglected here. In this text I have confined myself to *human* semiosis, so that this is not the place to find an introduction to such branches of semiotics as that concerned with the behaviour and communication of animals (*zoosemiotics*). Nor do I discuss the semiotics of communication between machines. My focus is on the humanities and so there is no mathematical semiotics here either. Even within the humanities, I did not feel competent to cover musical or architectural semiotics. I know that students of some of these subjects are amongst those who have consulted the online text, which lends me some hope that they will still find the exploration of general principles of some relevance to their own priorities. The exclusion of certain subjects is not, of course, to suggest that they are any less important to the semiotic enterprise. The unavoidable selectivity of the text invites the productivity of the reader in its deconstruction. Driven by their own purposes, readers will no doubt be alert 'what is conspicuous by its absence'.

Semiotics is a huge field, and no treatment of it can claim to be comprehensive. My attempt to offer a coherent account of some key concepts is in some ways misleading: there are divergent schools of thought in semiotics, and there is remarkably little consensus amongst contemporary theorists regarding the scope of the subject, core concepts or methodological tools. This particular account betrays its European origins, focusing on Saussurean and post-Saussurean semiotics (structuralist semiotics and post-structuralist critiques) rather than, for instance, on Peircean semiotics (although some key Peircean concepts are mentioned). The focus on structuralist semiotics is intended to be of value to readers who wish to use semiotics as an approach to textual analysis. However, semiotics is far more than a method of analysing texts in a variety of media, and I hope I will also inspire the reader's enthusiasm for exploring some of the fascinating philosophical issues which semiotics raises.



Since a printed book appeared with the same title ([Cobley & Jansz 1997](#)), I feel tempted to retitle this on-line publication as *Semiotics for **Absolute** Beginners*, but have so far retained the original title. As it happens, the book mentioned has subsequently (1999) been retitled [Introducing Semiotics](#). I always intended to write my own text, as far as my ability allowed, for absolute beginners. If you know of any way in which I could improve the text in this respect I would be happy to hear from you. The amount of 'positive feedback' generated by this on-line publication has amazed and puzzled me (as well as encouraged me), especially since it was originally produced

primarily for my own students. One reason may be that exposure to a new medium seems to generate fresh interest in semiotics. Another may be that so much of what is written about semiotics is written as if to keep out those who are not already 'members of the club'. Many readers have been kind enough to report that this on-line publication is indeed useful for beginners (which is gratifying). It is certainly intended to be a 'reader's companion' in approaching more difficult semiotic texts, which so often assume knowledge of much of the jargon. I apologise to any readers who need no such introduction for the occasional oversimplification to which I have sometimes succumbed in the interests of serving my primary audience, but if they feel I have gone too far in some cases I would be keen to hear how I could rectify this.

This document - which I call *S4B* for short - has been developed in hypertext rather than simply transferred to the World Wide Web from a word processor. Whilst it is not radically hypertextual in its design, I have tried to bear in mind that people may initially arrive at any page within in and try to work their way through the document from their entry point. Consequently, readers who follow a simple linear route are likely to be struck by the amount of what may seem to them like repetition. I hope that this 'modular' approach is not too irritating. The use of the internet reflects my sense of the *provisional* nature of the text (and of my current understanding of the field 'at the time of writing'). The hypertext document is in fact my 'master copy' - my own printed copies are nearly always out-of-date since I update it whenever a useful change strikes me. In this sense, in using the text online you have access to my current personal notes on the topic. You can see how recently I revised any particular page by checking the date and time given at the bottom of the page in question, though note that the changes made are sometimes simply to the layout rather than to the text itself. You may even be reading it at a time when I am working on the text. In the light of this information you may be less surprised when you encounter material which I have not yet fully integrated into the 'flow' of the text. Some of the 'scaffolding' involved in constructing the online text is still visible. If you print the text out, remember that it was not originally written to be read in that form!

After I had installed an 'access counter' to monitor usage of the online text I was astonished to discover the number of 'hits' it generated. Furthermore, such accesses initially seemed to grow exponentially. Hits since 18th September 1995 reached 100,000 on 13th February 1999, 150,000 on 9th September 1999, 200,000 on 5th April 2000 and 250,000 on 6th December 2000. This is despite the use of automatic 'caches' which store the text locally for temporary re-use without reaccessing the original site. The text also generated a large number of e-mail messages from all over the world, including one of Professor Umberto Eco's own students (who shall remain anonymous) who told me that after reading this text they were able to understand him much better! My awareness that the text had a large and disparate audience contributed to the way in which it developed. Martin Ryder in the

USA, who runs the most widely-used webpage of semiotic links, has suggested that my own online text was a key factor in the remarkable growth of interest in semiotics online: it was the focus, he says, for the emergence of a semiotic community. If I had believed that I think I would have been paralysed by a sense of the inadequacies of my text and of the limitations of my knowledge and capabilities to address such a task. Luckily I wasn't originally aware of any such possibility: my online audience was invisible.

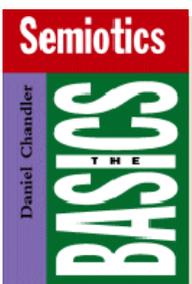
Clearly, publication of academic papers on the web offers the potential of a far larger audience than that to which academics are accustomed. I urge fellow academics to retain on-line publishing rights for their papers by adding to their publishing contracts and to their manuscripts submitted for print publication a line to the effect that 'the author reserves the right to publish on-line versions of this text'. I have so far resisted the temptation to include a comment form copying readers' comments automatically to my Head of Department so that my colleagues would realize that my ventures into cyberspace are appreciated by someone! I do try to answer e-mail from readers, but am not always able to spare the time, so I hope I will be forgiven for thanking here anyone who has not received an individual reply. I continue to welcome comments and suggestions.

I occasionally get e-mail messages asking whether any payment is due in return for the use of this resource. Unless you propose to distribute copies no payment or licence is required. However, if you want to support the site and are feeling generous are some options you might consider:

- [buy the book](#) of this online text
- [buy a book which is now surplus to my own requirements](#) (times are that tough for UK academics!)
- send me a book from my *wishlist* at Amazon.co.uk or Amazon.com

You do *not* have to ask my permission to include a link to it from a webpage. You may also store a copy on your own PC for personal use. However, please do *not* store a 'local copy' on a server or store and distribute the text on a CD. I am happy to negotiate official [mirror](#) sites.

In quoting from the text of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* that the translation used is that of Roy Harris ([Saussure 1983](#)), although, following the practice of John Sturrock in using this translation ([Sturrock 1986, 31, 32](#)), I have retained the terms 'signifier' and 'signified' rather than use Harris's translation of *signifiant* as 'signal' and *signifié* as 'signification'. Whilst it is far more recent (1983) than the Wade Baskin translation (1959), Harris's translation is rarely cited in the texts which most students are likely to encounter. I have therefore cited page references for Baskin's translation (the 1974 edition) alongside those for Harris's translation. The status of the French 'original' is problematic, since not only was it first published posthumously in 1916 (Saussure having died in 1913), but it was not written by Saussure himself - being a compilation based on notes taken by his students from lectures delivered between 1907 and 1911.

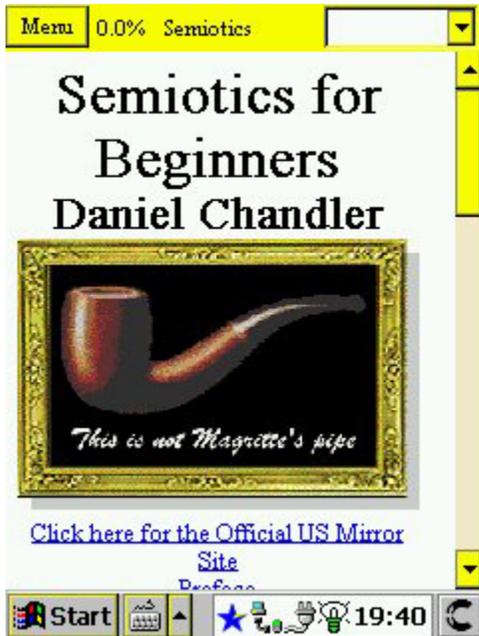


The main text is periodically updated (sometimes intensively). The on-line text is now available in English in the frozen form of print. The online version has special advantages: notably, for the writer revisability, for the reader, being able to 'search' the text and for both, the 'connections' made possible by hypertextual links. However, the main problem for the reader (other than the discomfort of extended reading from the screen) may be that it doesn't stand still long enough to get to know it - one can 'know

one's way around' a book precisely because it remains as constant as a map (unlike the terrain it depicts). The book version has now been published by Routledge under the title: *Semiotics: The Basics*. The online text will continue to be available. For details of the printed book, [click here](#). Note that it will be cheaper to buy the book than to print out the online version, and that the book will be much tidier to shelve and easier to browse!



Up until 2001 there was only one official printed version of this text. By curious circumstance that book is not in the language in which the text was originated. An authorized Spanish translation - [Semiótica para Principiantes](#) - by Vanessa Hogan Vega and Iván Rodrigo Mendizábal is available in the series *Plurimino* from [Ediciones Abya-Yala](#), Av. 12 de Octubre 14-30 y Wilson, Casilla 17-12-719, Quito, Ecuador in association with Escuela de Comunicación Social de la Universidad Politécnica Salesiana (1998, 146 pp, with bibliography, ISBN 9978-04-429-9). This was based on the text as at mid-June 1998 ([Chandler 1998](#)). There is now also a Korean translation and an Arabic one. A Polish translation is underway (Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen). If there is a demand for translations into other languages I would be pleased to suggest this to my British publishers.



There is a 1999 [Greek language translation online](#) by Professor Maria Constantopoulou of the [Athens University of Economics and Business](#), to whom I am deeply indebted. Print publication in Greek is currently being negotiated. An official US mirror site for *Semiotics for Beginners* is at <http://www.argyroneta.com/s4b/>. It is run by Martin C Messer in North Carolina. Thanks Martin! Note that this site is not always up-to-date. There is also an earlier version of *Semiotics for Beginners* for Palmsize PCs running WindowsCE with the *Starbuck* bookreader. This can be found at: <http://www.adbosch.demon.nl/starbuck.htm>. Offers to produce other specialized versions are also welcome.

I would like to thank Professor Dr Winfried Nöth of the University of Kassel for his useful comments on '[articulation](#)' and 'empty signifiers'. Dr David Mick of the University of Wisconsin-Madison has also been particularly kind in keeping me updated with his own papers on the semiotics of advertising which have been a very useful source of ideas and observations.

Introduction

If you go into a bookshop and ask them where to find a book on semiotics you are likely to meet with a blank look. Even worse, you might be asked to define what semiotics is - which would be a bit tricky if you were looking for a beginner's guide. It's worse still if you do know a bit about semiotics, because it can be hard to offer a simple definition which is of much use in the bookshop. If you've ever been in such a situation, you'll probably agree that it's wise not to ask. Semiotics could be anywhere. The shortest definition is that it is *the study of signs*. But that doesn't leave enquirers much wiser. 'What do you mean by a sign?' people usually ask next. The kinds of signs that are likely to spring immediately to mind are those which we routinely refer to as 'signs' in everyday life, such as road signs, pub signs and star signs. If you were to agree with them that semiotics can include the study of all these and more, people will probably assume that semiotics is about 'visual signs'. You would confirm their hunch if you said that signs can also be drawings, paintings and photographs, and by now they'd be keen to direct you to the art and photography sections. But if you are thick-skinned and tell them that it also includes words, sounds and 'body language' they may reasonably wonder what all these things have in common and how anyone could possibly study such disparate phenomena. If you get this far they've probably already 'read the signs' which suggest that you are either eccentric or insane and communication may have ceased.

Assuming that you are not one of those annoying people who keeps everyone waiting with your awkward question, if you are searching for books on semiotics you could do worse than by starting off in the *linguistics* section.



Ferdinand de Saussure

It is... possible to conceive of a science *which studies the role of signs as part of social life*. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it *semiology* (from the Greek *semeïon*, 'sign'). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready for it in advance. Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge. ([Saussure 1983, 15-16](#); [Saussure 1974, 16](#))

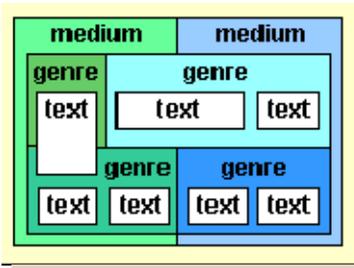
Thus wrote the Swiss linguist [Ferdinand de Saussure](#) (1857-1913), a founder not only of linguistics but also of what is now more usually referred to as semiotics (in his *Course in General Linguistics*, 1916). Other than Saussure (the usual abbreviation), key figures in the early development of semiotics were the American philosopher [Charles Sanders Peirce](#) (*sic*, pronounced 'purse') (1839-1914) and later [Charles William Morris](#) (1901-1979), who developed a *behaviourist* semiotics. Leading modern semiotic theorists include [Roland Barthes](#) (1915-1980), [Algirdas Greimas](#) (1917-1992), [Yuri Lotman](#) (1922-1993), [Christian Metz](#) (1931-1993), [Umberto Eco](#) (b 1932) and [Julia Kristeva](#) (b 1941). A number of linguists other than Saussure have worked within a semiotic framework, such as [Louis Hjelmslev](#) (1899-1966) and [Roman Jakobson](#) (1896-1982). It is difficult to disentangle European semiotics from [structuralism](#) in its origins; major structuralists include not only

Saussure but also [Claude Lévi-Strauss](#) (b. 1908) in anthropology (who saw his subject as a branch of semiotics) and [Jacques Lacan](#) (1901-1981) in psychoanalysis. Structuralism is an analytical method which has been employed by many semioticians and which is based on Saussure's linguistic model. Structuralists seek to describe the overall organization of sign systems as 'languages' - as with Lévi-Strauss and myth, kinship rules and totemism, Lacan and the unconscious and Barthes and Greimas and the 'grammar' of narrative. They engage in a search for 'deep structures' underlying the 'surface features' of phenomena. However, contemporary *social semiotics* has moved beyond the structuralist concern with the internal relations of parts within a self-contained system, seeking to explore the use of signs in specific social situations. Modern semiotic theory is also sometimes allied with a [Marxist](#) approach which stresses the role of *ideology*.

Semiotics began to become a major approach to cultural studies in the late 1960s, partly as a result of the work of Roland Barthes. The translation into English of his popular essays in a collection entitled *Mythologies* ([Barthes 1957](#)), followed in the 1970s and 1980s by many of his other writings, greatly increased scholarly awareness of this approach. Writing in 1964, Barthes declared that 'semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not *languages*, at least systems of signification' ([Barthes 1967, 9](#)). The adoption of semiotics in Britain was influenced by its prominence in the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham whilst the centre was under the direction of the neo-Marxist sociologist Stuart Hall (director 1969-79). Although semiotics may be less central now within cultural and media studies (at least in its earlier, more structuralist form), it remains essential for anyone in the field to understand it. What individual scholars have to assess, of course, is whether and how semiotics may be useful in shedding light on any aspect of their concerns. Note that Saussure's term, 'semiology' is sometimes used to refer to the Saussurean tradition, whilst 'semiotics' sometimes refers to the Peircean tradition, but that nowadays the term 'semiotics' is more likely to be used as an umbrella term to embrace the whole field ([Nöth 1990, 14](#)).

Semiotics is not widely institutionalized as an academic discipline. It is a field of study involving many different theoretical stances and methodological tools. One of the broadest definitions is that of Umberto Eco, who states that 'semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign' ([Eco 1976, 7](#)). Semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as 'signs' in everyday speech, but of anything which 'stands for' something else. In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. Whilst for the linguist Saussure, 'semiology' was 'a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life', for the philosopher Charles Peirce 'semiotic' was the 'formal doctrine of signs' which was closely related to Logic ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.227](#)). For him, 'a sign... is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity' ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.228](#)). He declared that 'every thought is a sign' ([Peirce 1931-58, 1.538; cf. 5.250ff, 5.283ff](#)). Contemporary semioticians study signs not in isolation but as part of semiotic 'sign systems' (such as a medium or genre). They study how *meanings* are made: as such, being concerned not only with communication but also with the construction and maintenance of reality. Semiotics and that branch of linguistics known as semantics have a common concern with the meaning of signs, but John Sturrock argues that whereas semantics focuses on *what* words mean, semiotics is concerned with *how* signs mean ([Sturrock 1986, 22](#)). For C W Morris (deriving this threefold classification from Peirce), semiotics embraced semantics, along with the other traditional branches of linguistics:

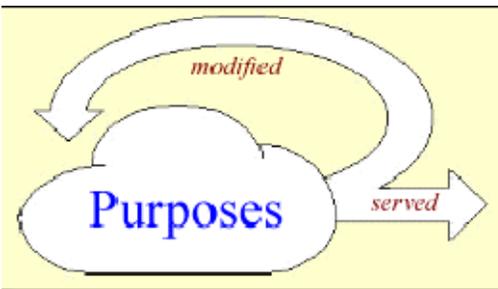
- *semantics*: the relationship of signs to what they stand for;
- *syntactics* (or *syntax*): the formal or structural relations between signs;
- *pragmatics*: the relation of signs to interpreters ([Morris 1938, 6-7](#)).



Semiotics is often employed in the analysis of texts (although it is far more than just a mode of textual analysis). Here it should perhaps be noted that a 'text' can exist in any medium and may be verbal, non-verbal, or both, despite the [logocentric bias](#) of this distinction. The term *text* usually refers to a message which has been recorded in some way (e.g. writing, audio- and video-recording) so that it is physically independent of its [sender or receiver](#). A text is an assemblage of signs (such as words, images, sounds and/or gestures) constructed (and interpreted) with reference to the conventions associated with a [genre](#) and in a particular medium of communication.

The term 'medium' is used in a variety of ways by different theorists, and may include such broad categories as speech and writing or print and broadcasting or relate to specific technical forms within the *mass media* (radio, television, newspapers, magazines, books, photographs, films and records) or the *media of interpersonal communication* (telephone, letter, fax, e-mail, video-conferencing, computer-based chat systems). Some theorists classify media according to the 'channels' involved (visual, auditory, tactile and so on) ([Nöth 1995, 175](#)). Human experience is inherently multisensory, and every representation of experience is subject to the constraints and affordances of the medium involved. Every medium is constrained by the channels which it utilizes. For instance, even in the very flexible medium of language 'words fail us' in attempting to represent some experiences, and we have no way at all of representing smell or touch with conventional media. Different media and genres provide different frameworks for representing experience, facilitating some forms of expression and inhibiting others. The differences between media lead Emile Benveniste to argue that the 'first principle' of semiotic systems is that they are not 'synonymous': 'we are not able to say "the same thing"' in systems based on different units (in [Innis 1986, 235](#)) in contrast to Hjelmslev, who asserted that 'in practice, language is a semiotic into which all other semiotics may be translated' (cited in [Genosko 1994, 62](#)).

The everyday use of a medium by someone who knows how to use it typically passes unquestioned as unproblematic and 'neutral': this is hardly surprising since media evolve as a means of accomplishing purposes in which they are usually intended to be incidental. And the more frequently and fluently a medium is used, the more 'transparent' or 'invisible' to its users it tends to become. For most routine purposes, awareness of a medium may hamper its effectiveness as a means to an end. Indeed, it is typically when the medium acquires transparency that its potential to fulfil its primary function is greatest.



The selectivity of any medium leads to its use having influences of which the user may not always be conscious, and which may not have been part of the purpose in using it. We can be so familiar with the medium that we are 'anaesthetized' to the mediation it involves: we 'don't know what we're missing'. Insofar as we are numbed to the processes involved we cannot be said to be exercising 'choices' in its use. In this way the means we use may modify our ends. Amongst the phenomena enhanced or

reduced by media selectivity are the ends for which a medium was used. In some cases, our 'purposes' may be subtly (and perhaps invisibly), redefined by our use of a particular medium. This is the opposite of the pragmatic and rationalistic stance, according to which the means are chosen to suit the user's ends, and are entirely under the user's control.

An awareness of this phenomenon of transformation by media has often led media theorists to argue deterministically that our technical means and systems always and inevitably become 'ends in themselves' (a common interpretation of Marshall McLuhan's famous aphorism, 'the medium is the message'), and has even led some to present media as wholly autonomous entities with 'purposes' (as opposed to functions) of their own. However, one need not adopt such extreme stances in acknowledging the transformations involved in processes of mediation. When we use a medium for any purpose, its use becomes part of that purpose. Travelling is an unavoidable part of getting somewhere; it may even become a primary goal. Travelling by one particular method of transport rather than another is part of the experience. So too with writing rather than speaking, or using a word processor rather than a pen. In using any medium, to some extent we serve its 'purposes' as well as its serving ours. When we engage with media we both act and are acted upon, use and are used. Where a medium has a variety of functions it may be impossible to choose to use it for only one of these functions in isolation. The making of meanings with such media must involve some degree of compromise. Complete identity between any specific purpose and the functionality of a medium is likely to be rare, although the degree of match may on most occasions be accepted as adequate.

I am reminded here of an observation by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss that in the case of what he called *bricolage*, the process of creating something is not a matter of the calculated choice and use of whatever materials are technically best-adapted to a clearly predetermined purpose, but rather it involves a 'dialogue with the materials and means of execution' ([Lévi-Strauss 1974, 29](#)). In such a dialogue, the materials which are ready-to-hand may (as we say) 'suggest' adaptive courses of action, and the initial aim may be modified. Consequently, such acts of creation are not purely instrumental: the *bricoleur* "speaks" not only with things... but also through the medium of things' ([ibid., 21](#)): the use of the medium can be expressive. The context of Lévi-Strauss's point was a discussion of 'mythical thought', but I would argue that bricolage can be involved in the use of any medium, for any purpose. The act of writing, for instance, may be shaped not only by the writer's conscious purposes but also by features of the media involved - such as the kind of language and writing tools used - as well as by the social and psychological processes of mediation involved. Any 'resistance' offered by the writer's materials can be an intrinsic part of the process of writing. However, not every writer acts or feels like a bricoleur. Individuals differ strikingly in their responses to the notion of media transformation. They range from those who insist that they are in total control of the media which they 'use' to those who experience a profound sense of being shaped by the media which 'use' them ([Chandler 1995](#)).

Norman Fairclough comments on the importance of the differences between the various mass media in the channels and technologies they draw upon.

The press uses a visual channel, its language is written, and it draws upon technologies of photographic reproduction, graphic design, and printing. Radio, by contrast, uses an oral channel and spoken language and relies on technologies of sound recording and broadcasting, whilst television combines technologies of sound- and image-recording and broadcasting...

These differences in channel and technology have significant wider implications in terms of the meaning potential of the different media. For instance, print is in an important sense less personal than radio or television. Radio begins to allow individuality and personality to be foregrounded through transmitting individual qualities of voice. Television takes the process much further by making people visually available, and not in the frozen modality of newspaper photographs, but in movement and action. ([Fairclough 1995, 38-9](#))

Whilst [technological determinists](#) emphasize that semiotic ecologies are influenced by the fundamental design features of different media, it is important to recognize the importance of socio-cultural and historical factors in shaping how different media are used and their (ever-shifting) status within particular cultural contexts. For instance, many contemporary cultural theorists have remarked on the growth of the importance of visual media compared with linguistic media in contemporary society and the associated shifts in the communicative functions of such media. Thinking in 'ecological' terms about the interaction of different semiotic structures and languages led the Russian cultural semiotician Yuri Lotman to coin the term 'semiosphere' to refer to 'the whole semiotic space of the culture in question' ([Lotman 1990, 124-125](#)). The concept is related to ecologists' references to 'the biosphere' and perhaps to cultural theorists' references to the public and private spheres, but most reminiscent of Teilhard de Chardin's notion (dating back to 1949) of the 'noosphere' - the domain in which mind is exercised. Whilst Lotman referred to such semiospheres as governing the functioning of languages within cultures, John Hartley comments that 'there is more than one level at which one might identify a semiosphere - at the level of a single national or linguistic culture, for instance, or of a larger unity such as "the West", right up to "the species"'; we might similarly characterize the semiosphere of a particular historical period ([Hartley 1996, 106](#)). This conception of a semiosphere may make semioticians seem territorially imperialistic to their critics, but it offers a more unified and dynamic vision of semiosis than the study of a specific medium as if each existed in a vacuum.

There are, of course, other approaches to [textual analysis](#) apart from semiotics - notably [rhetorical analysis](#), [discourse analysis](#) and [content analysis](#). In the field of media and communication studies content analysis is a prominent rival to semiotics as a method of textual analysis. Whereas semiotics is now closely associated with cultural studies, content analysis is well-established within the mainstream tradition of social science research. Whilst content analysis involves a quantitative approach to the analysis of the manifest 'content' of media texts, semiotics seeks to analyse media texts as structured wholes and investigates latent, [connotative](#) meanings. Semiotics is rarely quantitative, and often involves a rejection of such approaches. Just because an item occurs frequently in a text does not make it significant. The structuralist semiotician is more concerned with the relation of elements to each other. A social semiotician would also emphasize the importance of the significance which readers attach to the signs within a text. Whereas *content analysis* focuses on explicit content and tends to suggest that this represents a single, fixed meaning, semiotic studies focus on the system of rules governing the 'discourse' involved in media texts, stressing the role of semiotic context in shaping meaning. However, some researchers have combined semiotic analysis and content analysis (e.g. [Glasgow University Media Group 1980](#); [Leiss et al. 1990](#); [McQuarrie & Mick 1992](#)).

Some commentators adopt C W Morris's definition of semiotics (in the spirit of Saussure) as 'the science of signs' ([Morris 1938, 1-2](#)). The term 'science' is misleading. As yet semiotics involves no widely-agreed theoretical assumptions, models or empirical methodologies. Semiotics has tended to

be largely theoretical, many of its theorists seeking to establish its scope and general principles. Peirce and Saussure, for instance, were both concerned with the fundamental definition of the sign. Peirce developed elaborate logical taxonomies of types of signs. Subsequent semioticians have sought to identify and categorize the codes or conventions according to which signs are organized. Clearly there is a need to establish a firm theoretical foundation for a subject which is currently characterized by a host of competing theoretical assumptions. As for methodologies, Saussure's theories constituted a starting point for the development of various structuralist methodologies for analysing texts and social practices. These have been very widely employed in the analysis of a host of cultural phenomena. However, such methods are not universally accepted: socially-oriented theorists have criticized their exclusive focus on structure, and no alternative methodologies have as yet been widely adopted. Some semiotic research is empirically-oriented, applying and testing semiotic principles. Bob Hodge and David Tripp employed empirical methods in their classic study of *Children and Television* ([Hodge & Tripp 1986](#)). But there is at present little sense of semiotics as a unified enterprise building on cumulative research findings.

Semiotics represents a range of studies in art, literature, anthropology and the mass media rather than an independent academic discipline. Those involved in semiotics include linguists, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, literary, aesthetic and media theorists, psychoanalysts and educationalists. Beyond the most basic definition, there is considerable variation amongst leading semioticians as to what semiotics involves. It is not only concerned with (intentional) communication but also with our ascription of significance to anything in the world. Semiotics has changed over time, since semioticians have sought to remedy weaknesses in early semiotic approaches. Even with the most basic semiotic terms there are multiple definitions. Consequently, anyone attempting semiotic analysis would be wise to make clear which definitions are being applied and, if a particular semiotician's approach is being adopted, what its source is. There are two divergent traditions in semiotics stemming respectively from Saussure and Peirce. The work of Louis Hjelmslev, Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Julia Kristeva, Christian Metz and Jean Baudrillard (b 1929) follows in the 'semiological' tradition of Saussure whilst that of Charles W Morris, Ivor A Richards (1893-1979), Charles K Ogden (1889-1957) and Thomas Sebeok (b 1920) is in the 'semiotic' tradition of Peirce. The leading semiotician bridging these two traditions is the celebrated Italian author Umberto Eco, who as the author of the bestseller *The Name of the Rose* (novel 1980, film 1986) is probably the only semiotician whose film rights are of any value ([Eco 1980](#)).



The Rosetta Stone

Saussure argued that 'nothing is more appropriate than the study of languages to bring out the nature of the semiological problem' ([Saussure 1983, 16](#); [Saussure 1974, 16](#)). Semiotics draws heavily on linguistic concepts, partly because of the influence of Saussure and because linguistics is a more established discipline than the study of other sign systems. Structuralists adopted language as their model in exploring a much wider range of social phenomena: Lévi-Strauss for myth, kinship rules and totemism; Lacan for the unconscious; Barthes and Greimas for the 'grammar' of narrative. Julia Kristeva declared that 'what semiotics has discovered... is that the *law* governing or, if one prefers, the *major constraint* affecting any social practice lies in the fact that it signifies; i.e. that it is articulated *like* a language' (cited in [Hawkes 1977, 125](#)). Saussure referred to language (his model being *speech*) as 'the most important' of all of the systems of signs ([Saussure 1983, 15](#); [Saussure 1974, 16](#)).

Language is almost unvariably regarded as the most powerful communication system by far. For instance, Marvin Harris observes that 'human languages are unique among communication systems in possessing *semantic universality*... A communication system that has semantic universality can convey information about all aspects, domains, properties, places, or events in the past, present or future, whether actual or possible, real or imaginary' (cited in [Wilden 1987, 138](#)). Perhaps language is indeed fundamental: Emile Benveniste observed that 'language is the interpreting system of all other systems, linguistic and non-linguistic' (in [Innis 1986, 239](#)), whilst Claude Lévi-Strauss noted that 'language is the semiotic system *par excellence*; it cannot but signify, and exists only through signification' ([Lévi-Strauss 1972, 48](#)).

Saussure saw linguistics as a branch of 'semiology':

Linguistics is only one branch of this general science [of semiology]. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics... As far as we are concerned... the linguistic problem is first and foremost semiological... If one wishes to discover the true nature of language systems, one must first consider what they have in common with all other systems of the same kind... In this way, light will be thrown not only upon the linguistic problem. By considering rites, customs etc. as signs, it will be possible, we believe, to see them in a new perspective. The need will be felt to consider them as semiological phenomena and to explain them in terms of the laws of semiology. ([Saussure 1983, 16-17](#); [Saussure 1974, 16-17](#))

Whilst Roland Barthes declared that 'perhaps we must invert Saussure's formulation and assert that semiology is a branch of linguistics', others have accepted Saussure's location of linguistics within semiotics ([Barthes 1985, xi](#)). Other than himself, Jean-Marie Floch instances Hjelmslev and Greimas ([Floch 2000, 93](#)). However, even if we theoretically locate linguistics within semiotics it is difficult to avoid adopting the linguistic model in exploring other sign systems. Semioticians commonly refer to films, television and radio programmes, advertising posters and so on as 'texts', and to 'reading television' ([Fiske and Hartley 1978](#)). Media such as television and film are regarded by some semioticians as being in some respects like 'languages'. The issue tends to revolve around whether film is closer to what we treat as 'reality' in the everyday world of our own experience or whether it has more in common with a symbolic system like writing. Some refer to the 'grammar' of media other than language. For James Monaco, 'film has no grammar', and he offers a useful critique of glib analogies between film techniques and the grammar of natural language ([ibid., 129](#)). There is a danger of trying to force all media into a linguistic framework. With regard to photography (though one might say the same for film and television), Victor Burgin insists that: 'There is no 'language' of photography, no single signifying system (as opposed to technical apparatus) upon which all photographs depend (in the sense in which all texts in English depend upon the English language); there is, rather, a heterogeneous complex of [codes](#) upon which photography may draw' ([Burgin 1982b, 143](#)).

We will shortly examine Saussure's model of the sign, but before doing so it is important to understand something about the general framework within which he situated it. Saussure made what is now a famous distinction between *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech). *Langue* refers to the system of rules and conventions which is independent of, and pre-exists, individual users; *parole* refers to its use in particular instances. Applying the notion to semiotic systems in general rather than simply to language, the distinction is one between *code* and *message*, *structure* and *event* or *system* and *usage* (in specific texts or contexts). According to the Saussurean distinction, in a

semiotic system such as cinema, 'any specific film is the speech of that underlying system of cinema language' ([Langholz Leymore 1975, 3](#)). Saussure focused on *langue* rather than *parole*. To the traditional, Saussurean semiotician, what matters most are the underlying structures and rules of a semiotic system as a whole rather than specific performances or practices which are merely instances of its use. Saussure's approach was to study the system 'synchronically' if it were frozen in time (like a photograph) - rather than 'diachronically' - in terms of its evolution over time (like a film). Structuralist cultural theorists subsequently adopted this Saussurean priority, focusing on the functions of social and cultural phenomena within semiotic systems. Theorists differ over whether the system precedes and determines usage (structural determinism) or whether usage precedes and determines the system (social determinism) (although note that most structuralists argue that the system *constrains* rather than completely *determines* usage).

The structuralist dichotomy between usage and system has been criticized for its rigidity, splitting process from product, subject from structure ([Coward & Ellis 1977, 4, 14](#)). The prioritization of structure over usage fails to account for changes in structure. Marxist theorists have been particularly critical of this. In the late 1920s, Valentin Volosinov (1884/5-1936) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) criticized Saussure's synchronic approach and his emphasis on internal relations within the system of language ([Voloshinov 1973](#); [Morris 1994](#)). Volosinov reversed the Saussurean priority of *langue* over *parole*: 'The sign is part of organized social intercourse and cannot exist, as such, outside it, reverting to a mere physical artifact' ([Voloshinov 1973, 21](#)). The meaning of a sign is not in its relationship to other signs within the language system but rather in the social context of its use. Saussure was criticized for ignoring historicity ([ibid., 61](#)). The Prague school linguists Roman Jakobson and Yuri Tynyanov declared in 1927 that 'pure synchronism now proves to be an illusion', adding that 'every synchronic system has its past and its future as inseparable structural elements of the system' (cited in [Voloshinov 1973, 166](#)). Writing in 1929, Volosinov observed that 'there is no real moment in time when a synchronic system of language could be constructed... A synchronic system may be said to exist only from the point of view of the subjective consciousness of an individual speaker belonging to some particular language group at some particular moment of historical time' ([Voloshinov 1973, 66](#)). Whilst the French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss applied a synchronic approach in the domain of anthropology, most contemporary semioticians have sought to reprioritize historicity and social context. Language is seldom treated as a static, closed and stable system which is inherited from preceding generations but as constantly changing. The sign, as Voloshinov put it, is 'an arena of the class struggle' ([ibid., 23](#)). Seeking to establish a wholeheartedly 'social semiotics', Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress declare that 'the social dimensions of semiotic systems are so intrinsic to their nature and function that the systems cannot be studied in isolation' ([Hodge & Kress 1988, 1](#)).

Whilst Saussure may be hailed as a founder of semiotics, semiotics has become increasingly less Saussurean. Teresa de Lauretis describes the movement away from structuralist semiotics which began in the 1970s:

In the last decade or so, semiotics has undergone a shift of its theoretical gears: a shift away from the classification of sign systems - their basic units, their levels of structural organization - and towards the exploration of the modes of production of signs and meanings, the ways in which systems and codes are used, transformed or transgressed in social practice. While formerly the emphasis was on studying sign systems (language, literature, cinema, architecture, music, etc.), conceived of as mechanisms that generate messages, what is now being examined is the work performed through them. It is this work or activity which constitutes

and/or transforms the codes, at the same time as it constitutes and transforms the individuals using the codes, performing the work; the individuals who are, therefore, the subjects of semiosis.

'Semiosis', a term borrowed from Charles Sanders Peirce, is expanded by Eco to designate the process by which a culture produces signs and/or attributes meaning to signs. Although for Eco meaning production or semiosis is a social activity, he allows that subjective factors are involved in each individual act of semiosis. The notion then might be pertinent to the two main emphases of current, or poststructuralist, semiotic theory. One is a semiotics focused on the subjective aspects of signification and strongly influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, where meaning is construed as a subject-effect (the subject being an effect of the signifier). The other is a semiotics concerned to stress the social aspect of signification, its practical, aesthetic, or ideological use in interpersonal communication; there, meaning is construed as semantic value produced through culturally shared codes. ([de Lauretis 1984, 167](#))

This text outlines some of the key concepts in semiotics, together with relevant critiques, beginning with the most fundamental [concept of the sign](#) itself. I hope it will prove to be a useful companion to the reader in finding their own path through the subject. But before launching on an exploration of this intriguing but demanding subject let us consider why we should bother: why should we study semiotics? This is a pressing question in part because the writings of semioticians have a reputation for being dense with jargon: Justin Lewis notes that 'its advocates have written in a style that ranges from the obscure to the incomprehensible' ([Lewis 1991, 25](#)); another critic wittily remarked that 'semiotics tells us things we already know in a language we will never understand' (Paddy Whannel, cited in [Seiter 1992, 1](#)). The semiotic establishment is a very exclusive club but, as David Sless remarks, 'semiotics is far too important an enterprise to be left to semioticians' ([Sless 1986, 1](#)).

Semiotics is important because it can help us not to take 'reality' for granted as something having a purely objective existence which is independent of human interpretation. It teaches us that reality is a system of signs. Studying semiotics can assist us to become more aware of reality as a construction and of the roles played by ourselves and others in constructing it. It can help us to realize that information or meaning is not 'contained' in the world or in books, computers or audio-visual media. Meaning is not 'transmitted' to us - we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we are normally unaware. Becoming aware of such codes is both inherently fascinating and intellectually empowering. We learn from semiotics that we live in a world of signs and we have no way of understanding anything except through signs and the codes into which they are organized. Through the study of semiotics we become aware that these signs and codes are normally transparent and disguise our task in 'reading' them. Living in a world of increasingly visual signs, we need to learn that even the most 'realistic' signs are not what they appear to be. By making more explicit the codes by which signs are interpreted we may perform the valuable semiotic function of 'denaturalizing' signs. In defining realities signs serve ideological functions. Deconstructing and contesting the realities of signs can reveal *whose* realities are privileged and whose are suppressed. The study of signs is the study of the construction and maintenance of reality. To decline such a study is to leave to others the control of the world of meanings which we inhabit.

Signs



We seem as a species to be driven by a [desire to make meanings](#): above all, we are surely *Homo significans* - meaning-makers. Distinctively, we make meanings through our creation and interpretation of 'signs'. Indeed, according to Peirce, 'we think only in signs' ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.302](#)). Signs take the form of words, [images](#), sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects, but such things have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning. 'Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign', declares Peirce ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.172](#)). Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as 'signifying' something - referring to or *standing for* something other than itself. We interpret things as signs largely

unconsciously by relating them to familiar systems of conventions. It is this meaningful use of signs which is at the heart of the concerns of semiotics.

The two dominant models of what constitutes a sign are those of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. These will be discussed in turn.

Saussure offered a 'dyadic' or two-part model of the sign. He defined a sign as being composed of:

- a 'signifier' (*signifiant*) - the *form* which the sign takes; and
 - the 'signified' (*signifié*) - the *concept* it represents.

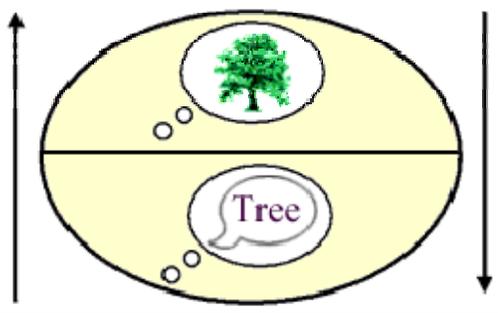


The *sign* is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified ([Saussure 1983, 67](#); [Saussure 1974, 67](#)). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is referred to as 'signification', and this is represented in the Saussurean diagram by the arrows. The horizontal line marking the two elements of the sign is referred to as 'the bar'.

If we take a linguistic example, the word 'Open' (when it is invested with meaning by someone who encounters it on a shop doorway) is a *sign* consisting of:

- a *signifier*: the word **open**;
- a *signified concept*: that the shop is open for business.

A sign must have both a signifier and a signified. You cannot have a totally meaningless signifier or a completely formless signified ([Saussure 1983, 101](#); [Saussure 1974, 102-103](#)). A sign is a recognizable combination of a signifier with a particular signified. The same signifier (the word 'open') could stand for a different signified (and thus be a different sign) if it were on a push-button inside a lift ('push to open door'). Similarly, many signifiers could stand for the concept 'open' (for instance, on top of a packing carton, a small outline of a box with an open flap for 'open this end') - again, with each unique pairing constituting a different sign.



Nowadays, whilst the basic 'Saussurean' model is commonly adopted, it tends to be a more materialistic model than that of Saussure himself. The *signifier* is now commonly interpreted as the *material (or physical) form* of the sign - it is something which can be seen, heard, touched, smelt or tasted. For Saussure, both the signifier and the signified were purely 'psychological' ([Saussure 1983, 12, 14-15, 66](#); [Saussure 1974, 12, 15, 65-66](#)). Both were *form* rather than *substance*:

A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern. The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses. This sound pattern may be called a 'material' element only in that it is the representation of our sensory impressions. The sound pattern may thus be distinguished from the other element associated with it in a linguistic sign. This other element is generally of a more abstract kind: the concept. ([Saussure 1983, 66](#); [Saussure 1974, 66](#))

Saussure was focusing on the *linguistic sign* (such as a word) [and he 'phonocentrically' privileged the spoken word](#), referring specifically to the *image acoustique* ('sound-image' or 'sound pattern'), seeing writing as a separate, secondary, dependent but comparable sign system ([Saussure 1983, 15, 24-25, 117](#); [Saussure 1974, 15, 16, 23-24, 119](#)). Within the ('separate') system of written signs, a signifier such as the written letter 't' signified a sound in the primary sign system of language (and thus a written word would also signify a sound rather than a concept). Thus for Saussure, writing relates to speech as signifier to signified. Most subsequent theorists who have adopted Saussure's model are content to refer to the form of linguistic signs as either spoken or written. We will return later to the issue of the post-Saussurean 'rematerialization' of the sign.

As for the *signified*, most commentators who adopt Saussure's model still treat this as a mental construct, although they often note that it may nevertheless refer indirectly to things in the world. Saussure's original model of the sign 'brackets the referent': excluding reference to objects existing in the world. His *signified* is not to be identified directly with a referent but is a *concept* in the mind - not a thing but the notion of a thing. Some people may wonder why Saussure's model of the sign refers only to a concept and not to a thing. An observation from the philosopher Susanne Langer (who was not referring to Saussure's theories) may be useful here. Note that like most contemporary commentators, Langer uses the term 'symbol' to refer to the linguistic sign (a term which Saussure himself avoided): 'Symbols are not proxy for their objects but are *vehicles for the conception of objects*... In talking *about* things we have conceptions of them, not the things themselves; and *it is the conceptions, not the things, that symbols directly mean*. Behaviour towards conceptions is what words normally evoke; this is the typical process of thinking'. She adds that 'If I say "Napoleon", you do not bow to the conqueror of Europe as though I had introduced him, but merely think of him' ([Langer 1951, 61](#)).

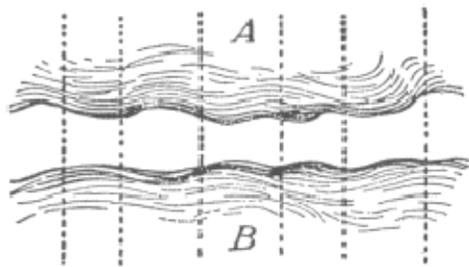
Thus, for Saussure the linguistic sign is wholly immaterial - although he disliked referring to it as 'abstract' ([Saussure 1983, 15](#); [Saussure 1974, 15](#)). The immateriality of the Saussurean sign is a feature which tends to be neglected in many popular commentaries. If the notion seems strange, we need to remind ourselves that words have no value in themselves - that is their value. Saussure

noted that it is not the metal in a coin that fixes its value ([Saussure 1983, 117](#); [Saussure 1974, 118](#)). Several reasons could be offered for this. For instance, if linguistic signs drew attention to their materiality this would hinder their communicative transparency ([Langer 1951, 73](#)). Furthermore, being immaterial, language is an extraordinarily economical medium and words are always ready-to-hand. Nevertheless, a principled argument can be made for the reevaluation of the materiality of the sign, as we shall see in due course.

Saussure noted that his choice of the terms *signifier* and *signified* helped to indicate 'the distinction which separates each from the other' ([Saussure 1983, 67](#); [Saussure 1974, 67](#)). Despite this, and the horizontal bar in his diagram of the sign, Saussure stressed that sound and thought (or the signifier and the signified) were as inseparable as the two sides of a piece of paper ([Saussure 1983, 111](#); [Saussure 1974, 113](#)). They were 'intimately linked' in the mind 'by an associative link' - 'each triggers the other' ([Saussure 1983, 66](#); [Saussure 1974, 66](#)). Saussure presented these elements as wholly interdependent, neither pre-existing the other ([Silverman 1983, 103](#)). Within the context of spoken language, a sign could not consist of sound without sense or of sense without sound. He used the two arrows in the diagram to suggest their interaction. The bar and the opposition nevertheless suggests that the signifier and the signified can be distinguished for analytical purposes. Poststructuralist theorists criticize the clear distinction which the Saussurean bar seems to suggest between the signifier and the signified; they seek to blur or erase it in order to reconfigure the sign or structural relations. Some theorists have argued that 'the signifier is always separated from the signified... and has a real autonomy' (Lechte 1994, 68), a point to which we will return in discussing the arbitrariness of the sign. Commonsense tends to insist that the *signified* takes precedence over, and pre-exists, the signifier: 'look after the sense', quipped Lewis Carroll, 'and the sounds will take care of themselves' (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, chapter 9). However, in dramatic contrast, post-Saussurean theorists have seen the model as implicitly granting primacy to the *signifier*, thus reversing the commonsensical position.

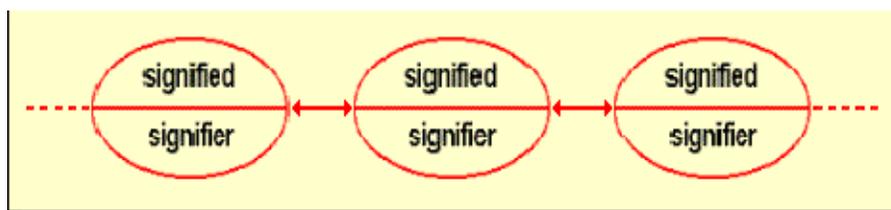
Louis Hjelmslev used the terms 'expression' and 'content' to refer to the *signifier* and *signified* respectively ([Hjelmslev 1961, 47ff](#)). The distinction between signifier and signified has sometimes been equated to the familiar dualism of 'form and content'. Within such a framework the signifier is seen as the *form* of the sign and the signified as the *content*. However, the metaphor of form as a 'container' is problematic, tending to support the equation of content with *meaning*, implying that meaning can be 'extracted' without an [active process of interpretation](#) and that form is not in itself meaningful ([Chandler 1995 104-6](#)).

Saussure argued that signs only make sense as part of a formal, generalized and abstract system. His conception of meaning was purely *structural* and *relational* rather than *referential*: primacy is given to relationships rather than to things (the meaning of signs was seen as lying in their systematic relation to each other rather than deriving from any inherent features of signifiers or any reference to material things). Saussure did not define signs in terms of some 'essential' or intrinsic nature. For Saussure, signs refer primarily to each other. Within the language system, 'everything depends on relations' ([Saussure 1983, 121](#); [Saussure 1974, 122](#)). No sign makes sense on its own but only in relation to other signs. Both signifier and signified are purely relational entities ([Saussure 1983, 118](#); [Saussure 1974, 120](#)). This notion can be hard to understand since we may feel that an individual word such as 'tree' does have some meaning for us, but its meaning depends on its context in relation to the other words with which it is used.



Together with the 'vertical' alignment of signifier and signified *within* each individual sign (suggesting two structural 'levels'), the emphasis on the relationship *between* signs defines what are in effect two planes - that of the signifier and the signified. Later, Louis Hjelmslev referred to the planes of 'expression' and 'content' ([Hjelmslev 1961, 60](#)). Saussure himself referred to *sound* and *thought* as two distinct but correlated planes. 'We can envisage... the language... as a series of adjoining subdivisions simultaneously imprinted both on the plane of vague, amorphous

thought (A), and on the equally featureless plane of sound (B)' ([Saussure 1983, 110-111](#); [Saussure 1974, 112](#)). The arbitrary division of the two continua into signs is suggested by the dotted lines whilst the wavy (rather than parallel) edges of the two 'amorphous' masses suggest the lack of any 'natural' fit between them. The gulf and lack of fit between the two planes highlights their relative autonomy. Whilst Saussure is careful not to refer directly to 'reality', Fredric Jameson reads into this feature of Saussure's system that 'it is not so much the individual word or sentence that "stands for" or "reflects" the individual object or event in the real world, but rather that the entire system of signs, the entire field of the *langue*, lies parallel to reality itself; that it is the totality of systematic language, in other words, which is analogous to whatever organized structures exist in the world of reality, and that our understanding proceeds from one whole or Gestalt to the other, rather than on a one-to-one basis' ([Jameson 1972, 32-33](#)).



What Saussure refers to as the 'value' of a sign depends on its relations with other signs within the system - a sign has no 'absolute' value independent of this context ([Saussure 1983, 80](#); [Saussure 1974, 80](#)). Saussure uses an analogy with the game of chess, noting that the value of each piece depends on its position on the chessboard ([Saussure 1983, 88](#); [Saussure 1974, 88](#)). The sign is more than the sum of its parts. Whilst *signification* - what is signified - clearly depends on the relationship between the two parts of the sign, the *value* of a sign is determined by the relationships between the sign and other signs within the system as a whole ([Saussure 1983, 112-113](#); [Saussure 1974, 114](#)).

The notion of value... shows us that it is a great mistake to consider a sign as nothing more than the combination of a certain sound and a certain concept. To think of a sign as nothing more would be to isolate it from the system to which it belongs. It would be to suppose that a start could be made with individual signs, and a system constructed by putting them together. On the contrary, the system as a united whole is the starting point, from which it becomes possible, by a process of analysis, to identify its constituent elements. ([Saussure 1983, 112](#); [Saussure 1974, 113](#))

As an example of the distinction between signification and value, Saussure notes that 'The French word *mouton* may have the same meaning as the English word *sheep*; but it does not have the same value. There are various reasons for this, but in particular the fact that the English word for the meat

of this animal, as prepared and served for a meal, is not *sheep* but *mutton*. The difference in value between *sheep* and *mouton* hinges on the fact that in English there is also another word *mutton* for the meat, whereas *mouton* in French covers both' ([Saussure 1983, 114](#); [Saussure 1974, 115-116](#)).

Saussure's relational conception of meaning was specifically *differential*: he emphasized the differences between signs. Language for him was a system of functional differences and oppositions. 'In a language, as in every other semiological system, what distinguishes a sign is what constitutes it' ([Saussure 1983, 119](#); [Saussure 1974, 121](#)). As John Sturrock points out, 'a one-term language is an impossibility because its single term could be applied to everything and differentiate nothing; it requires at least one other term to give it definition' ([Sturrock 1979, 10](#)). Advertising furnishes a good example of this notion, since what matters in 'positioning' a product is *not* the relationship of advertising signifiers to real-world referents, but the differentiation of each sign from the others to which it is related. Saussure's concept of the relational identity of signs is at the heart of structuralist theory. Structuralist analysis focuses on the structural relations which are functional in the signifying system at a particular moment in history. 'Relations are important for what they can explain: meaningful contrasts and permitted or forbidden combinations' ([Culler 1975, 14](#)).

Saussure emphasized in particular *negative*, oppositional differences between signs, and the key relationships in structuralist analysis are binary oppositions (such as *nature/culture*, *life/death*). Saussure argued that 'concepts... are defined not positively, in terms of their content, but *negatively* by contrast with other items in the same system. What characterizes each most exactly is *being whatever the others are not*' ([Saussure 1983, 115](#); [Saussure 1974, 117](#); my emphasis). This notion may initially seem mystifying if not perverse, but the concept of negative differentiation becomes clearer if we consider how we might teach someone who did not share our language what we mean by the term 'red'. We would be unlikely to make our point by simply showing them a range of different objects which all happened to be red - we would probably do better to single out a red object from a sets of objects which were identical in all respects except colour. Although Saussure focuses on speech, he also noted that in writing, 'the values of the letter are purely negative and differential' - all we need to be able to do is to distinguish one letter from another ([Saussure 1983, 118](#); [Saussure 1974, 119-120](#)). As for his emphasis on negative differences, Saussure remarks that although both the signified and the signifier are purely differential and negative when considered separately, the sign in which they are combined is a *positive* term. He adds that 'the moment we compare one sign with another as positive combinations, the term *difference* should be dropped... Two signs... are not different from each other, but only distinct. They are simply in *opposition* to each other. The entire mechanism of language... is based on oppositions of this kind and upon the phonic and conceptual differences they involve' ([Saussure 1983, 119](#); [Saussure 1974, 120-121](#)).

Although the signifier is treated by its users as 'standing for' the signified, Saussurean semioticians emphasize that there is no necessary, intrinsic, direct or inevitable relationship between the signifier and the signified. Saussure stressed the *arbitrariness* of the sign ([Saussure 1983, 67, 78](#); [Saussure 1974, 67, 78](#)) - more specifically the arbitrariness of the link between the signifier and the signified ([Saussure 1983, 67](#); [Saussure 1974, 67](#)). He was focusing on linguistic signs, seeing language as the most important sign system; for Saussure, the arbitrary nature of the sign was the first principle of language ([Saussure 1983, 67](#); [Saussure 1974, 67](#)) - arbitrariness was identified later by Charles Hockett as a key 'design feature' of language ([Hockett 1958](#); [Hockett 1960](#); [Hockett 1965](#)). The feature of arbitrariness may indeed help to account for the extraordinary versatility of language ([Lyons 1977, 71](#)). In the context of natural language, Saussure stressed that there is no inherent, essential,

'transparent', self-evident or 'natural' connection between the signifier and the signified - between the sound or shape of a word and the concept to which it refers ([Saussure 1983, 67, 68-69, 76, 111, 117](#); [Saussure 1974, 67, 69, 76, 113, 119](#)). Note that Saussure himself avoids directly relating the principle of arbitrariness to the relationship between language and an external world, but that subsequent commentators often do, and indeed, lurking behind the purely conceptual 'signified' one can often detect Saussure's allusion to real-world referents ([Coward & Ellis 1977, 22](#)). In language at least, the form of the signifier is not determined by what it signifies: there is nothing 'treeish' about the word 'tree'. Languages differ, of course, in how they refer to the same referent. No specific signifier is 'naturally' more suited to a signified than any other signifier; in principle any signifier could represent any signified. Saussure observed that 'there is nothing at all to prevent the association of any idea whatsoever with any sequence of sounds whatsoever' ([Saussure 1983, 76](#); [Saussure 1974, 76](#)); 'the process which selects one particular sound-sequence to correspond to one particular idea is completely arbitrary' ([Saussure 1983, 111](#); [Saussure 1974, 113](#)).

This principle of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign was not an original conception: Aristotle had noted that 'there can be no natural connection between the sound of any language and the things signified' (cited in [Richards 1932, 32](#)). In Plato's *Cratylus* Hermogenes urged Socrates to accept that 'whatever name you give to a thing is its right name; and if you give up that name and change it for another, the later name is no less correct than the earlier, just as we change the name of our servants; for I think no name belongs to a particular thing by nature' (cited in [Harris 1987, 67](#)). 'That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet', as Shakespeare put it. Whilst the notion of the arbitrariness of language was not new, but the emphasis which Saussure gave it can be seen as an original contribution, particularly in the context of a theory which bracketed the referent. Note that although Saussure prioritized speech, he also stressed that 'the signs used in writing are arbitrary, The letter *t*, for instance, has no connection with the sound it denotes' ([Saussure 1983, 117](#); [Saussure 1974, 119](#)).

The arbitrariness principle can be applied not only to the sign, but to the whole sign-system. The fundamental arbitrariness of language is apparent from the observation that [each language involves different distinctions](#) between one signifier and another (e.g. 'tree' and 'free') and between one signified and another (e.g. 'tree' and 'bush'). The signified is clearly arbitrary if *reality* is perceived as a seamless continuum (which is how Saussure sees the initially undifferentiated realms of both thought and sound): where, for example, does a 'corner' end? Commonsense suggests that the existence of things in the world preceded our apparently simple application of 'labels' to them (a 'nomenclaturist' notion which Saussure rejected and to which we will return in due course). Saussure noted that 'if words had the job of representing concepts fixed in advance, one would be able to find exact equivalents for them as between one language and another. But this is not the case' ([Saussure 1983, 114-115](#); [Saussure 1974, 116](#)). Reality is divided up into arbitrary categories by every language and the conceptual world with which each of us is familiar could have been divided up very differently. Indeed, no two languages categorize reality in the same way. As John Passmore puts it, 'Languages differ by differentiating differently' (cited in [Sturrock 1986, 17](#)). Linguistic categories are not simply a consequence of some predefined structure in the world. There are no 'natural' concepts or categories which are simply 'reflected' in language. Language plays a crucial role in 'constructing reality'.



If one accepts the arbitrariness of the relationship between signifier and signified then one may argue counter-intuitively that the signified is determined by the signifier

rather than vice versa. Indeed, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, in adapting Saussurean theories, sought to highlight the primacy of the signifier in the psyche by rewriting Saussure's model of the sign in the form of a quasi-algebraic sign in which a capital 'S' (representing the *signifier*) is placed over a lower case and italicized 's' (representing the *signified*), these two signifiers being separated by a horizontal 'bar' ([Lacan 1977, 149](#)). This suited Lacan's purpose of emphasizing how the signified inevitably 'slips beneath' the signifier, resisting our attempts to delimit it. Lacan poetically refers to Saussure's illustration of the planes of sound and thought as 'an image resembling the wavy lines of the upper and lower Waters in miniatures from manuscripts of *Genesis*; a double flux marked by streaks of rain', suggesting that this can be seen as illustrating the 'incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier' - although he argues that one should regard the dotted vertical lines not as 'segments of correspondence' but as 'anchoring points' (*points de capiton* - literally, the 'buttons' which anchor upholstery to furniture). However, he notes that this model is too linear, since 'there is in effect no signifying chain that does not have, as if attached to the punctuation of each of its units, a whole articulation of relevant contexts suspended 'vertically', as it were, from that point' ([ibid., 154](#)). In the spirit of the Lacanian critique of Saussure's model, subsequent theorists have emphasized the temporary nature of the bond between signifier and signified, stressing that the 'fixing' of 'the chain of signifiers' is socially situated ([Coward & Ellis 1977, 6, 13, 17, 67](#)). Note that whilst the intent of Lacan in placing the signifier *over* the signified is clear enough, his representational strategy seems a little curious, since in the modelling of society orthodox Marxists routinely represent the fundamental driving force of 'the [techno-economic] base' as (logically) below 'the [ideological] superstructure'.

The arbitrariness of the sign is a radical concept because it proposes the autonomy of language in relation to reality. The Saussurean model, with its emphasis on internal structures within a sign system, can be seen as supporting the notion that language does not 'reflect' reality but rather *constructs* it. We can use language 'to say what isn't in the world, as well as what is. And since we come to know the world through whatever language we have been born into the midst of, it is legitimate to argue that our language determines reality, rather than reality our language' ([Sturrock 1986, 79](#)). In their book *The Meaning of Meaning*, Ogden and Richards criticized Saussure for 'neglecting entirely the things for which signs stand' ([Ogden & Richards 1923, 8](#)). Later critics have lamented his model's detachment from social context ([Gardiner 1992, 11](#)). Robert Stam argues that by 'bracketing the referent', the Saussurean model 'severs text from history' ([Stam 2000, 122](#)). We will return to this theme of the relationship between language and 'reality' in our discussion of ['modality and representation'](#).

The arbitrary aspect of signs does help to account for the scope for their interpretation (and the importance of context). There is no one-to-one link between signifier and signified; signs have multiple rather than single meanings. Within a single language, one signifier may refer to many signifieds (e.g. puns) and one signified may be referred to by many signifiers (e.g. synonyms). Some commentators are critical of the stance that the relationship of the signifier to the signified, even in language, is always completely arbitrary (e.g. [Lewis 1991, 29](#)). Onomatopoeic words are often mentioned in this context, though some semioticians retort that this hardly accounts for the variability between different languages in their words for the same sounds (notably the sounds made by familiar animals) ([Saussure 1983, 69](#); [Saussure 1974, 69](#)).

Saussure declares that 'the entire linguistic system is founded upon the irrational principle that the sign is arbitrary'. This provocative declaration is followed immediately by the acknowledgement that 'applied without restriction, this principle would lead to utter chaos' ([Saussure 1983, 131](#); [Saussure](#)

[1974, 133](#)). If linguistic signs were to be *totally* arbitrary in every way language would not be a system and its communicative function would be destroyed. He concedes that 'there exists no language in which nothing at all is motivated' (*ibid.*). Saussure admits that 'a language is not completely arbitrary, for the system has a certain rationality' ([Saussure 1983, 73](#); [Saussure 1974, 73](#)). The principle of arbitrariness does not mean that the form of a word is accidental or random, of course. Whilst the sign is not determined *extralinguistically* it is subject to *intralinguistic* determination. For instance, signifiers must constitute well-formed combinations of sounds which conform with existing patterns within the language in question. Furthermore, we can recognize that a compound noun such as 'screwdriver' is not wholly arbitrary since it is a meaningful combination of two existing signs. Saussure introduces a distinction between *degrees* of arbitrariness:

The fundamental principle of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign does not prevent us from distinguishing in any language between what is intrinsically arbitrary - that is, unmotivated - and what is only relatively arbitrary. Not all signs are absolutely arbitrary. In some cases, there are factors which allow us to recognize different degrees of arbitrariness, although never to discard the notion entirely. *The sign may be motivated to a certain extent* ([Saussure 1983, 130](#); [Saussure 1974, 131](#); original emphasis, see also following pages)

Here then Saussure modifies his stance somewhat and refers to signs as being 'relatively arbitrary'. Some subsequent theorists (echoing [Althusserian Marxist terminology](#)) refer to the relationship between the signifier and the signified in terms of 'relative autonomy' ([Tagg 1988, 167](#); [Lechte 1994, 150](#)). The *relative* conventionality of relationships between signified and signifier is a point to which I return below.

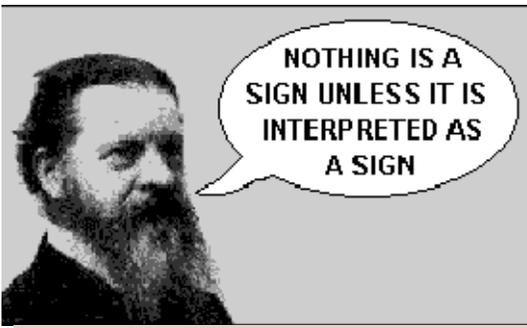
It should be noted that whilst the relationships between signifiers and their signifieds are *ontologically* arbitrary (philosophically, it would not make any difference to the status of these entities in 'the order of things' if what we call 'black' had always been called 'white' and *vice versa*), this is not to suggest that signifying systems are *socially* or *historically* arbitrary. Natural languages are not, of course, arbitrarily established, unlike historical inventions such as Morse Code. Nor does the arbitrary nature of the sign make it socially 'neutral' or materially 'transparent' - for example, in Western culture 'white' has come to be a privileged signifier ([Dyer 1997](#)). Even in the case of the 'arbitrary' colours of traffic lights, the original choice of red for 'stop' was not entirely arbitrary, since it already carried relevant associations with danger. As Lévi-Strauss noted, the sign is arbitrary *a priori* but ceases to be arbitrary *a posteriori* - after the sign has come into historical existence it cannot be arbitrarily changed ([Lévi-Strauss 1972, 91](#)). As part of its social use within a [code](#) (a term which became fundamental amongst post-Saussurean semioticians), every sign acquires a history and [connotations](#) of its own which are familiar to members of the sign-users' culture. Saussure remarked that although the signifier 'may seem to be freely chosen', from the point of view of the linguistic community it is 'imposed rather than freely chosen' because 'a language is always an inheritance from the past' which its users have 'no choice but to accept' ([Saussure 1983, 71-72](#); [Saussure 1974, 71](#)). Indeed, 'it is because the linguistic sign is arbitrary that it knows no other law than that of tradition, and [it is] because it is founded upon tradition that it can be arbitrary' ([Saussure 1983, 74](#); [Saussure 1974, 74](#)). The arbitrariness principle does *not*, of course mean that an individual can arbitrarily choose any signifier for a given signified. The relation between a signifier and its signified is *not* a matter of individual choice; if it were then communication would become impossible. 'The individual has no power to alter a sign in any respect once it has become established in the linguistic community' ([Saussure 1983, 68](#); [Saussure 1974, 69](#)). From the point-of-view of individual language-users,

language is a 'given' - we don't create the system for ourselves. Saussure refers to the language system as a non-negotiable 'contract' into which one is born ([Saussure 1983, 14](#); [Saussure 1974, 14](#)) - although he later problematizes the term (*ibid.*, 71). The ontological arbitrariness which it involves becomes invisible to us as we learn to accept it as 'natural'.



The Saussurean legacy of the arbitrariness of signs leads semioticians to stress that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is *conventional* - dependent on social and cultural conventions. This is particularly clear in the case of the linguistic signs with which Saussure was concerned: a word means what it does to us only because we collectively agree to let it do so. Saussure felt that the main concern of semiotics should be 'the whole group of systems grounded in the arbitrariness of the sign'. He argued that: 'signs which are entirely arbitrary convey better than others the ideal semiological process. That is why the most complex and the most widespread of all systems of expression, which is the one we find in human languages, is also the most characteristic of all. In this sense, linguistics serves as a model for the whole of semiology, even though languages represent only one type of semiological system' ([Saussure 1983, 68](#); [Saussure 1974, 68](#)). He did not in fact offer many examples of sign systems other than spoken

language and writing, mentioning only: the deaf-and-dumb alphabet; social customs; etiquette; religious and other symbolic rites; legal procedures; military signals and nautical flags ([Saussure 1983, 15, 17, 68, 74](#); [Saussure 1974, 16, 17, 68, 73](#)). Saussure added that 'any means of expression accepted in a society rests in principle upon a collective habit, or on convention - which comes to the same thing' ([Saussure 1983, 68](#); [Saussure 1974, 68](#)). However, whilst purely conventional signs such as words are quite independent of their referents, other less conventional forms of signs are often somewhat less independent of them. Nevertheless, since the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs is clear, those who have adopted the Saussurean model have tended to avoid 'the familiar mistake of assuming that signs which appear natural to those who use them have an intrinsic meaning and require no explanation' ([Culler 1975, 5](#)).



At around the same time as Saussure was formulating his model of the sign, of 'semiology' and of a structuralist methodology, across the Atlantic independent work was also in progress as the pragmatist philosopher and logician Charles Sanders Peirce formulated his own model of the sign, of 'semiotic' and of the taxonomies of signs. In contrast to Saussure's model of the sign in the form of a 'self-contained dyad', Peirce offered a triadic model:

- The **Representamen**: the form which the sign takes (not necessarily material);
- An **Interpretant**: *not* an interpreter but rather the sense made of the sign;
- An **Object**: to which the sign refers.

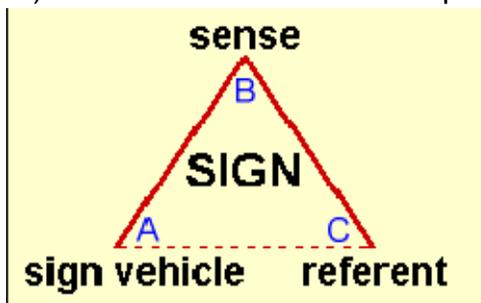
'A sign... [in the form of a *representamen*] is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but

in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen' ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.228](#)). The interaction between the *representamen*, the *object* and the *interpretant* is referred to by Peirce as 'semiosis' ([ibid., 5.484](#)). Within Peirce's model of the sign, the traffic light sign for 'stop' would consist of: a red light facing traffic at an intersection (the representamen); vehicles halting (the object) and the idea that a red light indicates that vehicles must stop (the interpretant).

Peirce's model of the sign includes an *object* or referent - which does not, of course, feature directly in Saussure's model. The *representamen* is similar in meaning to Saussure's *signifier* whilst the *interpretant* is similar in meaning to the *signified* ([Silverman 1983, 15](#)). However, the *interpretant* has a quality unlike that of the *signified*: it is itself a sign in the mind of the interpreter. Peirce noted that 'a sign... addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign' ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.228](#)). Umberto Eco uses the phrase 'unlimited semiosis' to refer to the way in which this could lead (as Peirce was well aware) to a series of successive interpretants (potentially) *ad infinitum* ([ibid., 1.339, 2.303](#)). Elsewhere Peirce added that 'the meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation' ([ibid., 1.339](#)). Any initial interpretation can be re-interpreted. That a signified can itself play the role of a signifier is familiar to anyone who uses a dictionary and finds themselves going beyond the original definition to look up yet another word which it employs. This concept can be seen as going beyond Saussure's emphasis on the value of a sign lying in its relation to other signs and it was later to be developed more radically by poststructuralist theorists. Another concept which is alluded to within Peirce's model which has been taken up by later theorists but which was explicitly excluded from Saussure's model is the notion of dialogical thought. It stems in part from Peirce's emphasis on 'semiosis' as a *process* which is in distinct contrast to Saussure's synchronic emphasis on *structure* ([Peirce 1931-58, 5.484, 5.488](#)). Peirce argued that 'all thinking is dialogic in form. Your self of one instant appeals to your deeper self for his assent' ([Peirce 1931-58, 6.338](#)). This notion resurfaced in a more developed form in the 1920s in the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin ([Bakhtin 1981](#)). One important aspect of this is its characterization even of internal reflection as fundamentally social.

Peirce, clearly fascinated by tripartite structures, made a phenomenological distinction between the sign itself [or the representamen] as an instance of 'Firstness', its object as an instance of 'Secondness' and the interpretant as an instance of 'Thirdness'. Such unfamiliar terms are relatively modest examples of Peircean coinages, and the complexity of his terminology and style has been a factor in limiting the influence of a distinctively Peircean semiotics.

Variants of Peirce's triad are often presented as 'the semiotic triangle' (as if there were only one version). Here is a version which is quite often encountered and which changes only the unfamiliar



One

Peircean terms ([Nöth 1990, 89](#)):

- **Sign vehicle:** the form of the sign;
- **Sense:** the sense made of the sign;
- **Referent:** what the sign 'stands for'.

fairly well-known semiotic triangle is that of Ogden and Richards, in which the terms used are (a) 'symbol', (b) 'thought or reference' and (c) 'referent' ([Ogden & Richards 1923, 14](#)). The broken line at the base of the triangle is intended to indicate that there is not

necessarily any observable or direct relationship between the sign vehicle and the referent. Unlike Saussure's abstract *signified* (which is analogous to term **B** rather than to **C**) the *referent* is an 'object'. This need not exclude the reference of signs to abstract concepts and fictional entities as well as to physical things, but Peirce's model allocates a place for an objective reality which Saussure's model did not directly feature (though Peirce was not a naive realist, and argued that all experience is mediated by signs). Note, however, that Peirce emphasized that 'the dependence of the mode of existence of the thing represented upon the mode of this or that representation of it... is contrary to the nature of reality' ([Peirce 1931-58, 5.323](#)). The inclusion of a referent in Peirce's model does not automatically make it a better model of the sign than that of Saussure. Indeed, as John Lyons notes:

There is considerable disagreement about the details of the triadic analysis even among those who accept that all three components, **A**, **B** and **C**, must be taken into account. Should **A** be defined as a physical or a mental entity? What is the psychological or ontological status of **B**? Is **C** something that is referred to on a particular occasion? Or is it the totality of things that might be referred to by uttering the sign...? Or, yet a third possibility, is it some typical or ideal representative of this class? ([Lyons 1977, 99](#))

The notion of the importance of sense-making (which requires an *interpreter* - though Peirce doesn't feature that term in his triad) has had a particular appeal for communication and media theorists who stress the importance of the active process of interpretation, and thus reject the equation of 'content' and meaning. Many of these theorists allude to semiotic triangles in which the interpreter (or 'user') of the sign features explicitly (in place of 'sense' or 'interpretant'). This highlights the *process* of semiosis (which is very much a Peircean concept). The meaning of a sign is not contained within it, but arises in its interpretation. Whether a dyadic or triadic model is adopted, the role of the interpreter must be accounted for - either within the formal model of the sign, or as an essential part of the process of semiosis. David Sless declares that 'statements about users, signs or referents can never be made in isolation from each other. A statement about one always contains implications about the other two' ([Sless 1986, 6](#)). Paul Thibault argues that the *interpreter* features implicitly even within Saussure's apparently dyadic model ([Thibault 1997, 184](#)).

Note that semioticians make a distinction between a sign and a 'sign vehicle' (the latter being a 'signifier' to Saussureans and a 'representamen' to Peirceans). The sign is more than just a sign vehicle. The term 'sign' is often used loosely, so that this distinction is not always preserved. In the Saussurean framework, some references to 'the sign' should be to the *signifier*, and similarly, Peirce himself frequently mentions 'the sign' when, strictly speaking, he is referring to the *representamen*. It is easy to be found guilty of such a slippage, perhaps because we are so used to 'looking beyond' the form which the sign happens to take. However, to reiterate: the *signifier* or *representamen* is the *form* in which the sign appears (such as the spoken or written form of a word) whereas the *sign* is the whole meaningful ensemble.

Whereas Saussure emphasized the arbitrary nature of the (linguistic) sign, most semioticians stress that signs differ in how arbitrary/conventional (or by contrast 'transparent') they are. Symbolism reflects only one form of relationship between signifiers and their signifieds. Whilst Saussure did not offer a typology of signs, Charles Peirce was a compulsive taxonomist and he offered several logical typologies ([Peirce 1931-58, 1.291, 2.243](#)). However, his divisions and subdivisions of signs are extraordinarily elaborate: indeed, he offered the theoretical projection that there could be 59,049 types of signs! Peirce himself noted wryly that this calculation 'threatens a multitude of classes too

great to be conveniently carried in one's head', adding that 'we shall, I think, do well to postpone preparation for further divisions until there be a prospect of such a thing being wanted' ([Peirce 1931-58, 1.291](#)). However, even his more modest proposals are daunting: Susanne Langer commented that 'there is but cold comfort in his assurance that his original 59,049 types can really be boiled down to a mere sixty-six' ([Langer 1951, 56](#)). Unfortunately, the complexity of such typologies rendered them 'nearly useless' as working models for others in the field ([Sturrock 1986, 17](#)). However, one of Peirce's basic classifications (first outlined in 1867) has been very widely referred to in subsequent semiotic studies ([Peirce 1931-58, 1.564](#)). He regarded it as 'the most fundamental' division of signs ([ibid., 2.275](#)). It is less useful as a classification of distinct 'types of signs' than of differing 'modes of relationship' between sign vehicles and their referents ([Hawkes 1977, 129](#)). Note that in the subsequent account, I have continued to employ the Saussurean terms *signifier* and *signified*, even though Peirce referred to the relation between the 'sign' (*sic*) and the *object*, since the Peircean distinctions are most commonly employed within a broadly Saussurean framework. Such incorporation tends to emphasize (albeit indirectly) the referential potential of the signified within the Saussurean model. Here then are the three modes together with some brief definitions of my own and some illustrative examples:



Symbol/symbolic: a mode in which the signifier does *not* resemble the signified but which is fundamentally *arbitrary* or purely conventional - so that the relationship must be learnt: e.g. language in general (plus specific languages, alphabetical letters, punctuation marks, words, phrases and sentences), numbers, morse code, traffic lights, national flags;



Icon/iconic: a mode in which the signifier is perceived as *resembling* or imitating the signified (recognizably looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling like it) - being similar in possessing some of its qualities: e.g. a portrait, a cartoon, a scale-model, onomatopoeia, metaphors, 'realistic' sounds in 'programme music', sound effects in radio drama, a dubbed film soundtrack, imitative gestures;



Index/indexical: a mode in which the signifier is *not arbitrary* but is *directly connected* in some way (physically or causally) to the signified - this link can be observed or inferred: e.g. 'natural signs' (smoke, thunder, footprints, echoes, non-synthetic odours and flavours), medical symptoms (pain, a rash, pulse-rate), measuring instruments (weathercock, thermometer, clock, spirit-level), 'signals' (a knock on a door, a phone ringing), pointers (a pointing 'index' finger, a directional signpost), recordings (a photograph, a film, video or television shot, an audio-recorded voice), personal 'trademarks' (handwriting, catchphrase) and indexical words ('that', 'this', 'here', 'there').

The three forms are listed here in decreasing order of conventionality. Symbolic signs such as language are (at least) highly conventional; iconic signs always involve some degree of conventionality; indexical signs 'direct the attention to their objects by blind compulsion' ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.306](#)). *Indexical* and *iconic* signifiers can be seen as more constrained by referential *signifieds* whereas in the more conventional *symbolic* signs the *signified* can be seen as being defined to a greater extent by the *signifier*. Within each form signs also vary in their degree of conventionality. Other criteria might be applied to rank the three forms differently. For instance, Hodge and Kress suggest that indexicality is based on an act of judgement or inference whereas iconicity is closer to 'direct perception' making the highest '[modality](#)' that of iconic signs. Note that the terms 'motivation' (from Saussure) and 'constraint' are sometimes used to describe the extent to which the signified determines the signifier. The more a signifier is constrained by the signified, the more 'motivated' the

sign is: iconic signs are highly motivated; symbolic signs are unmotivated. The less motivated the sign, the more learning of an agreed convention is required. Nevertheless, most semioticians emphasize the role of convention in relation to signs. As we shall see, even photographs and films are built on conventions which we must learn to 'read'. Such conventions are an important social dimension of semiotics.

Peirce and Saussure used the term '*symbol*' differently from each other. Whilst nowadays most theorists would refer to language as a symbolic sign system, Saussure avoided referring to linguistic signs as 'symbols', since the ordinary everyday use of this term refers to examples such as a pair of scales (signifying *justice*), and he insisted that such signs are 'never wholly arbitrary. They are not empty configurations'. They 'show at least a vestige of natural connection' between the signifier and the signified - a link which he later refers to as 'rational' ([Saussure 1983, 68, 73](#); [Saussure 1974, 68, 73](#)). Whilst Saussure focused on the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, a more obvious example of arbitrary symbolism is mathematics. Mathematics does not need to refer to an external world at all: its signifieds are indisputably *concepts* and mathematics is a system of relations ([Langer 1951, 28](#)).

For Peirce, a symbol is 'a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the symbol to be interpreted as referring to that object' ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.249](#)). We interpret symbols according to 'a rule' or 'a habitual connection' ([ibid., 2.292, 2.297, 1.369](#)). 'The symbol is connected with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using animal, without which no such connection would exist' ([ibid., 2.299](#)). It 'is constituted a sign merely or mainly by the fact that it is used and understood as such' ([ibid., 2.307](#)). It 'would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant' ([ibid., 2.304](#)). A symbol is 'a conventional sign, or one depending upon habit (acquired or inborn)' ([ibid., 2.297](#)). 'All words, sentences, books and other conventional signs are symbols' ([ibid., 2.292](#)). Peirce thus characterizes linguistic signs in terms of their *conventionality* in a similar way to Saussure. In a rare direct reference to the arbitrariness of symbols (which he then called 'tokens'), he noted that they 'are, for the most part, conventional or arbitrary' ([ibid., 3.360](#)). A symbol is a sign 'whose special significance or fitness to represent just what it does represent lies in nothing but the very fact of there being a habit, disposition, or other effective general rule that it will be so interpreted. Take, for example, the word "*man*". These three letters are not in the least like a man; nor is the sound with which they are associated' ([ibid., 4.447](#)). He adds elsewhere that 'a *symbol*... fulfills its function regardless of any similarity or analogy with its object and equally regardless of any *factual* connection therewith' but solely because it will be interpreted as a sign ([ibid., 5.73](#); *original emphasis*).

Turning to *icons*, Peirce declared that an iconic sign represents its object 'mainly by its similarity' ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.276](#)). A sign is an icon 'insofar as it is like that thing and used as a sign of it' ([ibid., 2.247](#)). Indeed, he originally termed such modes, 'likenesses' (e.g. [ibid., 1.558](#)). He added that 'every picture (however conventional its method)' is an icon ([ibid., 2.279](#)). Icons have qualities which 'resemble' those of the objects they represent, and they 'excite analogous sensations in the mind' ([ibid., 2.299](#); see also [3.362](#)). Unlike the index, 'the icon has no dynamical connection with the object it represents' ([ibid.](#)). Just because a signifier resembles that which it depicts does not necessarily make it purely iconic. The philosopher Susanne Langer argues that 'the picture is essentially a symbol, not a duplicate, of what it represents' ([Langer 1951, 67](#)). Pictures resemble what they represent only in some respects. What we tend to recognize in an image are analogous relations of parts to a whole ([ibid., 67-70](#)). For Peirce, icons included 'every diagram, even although there be no sensuous resemblance between it and its object, but only an analogy between the relations of the

parts of each' ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.279](#)). 'Many diagrams resemble their objects not at all in looks; it is only in respect to the relations of their parts that their likeness consists' ([ibid., 2.282](#)). Even the most 'realistic' image is not a replica or even a copy of what is depicted. We rarely mistake a representation for what it represents.

Semioticians generally maintain that there are no 'pure' icons - there is always an element of cultural convention involved. Peirce stated that although 'any material image' (such as a painting) may be perceived as looking like what it represents, it is 'largely conventional in its mode of representation' ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.276](#)). 'We say that the portrait of a person we have not seen is *convincing*. So far as, on the ground merely of what I see in it, I am led to form an idea of the person it represents, it is an icon. But, in fact, it is not a pure icon, because I am greatly influenced by knowing that it is an *effect*, through the artist, caused by the original's appearance... Besides, I know that portraits have but the slightest resemblance to their originals, except in certain conventional respects, and after a conventional scale of values, etc.' ([ibid., 2.92](#)).



Guy Cook asks whether the iconic sign on the door of a public lavatory for men actually looks more like a man than like a woman. 'For a sign to be truly iconic, it would have to be transparent to someone who had never seen it before - and it seems unlikely that this is as much the case as is sometimes supposed. We see the resemblance when we already know the meaning' ([Cook 1992, 70](#)). Thus, even a 'realistic' picture is *symbolic* as well as iconic.

Iconic and indexical signs are more likely to be read as 'natural' than symbolic signs when making the connection between signifier and signified has become habitual. Iconic signifiers can be highly evocative. Kent Grayson observes:

'Because we can see the object in the sign, we are often left with a sense that the icon has brought us closer to the truth than if we had instead seen an index or a symbol' ([Grayson 1998, 36](#)). He adds that 'instead of drawing our attention to the gaps that always exist in representation, iconic experiences encourage us subconsciously to fill in these gaps and then to believe that there were no gaps in the first place... This is the paradox of representation: it may deceive most when we think it works best' ([ibid., 41](#)).

The linguist John Lyons notes that iconicity is 'always dependent upon properties of the medium in which the form is manifest' ([Lyons 1977, 105](#)). He offers the example of the onomatopoeic English word *cuckoo*, noting that it is only iconic in the phonic medium (speech) and not in the graphic medium (writing). Whilst the phonic medium can represent characteristic sounds (albeit in a relatively conventionalized way), the graphic medium can represent characteristic shapes (as in the case of Egyptian hieroglyphs) ([Lyons 1977, 103](#)). We will return shortly to the importance of the materiality of the sign.

Indexicality is perhaps the most unfamiliar concept. Peirce offers various criteria for what constitutes an index. An index 'indicates' something: for example, 'a sundial or clock *indicates* the time of day' ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.285](#)). He refers to a 'genuine relation' between the 'sign' and the *object* which does not depend purely on 'the interpreting mind' ([ibid., 2.92, 298](#)). The *object* is 'necessarily existent' ([ibid., 2.310](#)). The index is connected to its object 'as a matter of fact' ([ibid., 4.447](#)). There is 'a real connection' ([ibid., 5.75](#)). There may be a 'direct physical connection' ([ibid., 1.372, 2.281, 2.299](#)). An indexical sign is like 'a fragment torn away from the object' ([ibid., 2.231](#)). Unlike an icon (the object of

which may be fictional) an index stands 'unequivocally for this or that existing thing' ([ibid., 4.531](#)). Whilst 'it necessarily has some quality in common' with it, the signifier is 'really affected' by the signified; there is an 'actual modification' involved ([ibid., 2.248](#)). The relationship is *not* based on 'mere resemblance' ([ibid.](#)): 'indices... have no significant resemblance to their objects' ([ibid., 2.306](#)). 'Similarity or analogy' are not what define the index ([ibid., 2.305](#)). 'Anything which focusses the attention is an index. Anything which startles us is an index' ([ibid., 2.285](#); see also [3.434](#)). Indexical signs 'direct the attention to their objects by blind compulsion' ([ibid., 2.306](#); see also [2.191, 2.428](#)). 'Psychologically, the action of indices depends upon association by contiguity, and not upon association by resemblance or upon intellectual operations' ([ibid.](#)).

Whilst a photograph is also perceived as resembling that which it depicts, Peirce noted that a photograph is not only iconic but also *indexical*: 'photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that in certain respects they are exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the... class of signs... by physical connection [the indexical class]' ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.281](#); see also [5.554](#)). So in this sense, since the photographic image is an index of the effect of light on photographic emulsion, all *unedited* photographic and filmic images are indexical (although we should remember that conventional practices are always involved in composition, focusing, developing and so on). Such images do of course 'resemble' what they depict, and it has been suggested the 'real force' of the photographic and filmic image 'lies in its iconic signification' ([Deacon et al. 1999, 188](#)). However, whilst digital imaging techniques are increasingly eroding the indexicality of photographic images, it is arguable that it is the indexicality still routinely attributed to the medium which is primarily responsible for interpreters treating them as 'objective' records of 'reality'. Peirce observed that 'a photograph... owing to its optical connection with its object, is evidence that that appearance corresponds to a reality' ([Peirce 1931-58, 4.447](#)). In many contexts photographs are indeed regarded as 'evidence', not least in legal contexts. As for the moving image, video-cameras are of course widely used 'in evidence'. Documentary film and location footage in television news programmes depend upon the indexical nature of the sign. In such genres indexicality seems to warrant the status of the material as *evidence*. Photographic and filmic images may also be *symbolic*: in an empirical study of television news, Davis and Walton found that A relatively small proportion of the total number of shots is iconic or *directly* representative of the people, places and events which are subjects of the news text. A far greater proportion of shots has an oblique relationship to the text; they 'stand for' the subject matter indexically or symbolically ([Davis & Walton 1983b, 45](#)).

It is easy to slip into referring to Peirce's three forms as 'types of signs', but they are not necessarily mutually exclusive: a sign can be an icon, a symbol and an index, or any combination. Peirce was fully aware of this: for instance, he insisted that 'it would be difficult if not impossible to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality' ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.306](#)). A map is indexical in pointing to the locations of things, iconic in its representation of the directional relations and distances between landmarks and symbolic in using conventional symbols the significance of which must be learnt. The film theorist Peter Wollen argues that 'the great merit of Peirce's analysis of signs is that he did not see the different aspects as mutually exclusive. Unlike Saussure he did not show any particular prejudice in favour of one or the other. Indeed, he wanted a logic and a rhetoric which would be based on all three aspects' ([Wollen 1969, 141](#)). Film and television use all three forms: icon (sound and image), symbol (speech and writing), and index (as the

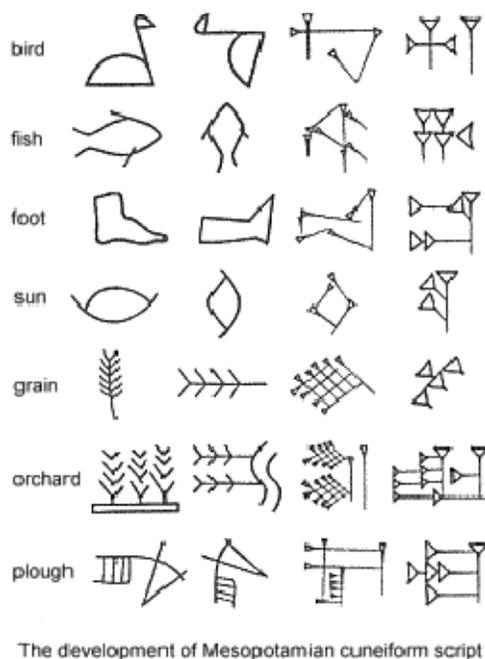
effect of what is filmed); at first sight iconic signs seem the dominant form, but some filmic signs are fairly arbitrary, such as 'dissolves' which signify that a scene from someone's memory is to follow.

Hawkes notes, following Jakobson, that the three modes 'co-exist in the form of a hierarchy in which one of them will inevitably have dominance over the other two', with dominance determined by context ([Hawkes 1977, 129](#)). Whether a sign is symbolic, iconic or indexical depends primarily on the way in which the sign is used, so textbook examples chosen to illustrate the various modes can be misleading. The same signifier may be used iconically in one context and symbolically in another: a photograph of a woman may stand for some broad category such as 'women' or may more specifically represent only the particular woman who is depicted. Signs cannot be classified in terms of the three modes without reference to the purposes of their users within particular contexts. A sign may consequently be treated as symbolic by one person, as iconic by another and as indexical by a third. As Kent Grayson puts it, 'When we speak of an icon, an index or a symbol, we are not referring to objective qualities of the sign itself, but to a viewer's experience of the sign' ([Grayson 1998, 35](#)). Signs may also shift in mode over time. As Jonathan Culler notes, 'In one sense a Rolls-Royce is an index of wealth in that one must be wealthy in order to purchase one, but it has been made a conventional sign of wealth by social usage' ([Culler 1975, 17](#)).

Despite his emphasis on studying 'the language-state' 'synchronically' (as if it were frozen at one moment in time) rather than 'diachronically' (studying its evolution), Saussure was well aware that the relationship between the signified and the signifier in language was subject to change over time ([Saussure 1983, 74ff](#); [Saussure 1974, 74ff](#)). However, this was not the focus of his concern. Critics of structuralist approaches emphasize that the relation between signifier and signified is subject to dynamic change: Rosalind Coward and John Ellis argue that any 'fixing' of 'the chain of signifiers' - is both temporary and socially determined ([Coward & Ellis 1977, 6, 8, 13](#)).

In terms of Peirce's three modes, a historical shift from one mode to another tends to occur. Although Peirce made far more allowance for non-linguistic signs than did Saussure, like Saussure, he too granted greater status to *symbolic* signs: 'they are the only general signs; and generality is essential to reasoning' ([Peirce 1931-58, 3.363](#); see also [4.448 & 4.531](#)). Saussure's emphasis on the importance of the principle of arbitrariness reflects his prioritizing of symbolic signs whilst Peirce referred to *Homo sapiens* as 'the symbol-using animal' ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.299](#)). The idea of the evolution of sign-systems towards the symbolic mode is consistent with such a perspective. Peirce speculates 'whether there be a life in signs, so that - the requisite vehicle being present - they will go through a certain order of development'. Interestingly, he does not present this as *necessarily* a matter of progress towards the 'ideal' of symbolic form since he allows for the theoretical possibility that 'the same round of changes of form is described over and over again' ([ibid., 2.111](#)). Whilst granting such a possibility, he nevertheless notes that 'a regular progression... may be remarked in the three orders of signs, Icon, Index, Symbol' ([ibid., 2.299](#)). Peirce posits iconicity as the original default mode of signification, declaring the icon to be 'an originalian sign' ([ibid., 2.92](#)), defining this as 'the most primitive, simple and original of the categories' ([ibid., 2.90](#)). Compared to the 'genuine sign... or symbol', an index is 'degenerate in the lesser degree' whilst an icon is 'degenerate in the greater degree'. Peirce noted that signs were 'originally in part iconic, in part indexical' ([ibid., 2.92](#)). He adds that 'in all primitive writing, such as the Egyptian hieroglyphics, there are icons of a non-logical kind, the ideographs' and he speculates that 'in the earliest form of speech there probably was a large element of mimicry' ([ibid., 2.280](#)). However, over time, linguistic signs developed a more

symbolic and conventional character ([ibid., 2.92, 2.280](#)). 'Symbols come into being by development out of other signs, particularly from icons' ([ibid., 2.302](#)).



The historical evidence does indicate a tendency of linguistic signs to evolve from indexical and iconic forms towards symbolic forms. Alphabets were not initially based on the substitution of conventional symbols for sounds. Marcel Danesi notes that 'archaeological research suggests... that the origins of alphabetical writing lie in symbols previously made out of elemental shapes that were used as image-making objects - much like the moulds that figurine and coin-makers use today. Only later did they take on more abstract qualities' ([Danesi 1999, 35](#); see [Schmandt-Besserat 1978](#)). Some of the letters in the Greek and Latin alphabets, of course, derive from iconic signs in Egyptian hieroglyphs. The early scripts of the Mediterranean civilizations used pictographs, ideographs and hieroglyphs. Many of these were iconic signs resembling the objects and actions to which they referred either directly or metaphorically. Over time, picture writing became more symbolic and less iconic ([Gelb 1963](#)). This shift from the iconic to the symbolic may have been 'dictated by the economy of using a chisel or a reed brush' ([Cherry 1966, 33](#)); in general, symbols are semiotically more flexible and efficient ([Lyons 1977, 103](#)). The anthropologist

Claude Lévi-Strauss identified a similar general movement from motivation to arbitrariness within the conceptual schemes employed by particular cultures ([Lévi-Strauss 1974, 156](#)).

Taking a historical perspective is one reason for the insistence of some theorists that 'signs are never arbitrary' ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 7](#)). Gunther Kress, for instance, emphasizes the motivation of the sign users rather than of the sign (see also [Hodge & Kress 1988, 21-2](#)). Rosalind Coward and John Ellis insist that 'every identity between signifier and signified is the result of productivity and a work of limiting that productivity' ([Coward & Ellis 1977, 7](#)).

A distinction is sometimes made between *digital* and *analogical* signs. Indeed, Anthony Wilden declares that 'no two categories, and no two kinds of experience are more fundamental in human life and thought than continuity and discontinuity' ([Wilden 1987, 222](#)). Whilst we experience time as a continuum, we may represent it in either analogue or digital form. A watch with an analogue display (with hour, minute and second hands) has the advantage of dividing an hour up like a cake (so that, in a lecture, for instance, we can 'see' how much time is left). A watch with a digital display (displaying the current time as a changing number) has the advantage of precision, so that we can easily see exactly what time it is 'now'. Even an analogue display is now simulated on some digital watches.

We have a deep attachment to analogical modes and we tend to regard digital representations as 'less real' or 'less authentic' - at least initially (as in the case of the audio CD compared to the vinyl LP). The *analogue/digital* distinction is frequently represented as 'natural' versus 'artificial'. Perhaps this is connected in part with the notion that the unconscious - that which we regard as 'deepest' within us - appears to operate analogically ([Wilden 1987, 224](#)). The privileging of the analogical may be linked with the status of the unconscious and the defiance of rationality in romantic ideology (which

still dominates our conception of ourselves as 'individuals'). The deliberate intention to communicate tends to be dominant in digital codes, whilst in analogue codes 'it is almost impossible... *not* to communicate' ([ibid., 225](#)). Beyond any conscious intention, we communicate through gesture, posture, facial expression, intonation and so on. Analogical codes unavoidably 'give us away', revealing such things as our moods, attitudes, intentions and truthfulness (or otherwise). However, although the appearance of the 'digital watch' in 1971 and the subsequent 'digital revolution' in audio- and video-recording have led us to associate the digital mode with electronic technologies, digital codes have existed since the earliest forms of language - and writing is a 'digital technology'. Signifying systems impose digital order on what we often experience as a dynamic and seamless flux. The very definition of something as a sign involves reducing the continuous to the discrete. [As we shall see later](#), binary (*either/or*) distinctions are a fundamental process in the creation of signifying structures. Digital signs involve discrete units such as words and 'whole numbers' and depend on the categorization of what is signified.

Analogical signs (such as visual images, gestures, textures, tastes and smells) involve graded relationships on a continuum. They can signify infinite subtleties which seem 'beyond words'. Emotions and feelings are analogical signifieds. Unlike symbolic signifiers, motivated signifiers (and their signifieds) blend into one another. There can be no comprehensive catalogue of such dynamic analogue signs as smiles or laughs. Analogue signs can of course be digitally reproduced (as is demonstrated by the digital recording of sounds and of both still and moving images) but they cannot be directly related to a standard 'dictionary' and syntax in the way that linguistic signs can. Bill Nichols notes that 'the graded quality of analogue codes may make them rich in meaning but it also renders them somewhat impoverished in syntactical complexity or semantic precision. By contrast the discrete units of digital codes may be somewhat impoverished in meaning but capable of much greater complexity or semantic signification' ([Nichols 1981, 47](#); see also [Wilden 1987, 138, 224](#)). The art historian Ernst Gombrich insists that 'statements cannot be translated into images' and that 'pictures cannot assert' - a contention also found in Peirce ([Gombrich 1982, 138, 175](#); [Peirce 1931-58, 2.291](#)). Nevertheless, whilst images serving such communicative purposes may be more 'open to interpretation', contemporary visual advertisements are a powerful example of how images may be used to make implicit claims which advertisers often prefer not to make more openly in words.

The Italian semiotician Umberto Eco has criticized the apparent equation of the terms 'arbitrary', 'conventional' and 'digital' by some commentators. He notes the way in which the following widespread pairings misleadingly suggest that the terms vertically aligned here are synonymous ([Eco 1976, 190](#)). He observes, for instance, that a photograph may be both 'motivated' and 'digital'. Nor is 'conventionality' (dependence on social and cultural conventions) equivalent to 'arbitrariness' (the lack of any intrinsic connection between the signifier and the signified). Yet it is easy to slip into treating such terms as equivalent - the current text far from immune to this. We may, as we shall see later, be so fond of [analogy](#) that we are often (perhaps unavoidably) its unwitting victims.

digital	vs.	analogical
arbitrary	vs.	motivated
conventional	vs.	natural

Another distinction between sign vehicles relates to the linguistic concept of *tokens* and *types* which derives from Peirce ([Peirce 1931-58, 4.537](#)). In relation to words in a spoken utterance or written text, a count of the tokens would be a count of the total number of words used (regardless of type), whilst a count of the types would be a count of the *different* words used, ignoring repetitions. In the language of semantics, tokens *instantiate* (are instances of) their type. 'Word' and 'word' are instances of the same type. Language depends on the distinction between tokens and types, between the particular instance and the general category. This is the basis of categorization. John Lyons notes that whether something is counted as a token of a type is relative to one's purposes - for instance:

- Are tokens to include words with different meanings which happen to be spelt or pronounced in the same way?
 - Does a capital letter instantiate the same type as the corresponding lower-case letter?
 - Does a word printed in italics instantiate the same type as a word printed in Roman?
 - Is a word handwritten by X ever the same as a word handwritten by Y?
- ([Lyons 1977, 13-15](#))

From a semiotic point-of-view, such questions could only be answered by considering in each case whether the different forms signified something of any consequence to the relevant sign-users in the context of the specific signifying practice being studied.

Eco lists three kinds of sign vehicles, and it is notable that the distinction relates in part at least to material form:

- signs in which there may be any number of tokens (replicas) of the same type (e.g. a printed word, or exactly the same model of car in the same colour);
 - 'signs whose tokens, even though produced according to a type, possess a certain quality of material uniqueness' (e.g. a word which someone speaks or which is handwritten);
 - 'signs whose token is their type, or signs in which type and token are identical' (e.g. a unique original oil-painting or Princess Diana's wedding dress).
- ([Eco 1976, 178ff](#))

The type-token distinction may influence the way in which a text is interpreted. In his influential essay on 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', the literary-philosophical theorist Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) noted that technological society is dominated by reproductions of original works - tokens of the original type ([Benjamin 1992, 211-244](#)). Indeed, even if we do see, for instance, 'the original' of a famous oil-painting, we are highly likely to have seen it first in the form of innumerable reproductions (books, postcards, posters - sometimes even in the form of pastiches or variations on the theme) and we may only be able to 'see' the original in the light of the judgements shaped by the copies or versions which we have encountered (see [Intertextuality](#)). In the postmodern era, the bulk of our texts are indeed 'copies without originals'.

The type-token distinction in relation to signs is important in social semiotic terms not as an absolute property of the sign vehicle but only insofar as it matters on any given occasion (for particular purposes) to those involved in using the sign. Minute differences in a pattern could be a matter of life and death for gamblers in relation to variations in the pattern on the backs of playing-cards within the

same pack, but stylistic differences in the design of each type of card (such as the Ace of Spades), are much appreciated by collectors as a distinctive feature of different packs of playing-cards.

As already indicated, Saussure saw both the signifier and the signified as non-material 'psychological' forms; the language itself is 'a form, not a substance' ([Saussure 1983, 111, 120](#); [Saussure 1974, 113, 122](#)). He uses several examples to reinforce his point. For instance, in one of several chess analogies, he notes that 'if pieces made of ivory are substituted for pieces made of wood, the change makes no difference to the system' ([Saussure 1983, 23](#); [Saussure 1974, 22](#)). Pursuing this *functional* approach, he notes elsewhere that the 8.25pm Geneva-to-Paris train is referred to as 'the same train' even though the combinations of locomotive, carriages and personnel may change. Similarly, he asks why a street which is completely rebuilt can still be 'the same street'. He suggests that this is 'because it is not a purely material structure' ([Saussure 1983, 107](#); [Saussure 1974, 108](#)). Saussure insists that this is not to say that such entities are 'abstract' since we cannot conceive of a street or train outside of its material realization - 'their physical existence is essential to our understanding of what they are' ([Saussure 1983, 107](#); [Saussure 1974, 109](#); see also *ibid*, 15). This can be related to the type-token distinction. Since Saussure sees language in terms of formal function rather than material substance, then whatever performs the same function within the system can be regarded as just another token of the same type. With regard to language, Saussure observes that 'sound, as a material element... is merely ancillary, a material the language uses' ([Saussure 1983, 116](#); [Saussure 1974, 118](#)). Linguistic signifiers are 'not physical in any way. They are constituted solely by differences which distinguish one such sound pattern from another' ([Saussure 1983, 117](#); [Saussure 1974, 118-119](#)). He admits at one point, with some apparent reluctance, that 'linguistic signs are, so to speak, tangible: writing can fix them in conventional images' ([Saussure 1983, 15](#); [Saussure 1974, 15](#)). However, referring to written signs, he comments that 'the actual mode of inscription is irrelevant, because it does not affect the system... Whether I write in black or white, in incised characters or in relief, with a pen or a chisel - none of that is of any importance for the meaning' ([Saussure 1983, 118](#); [Saussure 1974, 120](#)). One can understand how a linguist would tend to focus on form and function within language and to regard the material manifestations of language as of peripheral interest. 'The linguist... is interested in types, not tokens' ([Lyons 1977, 28](#)).

This was not only the attitude of the linguist Saussure, but also of the philosopher Peirce: 'The word "man"... does not consist of three films of ink. If the word "man" occurs hundreds of times in a book of which myriads of copies are printed, all those millions of triplets of patches of ink are embodiments of one and the same word... each of those embodiments a *replica* of the symbol. This shows that the word is not a thing' ([Peirce 1931-58, 4.447](#)). Peirce did refer to the materiality of the sign: 'since a sign is not identical with the thing signified, but differs from the latter in some respects, it must plainly have some characters which belong to it in itself... These I call the *material* qualities of the sign'. He granted that materiality is a property of the sign which is 'of great importance in the theory of cognition'. Materiality had 'nothing to do with its representative function' and it did not feature in his classificatory schemes. However, he alludes briefly to the signifying potential of materiality: 'if I take all the things which have certain qualities and physically connect them with another series of things, each to each, they become fit to be signs'. For instance, if the colour of a red flower matters to someone then redness is a sign ([ibid., 5.287](#)).

Whilst Saussure chose to ignore the materiality of the linguistic sign, most subsequent theorists who have adopted his model have chosen to reclaim the materiality of the sign (or more strictly of the signifier). Semioticians must take seriously any factors to which sign-users ascribe significance, and

the material form of a sign does sometimes make a difference. Contemporary theorists tend to acknowledge that the material form of the sign may generate [connotations](#) of its own. As early as 1929 Valentin Voloshinov published *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* which included a materialist critique of Saussure's psychological and implicitly idealist model of the sign. Voloshinov described Saussure's ideas as 'the most striking expression' of 'abstract objectivism' ([Voloshinov 1973, 58](#)). He insisted that 'a sign is a phenomenon of the external world' and that 'signs... are particular, material things'. Every sign 'has some kind of material embodiment, whether in sound, physical mass, colour, movements of the body, or the like' ([ibid., 10-11; cf. 28](#)). For Voloshinov, all signs, including language, have 'concrete material reality' ([ibid., 65](#)) and the physical properties of the sign matter.

Psychoanalytic theory also contributed to the reevaluation of the signifier - in Freudian dream theory the sound of the signifier could be regarded as a better guide to its possible signified than any conventional 'decoding' might have suggested ([Freud 1938, 319](#)). For instance, Freud reported that the dream of a young woman engaged to be married featured flowers - including lilies-of-the-valley and violets. Popular symbolism suggested that the lilies were a symbol of chastity and the woman agreed that she associated them with purity. However, Freud was surprised to discover that she associated the word 'violet' phonetically with the English word 'violate', suggesting her fear of the violence of 'defloration' (another word alluding to flowers) ([Freud 1938, 382-3](#)). If this sounds familiar, this particular dream motif featured in the film *Final Analysis* (1992). As the psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan emphasized (originally in 1957), the Freudian concepts of *condensation* and *displacement* illustrate the determination of the signified by the signifier in dreams ([Lacan 1977, 159ff](#)). In *condensation*, several thoughts are condensed into one symbol, whilst in *displacement* unconscious desire is displaced into an apparently trivial symbol (to avoid dream censorship).

Poststructuralist theorists have sought to revalorize the signifier. The phonocentrism which was allied with Saussure's suppression of the materiality of the linguistic sign was challenged in 1967, when the French poststructuralist Jacques Derrida, in his book *Of Grammatology*, attacked the privileging of speech over writing which is found in Saussure (as well as in the work of many other previous and subsequent linguists) ([Derrida 1976](#)). From Plato to Lévi-Strauss, the spoken word had held a privileged position in the Western worldview, being regarded as intimately involved in our sense of self and constituting a sign of truth and authenticity. Speech had become so thoroughly naturalized that 'not only do the signifier and the signified seem to unite, but also, in this confusion, the signifier seems to erase itself or to become transparent' ([Derrida 1981, 22](#)). Writing had traditionally been relegated to a secondary position. The deconstructive enterprise marked 'the return of the repressed' ([Derrida 1978, 197](#)). In seeking to establish 'Grammatology' or the study of textuality, Derrida championed the primacy of the material word. He noted that the specificity of words is itself a material dimension. 'The materiality of a word cannot be translated or carried over into another language. Materiality is precisely that which translation relinquishes' - this English translation presumably illustrating some such loss ([ibid., 210](#)). Roland Barthes also sought to revalorize the role of the signifier in the act of writing. He argued that in 'classic' literary writing, the writer 'is always supposed to go from signified to signifier, from content to form, from idea to text, from passion to expression' ([Barthes 1974, 174](#)). However, this was directly opposite to the way in which Barthes characterized the act of writing. For him, writing was a matter of working with the signifiers and letting the signifieds take care of themselves - a paradoxical phenomenon which other writers have often reported ([Chandler 1995, 60ff](#)). Subsequent theorists have also sought to 'rematerialize' the linguistic sign,

stressing that words are *things* and that texts are part of the material world (e.g. [Coward & Ellis 1977](#); [Silverman & Torode 1980](#)).

Jay David Bolter argues that 'signs are always anchored in a medium. Signs may be more or less dependent upon the characteristics of one medium - they may transfer more or less well to other media - but there is no such thing as a sign without a medium' ([Bolter 1991, 195-6](#)). This is a little misleading, because, as Justin Lewis notes, 'the *sign* has no material existence, since meaning is brought to words or objects, not *inscribed within* them. Only the signifier - the unit prior to meaning - exists as a material entity' ([Wren-Lewis 1983, 181](#)). Nevertheless, Bolter's point does apply to the sign vehicle, and as Hodge and Tripp note, 'fundamental to all semiotic analysis is the fact that any system of signs (semiotic *code*) is carried by a material medium *which has its own principles of structure*' ([Hodge & Tripp 1986, 17](#)). Furthermore, some media draw on several interacting sign systems: television and film, for example, utilize verbal, visual, auditory and locomotive signs. [The medium is not 'neutral'](#); each medium has its own constraints and, as Umberto Eco notes, each is already 'charged with cultural signification' ([Eco 1976, 267](#)). For instance, photographic and audio-visual media are almost invariably regarded as more 'real' than other forms of representation. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen argue that 'the material expression of the text is always significant; it is a separately variable semiotic feature' ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 231](#)). Changing the signifier at the level of the form or medium may thus influence the signified - the sense which readers make of what is ostensibly the same 'content'. Breaking up a relationship by fax is likely to be regarded in a different light from breaking up in a face-to-face situation.

I have alluded to the problematic distinction between form and content. The linguist Louis Hjelmslev acknowledged that 'there can be no content without an expression, or expressionless content; neither can there be an expression without a content, or content-less expression' ([Hjelmslev 1961, 49](#)). However, he offered a framework which facilitated analytical distinctions ([ibid., 47ff](#)). Whilst he referred to 'planes' of expression and content (Saussure's *signifier* and *signified*), he enriched this model ([ibid., 60](#)). His contribution was to suggest that both *expression* and *content* have *substance* and *form*. Thus there are four categories: substance of expression, form of expression, substance of content, form of content. Various theorists such as Christian Metz have built upon this theoretical distinction and they differ somewhat in what they assign to the four categories (see [Tudor 1974, 110](#); [Baggaley & Duck 1976, 149](#); [Metz 1981](#)).

	Substance	Form
Signifiers: plane of <i>expression</i>	<i>Substance of expression:</i> physical materials of the medium (e.g. photographs, recorded voices, printed words on paper)	<i>Form of expression:</i> language, formal syntactic structure, technique and style
Signifieds: plane of <i>content</i>	<i>Substance of content:</i> 'human content' (Metz), textual world, subject matter, genre	<i>Form of content:</i> 'semantic structure' (Baggaley & Duck), 'thematic structure' (including narrative) (Metz)

Whereas Saussure had insisted that language is 'a form, not a substance', Hjelmslev's framework allows us to analyse texts according to their various dimensions and to grant to each of these the potential for signification. Such a matrix provides a useful framework for the systematic analysis of texts, broadens the notion of what constitutes a sign, and reminds us that the materiality of the sign may in itself signify.

From an explicitly *social semiotic* perspective, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen adapt a linguistic model from Michael Halliday and insist that any semiotic system has three essential *metafunctions*:

- the *ideational* metafunction - 'to represent, in a referential or pseudo-referential sense, aspects of the experiential world outside its particular system of signs';
- the *interpersonal* metafunction - 'to project the relations between the producer of a sign... and the receiver/reproducer of that sign'; and
- the *textual* metafunction - 'to form *texts*, complexes of signs which cohere both internally and within the context in and for which they were produced'. ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 40-41](#))

Specific semiotic systems are called [codes](#).

Modality and Representation

Whilst semiotics is often encountered in the form of textual analysis, it also involves philosophical theorising on the role of signs in the construction of reality. Semiotics involves studying representations and the processes involved in representational practices, and to semioticians, 'reality' always involves representation.

To semioticians, a defining feature of signs is that they are treated by their users as 'standing for' or representing other things. Jonathan Swift's satirical account of the fictional academicians of Lagago highlights the inadequacies of the commonsense notion that signs stand directly for physical things in the world around us.

A Scheme for entirely abolishing all Words whatsoever... was urged as a great Advantage in Point of Health as well as Brevity. For it is plain, that every Word we speak is in some Degree a Diminution of our Lungs by Corrosion, and consequently contributes to the shortning of our Lives. An Expedient was therefore offered, that since Words are only Names for Things, it would be more convenient for all Men to carry about them, such Things as were necessary to express the particular Business they are to discourse on. And this Invention would certainly have taken Place, to the great Ease as well as Health of the Subject, if the Women in conjunction with the Vulgar and Illiterate had not threatned to raise a Rebellion, unless they might be allowed the Liberty to speak with their Tongues, after the manner of their Ancestors; such constant irreconcilable Enemies to Science are the common People. However, many of the most Learned and Wise adhere to the New Scheme of expressing themselves by Things, which hath only this Inconvenience attending it, that if a Man's Business be very great, and of various kinds, he must be obliged in Proportion to carry a greater bundle of Things upon his Back, unless he can afford one or two strong Servants to attend him. I have often beheld two

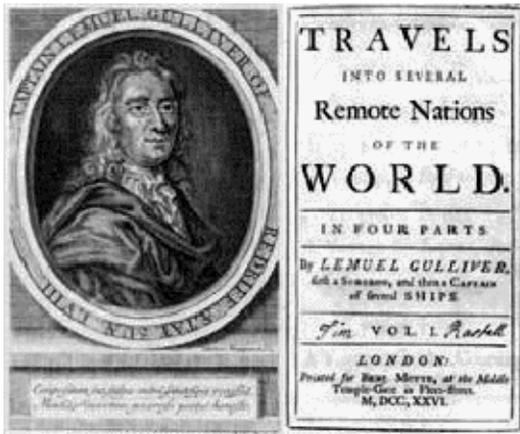
of those Sages almost sinking under the Weight of their Packs, like Pedlars among us; who, when they met in the Streets, would lay down their Loads, open their Sacks, and hold Conversation for an Hour together; then put up their Implements, help each other to resume their Burthens, and take their Leave.



But for short Conversations a Man may carry Implements in his Pockets and under his Arms, enough to supply him, and in his House he cannot be at a loss: Therefore the Room where Company meet who practise this Art, is full of all Things ready at Hand, requisite to furnish Matter for this kind of artificial Converse.

Another great Advantage proposed by this Invention, was that it would serve as a Universal Language to be understood in all civilized Nations, whose Goods and Utensils are generally of the same kind, or nearly resembling, so that their Uses might easily be comprehended. And thus Embassadors would be qualified to treat with foreign Princes or Ministers of State to whose Tongues they were utter Strangers.

(Jonathan Swift [1726/1735]: *Gulliver's Travels*, Part III, 'A Voyage to Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnagg, Glubbubdrib and Japan', Chapter V)



The proposal by the academicians of Lagago to substitute objects for words highlights problems with the simplistic notion of signs being direct substitutes for things. The academicians adopted the philosophical stance of naive realism in assuming that words simply mirror objects in an external world. They believed that 'Words are only Names for Things', a stance involving the assumption that 'things' necessarily exist independently of language prior to them being 'labelled' with words. According to this position (which accords with a still widespread popular misconception of language) there is a one-to-one correspondence between word and referent (sometimes called language-world *isomorphism*), and language is simply a *nomenclature* - an item-by-item naming of things in the world.

As Saussure put it, this is 'the superficial view taken by the general public' ([Saussure 1983, 16, 65](#); [Saussure 1974, 16, 65](#)).

Within the lexicon of a language, it is true that most of the words are 'lexical words' (or nouns) which refer to 'things', but most of these things are abstract concepts rather than physical objects in the world. Only 'proper nouns' have specific referents in the everyday world, and only some of these refer to a unique entity (e.g. Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwilllantysiliogogoch - the name of a Welsh village). As Rick Altman notes, 'A language made up entirely of proper nouns, like the one

used in horse racing forms, offers significant representational benefits; every name clearly corresponds to and identifies a single horse' ([Altman 1999, 87](#)). However, the communicative function of a fully-functioning language requires the scope of reference to move beyond the particularity of the individual instance. Whilst each leaf, cloud or smile is different from all others, effective communication requires general categories or 'universals'. Anyone who has attempted to communicate with people who do not share their language will be familiar with the limitations of simply pointing to things. You can't point to 'mind', 'culture' or 'history'; these are not 'things' at all. The vast majority of lexical words in a language exist on a high level of abstraction and refer to classes of things (such as 'buildings') or to concepts (such as 'construction'). Language depends on categorization, but as soon as we group instances into classes (tokens into types), we lose any one-to-one correspondence of word and thing (if by 'things' we mean specific objects). Furthermore, other than lexical words, the remaining elements of the lexicon of a language consist of 'function words' (or grammatical words, such as 'only' and 'under') which do not refer to objects in the world at all. The lexicon of a language consists of many kinds of signs other than simply nouns. Clearly, language cannot be reduced to the naming of things.

The less naive realists might note at this point that words do not necessarily name only physical things which exist in an objective material world but may also label imaginary things and also *concepts*. Peirce's referent, for instance, is not limited to things which exist in the physical world but may include non-existent objects and ideas. However, as Saussure noted, the notion of words as labels for concepts 'assumes that ideas exist independently of words' ([Saussure 1983, 65](#); [Saussure 1974, 65](#)). and for him, 'no ideas are established in advance... before the introduction of linguistic structure' ([Saussure 1983, 110](#); cf. [114-115, 118](#); [Saussure 1974, 112](#); cf. [116, 120](#)). It remains a rationalist and 'nomenclaturist' stance on language when words are seen as 'labels' for pre-existing ideas as well as for objects. It is reductionist: reducing language to the purely referential function of naming things. When we use language, its various kinds of signs relate to each other in complex ways which make nonsense of the reduction of language to a nomenclature. Referentiality may be a function of language but it is only one of its functions. Furthermore, as Vivien Burr puts it, 'whatever the nature of the "real" world, we cannot assume that the words in our language refer to it or describe it' ([Burr 1995, 60](#)). The philosophically flawed assumption that it is a necessary condition of a sign that the signifier has a referent has been termed the 'referential illusion' by Roland Barthes ([Barthes 1957](#)) and the 'referential fallacy' by Michael Riffaterre ([Genosko 1994, 38, 51](#); [Allen 2000, 115](#)).

A radical response to realists is that things do not exist independently of the sign systems which we use; 'reality' is created by the media which seem simply to represent it. Language does not simply name pre-existing categories; categories do not exist in 'the world' (where are the boundaries of a cloud; when does a smile begin?). We may acknowledge the cautionary remarks of John Lyons that such an emphasis on reality as invariably perceptually seamless may be an exaggeration. Lyons speculates that 'most of the phenomenal world, as we perceive it, is *not* an undifferentiated continuum' ; and our referential categories do seem to bear some relationship to certain features which seem to be inherently salient ([Lyons 1977, 247](#); *my emphasis*; cf. *ibid.*, 260). In support of this caveat, we may note that the Gestalt psychologists reported a universal human tendency to separate a salient *figure* from what the viewer relegates to the [back]ground (see Gombrich on 'the outline' in art: [Gombrich 1982, 283](#)). However, such observations clearly do not demonstrate that the lexical structure of language reflects the structure of an external reality. As Saussure noted, if words were simply a nomenclature for a pre-existing set of things in the world, translation from one language to another would be easy ([Saussure 1983, 114-115](#); [Saussure 1974, 116](#)) whereas in fact [languages](#)

[differ in how they categorize the world](#) - the signifieds in one language do not neatly correspond to those in another. Within a language, many words may refer to 'the same thing' but reflect different evaluations of it (one person's 'hovel' is another person's 'home'). Furthermore, what is signified by a word is subject to historical change. In this sense, 'reality' or 'the world' is created by the language we use: this argument insists on *the primacy of the signifier*. Even if we do not adopt the radical stance that 'the real world' is a product of our sign systems, we must still acknowledge that there are many things in the experiential world for which we have no words and that most words do not correspond to objects in the known world at all. Thus, all words are 'abstractions', and there is no direct correspondence between words and 'things' in the world.

Saussure's model of the sign involves no direct reference to reality outside the sign. This was not a 'denial' of extralinguistic reality as such but a reflection of his understanding of his own role as a linguist. Saussure accepted that in most scientific disciplines the 'objects of study' were 'given in advance' and existed independently of the observer's 'point of view'. However, he stressed that in linguistics, by contrast, 'it is the viewpoint adopted which creates the object' ([Saussure 1983, 8](#); [Saussure 1974, 8](#)). Whilst such a statement might go without comment in a discipline with an acknowledged self-sufficiency (such as mathematics), in the context of human language one can understand how it might be criticized as an idealist model. In the Saussurean model the signified is only a mental concept; concepts are mental constructs, not 'external' objects. However, as Rodowick notes, 'stressing the relation of difference or nonidentity between an object and the form or substance of its expression need not imply the absence of representation' ([Rodowick 1994, 162](#)). A concept may, of course, refer to something in experiential reality but the Saussurean stance is a denial of the 'essentialist' argument that signifieds are distinct, autonomous entities in an objective world which are definable in terms of some kind of unchanging 'essence' ([Culler 1985, 24](#)). Saussurean semiotics asserts the non-essential nature of objects. Just like signifiers, signifieds are part of the sign system; signifieds are socially constructed. According to the [Whorfian stance](#), the signified is an arbitrary product of our culture's 'way of seeing'. The Saussurean perspective 'tends to reverse the precedence which a nomenclaturist accords to the world outside language, by proposing that far from the world determining the order of our language, our language determines the order of the world' ([Sturrock 1986, 17](#)).

In contrast to the Saussurean model, Peirce's model of the sign explicitly features the *referent* - something beyond the sign to which the sign vehicle refers (though not necessarily a material thing). However, it also features the *interpretant* which leads to an 'infinite series' of signs, so at the same time Peirce's model also seems to suggest the relative independence of signs from any referents ([Silverman 1983, 15](#)). For Peirce, reality can only be known via signs. If representations are our only access to reality, determining their accuracy is a critical issue. Peirce adopted from logic the notion of 'modality' to refer to the truth value of a sign, acknowledging three kinds: actuality, (logical) necessity and (hypothetical) possibility ([Hodge & Kress 1988, 26](#)). Furthermore, his classification of signs in terms of the mode of relationship of the sign vehicle to its referent reflects their modality - their apparent transparency in relation to 'reality' (the symbolic mode, for instance, having *low* modality). Peirce asserted that, logically, signification could only ever offer a partial truth because if it offered the complete truth it would destroy itself by becoming identical with its object (cited in [Grayson 1998, 40](#)).

Theorists who veer towards the extreme position of philosophical *idealism* (for whom reality is purely subjective and is constructed in our use of signs) may see no problem with the Saussurean model. Indeed, the Saussurean model has itself been described as 'idealist' ([Culler 1985, 117](#)). Those drawn

towards philosophical *realism* (for whom a single objective reality exists indisputably 'outside' us) would challenge it. According to this stance, reality may be 'distorted' by the media which we use to apprehend it but such media play no part in 'constructing' the world. Even those who adopt an intermediate *constructionist* (or *constructivist*) position - that language and other media play a major part in 'the social construction of reality' - may tend to object to an apparent indifference towards social reality in Saussure's model. Those on the political left in particular would object to its sidelining of the importance of the material conditions of existence. Umberto Eco provocatively asserts that 'semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie' ([Eco 1976, 7](#)).

From the perspective of *social semiotics* the original Saussurean model is understandably problematic. Whatever our philosophical positions, in our daily behaviour we routinely act on the basis that some representations of reality are more reliable than others. And we do so in part with reference to cues within texts which semioticians (following linguists) call 'modality markers'. Such cues refer to what are variously described as the plausibility, reliability, credibility, truth, accuracy or facticity of texts within a given [genre](#) as representations of some recognizable reality. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen acknowledge that

A social semiotic theory of truth cannot claim to establish the absolute truth or untruth of representations. It can only show whether a given 'proposition' (visual, verbal or otherwise) is represented as true or not. From the point of view of social semiotics, truth is a construct of semiosis, and as such the truth of a particular social group, arising from the values and beliefs of that group. ([Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 159](#)).

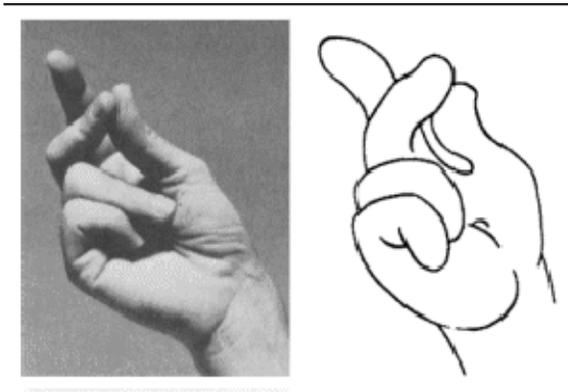
From such a perspective, reality has authors; thus there are many *realities* rather than the single reality posited by objectivists. This stance is related to [Whorfian](#) framings of relationships between language and reality. Constructionists insist that realities are not limitless and unique to the individual as extreme subjectivists would argue; rather, they are the product of social definitions and as such far from equal in status. Realities are contested, and textual representations are thus 'sites of struggle'.

Modality refers to the reality status accorded to or claimed by a sign, text or genre. More formally, Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress declare that 'modality refers to the status, authority and reliability of a message, to its ontological status, or to its value as truth or fact' ([Hodge & Kress 1988, 124](#)). In making sense of a text, its interpreters make '[modality judgements](#)' about it, drawing on their knowledge of the world and of the medium. For instance, they assign it to fact or fiction, actuality or acting, live or recorded, and they assess the possibility or plausibility of the events depicted or the claims made in it.



Clearly, the extent to which a text may be perceived as 'real' depends in part on the medium employed. Writing, for instance, generally has a lower modality than film and television. However, no rigid ranking of media modalities is possible. John Kennedy showed children a simple line drawing featuring a group of children sitting in a circle with a gap in their midst ([Kennedy 1974](#)). He asked them to add to this gap a drawing of their own, and when they concentrated on the central region of the drawing, many of them tried to pick up the pencil which was

depicted in the top right-hand corner of the drawing! Being absorbed in the task led them to unconsciously accept the terms in which reality was constructed within the medium. This is not likely to be a phenomenon confined to children, since when absorbed in narrative (in many media) we frequently fall into a 'suspension of disbelief' without compromising our ability to distinguish representations from reality. Charles Peirce reflected that 'in contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy disappears' ([Peirce 1931-58, 3.362](#)).



Whilst in a conscious comparison of a photographic image with a cartoon image of the same thing the photograph is likely to be judged as more 'realistic', the mental schemata involved in visual recognition may be closer to the stereotypical simplicity of cartoon images than to photographs. People can identify an image as a hand when it is drawn as a cartoon more quickly than when they are shown a photograph of a hand ([Ryan & Schwartz 1956](#)). This underlines the importance of perceptual [codes](#) in constructing reality. Umberto Eco argues that through familiarity an iconic signifier can acquire primacy over its signified. Such a sign becomes conventional 'step by step,

the more its addressee becomes acquainted with it. At a certain point the iconic representation, however stylized it may be, appears to be more true than the real experience, and people begin to look at things through the glasses of iconic convention' ([Eco 1976, 204-5](#)).

Modality cues within texts include both formal features of the medium and content features such as the following (typical high modality cues are listed here as the first in each pair), though it is their interaction and interpretation, of course, which is most important.



Cornelius Gijsbrechts (1670):
A Cabinet of Curiosities with an Ivory Tankard
(showing reverse of cupboard door)
Oil on Canvas, *Statens Museum for Kunst*

Formal features

- 3D-flat
- detailed-abstract
- colour-monochrome
- edited-unedited
- moving-still
- audible-silent

Content features

- possible-impossible
- plausible-implausible
- familiar-unfamiliar
- current-distant in time
- local-distant in space

The media which are typically judged to be the most 'realistic' are photographic - especially film and television. James Monaco suggests that 'in film, the signifier and the signified are almost identical... The power of language systems is that there is a very great difference between the signifier and the signified; the power of film is that there is not' ([Monaco 1981, 127-8](#)). This is an important part of what Christian Metz was referring to when he described the cinematic signifier as 'the imaginary signifier'. In being less reliant than writing on symbolic signs, film, television and photography suggest less of an obvious gap between the signifier and its signified, which make them seem to offer 'reflections of reality' (even in that which is imaginary). But photography does not reproduce its object: it 'abstracts from, and mediates, the actual' ([Burgin 1982a, 61](#)). Whilst we do not mistake one for the other we do need to remind ourselves that a photograph or a film does not simply record an event, but is only one of an infinite number of possible representations. All media texts, however 'realistic', are representations rather than simply recordings or reproductions of reality. As the film theorist D N Rodowick puts it, 'Rather than reproducing the "world" spontaneously and automatically, as the ideology of realism would have the spectator believe, the cinematic apparatus always operates selectively, limiting, filtering and transforming the images that are its raw material' ([Rodowick 1994, 77](#)).

The film theorist André Bazin refers to the 'reproductive fallacy' as being that the only kind of representation which can show things 'as they really are' is one which is (or appears to be) exactly like that which it represents in every respect. Except in the case of digitally-sourced reproductions, texts are constructed from different materials from that which they represent, and representations

cannot be replicas. For Bazin, aesthetic realism depended on a broader 'truth to reality' ([Bazin 1974, 64](#); [Lovell 1983, 81](#)).

Modality judgements involve comparisons of textual representations with models drawn from the everyday world and with models based on the [genre](#); they are therefore obviously dependent on relevant experience of both the world and the medium. Robert Hodge and David Tripp's semiotic study of *Children and Television* focuses on the [development of children's modality judgements](#) ([Hodge & Tripp 1986](#)).

[Ien Ang \(1985\)](#) argues that watching television soap operas can involve a kind of *psychological* or *emotional realism* for viewers which exists at the [connotative rather than the denotative level](#). Viewers find some representations emotionally or psychologically 'true-to-life' (even if at the denotative level the treatment may seem 'unrealistic'). I would argue that especially with long-running soaps (which may become more 'real' to their fans over time) what we could call *generic realism* is another factor. Viewers familiar with the characters and conventions of a particular soap opera may often judge the programme largely in its own generic terms rather than with reference to some external 'reality'. For instance, is a character's current behaviour consistent with what we have learnt over time about that character? The soap may be accepted to some extent as a world in its own right, in which slightly different rules may sometimes apply. This is of course the basis for what Coleridge called the 'willing suspension of disbelief' on which drama depends.

Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress argue that:

Different genres, whether classified by medium (e.g. comic, cartoon, film, TV, painting) or by content (e.g. Western, Science Fiction, Romance, news) establish sets of modality markers, and an overall value which acts as a baseline for the genre. This baseline can be different for different kinds of viewer/reader, and for different texts or moments within texts. ([Hodge & Kress 1988, 142](#))

What are recognized as 'realistic' styles of representation reflect an aesthetic [code](#). Over time, certain methods of production within a medium and a genre become naturalized. The content comes to be accepted as a 'reflection of reality'. In the case of popular television and film, for instance, the use of ['invisible editing'](#) represents a widespread set of conventions which has come to seem 'natural' to most viewers. In 'realistic' texts what is foregrounded is the 'content' rather than the 'form' or style of production. As in the dominant mode of 'scientific' discourse, the medium and codes are discounted as neutral and transparent and the makers of the text retreat to invisibility. Consequently, 'reality' seems to pre-exist its representation and to 'speak for itself'; what is said thus has the aura of 'truth'. John Tagg argues that

The signifier is treated as if it were identical with a pre-existent signified and... the reader's role is purely that of a consumer... Signifier and signified appear not only to unite, but the signifier seems to become transparent so that the concept seems to present itself, and the arbitrary sign is naturalized by a spurious identity between reference and referents, between the text and the world. ([Tagg 1988, 99](#))

However, Tagg adds that such a stance need not involve positing 'a closed world of codes' ([ibid., 101](#)) or the denial of the existence of what is represented outside the process which represents it

([ibid., 167](#)). He stresses 'the crucial relation of meaning to questions of practice and power', arguing that 'the Real is a complex of dominant and dominated discourses which given texts exclude, separate or do not signify' ([ibid., 101](#)).



The Belgian surrealist René Magritte (1898-1967) painted *La Trahison des Images* (*The Treachery of Images*) in 1936. It depicts a side-on view of a smoker's pipe and the text 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' ('This is not a pipe'). The image provided here is similar but the text is different - this is not a reproduction of Magritte's painting(!). Both examples - Magritte's painting and this version - give us pause for thought. Each 'realistically' depicts an object which we easily recognize. If it were a language lesson or a child's 'reading book' (the style reminds me of old-fashioned *Ladybird* books for children), we might expect to see the words 'This is a pipe'.

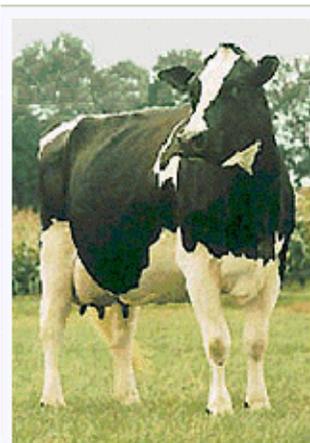
To depict a pipe and then provide a label which insists that 'this is not a pipe' initially seems perverse. Is it purely irrational or is there something which we can learn from this apparent paradox? What could it mean? As our minds struggle to find a stable, meaningful interpretation we may not be too happy that there is no single, 'correct' answer to this question - although those of us who are relatively 'tolerant of ambiguity' may accept that it offers a great deal of food for thought about levels (or modes) of reality. The indexical word 'this' can be seen as a key to the interpretation of this painting: what exactly does the word 'this' refer to? Anthony Wilden suggests several alternative interpretations:

- this [pipe] is not a pipe;
- this [image of a pipe] is not a pipe;
- this [painting] is not a pipe;
- this [sentence] is not a pipe;
- [this] this is not a pipe;
- [this] is not a pipe.

([Wilden 1987, 245](#))

Although we habitually relate the 'meaning' of texts to the stated or inferred purposes of their makers, Magritte's own purposes are not essential to our current concerns. It suits our purposes here to suggest that the painting could be taken as meaning that this representation (or any representation) is not that which it represents. That this image of a pipe is 'only an image' and that we can't smoke it seems obvious - nobody 'in their right mind' would be so foolish as to try to pick it up and use it as a functional pipe (although many readers will have heard by now of the unfortunate, deluded man who 'mistook his wife for a hat'). However, we do habitually refer to such realistic depictions in terms which suggest that they are nothing more nor less than what they depict. Any representation is more than merely a reproduction of that which it represents: it also contributes to the *construction* of reality. Even 'photorealism' does not depict unmediated reality. The most realistic representation may also symbolically or metaphorically 'stand for' something else entirely. Furthermore, the depiction of a pipe is no guarantee of the existence of a specific pipe in the world of which this is an accurate depiction. Indeed, it seems a fairly generalized pipe and could therefore be seen (as is frequently true of language lessons, children's encyclopedia entries and so on) as an illustration of the 'concept' of a pipe rather than of a specific pipe. The label seeks to [anchor](#) our interpretation - a concept to which

we will return later - and yet at the same time the label is part of the painting itself rather than a title attached to the frame. Magritte's painting could be seen as a kind of defamiliarization: we are so used to seeing things and attaching labels to them that we seldom look deeper and do not see things in their specificity. One function of art (and of surrealistic art in particular) is 'to make the familiar strange' (as the Russian formalists put it).



This is not a cow

Alfred Korzybski (1879-1950), the founder of a movement known as 'General Semantics', declared that 'the map is not the territory' and that 'the word is not the thing' ([Korzybski 1933](#); cf. [Chase 1938](#) and [Hayakawa 1941](#)). The non-identity of sign and thing is, of course, a very basic Saussurean principle. However, whilst Saussure's model is anti-realist, the General Semanticists adopted the realist stance that language comes 'between' us and the objective world and they sought to reform our verbal behaviour to counteract the linguistic distortion of 'reality'. They felt that one reason for the confusion of signifiers and referential signifieds was that we sometimes allow language to take us further up the 'ladder of abstraction' than we think we are. Here is a homely example of levels of verbal abstraction in relation to a cow called 'Bessie':

1. The cow known to science ultimately consists of atoms, electrons etc. according to present-day scientific inference...
2. The cow we perceive is not the word but the object of experience, that which our nervous system abstracts (selects)...
3. The word 'Bessie' (cow) is the *name* we give to the object of perception of level 2. The name is *not* the object; it merely *stands for* the object and omits reference to many characteristics of the object.
4. The word 'cow' stands for the characteristics we have abstracted as common to cow, cow, cow... cow. Characteristics peculiar to particular cows are left out.
5. When Bessie is referred to as 'livestock' only those characteristics she has in common with pigs, chickens, goats, etc. are referred to.
6. When Bessie is included among 'farm assets' reference is made only to what she has in common with all other saleable items on the farm.
7. When Bessie is referred to as an 'asset' still more of her characteristics are left out.
8. The word 'wealth' is an extremely high level of abstraction, omitting *almost* all reference to the characteristics of Bessie.

([McKim 1972, 128](#); the origins of this example are in Korzybski, via [Hayakawa 1941, 121ff](#))

The ladder metaphor is consistent with how we routinely refer to levels of abstraction - we talk of thinkers with 'their heads in the clouds' and of 'realists' with their 'feet on the ground'. As we move up the ladder we move from the particular to the general, from concrete reality to abstract generalization. The General Semanticists were of course hard-headed realists and what they wanted was for people to keep their feet firmly planted on the ground. In alerting language users to levels of abstraction, the General Semanticists sought to avoid the confusion of *higher logical types* with *lower logical types*. 'A map' is of a higher (more general) logical type than 'the territory', and linguistic representation in particular lends itself to this process of abstraction. Clearly we can learn more about a place by visiting it than by simply looking at a map of it, and we can tell more about a person by meeting them than by merely looking at a photograph of them. Translation from lower levels to higher levels

involves an inevitable loss of specificity - like earth being filtered through a series of increasingly fine sieves or like photocopies being repeatedly made of the 'copies' which they produce. Being alert for the consequent losses, absences or exclusions is important to the semiotician as well as the 'general semanticist'. Whilst the logician may be able to keep such levels separate, in most acts of communication some 'slippage' occurs routinely, although we are normally capable of identifying what kind of messages we are dealing with, assigning them to appropriate levels of abstraction. Semioticians observe that some kind of 'translation' is unavoidable in human communication. Claude Lévi-Strauss declared that 'understanding consists in the reduction of one type of reality to another' ([Lévi-Strauss 1961, 61](#)). Algirdas Greimas observed that 'signification is... nothing but... transposition from one level of language to another, from one language to a different language, and meaning is nothing but the possibility of such *transcoding*' (cited in [Jameson 1972, 215-216](#)).

Whilst it can be useful to consider abstraction in terms of levels and logical typing, the implicit filter metaphor in the General Semanticists' 'ladder of abstraction' is too uni-dimensional. Any given 'object' of perception could be categorised in a variety of ways rather than in terms of a single 'objective' hierarchy. The [categories](#) applied depend on such factors as experience, [roles and purposes](#). This raises issues of interpretation. For instance, looking at an advertisement featuring a woman's face, some viewers might assume that the image stood for women in general, others that she represented a particular type, role or group, and yet others might recognise her as a particular individual. Knowing the appropriate level of abstraction in relation to interpreting such an image would depend primarily on familiarity with the relevant cultural [codes](#).

The General Semanticists set themselves the therapeutic goal of 'purifying' language in order to make its relationship to reality more 'transparent', and from such roots sprang projects such as the development of 'Basic English' ([Ogden 1930](#)). Whatever reservations we may have about such goals, Korzybski's popularization of the principle of arbitrariness could be seen as a useful corrective to some of our habits of mind. As a caveat Korzybski's aphorism seems unnecessary: we all know that the word 'dog' cannot bark or bite, but in some circumstances we do behave as if certain signifiers are inseparable from what they stand for. 'Commonsense' still leads us routinely to identify sign and thing, representation with what it represents. Terence Hawkes notes that 'Saussure points out that native speakers tend to assume a necessary "fitness", an unquestionable "identity" between signifier and signified, between "the sound image" made by the word "tree" and the concept of an actual tree. This assumption is the basis of language's anaesthetic function' ([Hawkes 1977, 70](#)).



In his massively influential book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud argued that 'dream-content is, as it were, presented in hieroglyphics, whose symbols must be translated... It would of course be incorrect to read these symbols in accordance with their values as pictures, instead of in accordance with their meaning as symbols' ([Freud 1938, 319](#)). He also observed that 'words are often treated in dreams as things' ([ibid., 330](#)). Magritte played with our habit of identifying the signifier with the signified in a series of drawings and paintings in which objects are depicted with verbal labels which 'don't belong to them'. In his oil-painting entitled *The Interpretation of Dreams* we are confronted with images of six familiar objects together with verbal labels. Such arrangements are familiar, particularly in the

language-learning context suggested by the blackboard-like background. However, we quickly realize that the words do not match the images under which they appear. If we then rearrange them in our minds, we find that the labels do not correspond to *any* of the images. The relation between the image of an object and the verbal label attached to it is thus presented as arbitrary.

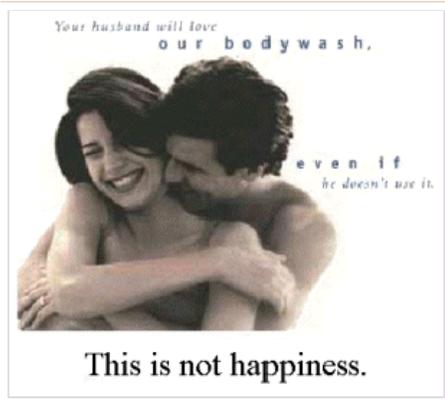
The confusion of the representation with the thing represented is a feature of schizophrenia and psychosis ([Wilden 1987, 201](#)). 'In order to be able to operate with symbols it is necessary first of all to be able to distinguish between the sign and the thing it signifies' ([Leach 1970, 43](#)). However, the confusion of 'levels of reality' is also a normal feature of an early phase of cognitive development in childhood. Jerome Bruner observed that for pre-school children thought and the object of thought seem to be the same thing, but that during schooling one comes to separate word and thing ([Bruner 1966](#)). The substitution of a sign for its referent (initially in the form of gestures and imitative sounds) constitutes a crucial phase in the infant's acquisition of language. The child quickly discovers the apparently magical power of words for referring to things in their absence - this property of *displacement* being a key 'design feature' of language ([Piaget 1971, 64](#); [Hockett 1958](#); [Hockett 1960](#); [Hockett 1965](#)). Helen Keller, who became blind and deaf at the age of eighteen months, was gradually taught to speak by her nurse ([Keller 1945](#)). At the age of nine whilst playing with water she felt with her hand the motions of the nurse's throat and mouth vibrating the word 'water'. In a sudden flash of revelation she cried out words to the effect that 'everything has a name!'. It is hardly surprising that even in middle childhood children sometimes appear to have difficulty in separating words from what they represent. Piaget illustrates the 'nominal realism' of young children in an interview with a child aged nine-and-a-half:

"Could the sun have been called 'moon' and the moon 'sun'? - 'No.' 'Why not?' - '*Because the sun shines brighter than the moon...*' 'But if everyone had called the sun 'moon', and the moon 'sun', would we have known it was wrong?' - '*Yes, because the sun is always bigger, it always stays like it is and so does the moon.*' 'Yes, but the sun isn't changed, only its name. Could it have been called... etc.?' - '*No... Because the moon rises in the evening, and the sun in the day.*'
([Piaget 1929: 81-2](#))

Thus for the child, words do not seem at all arbitrary. Similarly, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole found that unschooled Vai people in Liberia felt that the names of sun and moon could not be changed, one of them expressing the view that these were God-given names ([Scribner & Cole 1981, 141](#)).

The anthropologist Claude Lévy-Bruhl claimed that people in 'primitive' cultures had difficulty in distinguishing between names and the things to which they referred, regarding such signifiers as an intrinsic part of their signifieds (cited in [Olson 1994, 28](#)). The fear of 'graven images' within the Judeo-Christian tradition and also magical practices and beliefs such as Voodoo are clearly related to such a phenomenon. Emphasizing the epistemological significance of writing, David Olson argues that the invention (around 4000 years ago) of 'syntactic scripts' (which superseded the use of tokens) enabled referential words to be distinguished more easily from their referents, language to be seen as more than purely referential, and words to be seen as (linguistic) entities in their own right. He suggests that such scripts marked the end of 'word magic' since referential words came to be seen as representations rather than as intrinsic properties or parts of their referents. However, in the Middle Ages words and images were still seen as having a natural connection to things (which had 'true

names' given by Adam at the Creation). Words were seen as the names of things rather than as representations. As Michel Foucault (1926-84) has shown, only in the early modern period did scholars come to see words and other signifiers as representations which were subject to conventions rather than as copies ([Foucault 1970](#)). By the seventeenth century clear distinctions were being made between representations (signifiers), ideas (signifieds) and things (referents). Scholars now regarded signifiers as referring to ideas rather than directly to things. Representations were conventionalized constructions which were relatively independent both of what they represented and of their authors; knowledge involved manipulating such signs. Olson notes that once such distinctions are made, the way is open to making modality judgements about the status of



representations - such as their perceived truth or accuracy ([Olson 1994, 68-78, 165-168, 279-280](#)). Whilst the seventeenth century shift in attitudes towards signs was part of a search for 'neutrality', 'objectivity' and 'truth', in more recent times, of course, we have come to recognize that 'there is no representation without intention and interpretation' ([Olson 1994, 197](#)).

It is said that someone once asked an astronomer how he had discovered the name of a previously unknown star! Sophisticated literates are able to joke about the notion that names 'belong' to things. In one of Aldous Huxley's novels an old farmworker points out his pigs: "'Look at them, sir,' he said, with a motion of his hand towards the wallowing swine. 'Rightly is they called pigs' (*Chrome Yellow*, Chapter 5). Literate adults may not often seem to be prey to this sort of nominal realism. However, certain signifiers become regarded by some as far from 'arbitrary', acquiring almost magical power - as in relation to 'graphic' swearing and issues of prejudice - highlighting the point that signifiers are not *socially* arbitrary. Children are just as aware of this: many are far from convinced by adult advice that 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me'. By adding his own label to an advertisement, Thomas Streeter at the University of Vermont alerts us to the way in which referents can be redefined by the skilful use of verbal anchors. So reminding ourselves that 'the word is not the thing' may be more useful than it might at first seem to be.

The literary theorist Catherine Belsey argues that

Language is *experienced* as a nomenclature because its existence precedes our "understanding" of the world. Words seem to be symbols for things because things are inconceivable outside the system of differences which constitutes the language. Similarly, these very things seem to be represented in the mind, in an autonomous realm of thought, because thought is in essence symbolic, dependent on the differences brought about by the symbolic order. And so language is 'overlooked', suppressed in favour of a quest for meaning in experience and/or in the mind. The world of things and subjectivity then become the twin guarantors of truth. ([Belsey 1980, 46](#))

Hamlet refers to: 'the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature' (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, ii), and being 'true-to-life' is probably still a key criterion in judgements of literary worth. However, Belsey comments:

The claim that a literary form reflects the world is simply tautological. If by 'the world' we understand the world we experience, the world differentiated by language, then the claim that realism reflects the world means that realism reflects the world constructed in language. This is a tautology. If discourses articulate concepts through a system of signs which signify by means of their relationship to each other rather than to entities in the world, and if literature is a signifying practice, all it can reflect is the order inscribed in particular discourses, not the nature of the world. ([ibid.](#))

The medium of language comes to acquire the illusion of 'transparency': this feature of the medium tends to blind its users to the part it plays in constructing their experiential worlds. 'Realistic' texts reflect a mimetic purpose in representation - seeking to imitate so closely that which they depict that they may be experienced as virtually identical (and thus unmediated). Obviously, purely verbal signifiers cannot be mistaken for their real world referents. Whilst it is relatively easy for us to regard words as conventional symbols, it is more difficult to recognize the conventionality of images which resemble their signifieds. Yet even an image is not what it represents - the presence of an image marks the absence of its referent. The difference between signifier and signified is fundamental. Nevertheless, when the signifiers are experienced as highly 'realistic' - as in the case of photography and film - it is particularly easy to slip into regarding them as identical with their signifieds. In contrast even to realistic painting and drawing, photographs seem far less obviously 'authored' by a human being. Just as 'the word is not the thing' and 'the map is not the territory' nor is a photograph or television news footage that which it depicts. Yet in the 'commonsense' attitude of everyday life we routinely treat high modality signifiers in this way. Indeed, many realistic filmic narratives and documentaries seem to invite this confusion of representation with reality ([Nichols 1981, 21](#)). Thus television is frequently described as a 'window on the world' and we usually assume that 'the camera never lies'. We know of course that 'the dog in the film can bark but it cannot bite' ([Hall 1980, 131](#)) (though, when 'absorbed', we may 'suspend disbelief' in the context of what we know to be enacted drama). However, we are frequently inclined to accept 'the evidence of our own eyes' even when events are mediated by the cameras of journalists. Highly 'realistic' representations in any medium always involve a point-of-view. Representations which claim to be 'real' deny the unavoidable difference between map and territory. Lewis Carroll satirized the logical consequences of neglecting the importance of this difference:

'That's another thing we've learned from *your* Nation,' said Mein Herr, 'map-making. But we've carried it much further than *you*. What do you consider the *largest* map that would be really useful?'

'About six inches to the mile.'

'Only *six inches!*' exclaimed Mein Herr. 'We very soon got to six *yards* to the mile. Then we tried a *hundred* yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of *a mile to the mile!*'

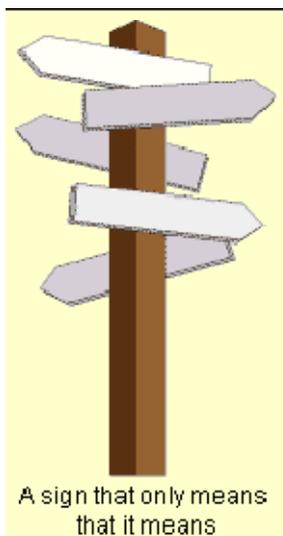
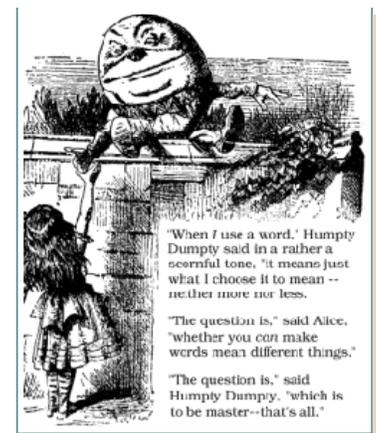
'Have you used it much?' I enquired.

'It has never been spread out, yet,' said Mein Herr: 'the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own

map, and I assure you it does nearly as well.'
 (Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, Chapter 11)

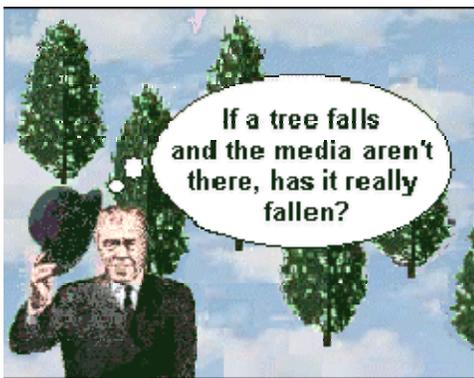
In the sense that there is always an unavoidable difference between the represented and its representation, 'the camera always lies'. We do not need to adopt the 'scientific' realism of the so-called General Semanticists concerning the 'distortion of reality' by our signifying systems, but may acknowledge instead that reality does not exist independently of signs, turning our critical attention to the issue of *whose* realities are privileged in particular representations - a perspective which, avoiding a retreat to subjectivism, pays due tribute to the unequal distribution of power in the social world.

Whilst Saussurean semioticians (with language as their model) have emphasized the arbitrary relationship of the signifier to the signified, some subsequent theorists have stressed 'the primacy of the signifier' - Jacques Lacan even praised Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty as 'the master of the signifier' for his declaration that 'when I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less'. Many postmodernist theorists postulate a complete disconnection of the signifier and the signified. An 'empty' or 'floating signifier' is variously defined as a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified. Such signifiers mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even *any* signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean. In such a state of radical disconnection between signifier and signified, 'a sign only means that it means' ([Goldman & Papon 1994, 50](#)). Such a disconnection is perhaps clearest in literary and aesthetic texts which foreground the act and form of expression and undermine any sense of a 'natural' or 'transparent' connection between a signifier and a referent. However, Jonathan Culler suggests that to refer to an 'empty signifier' is an implicit acceptance of its status as a signifier and is thus 'to correlate it with a signified' even if this is not known; 'the most radical play of the signifier still requires and works through the positing of signifieds' ([Culler 1985, 115](#)). Shakespeare famously referred to 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing' (*Macbeth* V, iii). The notion of the 'floating signifier' can be found around the year 1950 in Lévi-Strauss (see [Lechte 1994, 26-7, 64, 73](#)). Roland Barthes referred specifically to non-linguistic signs as being so open to interpretation that they constituted a 'floating chain of signifieds' ([Barthes 1977, 39](#)). The first explicit reference to an 'empty signifier' of which I am aware is that of Barthes in his essay 'Myth Today' ([Barthes 1957](#); cf. [Culler 1975, 19](#)). Barthes defines an empty signifier as one with no definite signified. There are some similarities with the linguistic concept of an 'empty category' ([Lechte 1994, 64](#)) and with Hjelmslev's *figurae* or non-signifying sign elements ([ibid., 137](#); see [Articulation](#)).



Whereas Saussure saw the signifier and the signified (however arbitrary their relationship) as being as inseparable as the two sides of a piece of paper, poststructuralists have rejected the stable and predictable relationship embedded in his model. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan wrote of 'the incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier' ([Lacan 1977, 154](#)) - he argued that there could be no anchoring of particular signifiers to particular signifieds - although this in itself is hardly contentious in the context of psychoanalysis. Jacques Derrida refers also to the 'freeplay' of signifiers: they are not fixed to their signifieds but point beyond themselves to other signifiers in

an 'indefinite referral of signifier to signified' ([Derrida 1978, 25](#)). He championed the 'deconstruction' of western semiotic systems, denying that there were any ultimate determinable meanings. Whilst for Saussure the meaning of signs derives from how they *differ* from each other, Derrida coined the term *différance* to allude also to the way in which meaning is endlessly *deferred*. There is no 'transcendent signified' ([Derrida 1978, 278-280](#); [Derrida 1976, 20](#)). These notions were anticipated by Peirce in his version of 'unlimited semiosis', although he emphasized that in practice this potentially endless process is inevitably cut short by the practical constraints of everyday life ([Gallie 1952, 126](#)). Unlike Peirce, postmodernist theories grant no access to any reality outside signification. For Derrida, 'il n'y a riens hors du texte' ('there is nothing outside the text') - although this assertion need not necessarily be taken 'literally' ([Derrida 1976, 158, 163](#)). For materialist marxists and realists, postmodernist idealism is intolerable: 'signs cannot be permitted to swallow up their referents in a never-ending chain of signification, in which one sign always points on to another, and the circle is never broken by the intrusion of that to which the sign refers' ([Lovell 1983, 16](#)). Some theorists note that an emphasis on the unavoidability of signification does not necessitate denying any external reality. David Sless comments that 'I am not suggesting that the only things in the universe are signs or texts, or that without signs nothing could exist. However, I am arguing that *without signs nothing is conceivable*' ([Sless 1986, 156](#)). We may note in passing that since the phrase 'the empty (or free-floating) signifier' has become something of an academic 'sound-bite' the term itself is ironically in danger of being an empty signifier.



The notion of reality as degenerative is found in the Romantic mythology of a primal state of unmediatedness (referring to children before language or human beings before The Fall) ([Chandler 1995, 31-2](#)). In his book *The Image*, Daniel Boorstin charted the rise of what he called 'pseudo-events' - events which are staged for the mass media to report ([Boorstin 1961](#)). However, any 'event' is a social construction - bounded 'events' have no objective existence, and all news items are 'stories' ([Galtung & Ruge 1981](#)).

We might posit three key historical shifts in representational paradigms in relation to Peirce's differential framing of the referential status of signs:

- an **indexical** phase - the signifier and the referent are regarded as directly connected;
- an **iconic** phase - the signifier is not regarded as part of the referent but as depicting it transparently;
- a **symbolic** phase - the signifier is regarded as arbitrary and as referring only to other signs.

Such a schematization bears some similarity to that of the postmodernist Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard interprets many representations as a means of concealing the absence of reality; he calls such representations 'simulacra' (or copies without originals) ([Baudrillard 1984](#)). He sees a degenerative evolution in modes of representation in which signs are increasingly empty of meaning:

These would be the successive phases of the image:

1. It is the reflection of a basic reality.
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality.

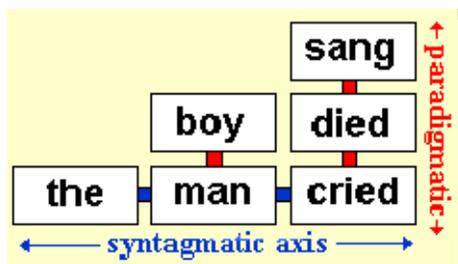
3. It masks the *absence* of a basic reality.
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.
([Baudrillard 1988, 170](#))

Baudrillard argues that when speech and writing were created, signs were invented to point to material or social reality, but the bond between signifier and signified became eroded. As advertising, propaganda and commodification set in, the sign began to hide 'basic reality'. In the postmodern age of 'hyper-reality' in which what are only illusions in the media of communication seem very real, signs hide the absence of reality and only pretend to mean something. For Baudrillard, *simulacra* - the signs which characterize late capitalism - come in three forms: *counterfeit* (imitation) - when there was still a direct link between signifiers and their signifieds; *production* (illusion) - when there was an indirect link between signifier and signified; and *simulation* (fake) - when signifiers came to stand in relation only to other signifiers and not in relation to any fixed external reality. It is hardly surprising that Douglas Kellner has criticized Baudrillard as a 'semiological idealist' who ignores the materiality of sign production (cited in [Stam 2000, 306](#)). Baudrillard's claim that the Gulf War never happened is certainly provocative ([Baudrillard 1995](#)).

Such perspectives, of course, beg the fundamental question, 'What is "real"?' The semiotic stance which problematizes 'reality' and emphasizes mediation and convention is sometimes criticized as extreme 'cultural relativism' by those who veer towards realism - such critics often object to an apparent sidelining of referential concerns such as 'accuracy' (e.g. [Gombrich 1982, 188, 279, 286](#)). However, even philosophical realists would accept that much of our knowledge of the world is indirect; we experience many things primarily (or even solely) as they are represented to us within our media and communication technologies. Since representations cannot be identical copies of what they represent, they can never be neutral and transparent but are instead constitutive of reality. As Judith Butler puts it, we need to ask, 'What does transparency keep obscure?' ([Butler 1999, xix](#)). Semiotics helps us to not to take representations for granted as 'reflections of reality', enabling us to take them apart and consider whose realities they represent.

Paradigms and Syntagms

Semiotics is probably best-known as an approach to textual analysis, and in this form it is characterized by a concern with *structural analysis*. Structuralist semiotic analysis involves identifying the constituent units in a semiotic system (such as a text or socio-cultural practice) and the structural relationships between them (oppositions, correlations and logical relations).



Saussure was 'concerned exclusively with three sorts of systemic relationships: that between a signifier and a signified; those between a sign and all of the other elements of its system; and those between a sign and the elements which surround it within a concrete signifying instance' ([Silverman 1983, 10](#)). He emphasized that meaning arises from the *differences* between signifiers; these differences are of two kinds: *syntagmatic* (concerning positioning) and *paradigmatic* (concerning substitution). Saussure called the latter *associative* relations ([Saussure](#)

[1983, 121](#); [Saussure 1974, 122](#)). but Roman Jakobson's term is now used. The distinction is a key one in structuralist semiotic analysis. These two dimensions are often presented as 'axes', where the horizontal axis is the syntagmatic and the vertical axis is the paradigmatic. The plane of the syntagm is that of the *combination* of 'this-and-this-and-this' (as in the sentence, 'the man cried') whilst the plane of the paradigm is that of the *selection* of 'this-or-this-or-this' (e.g. the replacement of the last word in the same sentence with 'died' or 'sang'). Whilst syntagmatic relations are possibilities of combination, paradigmatic relations are functional contrasts - they involve *differentiation*. Temporally, syntagmatic relations refer intratextually to other signifiers *co-present* within the text, whilst paradigmatic relations refer [intertextually](#) to signifiers which are *absent* from the text ([Saussure 1983, 122](#); [Saussure 1974, 123](#)). The 'value' of a sign is determined by both its paradigmatic and its syntagmatic relations. Syntagms and paradigms provide a structural context within which signs make sense; they are the structural forms through which signs are organized into [codes](#).

Paradigmatic relationships can operate on the level of the signifier, the signified or both ([Saussure 1983, 121-124](#); [Saussure 1974, 123-126](#); [Silverman 1983, 10](#); [Harris 1987, 124](#)). A paradigm is a set of associated signifiers or signifieds which are all members of some defining category, but in which each is significantly different. In natural language there are grammatical paradigms such as verbs or nouns. 'Paradigmatic relations are those which belong to the same set by virtue of a function they share... A sign enters into *paradigmatic* relations with all the signs which can also occur in the same context but not at the same time' ([Langholz Leymore 1975, 8](#)). In a given context, one member of the paradigm set is structurally replaceable with another. 'Signs are in paradigmatic relation when the choice of one *excludes* the choice of another' ([Silverman & Torode 1980, 255](#)). The use of one signifier (e.g. a particular word or a garment) rather than another from the same paradigm set (e.g. respectively, adjectives or hats) shapes the preferred meaning of a text. Paradigmatic relations can thus be seen as 'contrastive'. Note that the significance of the differences between even apparently synonymous signifiers is at the heart of [Whorfian theories about language](#). Saussure's notion of 'associative' relations was broader and less formal than what is normally meant by 'paradigmatic' relations. He referred to 'mental association' and included perceived similarities in *form* (e.g. homophones) or *meaning* (e.g. synonyms). Such similarities were diverse and ranged from strong to slight, and might refer to only part of a word (such as a shared prefix or suffix). He noted that there was no end (or commonly agreed order) to such associations ([Saussure 1983, 121-124](#); [Saussure 1974, 123-126](#)).

In film and television, paradigms include ways of changing shot (such as cut, fade, dissolve and wipe). The medium or genre are also paradigms, and particular media texts derive meaning from the ways in which the medium and genre used differs from the alternatives. The aphorism of [Marshall McLuhan \(1911-80\)](#) that 'the medium is the message' can thus be seen as reflecting a semiotic concern: to a semiotician [the medium is not 'neutral'](#).

A *syntagm* is an orderly combination of interacting signifiers which forms a meaningful whole within a text - sometimes, following Saussure, called a 'chain'. Such combinations are made within a framework of syntactic rules and conventions (both explicit and inexplicit). In language, a sentence, for instance, is a syntagm of words; so too are paragraphs and chapters. 'There are always larger units, composed of smaller units, with a relation of interdependence holding between both' ([Saussure 1983, 127](#); [Saussure 1974, 128](#)): syntagms can contain other syntagms. A printed advertisement is a syntagm of visual signifiers. Syntagmatic relations are the various ways in which elements within the same text may be related to each other. Syntagms are created by the linking of signifiers from

paradigm sets which are chosen on the basis of whether they are conventionally regarded as appropriate or may be required by some rule system (e.g. grammar). Syntagmatic relations highlight the importance of part-whole relationships: Saussure stressed that 'the whole depends on the parts, and the parts depend on the whole' ([Saussure 1983, 126](#); [Saussure 1974, 128](#)).

Syntagms are often defined as 'sequential' (and thus *temporal* - as in speech and music), but they can represent *spatial relationships*. Saussure himself (who emphasized 'auditory signifiers' which 'are presented one after another' and 'form a chain') noted that visual signifiers (he instanced nautical flags) 'can exploit more than one dimension simultaneously' ([Saussure 1983, 70](#); [Saussure 1974, 70](#)). *Spatial* syntagmatic relations are found in drawing, painting and photography. Many semiotic systems - such as drama, cinema, television and the world wide web - include both spatial and temporal syntagms.

Thwaites *et al.* argue that within a genre, whilst the syntagmatic dimension is the textual structure, the paradigmatic dimension can be as broad as the *choice of subject matter* ([Thwaites et al. 1994, 95](#)). In this framing, *form* is a syntagmatic dimension whilst *content* is a paradigmatic dimension. However, form is also subject to paradigmatic choices and content to syntagmatic arrangement.

Jonathan Culler offers an example of the syntagmatic relations and paradigmatic contrasts involved in Western menus:

In the food system... one defines on the syntagmatic axis the combinations of courses which can make up meals of various sorts; and each course or slot can be filled by one of a number of dishes which are in paradigmatic contrast with one another (one wouldn't combine roast beef and lamb chops in a single meal; they would be alternatives on any menu). These dishes which are alternative to one another often bear different meanings in that they connote varying degrees of luxury, elegance, etc. ([Culler 1985, 104](#)).



Roland Barthes

[Roland Barthes \(1967\)](#) outlined the paradigmatic and syntagmatic elements of the 'garment system' in similar terms. The paradigmatic elements are the items which cannot be worn at the same time on the same part of the body (such as hats, trousers, shoes). The syntagmatic dimension is the juxtaposition of different elements at the same time in a complete ensemble from hat to shoes.

Expanding on an example offered by David Lodge, Susan Spiggle explains in more detail how this might apply to a girl wearing a tee-shirt, jeans and sandals:

1. She selects signs from three *paradigms* (i.e. sets of possible signs - upper body garments, lower body garments, and footwear). Each paradigm contains a possible *set* of pieces from which she can choose only one. From the upper-body-garment paradigm (including blouses,

tee-shirts, tunics, sweaters), she selects one. These items share a *similar* structure, function, and/or other attribute with others in the set: they are related to one another on the basis of similarity. She further selects items related by similarity from the lower-body-garment and footwear paradigms. A socially defined, shared classification system or code shapes her selections.

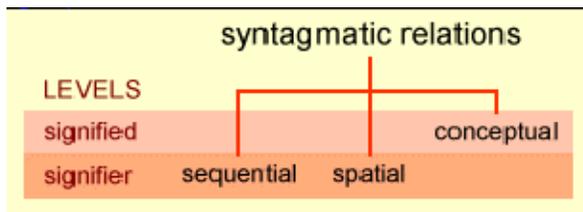
2. She *combines* the selected signs through rules (i.e., tee-shirts go with sandals, not high heels), sending a *message* through the ensemble - the *syntagm*. Selection requires her to perceive similarity and opposition among signs within the set (the paradigm), classifying them as items having the same function or structure, only one of which she needs. She can *substitute*, or select, a blouse for the tee-shirt - conveying a different message. The combination, tee-shirt–jeans–sandals, requires her to know the 'rules by which garments are acceptably combined... The combination... is, in short, a kind of sentence' ([Lodge 1977, 74](#)). The tee-shirt–jeans–sandals syntagm conveys a different meaning (sends a different message) at the beach than at a formal occasion. ([Spiggle 1998, 159](#))

In the case of film, our interpretation of an individual shot depends on both paradigmatic analysis (comparing it, not necessarily consciously, with the use of alternative kinds of shot) and syntagmatic analysis (comparing it with preceding and following shots). The same shot used within another sequence of shots could have quite a different preferred reading. Actually, filmic syntagms are not confined to such temporal syntagms (which are manifested in *montage*: the sequencing of shots) but include the spatial syntagms found also in still photography (in *mise-en-scène*: the composition of individual frames).

Both syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis treat signs as part of a system - exploring their functions within [codes](#) and sub-codes - a topic to which we will return. Although we will discuss syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations separately, it should be emphasized that the semiotic analysis of a text or corpus has to tackle the system as a whole, and that the two dimensions cannot be considered in isolation. The description of any semiotic system involves specifying both the membership of all of the relevant paradigmatic sets and also the possible combinations of one set with another in well-formed syntagms. For the analyst, according to Saussure (who was, of course, focusing on the language system as a whole), 'the system as a united whole is the starting point, from which it becomes possible, by a process of analysis, to identify its constituent elements'; one cannot try to construct the system by working upwards from the constituent elements ([Saussure 1983, 112](#); [Saussure 1974, 113](#)). However, Roland Barthes argued that 'an important part of the semiological undertaking' was to divide texts 'into minimal significant units... then to group these units into paradigmatic classes, and finally to classify the syntagmatic relations which link these units' ([Barthes 1967, 48](#); cf. [Langholz Leymore 1975, 21](#) and [Lévi-Strauss 1972, 211](#)). In practice, the analyst is likely to need to move back and forth between these two approaches as the analysis proceeds.

Syntagmatic Analysis

Saussure, of course, emphasized the theoretical importance of the relationship of signs to each other. He also noted that 'normally we do not express ourselves by using single linguistic signs, but groups of signs, organised in complexes which themselves are signs' ([Saussure 1983, 127](#); [Saussure 1974, 128](#)). However, in practice he treated the individual word as the primary example of the sign. Thinking and communication depend on *discourse* rather than isolated signs. Saussure's focus on the language *system* rather than on its *use* meant that discourse was neglected within his framework. The linking together of signs was conceived solely in terms of the grammatical possibilities which the system offered. This is a key feature of the Saussurean framework which led some theorists to abandon semiotics altogether in favour of a focus on 'discourse' whilst leading others to seek to reformulate a more socially-oriented semiotics (e.g. [Hodge & Kress 1988](#)). However, this is not to suggest that structural analysis is worthless. Analysts still engage in formal studies of narrative, film and television editing and so on which are based on structuralist principles. It remains important for anyone interested in the analysis of texts to be aware of what these principles are. Structuralists study texts as *syntagmatic* structures. The syntagmatic analysis of a text (whether it is verbal or non-verbal) involves studying its structure and the relationships between its parts. Structuralist semioticians seek to identify elementary constituent *segments* within the text - its syntagms. The study of syntagmatic relations reveals the conventions or 'rules of combination' underlying the production and interpretation of texts (such as the grammar of a language). The use of one syntagmatic structure rather than another within a text influences meaning.



Before discussing narrative, perhaps the most widespread form of syntagmatic structure and one which dominates structuralist semiotic studies, it is worth reminding ourselves that there are other syntagmatic forms. Whilst *narrative* is based on *sequential* (and causal) relationships (e.g. in film and television narrative sequences), there are

also syntagmatic forms based on *spatial* relationships (e.g. *montage* in posters and photographs, which works through juxtaposition) and on *conceptual* relationships (such as in exposition or argument). The distinctions between the modes of narrative, description, exposition and argument are not clear-cut ([Brooks & Warren 1972, 44](#)). Many texts contain more than one type of syntagmatic structure, though one may be dominant.

Exposition relies on the conceptual structure of argument or description. A useful discussion of the syntagmatic structure of *argument* (in relation to the mass media) can be found in [Tolson \(1996\)](#). Briefly, the structure of an argument is both serial and hierarchical. It involves three basic elements:

- a proposition or series of propositions;
- evidence;
- justifications.

[\(Tolson 1996, 29-33\)](#)

The conventions of expository prose in English have been listed as follows: 'A clearly defined topic, introduction, body which explicates all but nothing more than the stated topic, paragraphs which chain from one to the next, and a conclusion which tells the reader what has been discussed... no

digression... is permitted on the grounds that it would violate unity' (R B Kaplan & S Ostler, cited by [Swales 1990, 65](#)). Such structural conventions are associated by some theorists with 'masculine' rather than 'feminine' modes of discourse ([Goodman 1990](#); [Easthope 1990](#)). Masculine modes are held to involve clearly observable linear structures with 'tight', orderly and logical arguments leading to 'the main point' without backtracking or side-tracking. They can be seen as 'defensive' structures which seek to guard the author against academic criticism. As such these structures tend to support 'masculine' modes of discourse and to exclude 'women's ways of knowing'. Even without tying such conventions to gender bias it is clear that they facilitate certain modes of discourse and frustrate others.

One of the features which Anthony Easthope characterizes as stereotypically 'masculine' is a concern for seamless textual unity ([Easthope 1990](#)). Formal writing in general tends to have less obvious 'loose ends' than does casual discourse. Whilst, for the existentialist at least, there are always loose ends in the interpretation of experience, in most expository writing 'loose-ends' are considered to be 'out of place': stylistic seamlessness, unity and coherence are expected. A writing teacher asserts that 'in a finished work... the flimsy scaffolding is taken away' ([Murray 1978, 90-1](#)). Another author, drawing attention to this, remarks: 'the seams do not (I hope) show' ([Smith 1982, 2](#)). Seamlessness has a particularly high priority in science: 'the scientific article is expected to be a finished and polished piece of work' ([Hagstrom 1965, 31](#)). A cohesive structure reinforces a sense of the argument as 'coherent'. The tidiness of academic texts may also misleadingly suggest the enduring nature of the positions which they represent.

The basic three-part structure of introduction, main body and conclusion is satirized in the sardonic advice: 'First say what you're going to say, then say it, then say what you've already said.' Whilst this formulation masks the inexplicitness of academic writing, it highlights its structural closure. Structural closure suggests that 'the matter is closed' - that the text is 'finished'. Seamlessness and sequential structures reinforce an impression of the ground having been covered, of all the questions having been answered, of nothing important having been left out. Though it is a lie, closure suggests mastery of the material through its control of form. As David Lodge puts it, 'scholarly discourse aspires to the condition of monologue inasmuch as it tries to say the last word on a given subject, to affirm its mastery over all previous words on that subject' ([Lodge 1987, 96](#)). Of course, despite the occasional comment in reviews that a text is 'an exhaustive treatment' of its subject, no text can say everything that could be said; there is no first or last word on any subject. But competent academic writers typically learn to create an illusion of completeness which amounts to an attempt to prevent the reader from 'but-ing' in. Conventional academic textual structures frame the issues and guide the reader towards the author's resolution of them. Academic discourse uses univocal textual closure as a way of both controlling the reader and subordinating the topic to the author's purposes. Such closed textual structures can be seen as reflecting authorial attempts to create worlds whose completeness, order and clarity demand our recognition of them as somehow more absolute, more objective, more 'real', than the dynamic flux of everyday experience. Academic authors first fragment that which is experienced as seamless, and then, in conforming to various conventions in the use of the printed word, seek to give an impression of the seamlessness of their creations. The drive towards formal seamlessness suggests an imitation of the existential seamlessness, and hence 'authenticity', of lived experience.

In any expository writing, literary seamlessness may mask weaknesses or 'gaps' in the argument; it also masks the authorial manipulation involved in constructing an apparently 'natural' flow of words

and ideas. For instance, the orderliness of the scientific paper offers a misleadingly tidy picture of the process of scientific inquiry. Representation always seems tidier than reality. Seamlessness in writing is a Classical and 'realist' convention which may seem to suggest 'objectivity': whereas Romantic craftsmanship typically features the marks of the maker and may even employ 'alienation' - deliberately drawing attention to the making. Robert Merton argued for the reform of scientific writing, suggesting that 'if true art consists in concealing all signs of art [the Classical convention], true science consists in revealing its scaffolding as well as its finished structure' ([Merton 1968, 70](#)). Such 'visible architecture' has similarly been commended in the practice of historians ([Megill & McCloskey 1987, 235](#)). As the linguist Edward Sapir famously remarked, 'all grammars leak' ([Sapir 1971, 38](#)). Those who would learn from semiotics should search for structural leaks, seams and scaffolding as signs of the making of any representation, and also for what has been denied, hidden or excluded so that the text may seem to tell 'the whole truth'.

Theorists often assert that, unlike verbal language, the visual image is not suited to exposition (e.g. [Peirce 1931-58, 2.291](#); [Gombrich 1982, 138, 175](#)). Syntagms are often logocentrically defined purely as sequential or temporal 'chains'. But *spatial* relations are also syntagmatic. Whilst most obviously associated with art and photography, they are no less structurally important alongside temporal syntagms in media such as television, cinema and the World Wide Web. Unlike sequential syntagmatic relations, which are essentially about *before* and *after*, spatial syntagmatic relations include:

- above/below,
- in front/behind,
- close/distant,
- left/right (which can also have sequential significance),
- north/south/east/west, and
- inside/outside (or centre/periphery).

Such structural relationships are not semantically neutral. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have shown how fundamental 'orientational metaphors' are routinely linked to key concepts in a culture ([Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Chapter 4](#)). Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen identify three key spatial dimensions in visual texts: left/right, top/bottom and centre/margin ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996](#); [Kress & van Leeuwen 1998](#)).

The horizontal and vertical axes are not neutral dimensions of pictorial representation. Since writing and reading in European cultures proceed primarily along a horizontal axis from left to right (as in English but unlike, for instance, Arabic, Hebrew and Chinese), the 'default' for reading a picture within such reading/writing cultures (unless attention is diverted by some salient features) is likely to be generally in the same direction. This is especially likely where pictures are embedded in written text, as in the case of magazines and newspapers. There is thus a potential sequential significance in the left-hand and right-hand elements of a visual image - a sense of 'before' and 'after'. Kress and van Leeuwen relate the left-hand and right-hand elements to the linguistic concept of 'the Given' and 'the New'. They argue that on those occasions when pictures make significant use of the horizontal axis, positioning some elements left of centre and others right of centre, then the left-hand side is 'the side of the "already given", something the reader is assumed to know already', a familiar, well-established and agreed-upon point of departure - something which is commonsensical, assumed and self-evident, whilst the right-hand side is the side of the New. 'For something to be New means that it is

presented as something which is not yet known, or perhaps not yet agreed upon by the viewer, hence as something to which the viewer must pay special attention' - something more surprising, problematic or contestable ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 186-192](#); [Kress & van Leeuwen 1998, 189-193](#)). The concepts of the Given and the New owe their origin to Hallidayan linguistics ([Halliday 1994](#)).

The vertical compositional axis also carries connotations. Arguing for the fundamental significance of orientational metaphors in framing experience, Lakoff and Johnson observe that (in English usage) *up* has come to be associated with *more* and *down* with *less*. They outline further associations:

- *up* is associated with goodness, virtue, happiness, consciousness, health, life, the future, high status, having control or power, and with rationality, whilst
- *down* is associated with badness, depravity, sickness, death, low status, being subject to control or power, and with emotion ([Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Chapter 4](#)).

For one signifier to be located 'higher' than another is consequently not simply a spatial relationship but also an evaluative one in relation to the signifieds for which they stand. Erving Goffman's slim volume *Gender Advertisements* (1979) concerned the depictions of male and female figures in magazine advertisements. Although it was unsystematic and only some of his observations have been supported in subsequent empirical studies, it is widely celebrated as a classic of visual sociology. Probably the most relevant of his observations in the context of these notes was that 'men tend to be located higher than women' in these ads, symbolically reflecting the routine subordination of women to men in society ([Goffman 1979, 43](#)). Offering their own speculative mapping of the connotations of top and bottom, Kress and van Leeuwen argue that where an image is structured along a vertical axis, the upper and lower sections represent an opposition between 'the Ideal' and 'the Real' respectively. They suggest that the lower section in pictorial layouts tends to be more 'down-to-earth', concerned with practical or factual details, whilst the upper part tends to be concerned with abstract or generalized possibilities (a polarisation between respectively 'particular/general', 'local/global' etc.). In many Western printed advertisements, for instance, 'the upper section tends to... show us "what might be"; the lower section tends to be more informative and practical, showing us "what is"' ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 193-201](#); [Kress & van Leeuwen 1998, 193-195](#)).



The third key spatial dimension discussed by Kress and van Leeuwen is that of centre and margin. The composition of some visual images is based primarily not on a left-right or top-bottom structure but on a dominant centre and a periphery. 'For something to be presented as Centre means that it is presented as the nucleus of the information on which all the other elements are in some sense subservient. The Margins are these ancillary, dependent elements' ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 206](#); [Kress & van Leeuwen 1998, 196-198](#)). This is related to the fundamental perceptual distinction between *figure and ground* (see [Langholz Leymore 1975, 37ff](#) in relation to advertisements). Selective perception involves 'foregrounding' some features and 'backgrounding' others. We owe the concept of 'figure' and 'ground' in perception to the Gestalt psychologists: notably Max

Wertheimer (1880-1943), Wolfgang Köhler (1887-1967) and Kurt Koffka (1886-1941). Confronted by a visual image, we seem to need to separate a dominant shape (a 'figure' with a definite contour) from what our current concerns relegate to 'background' (or 'ground'). In visual images, the figure tends to be located centrally.

In one particular visual form - that of visual advertisements in print - relationships can be investigated, for instance, between key elements of *content* such as *product*, *props*, *setting* and *actors* ([Millum 1975, 88ff](#); see also [Langholz Leymore 1975, 64ff](#) and [Leiss et al. 1990, 230ff](#)), and between key aspects of *form* such as *headline*, *illustration*, *copy* and *logo/slogan* ([Millum 1975, 83](#)).

Turning from spatial to sequential syntagms brings us to *narrative* (which, as noted, may even underlie left/right spatial structures). Some critics claim that differences between narratives and non-narratives relate to differences among media, instancing individual drawings, paintings and photographs as non-narrative forms; others claim that narrative is a 'deep structure' independent of the medium ([Stern 1998, 5](#)). [Narrative theory \(or narratology\)](#) is a major interdisciplinary field in its own right, and is not necessarily framed within a semiotic perspective, although 'the analysis of narrative is an important branch of semiotics' ([Culler 1981, 186](#)). Semiotic narratology is concerned with narrative in any mode - literary or non-literary, fictional or non-fictional, verbal or visual - but tends to focus on minimal narrative units and the 'grammar of the plot' (some theorists refer to 'story grammars'). It follows in the tradition of the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp and the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Christian Metz observed that 'a narrative has a beginning and an ending, a fact that simultaneously distinguishes it from the rest of the world' ([Metz 1974, 17](#)). There are no 'events' in the world - narrative form is needed to create an event. Perhaps the most basic narrative syntagm is a linear temporal model composed of three phases - *equilibrium-disruption-equilibrium* - a 'chain' of events corresponding to the beginning, middle and end of a story (or, as Philip Larkin put it, describing the formula of the classic novel: 'a beginning, a *muddle* and an end'; *my emphasis*). In the orderly Aristotelian narrative form, *causation* and *goals* turn *story* (chronological events) into *plot*: events at the beginning cause those in the middle, and events in the middle cause those at the end. This is the basic formula for classic Hollywood movies in which the storyline is given priority over everything else. The film-maker Jean-Luc Godard declared that he liked a film to have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order; in 'classical' (realist) narrative, events are always in that order, providing continuity and closure. Roland Barthes argued that narrative is basically translatable - 'international, transhistorical, transcultural' ([Barthes 1977, 79](#)) and Barbara Stern comments that 'plots can be actualized in any medium capable of communicating two time orders (film, dance, opera, comic strips, interactive media, and so forth) and can be transposed from one medium to another' ([Stern 1998, 9](#)). Some theorists argue that the translatability of narrative makes it unlike other codes and such commentators grant narrative the privileged status of a 'metacode'.

Andrew Tolson notes that insofar as they are formulaic, 'narratives reduce the unique or the unusual to familiar and regular patterns of expectation' ([Tolson 1996, 43](#)). They provide structure and coherence. In this respect they are similar to [schemas](#) for familiar events in everyday life. Of course, what constitutes an 'event' is itself a construction: 'reality' cannot be reduced objectively to discrete temporal units; what counts as an 'event' is determined by the purposes of the interpreter. However, turning experience into narratives seems to be a fundamental feature of the human drive to make

meaning. Some theorists have argued that 'human beings are fundamentally story-tellers who experience themselves and their lives in narrative terms' ([Burr 1995, 137](#)).

Coherence is no guarantee of referential correspondence. The narrative form itself has a content of its own; the medium has a message. Narrative is such an automatic choice for representing events that it seems unproblematic and 'natural'. Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress argue that the use of a familiar narrative structure serves 'to naturalize the content of the narrative itself' ([Hodge & Kress 1988, 230](#)). Where narratives end in a return to predictable equilibrium this is referred to as narrative *closure*. Closure is often effected as the resolution of an opposition. Structural closure is regarded by many theorists as reinforcing a preferred reading, or in Hodge and Kress's terms, reinforcing the status quo. According to theorists applying the principles of Jacques Lacan, conventional narrative (in dominant forms of literature, cinema and so on) also plays a part in the constitution of the subject. Whilst narrative appears to demonstrate unity and coherence within the text, the subject participates in the sense of closure (in part through identification with characters). 'The coherence of narrative reciprocally reinscribes the coherence of the subject', returning the subject to the pre-linguistic realm of the Imaginary where the self had greater fixity and less fluidity than in the Symbolic realm of verbal language ([Nichols 1981, 78](#)).

The writing style of professional historians has traditionally involved a variant of the nineteenth-century 'realist' novelist's omniscient narrator and fluent narrative. Historians have only fragmentary 'sources', but 'the style exerts pressure to produce a whole and continuous story, sustaining the impression of omniscience, leaping over evidential voids' ([Megill & McCloskey 1987, 226](#)). Narrative may imply continuity where there is none. Foucault's poststructuralist history of ideas is radical in insisting instead on 'ruptures', 'discontinuities' and 'disjunctions' ([Foucault 1970](#)). Reflecting on his explorations of historiography in his book entitled *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White observes that 'narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form... but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications' ([White 1987, ix](#)). He adds that 'real life can never be truthfully represented as having the kind of formal coherency met with in the conventional, well-made or fabulistic story' (*ibid.*).

The structuralist semiotician's inductive search for underlying structural patterns highlights the similarities between what may initially seem to be very different narratives. As Barthes notes, for the structuralist analyst 'the first task is to divide up narrative and... define the smallest narrative units... Meaning must be the criterion of the unit: it is the functional nature of certain segments of the story that makes them units - hence the name "functions" immediately attributed to these first units' ([Barthes 1977, 88](#)). In a highly influential book, *The Morphology of the Folktale*, Vladimir Propp interpreted a hundred fairy tales in terms of around 30 'functions'. 'Function is understood as an act of character defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action' ([Propp 1928, 21](#)). Such functions are basic units of action. The folktales analysed by Propp were all based on the same basic formula:

The basic tale begins with either injury to a victim, or the lack of some important object. Thus, at the very beginning, the end result is given: it will consist in the retribution for the injury or the acquisition of the thing lacked. The hero, if he is not himself personally involved, is sent for, at which two key events take place.

He meets a donor (a toad, a hag, a bearded old man, etc.), who after testing him for the appropriate reaction (for some courtesy, for instance) supplies him with a magical agent (ring, horse, cloak, lion) which enables him to pass victoriously through his ordeal.

Then of course, he meets the villain, engaging him in the decisive combat. Yet, paradoxically enough, this episode, which would seem to be the central one, is not irreplaceable. There is an alternative track, in which the hero finds himself before a series of tasks or labours which, with the help of his agent, he is ultimately able to solve properly...

The latter part of the tale is little more than a series of retarding devices: the pursuit of the hero on his way home, the possible intrusion of a false hero, the unmasking of the latter, with the ultimate transfiguration, marriage and/or coronation of the hero himself. ([Jameson 1972, 65-6](#))

As Barthes notes, structuralists avoid defining human agents in terms of 'psychological essences', and participants are defined by analysts not in terms of 'what they are' as 'characters' but in terms of 'what they do' ([Barthes 1977, 106](#)). Propp listed seven *roles*: the *villain*, the *donor*, the *helper*, the *sought-for-person (and her father)*, the *dispatcher*, the *hero* and the *false hero* and schematized the various 'functions' within the story as follows:

1	Initial Situation	Members of family of hero introduced.
2	Absentation	One of the members absents himself from home.
3	Interdiction	An interdiction is addressed to the hero.
4	Violation	An interdiction is violated.
5	Reconnaissance	The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance.
6	Delivery	The villain receives information about his victim.
7	Trickery	The villain attempts to deceive the victim.
8	Complicity	The victim submits to deception, unwittingly helps his enemy.
9	Villainy	The villain causes harm or injury to members of the family.
10	Lack	One member of a family lacks something or wants something.
11	Mediation	Misfortune is known. Hero is dispatched.
12	Counteraction	Seekers decide to agree on counteraction.
13	Departure	The hero leaves home.
14	1st function of donor	Hero is tested, receives magical agent donor or helper.
15	Hero's Reaction	Hero reacts to action of the future donor.
16	Receipt of Magic Agent	Hero acquires the use of magical agent.

17	Spatial Transference	Hero is led to object of search.
18	Struggle	Hero and villain join in direct combat.
19	Branding	Hero is branded.
20	Victory	Villain is defeated
21	Liquidation	Initial misfortune or lack is liquidated.
22	Return	The hero returns.
23	Pursuit	A chase: the hero is pursued.
24	Rescue	Rescue of hero from pursuit.
25	Unrecognized	The hero, unrecognized, arrives home or in another arrival country.
26	Unfounded claims	A false hero presents unfounded claims.
27	Difficult task	A difficult task is proposed to the hero.
28	Solution	The task is resolved.
29	Recognition	The hero is recognized.
30	Exposure	The false hero or villain is exposed.
31	Transfiguration	The hero is given a new appearance.
32	Punishment	The villain is punished.
33	Wedding	The hero is married and ascends the throne.

This form of analysis downplays the specificity of individual texts in the interests of establishing *how* texts mean rather than *what* a particular text means. It is by definition, a 'reductive' strategy, and some literary theorists argue that there is a danger that in applying it, 'Russian folk tales become indistinguishable from the latest episode of *The Sweeney*, from *Star Wars* or from a Raymond Chandler novel' ([Woollocott 1982, 96](#)). Even Barthes noted that 'the first analysts of narrative were attempting... to see all the world's stories... within a single structure' and that this was a task which was 'ultimately undesirable, for the text thereby loses its difference' ([Barthes 1974, 3](#)). Difference is, after all, what identifies both the sign and the text. Despite this objection, Fredric Jameson suggests that the method has redeeming features. For instance, the notion of a grammar of plots allows us to see 'the work of a generation or a period in terms of a given model (or basic plot paradigm), which is then varied and articulated in as many ways possible until it is somehow exhausted and replaced by a new one' ([Jameson 1972, 124](#)).

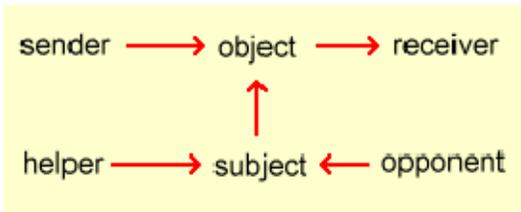
Unlike Propp, both Lévi-Strauss and Greimas based their interpretations of narrative structure on underlying oppositions. Lévi-Strauss saw the myths of a culture as variations on a limited number of basic themes built upon oppositions related to nature versus culture. Any myth could be reduced to a fundamental structure. He wrote that 'a compilation of known tales and myths would fill an imposing number of volumes. But they can be reduced to a small number of simple types if we abstract from among the diversity of characters a few elementary functions' ([Lévi-Strauss 1972, 203-204](#)). Myths

help people to make sense of the world in which they live. Lévi-Strauss saw myths as a kind of a message from our ancestors about humankind and our relationship to nature, in particular, how we became separated from other animals. However, the meaning was not to be found in any individual narrative but in the patterns underlying the myths of a given culture. Myths make sense only as part of a system. Edmund Leach makes this clearer by relating it to information theory ([Leach 1970, 59](#)). If we imagine that we are shouting a message to someone almost out of earshot, we may need to shout the message many times with changes of wording so as to include sufficient 'redundancy' to overcome the interference of various kinds of 'noise'. Some of the versions heard will lack some of the elements originally included, but by collating the different versions the message becomes clearer. Another way of looking at it is to see each mythical narrative as a different instrumental part in a musical score, and it is this elusive 'score' which Lévi-Strauss pursues. He treated the form of myths as a kind of language. He reported that his initial method of analysing the structure of myths into 'gross constituent units' or 'mythemes' involved 'breaking down its story into the shortest possible sentences' ([Lévi-Strauss 1972, 211](#)). This approach was based on an analogy with the 'morpheme', which is the smallest meaningful unit in linguistics. In order to explain the structure of a myth, Lévi-Strauss classified each mytheme in terms of its 'function' within the myth and finally related the various kinds of function to each other. He saw the possible combinations of mythemes as being governed by a kind of underlying universal grammar which was part of the deep structure of the mind itself. 'The study of myths is to Lévi-Strauss what the study of dreams was to Freud: the "royal road" to the unconscious' ([Wiseman & Groves 2000, 134](#)).

A good example of the Lévi-Straussean method is provided by Victor Larrucia in his own analysis of the story of 'Little Red Riding-Hood' (originating in the late seventeenth century in a tale by Perrault) ([Larrucia 1975](#)). According to this method the narrative is summarized in several columns, each corresponding to some unifying function or theme. The original sequence (indicated by numbers) is preserved when the table is read row-by-row.

1 Grandmother's illness causes mother to make Grandmother food	2 Little Red Riding Hood (LRRH) obeys mother and goes off to wood	3 LRRH meets (Wolf as) friend and talks	
4 Woodcutter's presence causes Wolf to speak to LRRH	5 LRRH obeys Wolf and takes long road to Grandmother's	6 Grandmother admits (Wolf as) LRRH	7 Wolf eats Grandmother
		8 LRRH meets (Wolf as) Grandmother	
	9 LRRH obeys Grandmother and gets into bed	10 LRRH questions (Wolf as) Grandmother	11 Wolf eats LRRH

Rather than offering any commentators' suggestions as to what themes these columns represent, I leave it to readers to speculate for themselves. Suggestions can be found in the references ([Larrucia 1975](#); [Silverman & Torode 1980, 314ff](#)).



The Lithuanian structuralist semiotician Algirdas Greimas proposed a grammar of narrative which could generate any known narrative structure ([Greimas 1983](#); [Greimas 1987](#)). As a result of a 'semiotic reduction' of Propp's seven roles he identified three types of narrative syntagms: *syntagms performanciels* - tasks and struggles; *syntagms contractuels* - the establishment or breaking of contracts; *syntagms disjonctionnels* - departures and arrivals ([Greimas 1987](#); [Culler 1975, 213](#); [Hawkes 1977, 94](#)).

Greimas claimed that three basic binary oppositions underlie all narrative themes, actions and character types (which he collectively calls 'actants'), namely: *subject/object* (Propp's *hero* and *sought-for-person*), *sender/receiver* (Propp's *dispatcher* and *hero* - again) and *helper/opponent* (conflations of Propp's *helper* and *donor*, plus the *villain* and the *false hero*) - note that Greimas argues that the hero is both *subject* and *receiver*. The *subject* is the one who seeks; the *object* is that which is sought. The *sender* sends the object and the *receiver* is its destination. The *helper* assists the action and the *opponent* blocks it. He extrapolates from the *subject-verb-object* sentence structure, proposing a fundamental, underlying 'actantial model' as the basis of story structures. He argues that in traditional syntax, 'functions' are the roles played by words - the *subject* being the one performing the action and the *object* being 'the one who suffers it' ([Jameson 1972, 124](#)). Terence Hawkes summarizes Greimas's model: a narrative sequence employs 'two actants whose relationship must be either oppositional or its reverse; and on the surface level this relationship will therefore generate fundamental actions of disjunction and conjunction, separation and union, struggle and reconciliation etc. The movement from one to the other, involving the transfer on the surface of some entity - a quality, an object - from one actant to the other, constitutes the essence of the narrative' ([Hawkes 1977, 90](#)). For Greimas, stories thus share a common 'grammar'. However, critics such as Jonathan Culler have not always been convinced of the validity of Greimas's methodology or of the workability or usefulness of his model ([Culler 1975, 213-214, 223-224](#)).

Like Greimas, in his book *Grammaire du Décaméron* (1969), the Bulgarian Tzvetan Todorov also offered a 'grammar' of narrative - in this case based on the stories of Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1353). For Todorov the basic syntactic units of narrative consist of *propositions* (such as *X makes love to Y*) which can be organized into *sequences*. A proposition is formed by the combination of *character* (noun) with an *attribute* (adjective) or an *action* (verb). In *The Decameron*, *attributes* consisted of states, internal properties and external conditions; there were three basic actions ('to modify a situation', 'to transgress' and 'to punish'). *Sequences* were based on temporal relations, logical relations and spatial relations. Each story within *The Decameron* constituted a kind of extended sentence, combining these units in various ways ([Hawkes 1977, 95-99](#)).

In a more popular context, Umberto Eco also focused on a finite corpus based on a single author - deriving a basic narrative scheme in relation to the James Bond novels (one could do much the same with the films):



- M moves and gives a task to Bond.
- The villain moves and appears to Bond.
- Bond moves and gives a first check to the villain or the villain gives first check to Bond.
- Woman moves and shows herself to Bond.
- Bond consumes woman: possesses her or begins her seduction.

- The villain captures Bond.
- The villain tortures Bond.
- Bond conquers the villain.
- Bond convalescing enjoys woman, whom he then loses.

[\(Eco 1966, 52\)](#)

Unlike Propp and Greimas, Eco goes beyond the reductive formalism of structural analysis, making links with the broader context of literary and ideological discourses ([Woollocott 1982, 96-7](#)).

Syntagmatic analysis can be applied not only to verbal texts but also to audio-visual ones. In film and television, a syntagmatic analysis would involve an analysis of how each *frame*, *shot*, *scene* or *sequence* related to the others (these are the standard levels of analysis in film theory). At the lowest level is the individual *frame*. Since films are projected at a rate of 24 frames a second, the viewer is never conscious of individual frames, but significant frames can be isolated by the analyst. At the next level up, a *shot* is a 'single take' - an unedited sequence of frames which may include camera movement. A shot is terminated by a cut (or other transition). A *scene* consists of more than one shot set in a single place and time. A *sequence* spans more than one place and or/time but it is a logical or thematic sequence (having 'dramatic unity'). The linguistic model often leads semioticians to a search for units of analysis in audio-visual media which are analogous to those used in linguistics. In the semiotics of film, crude equivalents with written language are sometimes postulated: such as the frame as morpheme (or word), the shot as sentence, the scene as paragraph, and the sequence as chapter (suggested equivalences vary amongst commentators) (see [Lapsley & Westlake 1988, 39ff](#)). For members of the Glasgow University Media Group the basic unit of analysis was the [shot](#), delimited by cuts and with allowance made for camera movement within the shot and for the accompanying soundtrack ([Davis & Walton 1983b, 43](#)). Shots can be broken into smaller meaningful units (above the level of the frame), but theorists disagree about what these might be. Above the level of the sequence, other narrative units can also be posited.

Christian Metz offered elaborate syntagmatic categories for narrative film ([Metz 1974, Chapter 5](#)) For Metz, these syntagms were analogous to sentences in verbal language, and he argued that there were eight key filmic syntagms which were based on ways of ordering narrative space and time.

- The *autonomous shot* (e.g. establishing shot, insert)
- The *parallel syntagm* (montage of motifs)
- The *bracketing syntagm* (montage of brief shots)
- The *descriptive syntagm* (sequence describing one moment)
- The *alternating syntagm* (two sequences alternating)
- The *scene* (shots implying temporal continuity)
- The *episodic sequence* (organized discontinuity of shots)
- The *ordinary sequence* (temporal with some compression)

However, Metz's '*grande syntagmatique*' has not proved an easy system to apply to some films. In their study of children's understanding of television, [Hodge and Tripp \(1986, 20\)](#) divide syntagms into four kinds, based on syntagms existing in the same time (*synchronic*), different times (diachronic), same space (syntopic), and different space (*diatopic*).

- *Synchronic/syntopic* (one place, one time: one shot)
- *Diachronic/syntopic* (same place sequence over time)
- *Synchronic/diatopic* (different places at same time)
- *Diachronic/diatopic* (shots related only by theme)

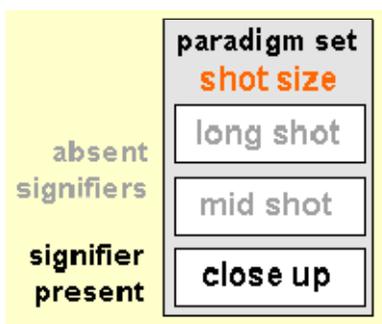
They add that whilst these are all *continuous syntagms* (single shots or successive shots), there are also *discontinuous syntagms* (related shots separated by others).

Beyond the fourfold distinction between frames, shots, scenes and sequences, the interpretative frameworks of film theorists differ considerably. In this sense at least, there is no cinematic 'language'.

Paradigmatic Analysis

Whereas syntagmatic analysis studies the 'surface structure' of a text, *paradigmatic analysis* seeks to identify the various paradigms (or pre-existing sets of signifiers) which underlie the manifest content of texts. This aspect of structural analysis involves a consideration of the positive or negative [connotations](#) of each signifier (revealed through the use of one signifier rather than another), and the existence of 'underlying' thematic paradigms (e.g. binary oppositions such as *public/private*). 'Paradigmatic relations' are the oppositions and contrasts between the signifiers that belong to the same set from which those used in the text were drawn.

Semioticians often focus on the issue of why a particular signifier rather than a workable alternative was used in a specific context: on what they often refer to as 'absences'. Saussure noted that a characteristic of what he called 'associative' relations - what would now be called paradigmatic relations - was that (in contrast to syntagmatic relations) such relations held '*in absentia*' - in the absence from a specific text of alternative signifiers from the same paradigm ([Saussure 1983, 122](#); [Saussure 1974, 123](#)). He also argued that signs take their value within the linguistic system from what they are *not* ([Saussure 1983, 115](#); [Saussure 1974, 117](#)). We have popular sayings in English concerning two kinds of absences: we refer to 'what goes without saying' and 'what is conspicuous by its absence'. What 'goes without saying' reflects what it is assumed that you 'take for granted' as 'obvious'. In relation to the coverage of an issue (such as in 'factual' genres) this is a profoundly ideological absence which helps to ['position' the text's readers](#), the implication being that 'people like us already agree what we think about issues like that'. As for the second kind of absence, an item which is present in the text may flout conventional expectations, making the conventional item 'conspicuous by its absence' and the unexpected item 'a statement'. This applies no less to cultural practices. If a man wears a suit at his office it says very little other than that he is conforming to a norm. But if one day he arrives in jeans and a tee-shirt, this will be interpreted as 'making a statement'. Analysing textual absences can help to reveal whose interests are served by their omission. Such analysis pays particular attention to the issue of which questions are left unasked.



Paradigmatic analysis involves comparing and contrasting each of the signifiers present in the text with absent signifiers which in similar circumstances might have been chosen, and considering the significance

of the choices made. It can be applied at any semiotic level, from the choice of a particular word, image or sound to the level of the choice of style, genre or medium. The use of one signifier rather than another from the same paradigm is based on factors such as technical constraints, code (e.g. genre), convention, connotation, style, rhetorical purpose and the limitations of the individual's own repertoire. The analysis of paradigmatic relations helps to define the 'value' of specific items in a text.

Some semioticians refer to the 'commutation test' which can be used in order to identify distinctive signifiers and to define their significance - determining whether a change on the level of the signifier leads to a change on the level of the signified. Its origins lie in a linguistic test of substitution applied by the Prague Structuralists (including Roman Jakobson). In order to identify within a language its phonemes and their 'distinctive features' (for example, *voiced/unvoiced*; *nasalized/not nasalized*), linguists experimented with changes in the phonetic structure of a word in order to see at what point it became a different word. The original commutation test has evolved into a rather more subjective form of textual analysis. Roland Barthes refers to using the commutation test to divide texts into minimal significant units, before grouping these units into paradigmatic classes ([Barthes 1967, 48](#)). To apply this test a particular signifier in a text is selected. Then alternatives to this signifier are considered. The effects of each substitution are considered in terms of how this might affect the sense made of the sign. This might involve imagining the use of a close-up rather than a mid-shot, a substitution in age, sex, class or ethnicity, substituting objects, a different caption for a photograph, etc. It could also involve swapping over two of the existing signifiers, changing their original relationship. The influence of the substitution on the meaning can help to suggest the contribution of the original signifier and also to identify syntagmatic units ([Barthes 1967, III 2.3](#); [Barthes 1985, 19-20](#)). The commutation test can identify the sets (paradigms) and codes to which the signifiers used belong. For instance, if changing the setting used in an advertisement contributes to changing the meaning then 'setting' is one of the paradigms; the paradigm set for the setting would consist of all of those alternative signifiers which could have been used and which would have shifted the meaning. Arriving at a party in a Nissan Micra 'says something different' from arriving in an Alfa Romeo. Wearing jeans to a job interview will be interpreted differently from 'power dressing'.

The commutation test may involve any of four basic transformations, some of which involve the modification of the syntagm. However, the consideration of an alternative syntagm can itself be seen as a paradigmatic substitution.

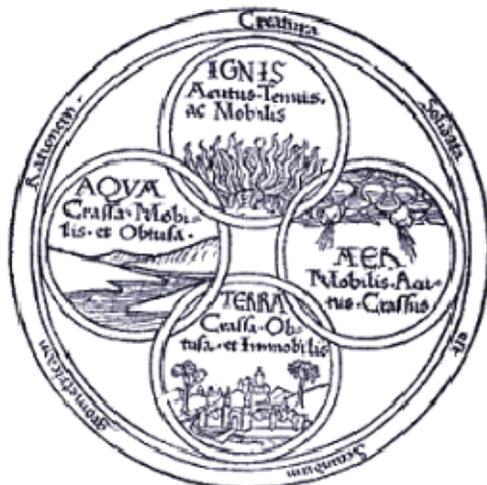
- **Paradigmatic transformations**
 - *substitution*;
 - *transposition*;
- **Syntagmatic transformations**
 - *addition*;
 - *deletion*.

These four basic transformational processes were noted as [features of perception and recall](#) ([Allport & Postman 1945](#); [Newcomb 1952: 88-96](#)). They correspond exactly to the four general categories to which Quintilian (circa 35-100 AD) assigned the [rhetorical figures \(or tropes\)](#) as 'deviations' from 'literal' language ([Nöth 1990, 341](#)).

Structuralists emphasize the importance of relations of paradigmatic opposition. The primary analytical method employed by many semioticians involves the identification of binary or polar

semantic oppositions (e.g. *us/them*, *public/private*) in texts or signifying practices. Such a quest is based on a form of 'dualism'. Note that the slanting line linking and separating the two terms in such pairings is sometimes referred to by semioticians as 'the bar', a term employed by Jacques Lacan ([Lacan 1977, 149](#)).

Dualism seems to be deeply-rooted in the development of human categorization. Jakobson and Halle observe that 'the binary opposition is a child's first logical operation' ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 60](#)). Whilst there are no opposites in 'nature', the binary oppositions which we employ in our cultural practices help to generate order out of the dynamic complexity of experience. At the most basic level of individual survival humans share with other animals the need to distinguish between 'own species and other, dominance and submission, sexual availability or lack of availability, what is edible and what is not' ([Leach 1970, 39](#)). The range of human distinctions is far more extensive than those which they share with other animals since it is supported by the elaborate system of categorization which language facilitates. The British anthropologist Sir Edmund Leach reflects that 'a speechless ape presumably has some sort of feelings for the opposition "I"/"Other", perhaps even for its expanded version "We"/"They", but the still more grandiose "Natural"/"Supernatural" ("Man"/"God") could only occur within a linguistic frame... The recognition of a distinction Natural/Supernatural (Real/Imaginary) is a basic marker of humanity' ([Leach 1982, 108-9](#)).



Isidore of Seville (c 560-636)
De Responsione Mvndi & Astorum Ordinatione
 published in Augsburg in 1472

People have believed in the fundamental character of binary oppositions since at least classical times. For instance, in his *Metaphysics* Aristotle advanced as primary oppositions: *form/matter*, *natural/unnatural*, *active/passive*, *whole/part*, *unity/variety*, *before/after* and *being/not-being*. But it is not in isolation that the rhetorical power of such oppositions resides, but in their articulation in relation to other oppositions. In Aristotle's *Physics* the four elements of *earth*, *air*, *fire* and *water* were said to be opposed in pairs. For more than two thousand years oppositional patterns based on these four elements were widely accepted as the fundamental structure underlying surface reality.

The elements of such frameworks appeared in various combinations, their shifting forms driven in part by the tensions inherent within such schemes. The theory of the elements continued to enjoy widespread influence until the time of

scientists such as Robert Boyle (1627-91).

Element	Quality	Humour	Body fluid	Organ	Season	Cardinal point	Zodiac signs	Planet
air	hot and moist	sanguine (active and enthusiastic)	blood	heart	spring	South	Gemini, Libra, Aquarius	Jupiter
fire	hot and dry	choleric (irritable and	yellow bile	liver	summer	East	Aries, Leo,	Mars

		changeable)					Sagittarius	
earth	cold and dry	melancholic (sad and brooding)	black bile	spleen	autumn	North	Taurus, Virgo, Capricorn	Saturn
water	cold and moist	phlegmatic (apathetic and sluggish)	phlegm	brain	winter	West	Cancer, Scorpio, Pisces	Venus

Lyons comments that 'binary opposition is one of the most important principles governing the structure of languages' ([Lyons 1977, 271](#)). Saussure, of course, emphasized the *differences* between signs rather than their similarities. Opposites (or antonyms) clearly have a very practical function compared with synonyms: that of *sorting*. Roman Jakobson built on Saussure's work, proposing that linguistic units are bound together by a system of binary oppositions. Such oppositions are essential to the generation of meaning: the meaning of 'dark' is relative to the meaning of 'light'; 'form' is inconceivable except in relation to 'content'. It is an open question whether our tendency to think in opposites is determined by the prominence of oppositions in language or whether language merely reflects a universal human characteristic.

The various conventionally-linked terms with which we are familiar within a culture might more appropriately be described as paired 'contrasts', since they are not always direct 'opposites' (although their use often involves polarization). Distinctions can be made between various types of 'oppositions', perhaps the most important being the following:

- *oppositions* (logical 'contradictories'): mutually exclusive terms (e.g. *alive/dead*, where 'not alive' can only be 'dead');
- *antonyms* (logical 'contraries'): terms which are comparatively graded on the same implicit dimension (e.g. *good/bad*, where 'not good' is not necessarily 'bad') ([Lyons 1977, 270ff](#); [Langholz Leymore 1975, 7](#); [Barthes 1985, 162ff](#)).

This is basically a distinction between *digital* and *analogue* oppositions: digital differences are *either/or*, analogue distinctions are *'more-or-less'*. We may note here that most of the oppositions in English are 'morphologically related' - that is, one term is a negative which is formed by the addition of a prefix such as *un-* or *-in* (e.g. *formal/informal*). Despite this, most of the *commonly used* oppositions in English (and in many other languages) are apparently morphologically *unrelated* (e.g. *good/bad*) (and thus more arbitrary). In English, most morphologically unrelated oppositions are comparative (gradable) and many morphologically related oppositions are *not*, but there many exceptions to this pattern - including terms which may be paired with another which is either morphologically related or unrelated (e.g. *friendly/unfriendly* and *friendly/hostile*). Positive and negative terms can be distinguished even in morphologically unrelated oppositions (such as *good/bad*) by such cues as their most common sequence - a point to which we will return ([Lyons 1977, 275-277](#)). There is no logical necessity for morphologically unrelated oppositions, as Syme explains to Winston in the dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* written by George Orwell in 1949:

It's a beautiful thing, the destruction of words. Of course the great wastage is in the verbs and adjectives... It isn't only the synonyms: there are also the antonyms. After all, what justification is there for a word which is simply the opposite of some other word? A word contains its opposite in itself. Take 'good', for instance. If you have a word like 'good', what need is there for a word like 'bad'? 'Ungood' will do just as well - better, because it's an exact opposite, which the other is not. ([Orwell 1989, 54](#)).

John Lyons suggests that the reason why we tend to use morphologically *unrelated* forms in comparative oppositions is to emphasize the semantic distinction involved: "'good" and "bad" are more obviously different lexemes than "friendly" and "unfriendly"' ([Lyons 1977, 277](#)). He adds that 'gradable opposites manifest the property of polarity more strikingly than do other opposites' ([ibid., 279](#)). Furthermore, in everyday discourse we frequently treat comparative terms as if they were discrete categories ([ibid., 278](#)). For whatever reasons we seem to favour categorization which is 'black and white'.

It is a feature of culture that binary oppositions come to seem 'natural' to members of a culture. Many pairings of concepts (such as *male/female* and *mind/body*) are familiar to members of a culture and may seem commonsensical distinctions for everyday communicational purposes even if they may be regarded as 'false dichotomies' in critical contexts. Rudyard Kipling satirized the apparently universal tendency to divide the people we know directly or indirectly into 'Us' and 'Them' ('We and They', [Kipling 1977, 289-290](#)):

All nice people, like us, are We
And everyone else is They:
But if you cross over the sea,
Instead of over the way,
You may end by (think of it!)
Looking on We
As only a sort of They!

The opposition of *self/other* (or *subject/object*) is psychologically fundamental. The neo-Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan wrote in 1957 (in 'The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious') that 'the unconscious is structured like a language' (cf. [Lacan 1977, 159, 298](#)). The mind imposes some degree of constancy on the dynamic flux of experience by defining 'the Self' in relation to 'the Other'. Initially, in the primal realm of 'the Real' (where there is no absence, loss or lack), the infant has no centre of identity and experiences no clear boundaries between itself and the external world.



The child emerges from the Real and enters 'the Imaginary' at the age of about six- to eighteen-months, before the acquisition of speech. This is a private psychic realm in which the construction of the Self as subject is initiated. In the realm of visual images, we find our sense of self reflected back by an Other with whom we identify. For Lacan, this does not reflect a dichotomy between Self and Other, because not only is Self always defined in terms of Other, but paradoxically, Self *is* Other. He describes a defining moment in the Imaginary which he calls 'the mirror phase', when seeing one's mirror image (and being told by one's mother, 'That's you!')

induces a strongly-defined illusion of a coherent and self-governing personal identity. This marks the child's emergence from a matriarchal state of 'nature' into the patriarchal order of culture.

As the child gains mastery within the pre-existing 'Symbolic order' (the public domain of verbal language), language (which can be mentally manipulated) helps to foster the individual's sense of a conscious Self residing in an 'internal world' which is distinct from 'the world outside'. However, a degree of individuality and autonomy is surrendered to the constraints of linguistic conventions, and the Self becomes a more fluid and ambiguous relational signifier rather than a relatively fixed entity. Subjectivity is dynamically constructed through discourse. Emile Benveniste argued that 'language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a subject by referring to himself as "I" in his discourse. Because of this, "I" posits another person, the one who, being as he is completely exterior to "me", becomes my echo to whom I say "you" and who says "you" to me'... Neither of these terms can be considered without the other; they are complementary... and at the same time they are reversible' ([Benveniste 1971, 225](#)).

The entry into the Symbolic order may be illustrated with Freud's description (in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920) of the *fort-da* game played by his grandson at the age of about eighteen months. The child was alternately throwing away and pulling back a cotton-reel, whilst attempting to say the words 'fort!' (gone away!) and 'da!' (there it is!) - thus creating the shortest possible narrative form. According to Freud this represented a symbolization of the mother leaving and returning. It turns a paradigmatic substitution into an elementary syntagm and demonstrates the lure of repetition and difference. Its focus on *absence/presence* has made it a favourite of post-structuralist theorists such as Lacan and Derrida. It can stand for anything which we have lost or fear losing, and for the pleasure or hope of its recovery. It is thus symbolic of the loss of (amongst other things) the imagined oneness of being in the Imaginary.

Romantics may (at least retrospectively) identify with a childhood sense of growing separation from that which can be described. They tend to echo the poet Shelley (1815) in a vision of primal experience as a mystical sense of oneness, of being within a universal continuum: 'Let us recollect our senses as children. What a distinct and intense apprehension we had of the world and of ourselves... We less habitually distinguished all that we saw and felt from ourselves. They seemed as it were to constitute one mass' ([Forman 1880, 261](#)). The Romantic sense of loss in mediation is perhaps most powerfully represented in Rousseau's interpretation of our use of tools as involving the loss of a primal unity with the world. Such Romantic visions emphasize the unity of the knower and the known. Childhood or primal experience is portrayed by Romantics as virtually 'unmediated'. And yet all but the most naive epistemology suggests that our experience of the world is unavoidably mediated. Indeed, without the separation of Self from Other there would be no 'me' who could hark back to a pre-lapsarian myth of oneness.

'Male' and 'female' are not 'opposites', and yet cultural myths routinely encourage us to treat them as such. Guy Cook offers a simple example of how images of masculinity and femininity can be generated through a series of binary oppositions in a literary text ([Cook 1992, 115](#)). He instances two consecutive speeches from the beginning of a scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*:

JULIET: Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day;
 It was the nightingale, and not the lark,
 That pierc'd the fearful hollow of thine ear;

Nightly she sings on yond pomegranate tree.
 Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.
 ROMEO: It was the lark, the herald of the morn,
 No nightingale. Look, love, what envious streaks
 Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east;
 Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
 Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.
 I must be gone and live or stay and die.

(*Romeo and Juliet* III, v)

Cook notes the following gendered oppositions:

Female	Juliet	question	stays	night	garden	nightingale	death	sleeping	hollow
Male	Romeo	answer	goes	day	mountain tops	lark	life	waking	candles

Such oppositions tend to retreat to transparency in reading or watching the play. The gendered character of the echoes and parallels is consequently quite surprising when the text is submitted to this kind of analysis. And yet these oppositions do not seem to be purely analytical constructions. Indeed, we may also note that Juliet emphasizes *sound* whilst Romeo relies on *vision* (yet another stereotypically gendered association). Through the endless repetition of such subtle patterns - in countless variations - mythologies such as that of heterosexual romance are generated and sustained.

Paired signifiers are seen by structuralist theorists as part of the 'deep [or 'hidden'] structure' of texts, shaping the preferred reading. Such linkages seem to become *aligned* in some texts and codes so that additional 'vertical' relationships (such as *male/mind*, *female/body*) acquire apparent links of their own - as feminists and queer theorists have noted ([Silverman 1983, 36](#); [Grosz 1993, 195](#); [Chaplin 1994, 11](#); [Butler 1999, 17](#)). As Kaja Silverman notes, 'a cultural code is a conceptual system which is organized around key oppositions and equations, in which a term like "woman" is defined in opposition to a term like "man", and in which each term is aligned with a cluster of symbolic attributes' ([Silverman 1983, 36](#)).

This notion can be traced to Claude Lévi-Strauss's discussion of analogical relationships which generate systems of meaning within classification systems. Structuralist theorists such as Lévi-Strauss have argued that binary oppositions form the basis of underlying 'classificatory systems' within cultures - constituting fundamental organizing metaphors and metonyms. He saw certain key binary oppositions as the invariants or universals of the human mind, cutting across cultural distinctions. Lévi-Strauss wrote:

If, as we believe to be the case, the unconscious activity of the mind consists in imposing form upon content, and if these forms are fundamentally the same for all minds - ancient and modern, primitive and civilized (as the study of the symbolic function, expressed in language, so strikingly indicates) - it is necessary and sufficient to grasp the unconscious structure

underlying each institution and each custom, in order to obtain a principle of interpretation valid for other institutions and other customs, provided of course that the analysis is carried far enough. ([Lévi-Strauss 1972, 21](#))

Lévi-Strauss undertook synchronic studies of systems of cultural practices, seeking to identify underlying semantic oppositions in relation to such phenomena as myths, totemism and kinship rules. Individual myths and cultural practices defy interpretation, making sense only as a part of a system of differences and oppositions expressing fundamental reflections on the relationship of nature and culture. This is expressed in terms of the relations between humankind and various other phenomena, such as: animals, plants, supernatural beings, heavenly bodies, forms of food and so on. Certain binary distinctions based on the form of human body are universal and seem fundamental - notably *male/female* and *right/left*. 'Such natural pairs are invariably loaded with cultural significance - they are made into the prototype symbols of the good and the bad, the permitted and the forbidden' ([Leach 1970, 44](#)). Lévi-Strauss argues that within a culture 'analogical thought' leads to some oppositions (such as *edible/inedible*) being perceived as metaphorically resembling the 'similar differences' of other oppositions (such as *native/foreign*) ([Lévi-Strauss 1974](#)).

Lévi-Strauss reported three stages in his analytical method:

- (1) define the phenomenon under study as a relation between two or more terms, real or supposed;
- (2) construct a table of possible permutations between these terms;
- (3) take this table as the general object of analysis which, at this level only, can yield necessary connections, the empirical phenomenon considered at the beginning being only one possible combination among others, the complete system of which must be reconstructed beforehand. ([Lévi-Strauss 1964, 16](#))

For Lévi-Strauss, myths represent a dreamlike working-over of a fundamental dilemma or contradiction within a culture which can be expressed in the form of a pair of oppositions. The development of the myth constitutes a repeated reframing of this tension through layers of paired opposites which are transformations of the primary pair. These layers begin with classifications based on physical perception and become increasingly more generalized. Claude Lévi-Strauss has demonstrated how cooking transforms Nature into Culture: South American myths oppose the *raw* to the *cooked* ([Lévi-Strauss 1970](#)). He comments on his theorizing: 'In order to construct this system of myths about cooking, we found ourselves obliged to use oppositions between terms all more or less drawn from sensory qualities: raw and cooked, fresh and rotten, and so forth. Now we find that the second step in our analysis reveals terms still opposed in pairs, but whose nature is different to the degree that they involve not so much a logic of qualities as one of forms: empty and full, container and contents, internal and external, included and excluded, etc.' (cited in [Jameson 1972, 118-119](#)).

In a major review of the anthropological literature, Lévi-Strauss famously and provocatively declared that 'exchange, as a total phenomenon, is from the first a total exchange, comprising food, manufactured objects and that most precious category of goods, women' ([Lévi-Strauss 1969, 60-1](#)). We have referred already to his reflections on the significance of our preparation of food. His observations on the social phenomenon of exchange are distinctive because he argued that exogamy (marrying outside the group) and more generally 'the relations between the sexes' are a form of communication ([ibid., 493-4](#)). Language, economics and sexuality - thus arguably the basis of all

communication - draw on three fundamental oppositions: *addressor/addressee; buyer/seller; masculine/feminine* ([Coward & Ellis 1977, 58](#)). As Lévi-Strauss noted, social exchanges involve the exchange of 'social values' ([Lévi-Strauss 1969, 62](#)). The production of subject positions in relation to these key oppositions can be seen as a primary mechanism for the reproduction of society and its values.

Lévi-Strauss even turned his attention to the textual codes of literature in what is probably the most famous structuralist textual analysis of all. In collaboration with the linguist Roman Jakobson, he undertook an analysis of the sonnet 'Les Chats' by Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). This involved a detailed outline of the oppositions of parts of speech, poetic forms, semantic features and so on ([Lane 1970, 202-221](#)). Since this is such a frequently-cited analysis, the poem and an English rendering are reproduced here for the reader's convenience. The commentators helpfully note, by the way, that *L'Érèbe* is a 'shady region bordering on Hell' and that Erebus is 'brother of the night' ([Lane 1970, 213](#)).

Les chats

Les amoureux fervents et les savants
austères

Aiment également, dans leur mûre
saison,

Les chats puissants et doux, orgueil de
la maison,

Qui comme eux sont frileux et comme
eux sédentaires.

Amis de la science et de la volupté,
Ils cherchent le silence et l'horreur des
ténèbres;

L'Érèbe les eût pris pour ses courriers
funèbres,

S'ils pouvaient au servage incliner leur
fierté.

Ils prennent en songeant les nobles
attitudes

Des grands sphinx allongés au fond des
solitudes,

Qui semblent s'endormir dans un rêve
sans fin;

Leurs reins féconds sont pleins
d'étincelles magiques,

Et des parcelles d'or, ainsi qu'un sable

Cats

Fervent lovers and austere savants

Cherish alike, in their mature season,

Cats powerful and gentle, pride of the
house,

Like them they feel the cold, like them
are sedentary.

Friends of science and of sensuality,
They seek silence and the horror of the
dark;

Erebus would take them for his funereal
couriers,

If they'd to servitude incline their pride.

They take on when dreaming the noble
postures

Of great sphinxes stretched out in the
depths of solitude,

Seeming to sleep in a dream without
end;

Their fecund loins are full of magic
sparks,

And particles of gold, as well as fine

fin,
Étoilent vaguement leurs prunelles
mystiques.

sand,
Vaguely star their mystic pupils.

In a headnote to the paper, Lévi-Strauss notes that the poem consisted of 'superimposed levels: phonology, phonetics, syntax, prosody, semantics etc.' ([Lane 1970, 202](#)). The authors demonstrate that 'the different levels on which we touched blend, complement each other or combine' ([ibid., 217](#)). For instance, they note a link between the grammatical and semantic levels: 'All beings in the sonnet are masculine but the cats and their alter ego, *les grands sphinx*, are of an androgynous nature. This very ambiguity is emphasized throughout the sonnet by the paradoxical choice of feminine substantives [nouns] for so-called masculine rhymes' ([ibid., 221](#)). Here is a breakdown of the rhyme scheme which, together with the text, may assist interested readers to note patterns for themselves.

Line	Rhyme word	English equivalent	Rhyme scheme	Rhyme form	Grammatical function	Singular/plural form
1	austères	austere	a	feminine	adjective	plural
2	saison	season	B	masculine	noun f	singular
3	maison	house	B	masculine	noun f	singular
4	sédentaires	sedentary	a	feminine	adjective	plural
5	volupté	sensuality	C	masculine	noun f	singular
6	ténèbres	dark(ness)	d	feminine	noun f	plural
7	funèbres	funereal	d	feminine	adjective	plural
8	fierté	pride	C	masculine	noun f	singular
9	attitudes	postures	e	feminine	noun f	plural
10	solitudes	emptiness	e	feminine	noun f	plural
11	fin	end	F	masculine	noun f	singular
12	magiques	magic(al)	g	feminine	adjective	plural
13	fin	fine	F	masculine	adjective	singular
14	mystiques	mystic(al)	g	feminine	adjective	plural

We have already noted the association of feminine nouns with masculine rhymes. In reflecting on patterns in this rhyme scheme, the reader may also notice, as Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson pointed out, the curious circumstance that in this sonnet 'all the substantives [nouns] are feminine' and that 'all feminine rhymes are plural' ([Lane 1970, 205, 220](#)). The authors argue that 'for Baudelaire, the image of the cat is closely linked to that of the woman', citing the association of '*puissants et doux*' with women in other poetry. Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson emphasize the importance of binary oppositions. At the semantic level, other than what they see as 'the oscillation between male and female' in the poem, they argue that another key opposition is *animate/inanimate*. At a linguistic level a fundamental opposition is *metaphor/metonymy*. Again, readers may care to identify such oppositions for themselves. The authors argue that the poem seeks to 'resolve' the oppositions which it generates at various levels ([ibid., 218-9](#)). Whilst widely-cited, this analysis is also understandably criticized as arid by those whom structuralism leaves cold. Being an archetypical structuralist analysis, it confines itself to structural relations within the text ([Riffaterre 1970](#)).

More broadly, aesthetic 'movements' can be interpreted in terms of paradigms of characteristic oppositions. Each movement can be loosely identified in terms of a primary focus of interest: for instance, *realism* tends to be primarily oriented towards the *world*, *neo-classicism* towards the *text* and *romanticism* towards the *author* (which is not to suggest, of course, that such goals have not been shared by *other* movements). Such broad goals generate and reflect associated values. Within a particular movement, various oppositions constitute a palette of possibilities for critical theorists within the movement. For instance, the [codes](#) of *romanticism* are built upon various implicit or explicit articulations of such oppositions as: *expressive/instrumental*, *feeling/thought*, *emotion/reason*, *spontaneity/deliberation*, *passion/calculation*, *inspiration/effort*, *genius/method*, *intensity/reflection*, *intuition/judgement*, *impulse/intention*, *unconsciousness/design*, *creativity/construction*, *originality/conventionality*, *creation/imitation*, *imagination/learning*, *dynamism/order*, *sincerity/facticity*, *natural/artificial* and *organic/mechanical*. The alignment of some of these pairs generates further associations: for instance, an alignment of *spontaneity/deliberation* with *sincerity/facticity* equates spontaneity with sincerity. More indirectly, it may also associate their opposites, so that deliberation reflects insincerity or untruthfulness. Romantic literary theorists often proclaimed spontaneity in expressive writing to be a mark of sincerity, of truth to feeling - even when this ran counter to their own compositional practices ([Chandler 1995, 49ff](#)). Even within 'the same' aesthetic movement, various theorists construct their own frameworks, as is illustrated in Abrams' study of romantic literary theory ([Abrams 1971](#)). Each opposition (or combination of oppositions) involves an implicit contrast with the priorities and values of another aesthetic movement: thus (in accord with the Saussurean principle of negative differentiation) an aesthetic movement is defined by what it is *not*. The evolution of aesthetic movements can be seen as the working-out of tensions between such oppositions. Similarly, within textual analysis, it has been argued that the structure of particular texts (or myths) works to position the reader to privilege one set of values and meanings over the other. Sometimes such oppositions may appear to be resolved in favour of dominant ideologies but poststructuralists argue that tensions between them *always* remain unresolved.

One aesthetic movement, that of Surrealism, can be seen as centrally concerned with the resolution of opposites. Charles Forceville argues that:

One of the central tenets of Surrealism was that ultimately all opposites (feeling vs. reason; beauty vs. ugliness; substance vs. spirit, etc.) are merely *apparent* opposites. In the last resort each two 'antitheses' are aspects of a deeper unity, and the Surrealists saw it as their task to show this unity. From this point of view, it is hardly surprising that metaphor, with its crucial characteristic of rendering one thing in terms of another, could play an important role in bridging the seemingly irreconcilable opposites. ([Forceville 1996, 59](#))

As we shall see shortly, this Surrealist mission has much in common with poststructuralist goals.

Paradigmatic analysis has also been applied to popular culture. Exploring a basic opposition of *wilderness/civilization*, Jim Kitses analysed the film genre of the *western* in relation to a series of oppositions: *individual/community*, *nature/culture*, *law/gun sheep/cattle* ([Kitses 1970](#)). John Fiske makes considerable analytical use of such oppositions in relation to mass media texts ([Fiske 1987](#)). Umberto Eco analysed the James Bond novels in terms of a series of oppositions: *Bond/villain*, *West/Soviet Union*, *anglo-saxon/other countries*, *ideals/cupidity*, *chance/planning*, *excess/moderation*, *perversion/innocence*, *loyalty/disloyalty* ([Eco 1966](#)).



Binary oppositions can be traced even in visual images. Jean-Marie Floch compares and contrasts the logos of the two major computer companies, IBM and Apple, revealing their differences to be based on a series of associated binary oppositions, the most obvious of which are listed here ([Floch 2000, 41](#)). The contrast could hardly involve a clearer opposition. Appropriately, Apple's logo seems to be defined purely in opposition to the more established/establishment image of IBM.

	IBM	Apple
<i>Structure</i>	repetition	non repetition
	disconnected lines	joined lines
<i>Colour</i>	monochromatic	polychromatic
	cold	warm
<i>Forms</i>	substance ('bold')	outline
	straight	curved

A past chairman of the Apple Products division is quoted as saying, 'Our logo is a great mystery: it is a symbol of pleasure and knowledge, partially eaten away and displaying the colours of the rainbow, but not in the proper order. We couldn't wish for a more fitting logo: pleasure, knowledge, hope and anarchy' ([Floch 2000, 54](#)). Clearly, the bitten apple refers both to the story of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden and to the association of IBM with the east coast and 'the Big Apple' of New York. The psychedelic mixed-up rainbow (green, yellow, orange, red, violet and blue) signifies the west coast hippie era of the 1960s, with its associations of idealism and 'doing your own thing'. Thus, despite representing a binary opposition to the IBM logo, the multi-coloured Apple logo seeks to signify a rejection of the binarism reflected in the 'black-and-white' (or rather monochrome) linearity of IBM's logo. Competing companies clearly need to establish distinct identities, and such identities are typically reflected in their logos. This example may tempt the reader to compare the visual identities of other competing corporations.

Oppositions are rarely equally weighted. The Russian linguist and semiotician Roman Jakobson introduced the theory of *markedness*: 'Every single constituent of any linguistic system is built on an opposition of two logical contradictories: the presence of an attribute ("markedness") in contraposition to its absence ("unmarkedness")' (cited in [Lechte 1994, 62](#)). The concept of markedness can be applied to the poles of a paradigmatic opposition: paired signs consist of an 'unmarked' and a 'marked' form. This applies, as we shall see, both at the level of the signifier and at the level of the signified. The 'marked' signifier is distinguished by some special semiotic feature ([Nöth 1990, 76](#)). In relation to linguistic signifiers, two characteristic features of marked forms are commonly identified: these relate to formal features and generic function. The more 'complex' form is marked, which typically involves both of the following features:

- *Formal marking*. In morphologically related oppositions, marking is based on the presence or absence of some particular formal feature. The marked signifier is formed by adding a distinctive feature to the unmarked signifier (for instance, the marked form 'unhappy' is formed by adding the prefix *un-* to the unmarked signifier 'happy') ([Greenberg 1966](#); [Clark & Clark, 1977](#); [Lyons 1977, 305ff](#)).
- *Distributional marking*. Formally marked terms show a tendency to be more restricted in the range of contexts in which they occur ([Lyons 1977, 306-307](#)).

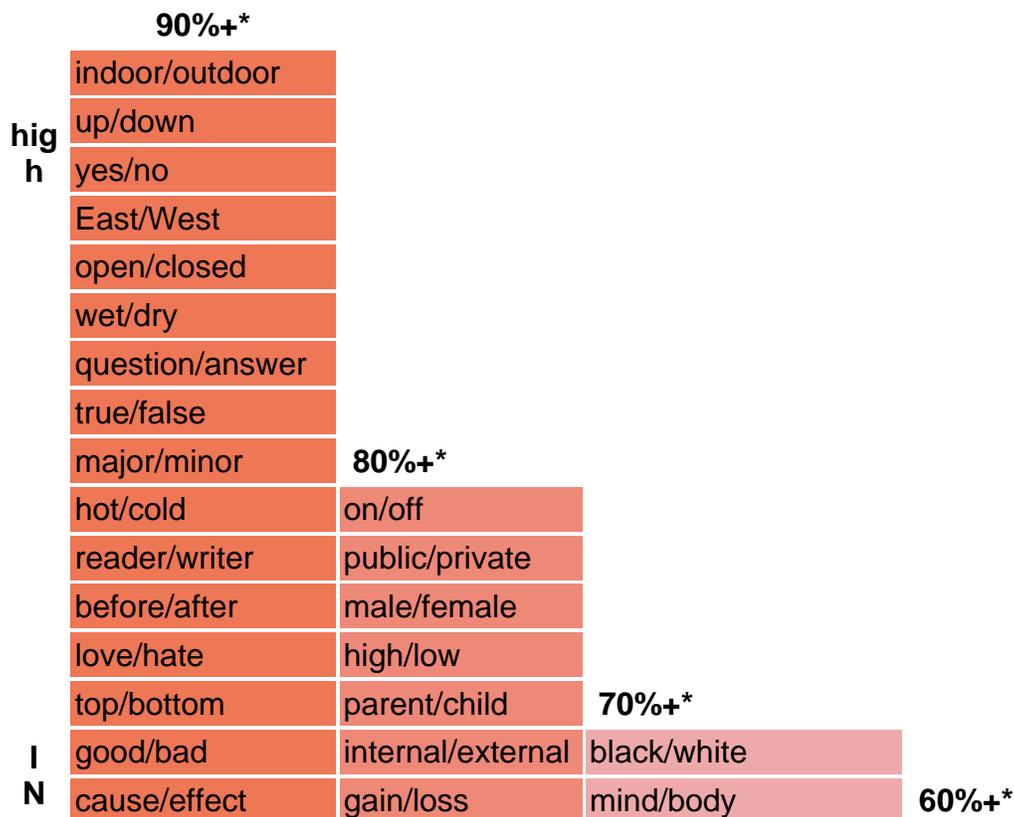
In English, linguistically *unmarked* forms include the *present tense* of verbs and the *singular* form of nouns. The *active voice* is normally unmarked, although in the restricted genre of traditional academic writing the *passive voice* is still often the unmarked form.

The markedness of linguistic signs includes *semantic* marking: a marked or unmarked status applies not only to *signifiers* but also to *signifieds*. According to 'the binary thesis' 'a signified's content is determined by a series of binary contrasts in which one term is marked and the other unmarked' ([Holdcroft 1991, 127](#)). With morphologically related pairings there is an obvious relation between formal and semantic marking, and John Lyons suggests that distributional marking in oppositions is probably determined by semantic marking ([Lyons 1977, 307](#)). One form of semantic marking relates to *specificity*. The unmarked term is often used as a generic term whilst the marked term is used in a more specific sense. General references to humanity used to use the term 'Man' (which in this sense was not intended to be sex-specific), and of course the word 'he' has long been used generically. In English the female category is generally marked in relation to the male, a point not lost on feminist theorists ([Clark & Clark 1977, 524](#)). Lyons notes, however, that it is not always the female term which is marked - he refers to several farmyard animals as exceptions - *bull*, *cock*, *ram* and *drake* - suggesting that this is perhaps because such animals are normally reared in smaller numbers ([Lyons 1977, 308](#)).

Where terms are paired the pairing is rarely symmetrical but rather *hierarchical*. With apologies to George Orwell we might coin the phrase that 'all signifieds are equal, but some are more equal than others'. With many of the familiarly paired terms, the two signifieds are accorded different values. The unmarked term is primary, being given precedence and priority, whilst the marked term is treated as secondary or even suppressed and excluded as an 'absent signifier'. When morphological cues (such as *un-* or *-in*) are lacking, the 'preferred sequence' or most common order of paired terms usually distinguishes the first as a semantically positive term and the second as a negative one ([Lyons 1977, 276](#); [Malkiel 1968](#)). 'Term B' is referred to by some theorists as being produced as an 'effect' of 'Term A'. The unmarked term is presented as fundamental and originative whilst the marked term 'is conceived in relation to it' as derivative, dependent, subordinate, supplemental or ancillary ([Culler 1985, 112](#); [Adams 1989, 142](#)). This framing ignores the fact that the unmarked term is logically and structurally dependent on the marked term to lend it substance. Even the arch-structuralist Lévi-Strauss acknowledged that 'the very notion of opposition implies that the two forms were originally conceived of as complementary terms, forming a part of the same classification' (in [Lane 1970, 202](#)). Derrida demonstrated that within the oppositional logic of binarism neither of the terms (or concepts) makes sense without the other. This is what he calls 'the logic of supplementarity': the 'secondary' term which is represented as 'marginal' and external is in fact constitutive of the 'primary' term and essential to it ([Derrida 1976](#)). The unmarked term is defined by what it seeks to exclude. Consequently, the boundaries of foundational oppositions, seemingly 'absolute', have to be policed because 'transgressions' are inevitable ([Eagleton 1983, 133](#)).

In the pairing of oppositions or contraries, Term B is defined *relationally* rather than substantively. The linguistic marking of signifiers in many of these pairings is referred to as 'privative' - consisting of suffixes or prefixes signifying *lack* or *absence* - e.g. *non-*, *un-* or *-less*. In such cases, Term B is defined by *negation* - being everything that Term A is *not*. For example, when we refer to 'non-verbal communication', the very label [defines such a mode of communication only in negative relation to 'verbal communication'](#). Indeed, the unmarked term is not merely neutral but implicitly positive in contrast to the negative connotations of the marked term. For the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan the marked term in the pairing of *men/women* is negatively defined within 'the symbolic order' in terms of the *absence* or *lack* of a privileged signifier associated with control and power - the *phallus* (though see feminist critiques of Lacan's *phallogentrism*, e.g. [Lovell 1983, 44-45](#)). The association of the marked term with absence and lack is of course problematized by those who have noted the irony that the dependence of Term A on Term B can be seen as reflecting a lack on the part of the *unmarked* term ([Fuss 1991, 3](#)).

The unmarked form is typically dominant (e.g. statistically within a text or corpus) and therefore seems to be 'neutral', 'normal' and 'natural'. It is thus 'transparent' - drawing no attention to its invisibly privileged status, whilst the deviance of the marked form is salient. Where it is not totally excluded, the 'marked' form is foregrounded - presented as 'different'; it is 'out of the ordinary' - an extraordinary deviational 'special case' which is something other than the standard or default form of the unmarked term ([Nöth 1990, 76](#); [Culler 1989, 271](#)). *Unmarked/marked* may thus be read as *norm/deviation*. It is notable that empirical studies have demonstrated that cognitive processing is more difficult with marked terms than with unmarked terms ([Clark & Clark 1977](#)). Marked forms take longer to recognize and process and more errors are made with these forms.



C I D E N C E	front/back	human/animal	left/right	adult/child	
	primary/secondary	past/present	positive/negative	urban/rural	
	birth/death	gay/straight	art/science	product/process	
	presence/absence	more/less	active/passive	horizontal/vertical	
	problem/solution	above/below	light/dark	physical/mental	
	win/lose	inner/outer	product/system	hard/soft	
	acceptance/rejection	thought/feeling	sex/gender	fast/slow	
	inclusion/exclusion	life/death	static/dynamic	quantity/quality	
	success/failure	subject/object	liberal/conservative	foreground/background	
	human/machine	producer/consumer	higher/lower	similarity/difference	
low	right/wrong	work/play	teacher/learner	temporary/permanent	
	nature/nurture	good/evil	war/peace	nature/culture	
	theory/practice	masculine/feminine	body/soul	poetry/prose	
	near/far	health/illness	fact/fiction	part/whole	50%+*
	self/other	comedy/tragedy	form/content	married/single	new/old
	figure/ground	insider/outsider	form/function	strong/weak	large/small
	rich/poor	happy/sad	simple/complex	subjective/objective	local/global
	fact/opinion	superior/inferior	original/copy	dead/alive	them/us
	system/use	present/absent	means/ends	shallow/deep	system/process
	hero/villain	clean/dirty	appearance/reality	competition/cooperation	young/old
fact/value	natural/artificial	competence/performance	live/recorded	majority/minority	
text/context	speaker/listener	one/many	head/heart	foreign/domestic	
raw/cooked	classical/romantic	speech/writing	formal/casual	structure/process	
substance/style	type/token	straight/curved	structure/agency	order/chaos	
base/superstructure	nature/technology	signifier/signified	message/medium	concrete/abstract	

knowledge/ignorance	rights/obligations	central/peripheral	form/meaning	words/actions
fact/fantasy	reason/emotion	wild/domestic	words/deeds	beautiful/ugly
knower/known	sacred/profane	stability/change	fact/theory	individual/society
literal/metaphorical	maker/user	realism/idealism	words/things	strange/familiar

← more marked **MARKEDNESS** less marked →

Markedness of some explicit oppositions in online texts retrieved using *Infoseek*, Sept. 2000

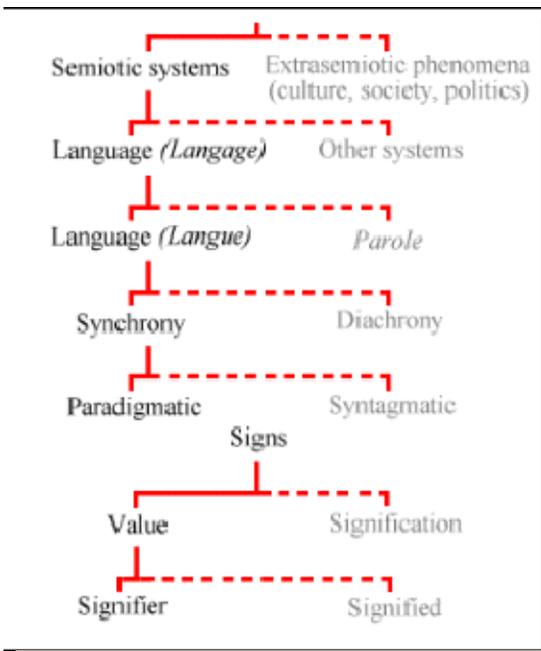
*Dominant order as % of total occurrences of both forms

On the limited evidence from frequency counts of explicit verbal pairings in written text, I would suggest that whilst it is very common for one term in such pairings to be marked, in some instances there is not a clearly marked term. For instance, in general usage there seems to be no inbuilt preference for one term in a pairing such as *old/young* (one is just as likely to encounter *young/old*). Furthermore, the extent to which a term is marked is variable. Some terms seem to be far more clearly marked than others: frequency counts based on texts on the World-Wide Web suggest that in the pairing *public/private*, for instance, *private* is very clearly the marked term (accorded secondary status). How strongly a term is marked also depends on contextual frameworks such as genres and sociolects, and in some contexts a pairing may be very deliberately and explicitly reversed when an interest group seeks to challenge the ideological priorities which the markedness may be taken to reflect. Not all of the pairs listed will seem to be 'the right way round' to everyone - you may find it interesting to identify which ones seem counter-intuitive to you and to speculate as to why this seems so.

However 'natural' familiar dichotomies and their markedness may seem, their *historical* origins or phases of dominance can often be traced. For instance, perhaps the most influential dualism in the history of Western civilization can be attributed primarily to the philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) who divided reality into two distinct ontological substances - *mind* and *body*. This distinction insists on the separation of an *external* or 'real' world from an *internal* or 'mental' one, the first being *material* and the second *non-material*. It created the poles of *objectivity* and *subjectivity* and fostered the illusion that 'I' can be distinguished from my body. Furthermore, Descartes' rationalist declaration that 'I think, therefore I am' encouraged the *privileging* of mind over body. He presented the subject as an autonomous individual with an ontological status *prior* to social structures (a notion rejected by poststructural theorists). He established the enduring assumption of the independence of the knower from the known. Cartesian dualism also underpins a host of associated and aligned dichotomies such as *reason/emotion*, *male/female*, *true/false*, *fact/fiction*, *public/private*, *self/other* and *human/animal*. Indeed, many feminist theorists lay a great deal of blame at Descartes' door for the orchestration of the ontological framework of patriarchal discourse. One of the most influential of theorists who have sought to study the ways in which reality is constructed and maintained within discourse by such dominant frameworks is the French historian of ideas, Michel Foucault, who focused on the analysis of 'discursive formations' in specific historical and socio-cultural contexts ([Foucault 1970](#); [Foucault 1974](#)).

The strategy of 'deconstruction' which was adopted by the post-structuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida (1976) sought to challenge the phonocentric privileging of *speech* over *writing* in western culture and to demonstrate the instability of this opposition ([Derrida 1976](#); [Derrida 1978](#)). Derrida also challenged the privileging of the signified over the signifier, seeing it as a perpetuation of the traditional opposition of matter and spirit or substance and thought. He noted that within such discourse the *material* form is always subordinated to the *less material* form. Derrida sought to blur the distinction between signifier and signified, insisting that 'the signified always already functions as a signifier' ([Derrida 1976, 7](#)). He similarly challenged other loaded oppositions such as presence over absence, nature over culture, masculine over feminine and literal over metaphorical. Other 'critical theorists' have similarly sought to 'valorize term B' in the semiotic analysis of textual representations, though most are content with simply *reversing* the valorization rather than more radically seeking to destabilize the oppositional framework. This strategy is reflected in the way in which some activists in minority groups have hijacked the dominant language of the majority - as in the case of a campaign against homophobia which was launched by the Terrence Higgins Trust in the UK in September 1999 under the slogan 'It's prejudice that's queer'. The posters used neatly inverted heterosexist notions by substituting *homophobia* for *homosexuality*: 'I can't stand homophobes, especially when they flaunt it'; 'My son is homophobic, but I hope it's just a phase'; and 'homophobes shouldn't be left alone with kids'. This strategy of ironic reversal had been foreshadowed in the wittily subversive formulation that 'we don't yet know what causes heterosexuality' (found in gay webpages).

Following on from Derrida's deconstruction of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress have offered a useful visual mapping of Saussure's model of semiotics in terms of its own explicit oppositions. The diagram shown below is based on theirs. The leftmost terms represent those which were privileged by Saussure whilst those on the right represent those which he marginalizes in the *Course*. Seeking to revalorize those terms which Saussure had devalored, Hodge and Kress build their own more explicitly *social* and *materialist* framework for semiotics on 'the contents of Saussure's rubbish bin'. Their agenda for an 'alternative semiotics' is based on:



1. culture, society and politics as intrinsic to semiotics;
2. other semiotic systems alongside verbal language;
3. *parole*, the act of speaking, and concrete signifying practices in other codes;
4. diachrony, time, history, process and change;
5. the processes of signification, the transactions between signifying systems and structures of reference;
6. structures of the signified;
7. the material nature of signs.

[\(Hodge & Kress 1988, 17\)](#)

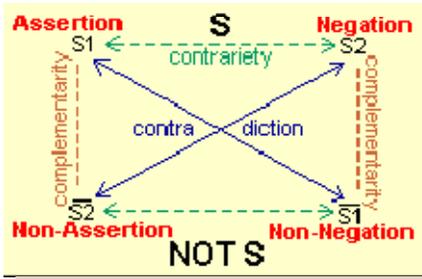
The concept of markedness can be applied more broadly than simply to paradigmatic pairings of words or concepts. Whether in textual or social practices, the choice of a marked form 'makes a statement'. Where a text deviates from conventional expectations it is 'marked'. Conventional, or 'over-coded' text (which follows a fairly predictable formula) is unmarked whereas unconventional or 'under-coded' text is marked. Marked or under-coded text requires the interpreter to do more interpretative work.

The existence of marked forms is not simply a structural feature of semiotic systems. Kathryn Woodward argues that 'it is through the marking out of... differences that social order is produced and maintained' ([Woodward 1997, 33](#)). Unmarked forms reflect the naturalization of dominant cultural values. The French feminist H  l  ne Cixous has emphasized the gendered character of binary oppositions, which are consistently weighted in favour of the male (cited in [Woodward 1997, 36](#) and [Allen 2000, 152](#)). As Trevor Millum notes:

The standards by which mankind in general and societies and individuals in particular have estimated the values of male and female are not neutral, but, as Simmel puts it, 'in themselves essentially masculine'. To be male is to be in some way normal, to be female is to be different, to depart from the norm, to be abnormal. ([Millum 1975, 71](#))

Applying the concept of marked forms to mass media genres, Merris Griffiths, then one of my own research students, examined [the production and editing styles of television advertisements for toys](#). Her findings showed that the style of advertisements aimed primarily at boys had far more in common with those aimed at a mixed audience than with those aimed at girls, making 'girls' advertisements' the marked category in commercials for toys. Notably, the girls' ads had significantly longer shots, significantly more dissolves (fade out/fade in of shot over shot), less long shots and more close-ups, less low shots, more level shots and less overhead shots. The gender-differentiated use of production features which characterized these children's commercials reflected a series of binary oppositions - fast vs. slow, abrupt vs. gradual, excited vs. calm, active vs. passive, detached vs. involved. Their close association in such ads led them to line up consistently together as 'masculine' vs. 'feminine' qualities. The 'relative autonomy' of formal features in commercials seems likely to function as a constant symbolic reaffirmation of the broader cultural stereotypes which associate such qualities with gender - especially when accompanied by gender-stereotyped content. Readers may care to reflect on the way in which 'dark goods' and 'light goods' have traditionally been sold in high-street electrical shops. Dark goods such as televisions, video-recorders, camcorders and sound-systems were primarily targetted at men and the sales staff focused on technical specifications. Light goods such as refrigerators, washing-machines and cookers were targetted at women and the sales staff focused on appearance. The extent to which this particular pattern still survives in your own locality may be checked by some investigative 'window-shopping'.

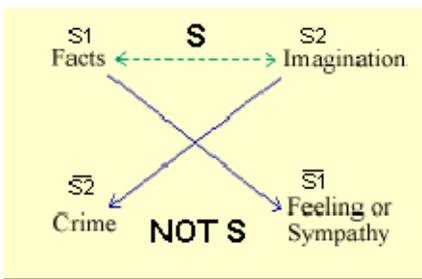
'Binarism' has been defined as 'the passion of those who tend to see everything as divided into two categories' ([Hervey 1982, 24](#)). There is a delightfully ironic quip (variously attributed) that 'The world is divided into those who divide people into two types, and those who don't'. The interpretive usefulness of simple dichotomies is often challenged on the basis that life and (perhaps by a misleading 'realist' analogy) texts are 'seamless webs' and thus better described in terms of continua. But it is useful to remind ourselves that any interpretive framework cuts up its material into manageable chunks. The test of its appropriateness can surely only be assessed in terms of whether it advances our understanding of the phenomenon in question.



The structuralist semiotician Algirdas Greimas introduced the *semiotic square* (which he adapted from the 'logical square' of scholastic philosophy) as a means of analysing paired concepts more fully ([Greimas 1987, xiv, 49](#)). The semiotic square is intended to map the logical conjunctions and disjunctions relating key semantic features in a text. Fredric Jameson notes that 'the entire mechanism... is capable of generating at least ten conceivable positions out of a rudimentary binary opposition' (in [Greimas 1987, xiv](#)). Whilst this suggests that the

possibilities for signification in a semiotic system are richer than the *either/or* of binary logic, but that they are nevertheless subject to 'semiotic constraints' - 'deep structures' providing basic axes of signification.

The symbols **S1**, **S2**, **Not S1** and **Not S2** represent positions within the system which may be occupied by concrete or abstract notions. The double-headed arrows represent bilateral relationships. The upper corners of the Greimasian square represent an opposition between **S1** and **S2** (e.g. white and black). The lower corners represent positions which are not accounted for in simple binary oppositions: **Not S2** and **Not S1** (e.g. non-white and non-black). **Not S1** consists of more than simply **S2** (e.g. that which is not white is not necessarily black). In the horizontal relationships represent an opposition between each of the left-hand terms (**S1** and **Not S2**) and its paired right-hand term (**Not S1** and **S2**). The terms at the top (**S1**, **S2**) represent 'presences', whilst their companion terms (**Not S1** and **Not S2**) represent 'absences'. The vertical relationships of 'implication' offer us an alternative conceptual synthesis of **S1** with **Not S2** and of **S2** with **Not S1** (e.g. of white with not-black or of black with not-white). Greimas refers to the relationships between the four positions as: *contrariety* or opposition (**S1/S2**); *complementarity* or implication (**S1/Not S2** and **S2/Not S1**); and *contradiction* (**S1/Not S1** and **S2/Not S2**). Varda Langholz Leymore offers an illustrative example of the linked terms 'beautiful' and 'ugly'. In the semiotic square the four related terms (clockwise) would be 'beautiful', 'ugly', 'not beautiful' and 'not ugly'. The initial pair is not simply a binary opposition because 'something which is not beautiful is not necessarily ugly and vice versa a thing which is not ugly is not necessarily beautiful' ([Langholz Leymore 1975, 29](#)). The same framework can be productively applied to many other paired terms, such as 'thin' and 'fat'.



Occupying a position within such as framework invests a sign with meanings. The semiotic square can be used to highlight 'hidden' underlying themes in a text or practice. Using a slightly adapted version of the square shown here, Fredric Jameson outlines how it might be applied to Charles Dickens' novel, *Hard Times*.

In *Hard Times* we witness the confrontation of what amount to two antagonistic intellectual systems: Mr Gradgrind's utilitarianism ('Facts! Facts!') and that world of anti-facts symbolized by Sissy Jupe and the circus, or in other words, imagination. The novel is primarily the education of the educator, the conversion of Mr Gradgrind from his inhuman system to the opposing one. It is thus a series of lessons administered to Mr Gradgrind, and we may sort these lessons into two groups and see them as the symbolic answers to two kinds of questions. It is as though the plot of the novel, seeking now to generate the terms **Not S1** and **Not S2**, were little more than a series of attempts to visualize the solutions to these riddles:

What happens if you negate or deny imagination? What would happen if, on the contrary, you negated facts? Little by little the products of Mr Gradgrind's system show us the various forms which the negation of the negation, which the denial of Imagination, may take: his son Tom (theft), his daughter Louisa (adultery, or at least projected adultery), his model pupil Blitzer (delation, and in general the death of the spirit). Thus the absent fourth term comes to the centre of the stage; the plot is nothing but an attempt to give it imaginative being, to work through faulty solutions and unacceptable hypotheses until an adequate embodiment has been realized in terms of the narrative material. With this discovery (Mr Gradgrind's education, Louisa's belated experience of family love), the semantic rectangle is completed and the novel comes to an end. ([Jameson 1972, 167-168](#))

In his foreword to an English translation of a book by Greimas, Jameson reflects on his own use of the technique. He suggests that the analyst should begin by provisionally listing all of the entities to be coordinated and that even apparently marginal entities should be on this initial list. He notes that even the order of the terms in the primary opposition is crucial: we have already seen how the first term in such pairings is typically privileged. He adds that 'the four primary terms... need to be conceived polysemically, each one carrying within it its own range of synonyms... such that... each of the four primary terms threatens to yawn open into its own fourfold system' (in [Greimas 1987, xv-xvi](#)). Jameson suggests that **Not S2**, the negation of the negation, 'is always the most critical position and the one that remains open or empty for the longest time, for its identification completes the process and in that sense constitutes the most creative act of the construction' ([ibid., xvi](#)). Using the earlier example of aesthetic movements and their dominant focuses, the reader might find it interesting to apply the semiotic square to these. To recap, it was suggested that realism tends to be primarily oriented towards the *world*, neo-classicism towards the *text* and romanticism towards the *author*. We may assign the concepts of world, text and author to three corners of the square - a fourth term is conspicuous by its absence. Jameson's caveats about the order and formulation of terms may be useful here.

Turning to other contexts, in relation to children's toys Dan Fleming offers an accessible application of the semiotic square ([Fleming 1996, 147ff](#)). Gilles Marion has used the Greimasian square to suggest four purposes in communicating through clothing: wanting to be seen; not wanting to be seen; wanting not to be seen; and not wanting not to be seen (cited in draft publication by David Mick). Most recently, Jean-Marie Floch has used the grid to illustrate an interesting exploration of the 'consumption values' represented by Habitat and Ikea furniture ([Floch 2000, 116-144](#)). However, the Greimasian analysis of texts in terms of the semiotic square has been criticized as easily leading to [reductionist](#) and programmatic decodings. Worse still, some theorists seem to use the square as little more than an objective-looking framework which gives the appearance of coherence and grand theory to loose argument and highly subjective opinions.

Critics of structuralist analysis note that binary oppositions need not only to be related to one another and interpreted, but also to be contextualised in terms of the social systems which give rise to texts ([Buxton 1990, 12](#)). Those who use this structuralist approach sometimes claim to be analysing the 'latent meaning' in a text: what it is 'really' about. Unfortunately, such approaches typically understate the subjectivity of the interpreter's framework. Illuminating as they may sometimes be, any inexplicit oppositions which are identified are in the mind of the interpreter rather than contained within the text itself ([Culler 1975](#); [Adams 1989, 139](#)). Yet another objection is that 'the question of whether categories like sacred/profane and happiness/misery are psychologically real in any meaningful

sense is not posed and the internal logic of structuralism would suggest it need not be posed' ([Young 1990, 184](#)).

Denotation, Connotation and Myth

Beyond its 'literal' meaning (its denotation), a particular word may have connotations: for instance, sexual connotations. 'Is there any such thing as a *single entendre*?' quipped the comic actor Kenneth Williams (we all know that 'a thing is a phallic symbol if it's longer than it's wide', as the singer Melanie put it). In semiotics, denotation and connotation are terms describing the relationship between the signifier and its signified, and an analytic distinction is made between two types of signifieds: a *denotative* signified and a *connotative* signified. Meaning includes both denotation and connotation.

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'Denotation' tends to be described as the definitional, 'literal', 'obvious' or 'commonsense' meaning of a sign. In the case of linguistic signs, the denotative meaning is what the dictionary attempts to provide. For the art historian Erwin Panofsky, the denotation of a representational visual image is what all viewers from any culture and at any time would recognize the image as depicting ([Panofsky 1970a, 51-3](#)). Even such a definition raises issues - *all* viewers? One suspects that this excludes very young children and those regarded as insane, for instance. But if it really means 'culturally well-adjusted' then it is already culture-specific, which takes us into the territory of connotation. The term 'connotation' is used to refer to the socio-cultural and 'personal' associations (ideological, emotional etc.) of the sign. These are typically related to the interpreter's class, age, gender, ethnicity and so on. Signs are more 'polysemic' - more open to interpretation - in their connotations than their denotations. Denotation is sometimes regarded as a *digital code* and connotation as an *analogue code* ([Wilden 1987, 224](#)).

As Roland Barthes noted, Saussure's model of the sign focused on denotation at the expense of connotation and it was left to subsequent theorists (notably Barthes himself) to offer an account of this important dimension of meaning ([Barthes 1967, 89ff](#)). In 'The Photographic Message' (1961) and 'The Rhetoric of the Image' (1964), Barthes argued that in photography connotation can be (analytically) distinguished from denotation ([Barthes 1977, 15-31, 32-51](#)). As Fiske puts it 'denotation is what is photographed, connotation is how it is photographed' ([Fiske 1982, 91](#)). However, in photography, denotation is foregrounded at the expense of connotation. The photographic signifier seems to be virtually identical with its signified, and the photograph appears to be a 'natural sign' produced without the intervention of a code ([Hall 1980, 132](#)). Barthes initially argued that only at a level higher than the 'literal' level of denotation, could a code be identified - that of connotation (we will return to this issue when we discuss *codes*). By 1973 Barthes had shifted his ground on this issue. In analysing the realist literary text Barthes came to the conclusion that 'denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the last of the connotations (the one which seems both to establish and close the reading), the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature' ([Barthes 1974, 9](#)). Connotation, in short, produces the illusion of denotation, the illusion of language as transparent and of the signifier and the signified as being identical. Thus denotation is just another connotation. From

such a perspective denotation can be seen as no more of a 'natural' meaning than is connotation but rather as a process of *naturalization*. Such a process leads to the powerful illusion that denotation is a purely literal and universal meaning which is not at all ideological, and indeed that those connotations which seem most obvious to individual interpreters are just as 'natural'. According to an Althusserian reading, when we first learn denotations, we are also being positioned within ideology by learning dominant connotations at the same time ([Silverman 1983, 30](#)).

Consequently, whilst theorists may find it analytically useful to distinguish connotation from denotation, in practice such meanings cannot be neatly separated. Most semioticians argue that no sign is purely denotative - lacking connotation. Valentin Voloshinov insisted that no strict division can be made between denotation and connotation because 'referential meaning is moulded by evaluation... meaning is always permeated with value judgement' ([Voloshinov 1973, 105](#)). There can be no neutral, objective description which is free of an evaluative element. David Mick and Laura Politi note that choosing not to differentiate denotation and connotation is allied to regarding comprehension and interpretation as similarly inseparable ([Mick & Politi 1989, 85](#)).

For most semioticians both denotation and connotation involve the use of [codes](#). Structural semioticians who emphasise the relative arbitrariness of signifiers and social semioticians who emphasize diversity of interpretation and the importance of cultural and historical contexts are hardly likely to accept the notion of a 'literal' meaning. Denotation simply involves a broader consensus. The denotational meaning of a sign would be broadly agreed upon by members of the same culture, whereas 'nobody is ever taken to task because their connotations are incorrect', so no inventory of the connotational meanings generated by any sign could ever be complete ([Barnard 1996, 83](#)). However, there is a danger here of stressing the 'individual subjectivity' of connotation: 'intersubjective' responses are shared to some degree by members of a culture; with any individual example only a limited range of connotations would make any sense. Connotations are not purely 'personal' meanings - they are determined by the codes to which the interpreter has access. Cultural codes provide a connotational framework since they are 'organized around key oppositions and equations', each term being 'aligned with a cluster of symbolic attributes' ([Silverman 1983, 36](#)). Certain connotations would be widely recognized within a culture. Most adults in Western cultures would know that a car can connote virility or freedom.

In the following extract from his essay 'Rhetoric of the Image', Roland Barthes demonstrates the subtlety and power of connotation in the context of advertising.



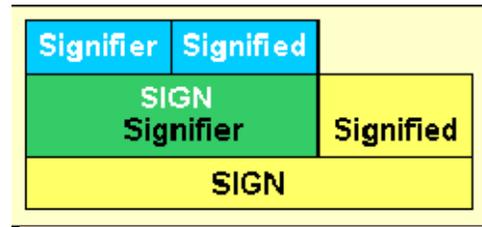
Here we have a Panzani advertisement: some packets of pasta, a tin, a sachet, some tomatoes, onions, peppers, a mushroom, all emerging from a half-open string bag, in yellows and greens on a red background. Let us try to 'skim off' the different messages it contains.

The image immediately yields a first message, whose substance is linguistic; its supports are the caption, which is marginal, and the labels, these being inserted into the natural disposition of the scene, '*en abyme*'. The code from which this message has been taken is none other than that of the French language; the only knowledge required to decipher it is a knowledge of writing and of French. In fact, this message can itself be further broken down, for the sign Panzani gives not simply the name of the firm but also, by its assonance, a additional signified, that of 'Italianicity'. The linguistic message is therefore twofold (at least in this particular image): denotational and connotational. Since, however, we have here only a single typical sign, namely that of articulated (written) language, it will be counted as one message.

Putting aside the linguistic message, we are left with the pure image (even if the labels are part of it, anecdotally). This image straightaway provides a series of discontinuous signs. First (the order is unimportant as these signs are not linear), the idea that what we have in the scene represented is a return from the market. A signified which itself implies two euphoric values: that of the freshness of the products and that of the essentially domestic preparation for which they are destined. Its signifier is the half-open bag which lets the provisions spill out over the table, 'unpacked'. To read this first sign requires only a knowledge which is in some sort implanted as part of the habits of a very widespread culture where 'shopping around for oneself' is opposed to the hasty stocking up (preserves, refrigerators) of a more 'mechanical' civilization. A second sign is more or less equally evident; its signifier is the bringing together of the tomato, the pepper and the tricoloured hues (yellow, green, red) of the poster; its signified is Italy, or rather *Italianicity*. This sign stands in a relation of redundancy with the connoted sign of the linguistic message (the Italian assonance of the name *Panzani*) and the knowledge it draws upon is already more particular; it is a specifically 'French' knowledge (an Italian would barely perceive the connotation of the name, no more probably than he would the Italianicity of tomato and pepper), based on a familiarity with certain tourist stereotypes. Continuing to explore the image (which is not to say that it is not entirely clear at the first glance), there is no difficulty in discovering at least two other signs: in the first, the serried collection of different objects transmits the idea of a total culinary service, on the one hand as though Panzani furnished everything necessary for a carefully balanced dish and on the other as though the concentrate in the tin were equivalent to the natural produce surrounding it; in the other sign, the composition of the image, evoking the memory of innumerable alimentary paintings, sends us to an aesthetic signified: the '*nature morte*' or, as it is better expressed in other languages, the 'still life'; the knowledge on which this sign depends is heavily cultural.

[\(Barthes 1977, 33\)](#)

Connotation and denotation are often described in terms of *levels of representation* or *levels of*



meaning. Roland Barthes adopted from Louis Hjelmslev the notion that there are different *orders of signification* ([Barthes 1957](#); [Hjelmslev 1961, 114ff](#)). The *first order of signification* is that of denotation: at this level there is a sign consisting of a signifier and a signified. Connotation is a *second-order of signification* which uses the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified. In this framework connotation

is a sign which derives from the signifier of a denotative sign (so denotation leads to a chain of connotations). This tends to suggest that denotation is an underlying and primary meaning - a notion which many other commentators have challenged. Barthes himself later gave priority to connotation, and in 1971 noted that it was no longer easy to separate the signifier from the signified, the ideological from the 'literal' ([Barthes 1977, 166](#)). In passing, we may note that this formulation underlines the point that 'what is a signifier or a signified depends entirely on the level at which the analysis operates: a signified on one level can become a signifier on another level' ([Willemen 1994, 105](#)). This is the mechanism by which signs may seem to signify one thing but are loaded with multiple meanings.

Changing the form of the signifier while keeping the same signified can generate different connotations. Changes of style or tone may involve different connotations, such as when using different typefaces for exactly the same text, or changing from sharp focus to soft focus when taking a photograph. The choice of words often involves connotations, as in references to 'strikes' vs. 'disputes', 'union demands' vs. 'management offers', and so on. [Tropes](#) such as metaphor generate connotations.

Connotation is not a purely paradigmatic dimension, as Saussure's characterization of the paradigmatic dimension as 'associative' might suggest. Whilst absent signifiers with which it is associated are clearly a key factor in generating connotations, so too are syntagmatic associations. The connotations of a signifier relate in part to the other signifiers with which it occurs within a particular text. However, referring to connotation entirely in terms of paradigms and syntagms confines us to the language system, and yet connotation is very much a question of how language is *used*. A purely structuralist account also limits us to a synchronic perspective and yet both connotations and denotations are subject not only to socio-cultural variability but also to historical factors: they change over time. Signs referring to disempowered groups (such as 'woman') can be seen as having had far more negative denotations as well as negative connotations than they do now because of their framing within dominant and authoritative codes of their time - including even supposedly 'objective' scientific codes. Fiske warns that 'it is often easy to read connotative values as denotative facts' ([Fiske 1982, 92](#)). Just as dangerously seductive, however, is the tendency to accept denotation as the 'literal', 'self-evident' 'truth'. Semiotic analysis can help us to counter such habits of mind.

Whilst the dominant methodologies in semiotic analysis are *qualitative*, semiotics is not incompatible with the use of quantitative techniques. In 1957 the psychologist Charles Osgood published a book on *The Measurement of Meaning* together with some of his colleagues ([Osgood et al. 1957](#)). In it these communication researchers outlined a technique called the *semantic differential* for the systematic mapping of *connotations* (or 'affective meanings'). The technique involves a pencil-and-paper test in which people are asked to give their impressionistic responses to a particular object,

state or event by indicating specific positions in relation to at least nine pairs of bipolar adjectives on a scale of one to seven. The aim is to locate a concept in 'semantic space' in three dimensions: **evaluation** (e.g. *good/bad*); **potency** (e.g. *strong/weak*); and **activity** (e.g. *active/passive*). The method has proved useful in studying attitudes and emotional reactions. It has been used, for instance, to make comparisons between different cultural groups. Whilst the technique has been used fairly widely in social science, it has not often been used by semioticians (including the self-styled 'scientist of connotations', Roland Barthes), although binary oppositions have routinely provided theoretical building-blocks for structuralist semioticians.

Related to connotation is what Roland Barthes refers to as *myth*. We usually associate myths with classical fables about the exploits of gods and heroes. But for Barthes myths were the dominant ideologies of our time. In a departure from Hjelmslev's model Barthes argues that the orders of signification called denotation and connotation combine to produce ideology - which has been described (though not by Barthes) as a *third order of signification* ([Fiske & Hartley 1978, 43](#); [O'Sullivan et al. 1994, 287](#)). In a very famous example from his essay 'Myth Today' (in *Mythologies*), Barthes illustrates this concept of *myth*:



I am at the barber's, and a copy of *Paris-Match* is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro* in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the *meaning* of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro* in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (*a black soldier is giving the French salute*); there is a signified (it is here a

purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier... In myth (and this is the chief peculiarity of the latter), the signifier is already formed by the signs of the language... Myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us...

One must put the biography of the Negro* in parentheses if one wants to free the picture, and prepare it to receive its signified... The form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance... It is this constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form which defines myth. The form of

myth is not a symbol: the Negro* who salutes is not the symbol of the French Empire: he has too much presence, he appears as a rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent, *indisputable* image. But at the same time this presence is tamed, put at a distance, made almost transparent; it recedes a little, it becomes the accomplice of a concept which comes to it fully armed, French imperialism...

Myth is... defined by its intention... much more than by its literal sense... In spite of this, its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, made absent by this literal sense (*The French Empire? It's just a fact: look at this good Negro* who salutes like one of our own boys*). This constituent ambiguity... has two consequences for the signification, which henceforth appears both like a notification and like a statement of fact... French imperialism condemns the saluting Negro* to be nothing more than an instrumental signifier, the Negro* suddenly hails me in the name of French imperialism; but at the same moment the Negro's* salute thickens, becomes vitrified, freezes into an eternal reference meant to establish French imperialism...

We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature... In the case of the soldier-Negro*... what is got rid of is certainly not French imperialism (on the contrary, since what must be actualized is its presence); it is the contingent, historical, in one word: *fabricated*, quality of colonialism. Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. If I *state the fact* of French imperialism without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and *goes without saying*: I am reassured. In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions... Things appear to mean something by themselves...

*Translator's term - *not* the choice of this author

[\(Barthes 1987\)](#)

Signs and codes are generated by myths and in turn serve to maintain them. Popular usage of the term 'myth' suggests that it refers to beliefs which are demonstrably false, but the semiotic use of the term does not necessarily suggest this. Myths can be seen as extended [metaphors](#). Like metaphors, myths help us to make sense of our experiences within a culture ([Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 185-6](#)). They express and serve to organize shared ways of conceptualizing something within a culture. Semioticians in the Saussurean tradition treat the relationship between nature and culture as relatively arbitrary ([Lévi-Strauss 1972, 90, 95](#)). For Barthes, myths serve the ideological function of *naturalization* ([Barthes 1977, 45-6](#)). Their function is to naturalize the cultural - in other words, to make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs seem entirely 'natural', 'normal', self-evident, timeless, obvious 'common-sense' - and thus objective and 'true' reflections of 'the way

things are'. Contemporary sociologists argue that social groups tend to regard as 'natural' whatever confers privilege and power upon themselves. Barthes saw myth as serving the ideological interests of the bourgeoisie. 'Bourgeois ideology... turns culture into nature,' he declares ([Barthes 1974, 206](#)). George Lakoff and Mark Johnson outline key features of the myth of *objectivism* which is dominant and pervasive in Western culture - a myth which allies itself with scientific truth, rationality, accuracy, fairness and impartiality and which is reflected in the discourse of science, law, government, journalism, morality, business, economics and scholarship ([Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 188-9](#)). Myths can function to hide the ideological function of signs and codes. The power of such myths is that they 'go without saying' and so appear not to need to be deciphered, interpreted or demystified.

Differences between the three orders of signification are not clear-cut, but for descriptive and analytic purposes some theorists distinguish them along the following lines. The first (denotative) order (or level) of signification is seen as primarily representational and relatively self-contained. The second (connotative) order of signification reflects 'expressive' values which are attached to a sign. In the third (mythological or ideological) order of signification the sign reflects major culturally-variable concepts underpinning a particular worldview - such as masculinity, femininity, freedom, individualism, objectivism, Englishness and so on. Susan Hayward offers a useful example of the three orders of signification in relation to a photograph of Marilyn Monroe:



At the denotative level this is a photograph of the movie star Marilyn Monroe. At a connotative level we associate this photograph with Marilyn Monroe's star qualities of glamour, sexuality, beauty - if this is an early photograph - but also with her depression, drug-taking and untimely death if it is one of her last photographs. At a mythic level we understand this sign as activating the myth of Hollywood: the dream factory that produces glamour in the form of the stars it constructs, but also the dream machine that can crush them - all with a view to profit and expediency. ([Hayward 1996, 310](#))

The semiotic analysis of cultural myths involves an attempt to deconstruct the ways in which codes operate within particular popular texts or genres, with the goal of revealing how certain values, attitudes and beliefs are supported whilst others are suppressed. The task of 'denaturalizing' such cultural assumptions is problematic when the semiotician is also a product of the same culture, since membership of a culture involves 'taking for granted' many of its dominant ideas. Nevertheless, where we seek to analyse our own cultures in this way it is essential to try to be explicitly reflexive about 'our own' values.

Rhetorical Tropes

Most contemporary semioticians regard rhetoric (or at least aspects of it) as falling within the domain of semiotics ([Nöth 1990, 338](#)). The study of what Saussure called 'the role of signs as part of social life' could not exclude the ancient art of persuasion. Whilst a general overview of rhetoric is beyond the scope of this text, a concern with certain key tropes (or figures of speech) is so prominent in semiotic theory that one cannot embark on an exploration of semiotics without some understanding of this topic.

Academic interest in rhetoric, or at least in the epistemological implications of certain tropes, was revived in the second half of the twentieth century by structuralists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roman Jakobson, the self-styled formalist Hayden White, poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, and cognitive semanticists such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. A sea-change in academic discourse, which has been visible in many disciplines, has been dubbed 'the rhetorical turn' or 'the discursive turn'. It reflects a radical challenge to the language of objectivism which derives from the seventeenth century quest to establish a 'scientific' use of language. The central proposition of this contemporary trend is that rhetorical forms are deeply and unavoidably involved in the shaping of realities. Language is not a neutral medium. In common usage we refer dismissively to 'heated rhetoric', 'empty rhetoric' and 'mere rhetoric'. However, rhetoric is not stylistic ornamentation but persuasive discourse. All discourse is unavoidably rhetorical, though academic writers in particular seldom acknowledge and often deny its presence in their writing. Rhetoric is often contrasted with rationality and allied with radical relativism or nihilism. Such assertions, of course, represent rhetoric at work (just as when the 'hardness' of the sciences is contrasted with the 'softness' of the humanities). Rhetoric is not simply a matter of how thoughts are presented but is itself an influence on ways of thinking which deserves serious attention. Academic authors construct texts which define particular realities and modes of knowing ([Bazerman 1981](#); [Hansen 1988](#)). 'Facts' do not 'speak for themselves': academic writers have to argue for their existence. Academic papers are not unproblematic presentations of knowledge, but are subtle rhetorical constructions with epistemological implications. Attending to rhetoric can assist us in deconstructing all kinds of discourse.

Terence Hawkes tells us that '*figurative language* is language which doesn't mean what it says' - in contrast to *literal language* which is at least intended to be, or taken as, purely [denotative](#) ([Hawkes 1972, 1](#)). Whilst this is a distinction which goes back to classical times it has been problematized by poststructuralist theorists (a topic to which we will return shortly). Somewhat less problematically, tropes can be seen as offering us a variety of ways of saying '*this is (or is like) that*'. Tropes may be essential to understanding if we interpret this as a process of rendering the unfamiliar more familiar. Furthermore, however they are defined, the conventions of figurative language constitute a rhetorical [code](#), and understanding this code is part of what it means to be a member of the culture in which it is employed. Like other codes, figurative language is part of the reality maintenance system of a culture or sub-culture. It is a code which relates ostensibly to *how* things are represented rather than to *what* is represented. Occasionally in everyday life our attention is drawn to an unusual metaphor - such as the critical quip that someone is 'one voucher short of a pop-up toaster'. However, much of the time - outside of 'poetic' contexts - we use or encounter many figures of speech without really noticing them - they retreat to 'transparency'. Such transparency tends to anaesthetize us to the way in which the culturally available stock of tropes acts as an anchor linking us to the dominant ways of thinking within our society ([Lakoff & Johnson 1980](#)). Our repeated exposure to, and use of, such figures of speech subtly sustains our tacit agreement with the shared assumptions of our society.

Tropes generate 'imagery' with [connotations](#) over and above any 'literal' meaning. Once we employ a trope, our utterance becomes part of a much larger system of associations which is beyond our control. For instance when we refer metaphorically to 'putting things into words' it tends to connote the idea of language as a 'container' - a particular view of language which has specific implications ([Reddy 1979](#)). Yet the use of tropes is unavoidable. We may think of figurative language as most obviously a feature of poetry and more generally of 'literary' writing, but, as Terry Eagleton remarks, 'there is more metaphor in Manchester than there is in Marvell' ([Eagleton 1983, 6](#)). According to

Roman Jakobson, metaphor and metonymy are the two fundamental modes of communicating meaning, and - according to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson - the basis for much of our understanding in everyday life ([Jakobson & Halle 1956](#); [Lakoff & Johnson 1980](#)).



Roland Barthes declared that 'no sooner is a form seen than it *must* resemble something: humanity seems doomed to analogy' (cited in [Silverman & Torode 1980, 248](#)). The ubiquity of tropes in visual as well as verbal forms can be seen as reflecting our fundamentally *relational*

understanding of reality. Reality is framed within systems of analogy. Figures of speech enable us to see one thing in terms of another. As with paradigm and syntagm, tropes 'orchestrate the interactions of signifiers and signifieds' in discourse ([Silverman 1983, 87](#)). A trope such as metaphor can be regarded as new sign formed from the signifier of one sign and the signified of another. The signifier thus stands for a different signified; the new signified replaces the usual one. As I will illustrate, the tropes differ in the nature of these substitutions.



Frontispiece to Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society*

In seventeenth century England the scientists of the Royal Society sought 'to separate knowledge of nature from the colours of rhetoric, the devices of the fancy, the delightful deceit of the fables' (Thomas Sprat, 1667: *The History of the Royal Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge*); they saw the 'trick of metaphors' as distorting reality. In the *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes dismissed 'the use of metaphors, tropes and other rhetorical figures, instead of words proper. For though it be lawful to say, for example, in common speech, *the way goeth, or leadeth hither, or thither, the proverb says this or that*, whereas ways cannot go, nor proverbs speak; yet in reckoning, and seeking of truth, such speeches are not to be admitted' (*Leviathan*, Part 1, Chapter 5), whilst John Locke wrote similarly in 1690:

If we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats: and therefore, however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and popular addresses, they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided; and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the language or person that makes use of them. (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 3, Chapter 10)

An attempt to avoid figurative language became closely allied to the realist ideology of objectivism. Language and reality, thought and language, and form and content are regarded by realists as separate, or at least as separable. Realists favour the use of the 'clearest', most 'transparent' language for the accurate and truthful description of 'facts'. However, language isn't 'glass' (as the metaphorical references to clarity and transparency suggest), and it is unavoidably implicated in the construction of the world as we know it. Banishing metaphor is an impossible task since it is central to

language. Ironically, the writings of Hobbes, Locke and Sprat are themselves richly metaphorical. The poet Wallace Stevens provocatively quipped that 'reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor' (cited in [Hawkes 1972, 57](#)). Those drawn towards philosophical idealism argue that all language is metaphor or even that 'reality' is purely a product of metaphors. Such a stance clearly denies any referential distinction between 'literal' and 'metaphorical'. Nietzsche declared: 'What... is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms' (cited in [Spivak 1976, xxii](#)). For Nietzsche, truth or reality was merely the solidification of old metaphors.

Poststructuralists (whose own use of language is typically highly metaphorical) argue that there can be no text which 'means what it says' (which is how 'literal' language is often defined). Constructivists might be content to insist that metaphors are pervasive and largely unrecognized within a culture or sub-culture and that highlighting them is a useful key to identifying whose realities such metaphors privilege. Identifying figurative tropes in texts and practices can help to highlight underlying thematic frameworks; semiotic textual analysis sometimes involves the identification of an 'overarching (or 'root') metaphor' or 'dominant trope'. For instance, Derrida shows how philosophers have traditionally referred to the mind and the intellect in terms of tropes based on the presence or absence of light ([Derrida 1974](#)); everyday language is rich in examples of the association of thinking with visual metaphors (bright, brilliant, dull, enlightening, illuminating, vision, clarity, reflection etc.). As Kress and van Leeuwen put it:

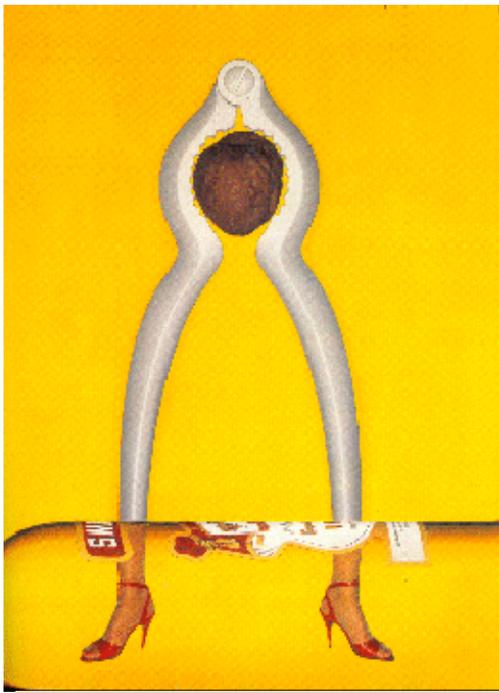
Seeing has, in our culture, become synonymous with understanding. We 'look' at a problem. We 'see' the point. We adopt a 'viewpoint'. We 'focus' on an issue. We 'see things in perspective'. The world 'as we see it' (rather than 'as we know it' and certainly not 'as we hear it' or 'as we feel it') has become the measure for what is 'real' and 'true'. ([Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 168](#))

Michel Foucault adopts a stance of linguistic determinism, arguing that the dominant tropes within the discourse of a particular historical period determine what can be known - constituting the basic *episteme* of the age. 'Discursive practice' is reduced to 'a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined by the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function' ([Foucault 1974, 117](#)). Since certain metaphors have become naturalized and we do not tend to notice the ways in which they can channel our thinking about the signifieds to which they refer, deliberately *using* unconventional tropes can sometimes help to denaturalize taken-for-granted ways of looking at phenomena ([Stern 1998, 165](#)).

Metaphor is so widespread that it is often used as an 'umbrella' term (another metaphor!) to include other figures of speech (such as metonyms) which can be technically distinguished from it in its narrower usage. Similes can be seen as a form of metaphor in which the figurative status of the comparison is made explicit through the use of the word 'as' or 'like'. Thus 'life is like a box of chocolates' (*Forrest Gump*, 1994). Much of the time we hardly notice that we are using metaphors at all and yet one study found that English speakers produced an average of 3000 novel metaphors per week ([Pollio et al. 1977](#)). Lakoff and Johnson argue that 'the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' ([Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 5](#)). In semiotic terms, a metaphor involves one signified acting as a signifier referring to a different signified. In literary terms, a metaphor consists of a 'literal' primary subject (or 'tenor') expressed in terms of a 'figurative' secondary subject (or 'vehicle') ([Richards 1932](#)). For instance: '*Experience* is a good *school*, but the

fees are high' (Heinrich Heine). In this case, the primary subject of *experience* is expressed in terms of the secondary subject of *school*. Typically, metaphor expresses an abstraction in terms of a more well-defined model.

The linking of a particular tenor and vehicle is normally unfamiliar: we must make an imaginative leap to recognize the resemblance to which a fresh metaphor alludes. Metaphor is initially unconventional because it apparently disregards 'literal' or denotative resemblance (though some kind of resemblance must become apparent if the metaphor is to make any sense at all to its interpreters). The basis in *resemblance* suggests that metaphor involves the *iconic* mode. However, to the extent that such a resemblance is oblique, we may think of metaphor as *symbolic*. More interpretative effort is required in making sense of metaphors than of more literal signifiers, but this interpretative effort may be experienced as pleasurable. Whilst metaphors may require an imaginative leap in their initial use (such as in aesthetic uses in poetry or the visual arts) many metaphors become so habitually employed that they are no longer perceived as being metaphors at all.



Metaphors need not be verbal. In film, a pair of consecutive shots is metaphorical when there is an implied comparison of the two shots. For instance, a shot of an aeroplane followed by a shot of a bird flying would be metaphorical, implying that the aeroplane is (or is like) a bird. So too would a shot of a bird landing accompanied by the sounds of an airport control tower and of a braking plane - as in an airline commercial cited by Charles Forceville ([Forceville 1996, 203](#)). In most cases the context would cue us as to which was the primary subject. An ad for an airline is more likely to suggest that an aeroplane is (like) a bird than that a bird is (like) an aeroplane. As with verbal metaphors, we are left to draw our own conclusions as to the points of comparison. Advertisers frequently use visual metaphors, as in this ad for Smirnoff vodka. Despite the frequently expressed notion that images cannot assert, metaphorical images often imply that which advertisers would not express in words. In this example from a men's magazine, the metaphor suggests that (Smirnoff enables you to see that) women (or perhaps some women) are nutcrackers (the code of related Smirnoff ads marks this as humour).



Visual metaphor can also involve a function of 'transference', transferring certain qualities from one sign to another. In relation to advertising this has been explored by Judith Williamson in her book, *Decoding Advertisements* ([Williamson 1978](#)). It is of course the role of advertisers to differentiate similar products from each other, and they do this by associating a product with a specific set of social values - in semiotic terms, creating distinct signifieds for it. Indeed, it has been suggested that ads provide 'a kind of dictionary constantly keeping us apprised of new consumer signifieds and signifiers' (McCracken, cited in [Stern 1998, 292](#)). This particular printed advertisement takes the form of a photographic close-up of the head and shoulders of the glamorous

French actress Catherine Deneuve (whose name appears in small type). Superimposed on the lower right-hand portion of the advertisement is the image of a bottle of perfume labelled Chanel No. 5. In this advertisement, two key signifiers are juxtaposed. The image of Catherine Deneuve richly signifies French chic, sophistication, elegance, beauty and glamour. The plain image of the bottle simply signifies *Chanel No. 5* perfume. This is a rather 'empty' signifier when we cannot actually smell the perfume (contemporary perfume ads in magazines often include a strip of paper impregnated with the scent). At the bottom of the ad, in large letters, the name of the perfume is repeated in its distinctive typographical style, making a link between the two key signifiers. The aim, of course, is for the viewer to transfer the qualities signified by the actress to the perfume, thus substituting one signified for another, and creating a new metaphorical sign which offers us the meaning that *Chanel No. 5 is beauty and elegance* ([Williamson 1978, 25](#)).

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson illustrate that underlying most of our fundamental concepts are several kinds of metaphor:

- *orientational metaphors* primarily relating to spatial organization (*up/down, in/out, front/back, on/off, near/far, deep/shallow and central/peripheral*);
- *ontological metaphors* which associate activities, emotions and ideas with entities and substances (most obviously, metaphors involving *personification*);
- *structural metaphors*: overarching metaphors (building on the other two types) which allow us to structure one concept in terms of another (e.g. *rational argument is war* or *time is a resource*).

Lakoff and Johnson note that metaphors may vary from culture to culture but argue that they are not arbitrary, being derived initially from our physical, social and cultural experience. In 1744, Giambattista Vico made the point that: 'it is noteworthy that in all languages the greater part of the expressions relating to inanimate things are formed by metaphor from the human body and its parts and from the human senses and passions'. His modern English translators offer this adaptation of his list:

Thus, head for top or beginning; the brow and shoulders of a hill; the eyes of needles and of potatoes; mouth for any opening; the lip of a cup or pitcher; the teeth of a rake, a saw, a comb; the beard of wheat; the tongue of a shoe; the gorge of a river; a neck of land; an arm of the sea; the hands of a clock; heart for centre (the Latins used *umbilicus*, navel, in this sense); the belly of a sail; foot for end or bottom; the flesh of fruits; a vein of rock or mineral; the blood of grapes for wine; the bowels of the earth. Heaven or the sea smiles, the wind whistles, the waves murmur; a body groans under a great weight. ([Vico 1968, 129](#))

Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors form systematic clusters such as that *ideas (or meanings) are objects, linguistic expressions are containers and communication is sending* - an example derived from Michael Reddy's discussion of 'the conduit metaphor' ([Reddy 1979](#)). Metaphors not only cluster in this way but extend into [myths](#). Lakoff and Johnson argue that dominant metaphors tend both to reflect and influence values in a culture or subculture: for instance, the pervasive Western metaphors that *knowledge is power* and *science subdues nature* are involved in the maintenance of the ideology of objectivism ([Lakoff & Johnson 1980](#)). This is consistent with the Whorfian perspective that different languages impose different systems of spatial and temporal relations on experience through their figures of speech ([Whorf 1956](#)).

Whilst metaphor is based on apparent unrelatedness, *metonymy* is a function which involves using one signified to stand for another signified which is *directly related* to it or *closely associated* with it in some way. Metonyms are based on various *indexical* relationships between signifieds, notably the substitution of *effect* for *cause*. The best definition I have found is that 'metonymy is the evocation of the whole by a connection. It consists in using for the name of a thing or a relationship an attribute, a suggested sense, or something closely related, such as effect for cause... the imputed relationship being that of contiguity' ([Wilden 1987, 198](#)). It can be seen as based on substitution by *adjuncts* (things that are found together) or on *functional relationships*. Many of these forms notably make an abstract referent more concrete, although some theorists also include substitution in the opposite direction (e.g. *cause* for *effect*). *Part/whole* relationships are sometimes distinguished as a special kind of metonymy or as a separate trope, as we will see shortly. Metonymy includes the substitution of:

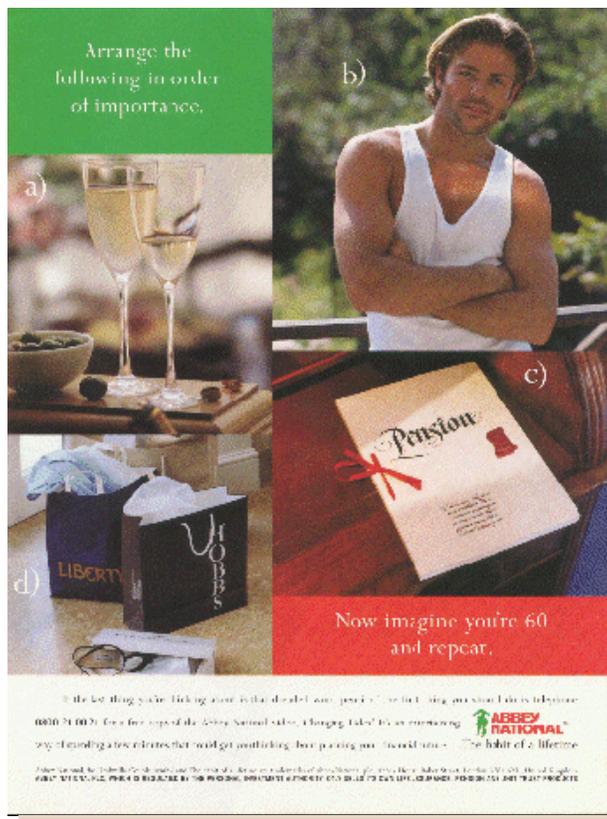
- *effect* for *cause* ('Don't get hot under the collar!' for 'Don't get angry!');
- *object* for *user* (or associated *institution*) ('the Crown' for the monarchy, 'the stage' for the theatre and 'the press' for journalists);
- *substance* for *form* ('plastic' for 'credit card', 'lead' for 'bullet');
- *place* for *event*: ('*Chernobyl* changed attitudes to nuclear power');
- *place* for *person* ('*No. 10* for the British prime minister);
- *place* for *institution* ('*Whitehall* isn't saying anything');
- *institution* for *people* ('The *government* is not backing down').

Lakoff and Johnson comment on several types of metonym, including:

- *producer* for *product* ('She owns a *Picasso*');
- *object* for *user* ('The *ham sandwich* wants his check [bill]');
- *controller* for *controlled* ('*Nixon* bombed Hanoi').

They argue that (as with metaphor) particular kinds of metonymic substitution may influence our thoughts, attitudes and actions by focusing on certain aspects of a concept and suppressing other aspects which are inconsistent with the metonym:

When we think of a *Picasso*, we are not just thinking of a work of art alone, in and of itself. We think of it in terms of its relation to the artist, this is, his conception of art, his technique, his role in art history, etc. We act with reverence towards a *Picasso*, even a sketch he made as a teenager, because of its relation to the artist. Similarly, when a waitress says, 'The ham sandwich wants his check,' she is not interested in the person as a person but only as a customer, which is why the use of such a sentence is dehumanizing. Nixon may not himself have dropped the bombs on Hanoi, but via the *controller for controlled* metonymy we not only say 'Nixon bombed Hanoi' but also think of him as doing the bombing and hold him responsible for it... This is possible because of the nature of the metonymic relationship... where responsibility is what is focused on. ([Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 39](#))



As with metaphors, metonyms may be visual as well as verbal. In film, which Jakobson regarded as a basically metonymic medium, 'metonymy can be applied to an object that is visibly present but which represents another object or subject to which it is related but which is absent' ([Hayward 1996, 217](#)). An ad for pensions in a women's magazine asked the reader to arrange four images in order of importance: each image was metonymic, standing for related activities (such as shopping bags for material goods). Metonymy is common in cigarette advertising in countries where legislation prohibits depictions of the cigarettes themselves or of people using them. The ads for Benson and Hedges and for Silk Cut are good examples of this.

Jakobson argues that whereas a *metaphorical* term is connected with that for which it is substituted on the basis of *similarity*, *metonymy* is based on *contiguity* or closeness ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 91, 95](#)). The indexicality of metonyms also tends to suggest that they are 'directly connected to' reality in contrast to the mere *iconicity* or *symbolism* of metaphor. Metonyms seem to be more obviously 'grounded in our experience' than metaphors since they usually involve direct associations ([Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 39](#)). Metonymy does not require transposition (an imaginative leap) from one domain to another as metaphor does. This difference can lead metonymy to seem more 'natural' than metaphors - which when still 'fresh' are stylistically foregrounded. Metonymic signifiers foreground the signified whilst metaphoric signifiers foreground the signifier ([Lodge 1977, xiv](#)). Jakobson suggested that the metonymic mode tends to be foregrounded in prose whereas the metaphoric mode tends to be foregrounded in poetry ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 95-96](#)). He regarded 'so-called realistic literature' as 'intimately tied with the metonymic principle' ([Jakobson 1960, 375](#); cf. [Jakobson & Halle 1956, 92](#)). Such literature represents actions as based on cause and effect and as contiguous in time and space. Whilst metonymy is associated with realism, metaphor is associated with romanticism and surrealism ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 92](#)).

Some theorists identify *synecdoche* as a separate trope, some see it as a special form of metonymy and others subsume its functions entirely within metonymy. Jakobson noted that both metonymy and synecdoche are based on *contiguity* ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 95](#)). The definition of synecdoche varies from theorist to theorist (sometimes markedly). The rhetorician Richard Lanham represents the most common tendency to describe synecdoche as 'the substitution of part for whole, genus for species or vice versa' ([Lanham 1969, 97](#)). Thus one term is more comprehensive than the other. Some theorists restrict the directionality of application (e.g. part for whole but *not* whole for part).

Some limit synecdoche further to cases where one element is *physically* part of the other. Here are some examples:

- *part* for *whole* ('I'm off to the smoke [London]'; 'we need to hire some more hands [workers]'; 'two heads are better than one'; 'I've got a new set of wheels', the American expression 'get your butt over here!');
- *whole* for *part* (e.g. 'I was stopped by the law' - where the law stands for a police officer, 'Wales' for 'the Welsh national rugby team' or 'the market' for customers);
- *species* for *genus* (*hypernymy*) - the use of a *member of a class* (*hyponym*) for the *class* (*superordinate*) which includes it (e.g. *a mother* for *motherhood*, 'bread' for 'food', 'Hoover' for 'vacuum-cleaner');
- *genus* for *species* (*hyponymy*) - the use of a *superordinate* for a *hyponym* (e.g. 'vehicle' for 'car', or 'machine' for 'computer').

Stephen Pepper identified four basic worldviews - formism, mechanism, contextualism and organicism, each with its own distinctive 'root metaphor' - respectively, *similarity*, *simple machine*, *historic event* and *organism* ([Pepper 1942, 84ff](#)). Meyer Abrams has identified Pepper's scheme as an application of synecdoche, since each worldview presents the whole of reality in terms of one of its parts ([Abrams 1971, 31](#)).



In photographic and filmic media a close-up is a simple synecdoche - a part representing the whole ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 92](#)). Indeed, the formal frame of any visual image (painting, drawing, photograph, film or television frame) functions as a synecdoche in that it suggests that what is being offered is a 'slice-of-life', and that the world outside the frame is carrying on in the same manner as the world depicted within it. This is perhaps particularly so when the frame cuts across some of the objects depicted within it rather than enclosing them as wholly discrete entities. Synecdoche invites or expects the viewer to 'fill in the gaps' and advertisements frequently employ this trope. The Nissan ad shown here was part of a campaign targeting a new model of car primarily at women drivers (the Micra). The ad is synecdochic in several ways: it is a close-up and we can mentally expand the frame; it is a 'cover-up' and the magazine's readers can use their imaginations; it is also a frozen moment and we can infer the preceding events.

Any attempt to represent reality can be seen as involving synecdoche, since it can only involve selection (and yet such selections serve to guide us in envisaging larger frameworks). Whilst indexical relations in general reflect the closest link which a signifier can be seen as having with a signified, the *part/whole* relations of synecdoche reflect the most direct link of all. That which is seen as forming part of a larger whole to which it refers is connected *existentially* to what is signified - as an integral part of its being. Jakobson noted the use of 'synecdochic details' by realist authors ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 92](#)). In 'factual' genres a danger lies in what has been called 'the metonymic fallacy' (more accurately the 'synecdochic fallacy') whereby the represented part is taken as an accurate reflection of the whole of

that which it is taken as standing for - for instance, a white, middle-class woman standing for all women ([Barthes 1974, 162](#); [Alcoff & Potter 1993, 14](#)). Framing is of course always highly and unavoidably selective. In fictional genres, 'realism' seeks encourage us to treat that which is missing as 'going without saying' rather than as 'conspicuous by its absence'. In mainstream films and television dramas, for instance, we are not intended to be aware that the stage-set 'rooms' have only three walls.

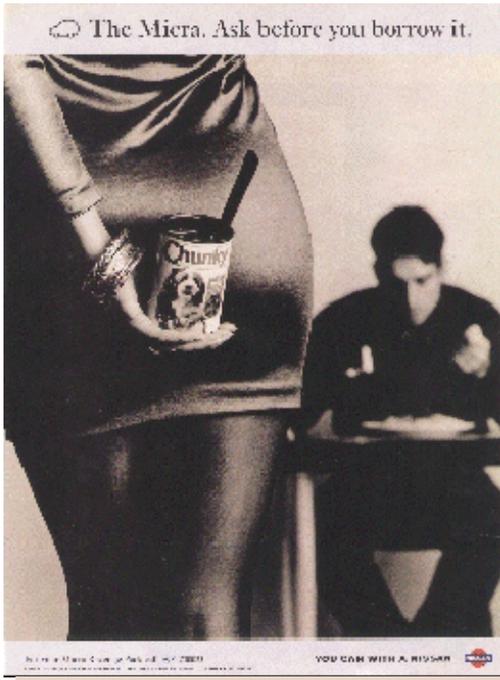
Whether synecdoche is separable from metonymy in general is disputed by some theorists (e.g. [Eco 1984](#)). Others disagree about what constitutes synecdoche. Roman Jakobson argues that whilst both metonymy and synecdoche involve a part standing for a whole, in metonymy the relation is *internal* (*sail* for *ship*) whereas in synecdoche the relation is *external* (*pen* for *writer*) (see [Lechte 1994, 63](#)). However, this does not reflect a broad consensus - indeed, general usage reflects the reverse (synecdochic links are often listed as *internal*). If the distinction is made as outlined above (*pace* Jakobson), metonymy in its narrower sense would then be based only on the more abstract indexical links such as causality. Even if synecdoche is given a separate status, general usage would suggest that metonymy would remain an umbrella term for indexical links as well as having a narrower meaning of its own (as distinct from synecdoche).

Irony is the most radical of the four main tropes. As with metaphor, the signifier of the ironic sign seems to signify one thing but we know from another signifier that it actually signifies something very different. Where it means the *opposite* of what it says (as it usually does) it is based on binary opposition. Irony may thus reflect the opposite of the thoughts or feelings of the speaker or writer (as when you say 'I love it' when you hate it) or the opposite of the truth about external reality (as in 'There's a crowd here' when it's deserted). It can also be seen as being based on substitution by *dissimilarity* or *disjunction*. Whilst typically an ironic statement signifies the opposite of its literal signification, such variations as understatement and overstatement can also be regarded as ironic. At some point, exaggeration may slide into irony.

Unless the ironic sign is a spoken utterance (when a sarcastic intonation may mark the irony) the marker of its ironic status comes from beyond the literal sign. A 'knowing' smile is often offered as a cue. In Britain a fashion for 'air quotes' (gestural inverted commas) in the 1980s was followed in the 1990s by a fashion for some young people to mark spoken irony - after a pause - with the word 'Not!', as in 'he is a real hunk - Not!'. However, irony is often more difficult to identify. All of the tropes involve the non-literal substitution of a new signified for the usual one and comprehension requires a distinction between what is *said* and what is *meant*. Thus they are all, in a sense, *double* signs. However, whereas the other tropes involve shifts in what is being referred to, irony involves a shift in *modality*. The evaluation of the ironic sign requires the retrospective assessment of its modality status. Re-evaluating an apparently literal sign for ironic cues requires reference to perceived intent and to truth status. An ironic statement is not, of course, the same as a *lie* since it is not intended to be taken as 'true'. Irony has sometimes been referred to as 'double-coded'.

Modality status	Postcard message	Truth status	Perceived intent
literal/factual	"The weather is wonderful"	true (the weather <i>is</i> wonderful)	to inform
ironic	"The weather is wonderful"	false (the weather is <i>dreadful</i>)	to amuse
lie	"The weather is wonderful"	false (the weather is <i>dreadful</i>)	to mislead

Irony thus poses particular difficulties for the literalist stance of structuralists and formalists that meaning is immanent - that it lies *within* a text.



Irony is a marked form which foregrounds the signifier. Adolescents sometimes use it to suggest that they are sophisticated and not naive. Limited use is usually intended as a form of humour. Frequent use may be associated with reflexiveness, detachment or scepticism. It sometimes marks a cynical stance which assumes that people never mean or do what they say. Sustained use may even reflect nihilism or relativism (nothing - or everything - is 'true'). Whilst irony has a long pedigree, its use has become one of the most characteristic features of 'postmodern' texts and aesthetic practices. Where irony is used in one-to-one communication it is of course essential that it is understood as being ironic rather than literal. However, with larger audiences it constitutes a form of 'narrowcasting', since not everyone will interpret it as irony. Dramatic irony is a form whereby the reader or viewer knows something that one or more of the depicted people do not know. This ad from the same Nissan campaign illustrated earlier makes effective use of irony. We notice two people: in soft focus we see a man absorbed in eating his food at a table; in sharp focus

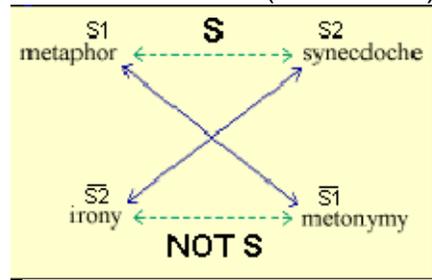
close-up we see a woman facing him, hiding behind her back an open can. As we read the label we realize that she has fed him dog-food (because he didn't ask before borrowing her car).

Here, for convenience, is a brief summary of the four tropes with some linguistic examples:

Trope	Basis	Linguistic example	Intended meaning
<i>Metaphor</i>	Similarity despite difference (explicit in the case of <i>simile</i>)	I work at the coalface	I do the hard work here
<i>Metonymy</i>	Relatedness through direct association	I'm one of the suits	I'm one of the managers
<i>Synecdoche</i>	Relatedness through categorical hierarchy	I deal with the general public	I deal with customers
<i>Irony</i>	Inexplicit direct opposite (more explicit in <i>sarcasm</i>)	I love working here	I hate working here

Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) is usually credited with being the first to identify metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony as the four basic tropes (to which all others are reducible), although this distinction can be seen as having its roots in the *Rhetorica* of Peter Ramus (1515-1572) (Vico 1968, 129-131). This reduction was popularized in the twentieth century by the American rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1897-1993), who referred to the four 'master tropes' (Burke 1969, 503-17). Each of these four tropes represents a different relationship between the signifier and the signified; Hayden White suggests that these relationships consist of:

resemblance (metaphor), adjacency (metonymy), essentiality (synecdoche) and 'doubling' (irony) (White 1979, 97). These tropes seem to be so ubiquitous that Jonathan Culler (following Hans Kellner) suggests that they may constitute 'a system, indeed *the* system, by which the mind comes to grasp the world conceptually in language' (Culler 1981, 65). Fredric Jameson's use of the **semiotic square** provides a useful mapping of these tropes (Jameson in Greimas 1987, xix). Note that such frameworks depend on a distinction being made between metonymy and synecdoche, but that such terms are often either defined variously or not defined at all. In his book *Metahistory*, White saw the four 'master tropes' as part of the 'deep structure' underlying different historiographical styles (White 1973, ix). In what is, of course, a rhetorical act of analogy itself, White also linked metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony with four literary genres, Pepper's worldviews and four basic ideologies. In Lévi-Straussian rhetoric, he saw these various systems of classification as 'structurally homologous with one another' (White 1978, 70).



Trope	Genre ('mode of emplotment')	Worldview ('mode of argument')	Ideology ('mode of ideological implication')
<i>Metaphor</i>	romance	formism	anarchism
<i>Metonymy</i>	comedy	organicism	conservatism
<i>Synecdoche</i>	tragedy	mechanism	radicalism
<i>Irony</i>	satire	contextualism	liberalism

Hayden White has suggested a tropological *sequence* in Western discourse (originally based on historical writing), whereby the dominant trope changed from one period to the next - *from metaphor to metonymy to synecdoche to irony* (White 1973). He interprets Vico as the originator of this particular sequence, although Vico's hypothetical historical sequence for the development of the four key tropes seems to be open to the interpretation that it was *from metonymy to synecdoche to metaphor to irony* (White 1978, 5ff, 197ff; Vico 1968, 129-31). White suggests an ontogenetic parallel to his proposed sequence of tropes in Piaget's four stages of cognitive development. However, he denies any implication that earlier modes within such developmental schemes are in any way 'inferior' (White 1978, 9). This speculative analogy should not be taken as suggesting that *children's acquisition* of these tropes is related to the age-ranges which are included here.

Hayden White's Sequence of Tropes	Piagetian stages of cognitive development	White's alignment of Foucault's historical
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		epochs
<i>Metaphor</i>	<i>sensorimotor</i> stage (birth to about 2 years)	<i>Renaissance</i> period (sixteenth century)
<i>Metonymy</i>	<i>pre-operational</i> stage (2 to 6/7 years)	<i>Classical</i> period (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries)
<i>Synecdoche</i>	<i>concrete operations</i> stage (6/7 to 11/12 years)	<i>Modern</i> period (late eighteenth to early twentieth century)
<i>Irony</i>	<i>formal operations</i> stage (11/12 to adult)	<i>Postmodern</i> period

Michel Foucault undertook an 'archeological' study of three loosely defined historical periods: the 'Renaissance' period, the 'Classical' period and the 'Modern' period. He argued that each period had an underlying epistemology. White suggests that each of these periods, together with the Postmodern period in which Foucault wrote, reflects one of the four master tropes in White's suggested sequence ([White 1978, 230-60](#)). Elsewhere he argues that in Foucault, 'every "discursive formation" undergoes a finite number of... shifts before reaching the limits of the *épistème* that sanctions its operations. This number corresponds to the fundamental modes of figuration identified by the theory of tropology: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony (which is here understood as *self-conscious* catechresis)' ([White 1979, 95](#)). Cathachresis is variously defined, but it is based on the notion of an abusive comparison.

Foucault himself speculated about a sequence of tropes, although this is not the same sequence as that proposed by White. He related this to the development of writing and language in a three-part sequence from *synecdoche to metonymy to catachresis or metaphor*. This is reminiscent of the speculations of Peirce about the evolution of language from the indexical and iconic towards the symbolic ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.299, 2.92, 2.90, 2.280, 2.302](#)).

True writing began when the attempt was made to represent, no longer the thing itself, but one of its constituent elements, or one of the circumstances that habitually attend it, or again some other thing that it resembles... These three methods produced three techniques: the curiological writing of the Egyptians... which employs 'the principal circumstance of a subject in lieu of the whole' (a bow for a battle, a ladder for a siege); then the 'tropical' hieroglyphics... which employ some notable circumstance (since God is all-powerful he knows everything and sees all that men do: he is therefore represented by an eye); finally symbolic writing, which makes use of more or less concealed resemblances (the rising sun is expressed by the head of a crocodile whose round eyes are just level with the surface of the water). We can recognize here the three great figures of rhetoric: synecdoche, metonymy, catachresis. And it is by following the nervature laid down by these figures that those languages paralleled with a symbolic form of writing will be able to evolve...

In any representation, the mind can attach itself, and attach a verbal sign, to one element of that representation, to a circumstance attending it, to some other, absent, thing that is similar

to it and is recalled to memory on account of it. There is no doubt that this is how language developed and gradually drifted away from primary designations. Originally everything had a name - a proper or peculiar name. Then the name became attached to a single element of the thing, and became applicable to all the other individual things that also contained that element: it is no longer a particular oak that is called *tree*, but anything that includes at least a trunk and branches. The name also became attached to a conspicuous circumstance: *night* came to designate, not the end of this particular day, but the period of darkness separating all sunsets from all dawns. Finally, it attached itself to analogies: everything was called a *leaf* that was as thin and flexible as the leaf of a tree. The progressive analysis and more advanced articulation of language, which enable us to give a single name to several things, were developed along the lines of these three fundamental figures so well known to rhetoric: synecdoche, metonymy, and catachresis (or metaphor, if the analogy is less immediately perceptible)... At the base of spoken language, as with writing, what we discover is the rhetorical dimension of words: that freedom of the sign to align, according to the analysis of representation, upon some internal element, upon some adjacent point, upon some analogous figure. ([Foucault 1970, 110-11; 113-4](#))

Hayden White's four-part tropological system is widely cited and applied beyond the historiographical context in which he originally used it, and the application of such frameworks can often be enlightening. However, some caution is necessary in their use. Catachresis may be involved in applying any tropological framework. White himself notes that the 'affinities' suggested by his alignment of tropes with genres, worldviews and ideologies 'are not to be taken as *necessary* combinations of the modes in a given historian. On the contrary, the dialectical tension which characterizes the work of every master historian usually arises from an effort to wed a mode of emplotment with a mode of argument or of ideological implication which is inconsonant with it' ([White 1973, 29](#)). There is a danger of over-systematization when three- or four-fold distinctions are multiplied and correlated by analogy. Taken to relativistic extremes, everything can be taken as resembling everything else. Phenomena are seldom as tidy as our systems of classification. Systems always leak (and it's no good replacing the plumbing with poetry). Even Francis Bacon, who sought scientific dominion over nature, observed that 'the subtlety of nature is greater many times over than the subtlety of argument' ([Bacon 1620, 261-2](#)). It is for the individual reader to assess how interpretatively useful the application of such schemes may be on any particular occasion of use - and what the limitations of such analogies may be. Since they can be extraordinarily compelling, we need to ensure that they do not become 'more real' than what they purport to describe.

White argued that 'the fourfold analysis of figurative language has the added advantage of resisting the fall into an essentially *dualistic* conception of styles'. Roman Jakobson adopted two tropes rather than four as fundamental - metaphor and metonymy. White felt that Jakobson's approach produced a reductive dichotomy dividing nineteenth century literature into 'a romantic-poetic-Metaphorical tradition' and 'a realistic-prosaic-Metonymical tradition' ([White 1973, 33n](#)). However, Jakobson's notion of two basic poles has proved massively influential. He found evidence in the pathology of speech for metaphor and metonymy being basic in language and thinking. In a paper entitled 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances', he drew on existing data on two types of aphasia, interpreting these as 'similarity disorder' and 'contiguity disorder' ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 67-96](#)). Aphasics with *similarity disorder* had difficulty selecting the word they want and fell back on contiguity and contexture, making metonymic (or synecdochic) mistakes - such as saying 'pencil-sharpener' when they meant 'knife', or 'knife' when they meant 'fork' ([Jakobson & Halle 1956,](#)

[79, 83](#)). Aphasics with *contiguity disorder* had difficulty combining words correctly and used quasi-metaphorical expressions - such as calling a microscope a 'spy-glass' ([ibid.](#), 86).



Jakobson argued that metaphor and metonymy, or selection and combination, are the two basic axes of language and communication. Metaphor is a paradigmatic dimension (vertical, based on selection, substitution and similarity) and metonymy a syntagmatic dimension (horizontal, based on combination, contexture and contiguity) ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 90-96](#)). Many theorists have adopted and adapted Jakobson's framework, such as Lévi-Strauss ([Lévi-Strauss 1974](#)). Jakobson related the tropes to Freud's dreamwork processes, regarding Freud's 'condensation' as synecdochic and his 'displacement' as metonymic ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 95](#)). Jacques Lacan linked metaphor with *condensation* and metonymy with *displacement* ([Lacan 1977, 160](#)).

Hayden White made the same links as Lacan whilst suggesting that *synecdoche* was linked to *representation* and *irony* to *secondary revision* ([White 1978, 13-14](#)). The film theorist Christian Metz posited *discursive* and *referential* axes, both involving relationships of *similarity* and *contiguity*. Whilst the discursive function acts at the level of the *signifier* in the form of paradigms and syntagms, the referential function operates at the level of the *signified* in the form of metaphor and metonymy ([Metz 1982](#); [Silverman 1983, 288](#)).

In a more lighthearted vein, there is an amusing discussion of metaphor and metonymy in David Lodge's novel, *Nice Work* ([Lodge 1988](#)).



A typical instance of this was the furious argument they had about the Silk Cut advertisement... Every few miles, it seemed, they passed the same huge poster on roadside hoardings, a photographic depiction of a rippling expanse of purple silk in which there was a single slit, as if the material had been slashed with a razor. There were no words in the advertisement, except for the Government Health Warning about smoking.

This ubiquitous image, flashing past at regular intervals, both irritated and intrigued Robyn, and she began to do her semiotic stuff on the deep structure hidden beneath its bland surface.

It was in the first instance a kind of riddle. That is to say, in order to decode it, you had to know that there was a brand of cigarettes called Silk Cut. The poster was the iconic representation of a missing name, like a rebus. But the icon was also a metaphor. The shimmering silk, with its voluptuous curves and sensuous texture, obviously symbolized the female body, and the elliptical slit, foregrounded by a lighter colour showing through, was still more obviously a vagina. The advert thus appealed to both sensual and sadistic impulses, the desire to mutilate as well as penetrate the female body.

Vic Wilcox spluttered with outraged derision as she expounded this interpretation. He smoked a

different brand himself, but it was as if he felt his whole philosophy of life was threatened by Robyn's analysis of the advert. 'You must have a twisted mind to see all that in a perfectly harmless bit of cloth,' he said.

'What's the point of it, then?' Robyn challenged him. 'Why use cloth to advertise cigarettes?'

'Well, that's the name of 'em, isn't it? Silk Cut. It's a picture of the name. Nothing more or less.'

'Suppose they'd used a picture of a roll of silk cut in half - would that do just as well?'

'I suppose so. Yes, why not?'

'Because it would look like a penis cut in half, that's why.'

He forced a laugh to cover his embarrassment. 'Why can't you people take things at their face value?'

'What people are you referring to?'

'Highbrows. Intellectuals. You're always trying to find hidden meanings in things. Why? A cigarette is a cigarette. A piece of silk is a piece of silk. Why not leave it at that?'

'When they're represented they acquire additional meanings,' said Robyn. 'Signs are never innocent. Semiotics teaches us that.'

'Semi-what?'

'Semiotics. The study of signs.'

'It teaches us to have dirty minds, if you ask me.'

'Why do you think the wretched cigarettes were called Silk Cut in the first place?'

'I dunno. It's just a name, as good as any other.'

'Cut' has something to do with the tobacco, doesn't it? The way the tobacco leaf is cut. Like "Player's Navy Cut" - my uncle Walter used to smoke them.'

'Well, what if it does?' Vic said warily.

'But silk has nothing to do with tobacco. It's a metaphor, a metaphor that means something like, "smooth as silk". Somebody in an advertising agency dreamt up the name "Silk Cut" to suggest a cigarette that wouldn't give you a sore throat or a hacking cough or lung cancer. But after a while the public got used to the name, the word "Silk" ceased to signify, so they decided to have an advertising campaign to give the brand a high profile again. Some bright spark in the agency came up with the idea of rippling silk with a cut in it. The original metaphor is now represented literally.'

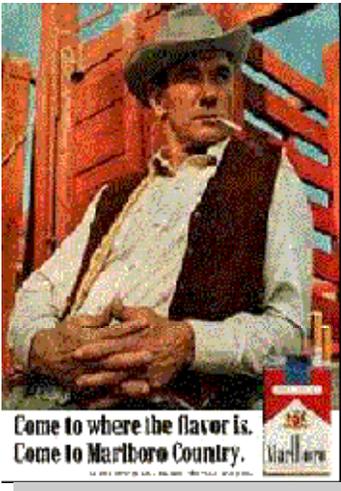
Whether they consciously intended or not doesn't really matter. It's a good example of the perpetual sliding of the signified under a signifier, actually.'

Wilcox chewed on this for a while, then said, 'Why do women smoke them, then, eh?' his triumphant expression showed that he thought this was a knock-down argument. 'If smoking Silk Cut is a form of aggravated rape, as you try to make out, how come women smoke 'em too?'

'Many women are masochistic by temperament,' said Robyn. 'They've learnt what's expected of them in a patriarchal society.'

'Ha!' Wilcox exclaimed, tossing back his head. 'I might have known you'd have some daft answer.'

'I don't know why you're so worked up,' Said Robyn. 'It's not as if you smoke Silk Cut yourself.'



'No, I smoke Marlboros. Funnily enough, I smoke them because I like the taste.'

'They're the ones that have the lone cowboy ads, aren't they?'

'I suppose that makes me a repressed homosexual, does it?'

'No, it's a very straightforward metonymic message.'

'Metawhat?'

'Metonymic. One of the fundamental tools of semiotics is the distinction between metaphor and metonymy. D'you want me to explain it to you?'

'It'll pass the time,' he said.

'Metaphor is a figure of speech based on similarity, whereas metonymy is based on contiguity. In metaphor you substitute something like the thing you mean for the thing itself, whereas in metonymy you substitute some attribute or cause or effect of the thing for the thing itself'.

'I don't understand a word you're saying.'

'Well, take one of your moulds. The bottom bit is called the drag because it's dragged across the floor and the top bit is called the cope because it covers the bottom bit.'

'I told you that.'

'Yes, I know. What you didn't tell me was that "drag" is a metonymy and "cope" is a metaphor.'

Vic grunted. 'What difference does it make?'

'It's just a question of understanding how language works. I thought you were interested in how

things work.'

'I don't see what it's got to do with cigarettes.'

'In the case of the Silk Cut poster, the picture signifies the female body metaphorically: the slit in the silk is like a vagina -'

Vic flinched at the word. 'So you say.'

'All holes, hollow places, fissures and folds represent the female genitals.'

'Prove it.'

'Freud proved it, by his successful analysis of dreams,' said Robyn. 'But the Marlboro ads don't use any metaphors. That's probably why you smoke them, actually.'

'What d'you mean?' he said suspiciously.

'You don't have any sympathy with the metaphorical way of looking at things. A cigarette is a cigarette as far as you are concerned.'

'Right.'

'The Marlboro ad doesn't disturb that naive faith in the stability of the signified. It establishes a metonymic connection - completely spurious of course, but realistically plausible - between smoking that particular brand and the healthy, heroic, outdoor life of the cowboy. Buy the cigarette and you buy the lifestyle, or the fantasy of living it.'

'Rubbish!' said Wilcox. 'I hate the country and the open air. I'm scared to go into a field with a cow in it.'

'Well then, maybe it's the solitariness of the cowboy in the ads that appeals to you. Self-reliant, independent, very macho.'

'I've never heard such a lot of balls in all my life,' said Vic Wilcox, which was strong language coming from him.

'Balls - now that's an interesting expression...' Robyn mused.

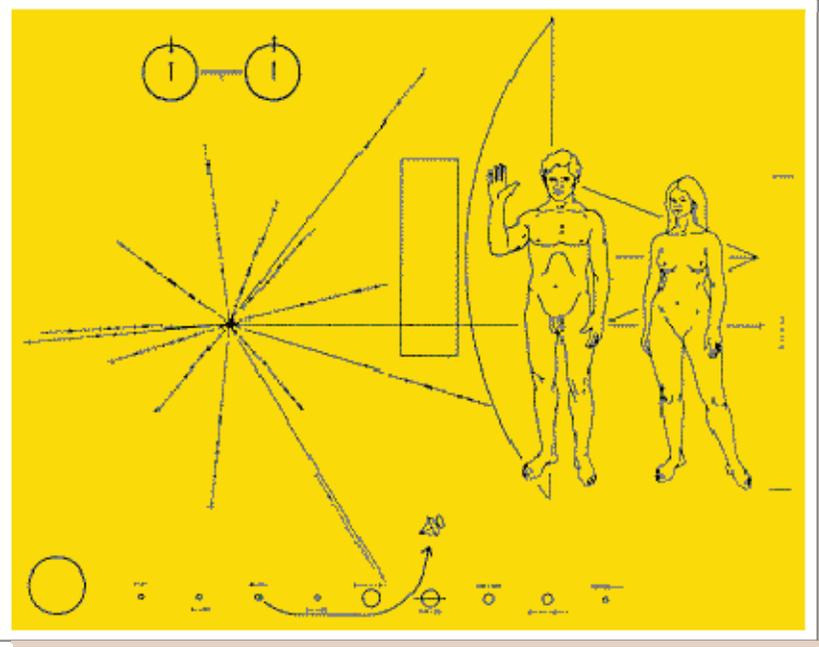
'Oh no!' he groaned.

'When you say a man "has balls", approvingly, it's a metonymy, whereas if you say something is a "lot of balls", or "a balls-up", it's a sort of metaphor. The metonymy attributes value to the testicles whereas the metaphor uses them to degrade something else.'

'I can't take any more of this,' said Vic. 'D'you mind if I smoke? Just a plain, ordinary cigarette?'

Codes

In 1972 NASA sent into deep space an interstellar probe called Pioneer 10. It bore a golden plaque.



The art historian Ernst Gombrich offers an insightful commentary on this:

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration has equipped a deep-space probe with a pictorial message 'on the off-chance that somewhere on the way it is intercepted by intelligent scientifically educated beings.' It is unlikely that their effort was meant to be taken quite seriously, but what if we try? These beings would first of all have to be equipped with 'receivers' among their sense organs that respond to the same band of electromagnetic waves as our eyes do. Even in that unlikely case they could not possibly get the message. Reading an image, like the reception of any other message, is dependent on prior knowledge of possibilities; we can only recognize what we know. Even the sight of the awkward naked figures in the illustration cannot be separated in our mind from our knowledge. We know that feet are for standing and eyes are for looking and we project this knowledge onto these configurations, which would look 'like nothing on earth' without this prior information. It is this information alone that enables us to separate the code from the message; we see which of the lines are intended as contours and which are intended as conventional modelling. Our 'scientifically educated' fellow creatures in space might be forgiven if they saw the figures as

wire constructs with loose bits and pieces hovering weightlessly in between. Even if they deciphered this aspect of the code, what would they make of the woman's right arm that tapers off like a flamingo's neck and beak? The creatures are 'drawn to scale against the outline of the spacecraft,' but if the recipients are supposed to understand foreshortening, they might also expect to see perspective and conceive the craft as being further back, which would make the scale of the manikins minute. As for the fact that 'the man has his right hand raised in greeting' (the female of the species presumably being less outgoing), not even an earthly Chinese or Indian would be able to correctly interpret this gesture from his own repertory.

The representation of humans is accompanied by a chart: a pattern of lines beside the figures standing for the 14 pulsars of the Milky Way, the whole being designed to locate the sun of our universe. A second drawing (how are they to know it is not part of the same chart?) 'shows the earth and the other planets in relation to the sun and the path of Pioneer from earth and swinging past Jupiter.' The trajectory, it will be noticed, is endowed with a directional arrowhead; it seems to have escaped the designers that this is a conventional symbol unknown to a race that never had the equivalent of bows and arrows. ([Gombrich 1974, 255-8](#); [Gombrich 1982, 150-151](#)).

Gombrich's commentary on this attempt at communication with alien beings highlights the importance of what semioticians call *codes*. The concept of the 'code' is fundamental in semiotics. Whilst Saussure dealt only with the overall code of language, he did of course stress that signs are not meaningful in isolation, but only when they are interpreted in relation to each other. It was another linguistic structuralist, Roman Jakobson, who emphasized that the production and interpretation of texts depends upon the existence of codes or conventions for communication ([Jakobson 1971](#)). Since the meaning of a sign depends on the code within which it is situated, codes provide a framework within which signs make sense. Indeed, we cannot grant something the status of a sign if it does not function within a code. Furthermore, if the relationship between a signifier and its signified is relatively arbitrary, then it is clear that interpreting the conventional meaning of signs requires familiarity with appropriate sets of conventions. Reading a text involves relating it to relevant 'codes'. Even an indexical and iconic sign such as a photograph involves a translation from three dimensions into two, and anthropologists have often reported the initial difficulties experienced by people in primal tribes in making sense of photographs and films ([Deregowski 1980](#)), whilst historians note that even in recent times the first instant snapshots confounded Western viewers because they were not accustomed to arrested images of transient movements and needed to go through a process of cultural habituation or training ([Gombrich 1982, 100, 273](#)). As Elizabeth Chaplin puts it, 'photography introduced a new way of seeing which had to be learned before it was rendered invisible' ([Chaplin 1994, 179](#)). What human beings see does not resemble a sequence of rectangular frames, and camerawork and editing conventions are not direct replications of the way in which we see the everyday world. When we look at things around us in everyday life we gain a sense of depth from our binocular vision, by rotating our head or by moving in relation to what we are looking at. To get a clearer view we can adjust the focus of our eyes. But for making sense of depth when we look at a photograph none of this helps. We have to decode the cues. Semioticians argue that, although exposure over time leads 'visual language' to seem 'natural', we need to learn how to 'read' even visual and audio-visual texts (though see [Messaris 1982](#) and [1994](#) for a critique of this stance). Any Westerners who feel somehow superior to those primal tribesfolk who experience initial difficulties with photography and film should consider what sense they themselves might make of unfamiliar artefacts - such as Oriental

lithographs or algebraic equations. The conventions of such forms need to be learned before we can make sense of them.

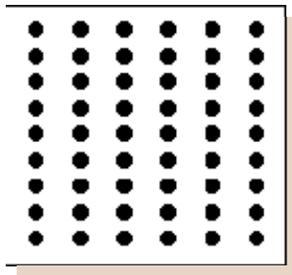
Some theorists argue that even our perception of the everyday world around us involves codes. Fredric Jameson declares that 'all perceptual systems are already languages in their own right' ([Jameson 1972, 152](#)). As Derrida would put it, perception is always already representation. 'Perception depends on coding the world into iconic signs that can re-present it within our mind. The force of the apparent identity is enormous, however. We think that it is the world itself we see in our "mind's eye", rather than a coded picture of it' ([Nichols 1981, 11-12](#)). According to the *Gestalt psychologists* - notably Max Wertheimer (1880-1943), Wolfgang Köhler (1887-1967) and Kurt Koffka (1886-1941) - there are certain universal features in human visual perception which in semiotic terms can be seen as constituting a perceptual code. We owe the concept of 'figure' and 'ground' in perception to this group of psychologists. Confronted by a visual image, we seem to need to separate a dominant shape (a 'figure' with a definite contour) from what our current concerns relegate to 'background' (or 'ground'). An illustration of this is the famous ambiguous figure devised by the Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin.



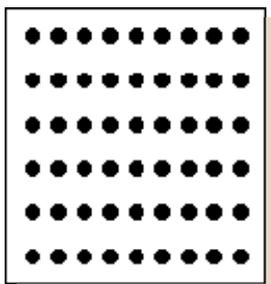
Images such as this are ambiguous concerning figure and ground. Is the figure a white vase (or goblet, or bird-bath) on a black background or silhouetted profiles on a white background? Perceptual set operates in such cases and we tend to favour one interpretation over the other (though altering the amount of black or white which is visible can create a bias towards one or the other). When we have identified a figure, the contours seem to belong to it, and it appears to be in front of the ground.

In addition to introducing the terms 'figure' and 'ground', the Gestalt psychologists outlined what seemed to be several fundamental and universal principles (sometimes even called 'laws') of perceptual organization. The main ones are as follows (some of the terms vary a little): proximity, similarity, good continuation, closure, smallness, surroundedness, symmetry and prägnanz.

The principle of *proximity* can be demonstrated thus:



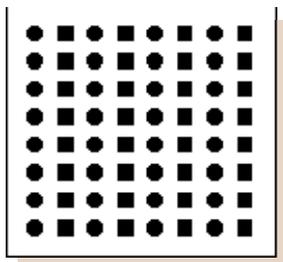
What you are likely to notice fairly quickly is that this is not just a square pattern of dots but rather is a series of *columns* of dots. The principle of proximity is that *features which are close together are associated*. Below is another example. Here we are likely to group the dots together in *rows*.



The principle also applies in the illustration below. We are more likely to associate the lines which are close together than those which are further apart. In this example we tend to see three pairs of lines which are fairly close together (and a lonely line on the far right) rather than three pairs of lines which are further apart (and a lonely line on the far left).

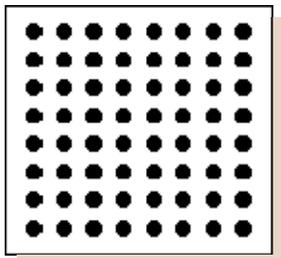


The significance of this principle on its own is likely to seem unclear initially; it is in their interaction that the principles become more apparent. So we will turn to a second major principle of perceptual organization - that of *similarity*. Look at the example below.

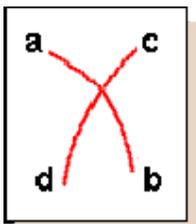


Here the little circles and squares are evenly spaced both horizontally and vertically so proximity does not come into play. However, we do tend to see alternating columns of circles and squares. This, the

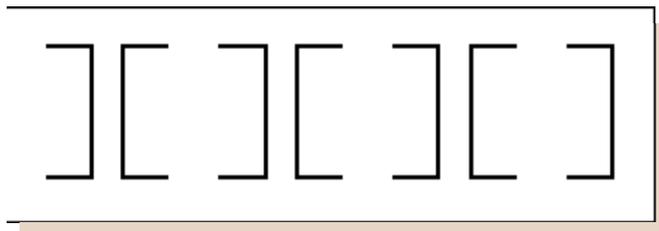
Gestalt psychologists would argue, is because of the principle of similarity - *features which look similar are associated*. Without the two different recurrent features we would see either rows or columns or both...



A third principle of perceptual organization is that of *good continuity*. This principle is that *contours based on smooth continuity are preferred to abrupt changes of direction*. Here, for instance, we are more likely to identify lines a-b and c-d crossing than to identify a-d and c-b or a-c and d-b as lines.



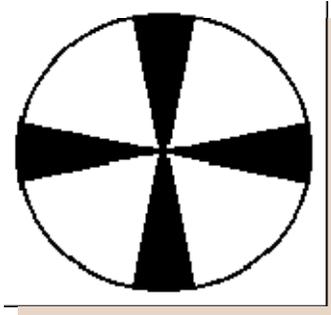
Closure is a fourth principle of perceptual organization: *interpretations which produce 'closed' rather than 'open' figures are favoured*.



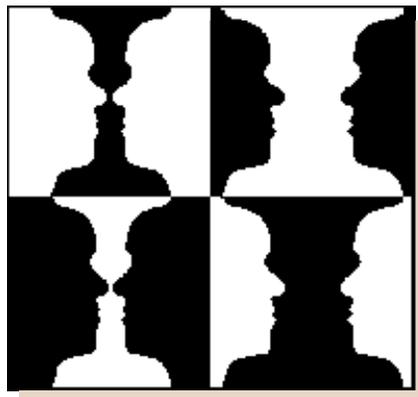
Here we tend to see three broken rectangles (and a lonely shape on the far left) rather than three 'girder' profiles (and a lonely shape on the right). In this case the principle of closure cuts across the principle of proximity, since if we remove the bracket shapes, we return to an image used earlier to illustrate proximity...



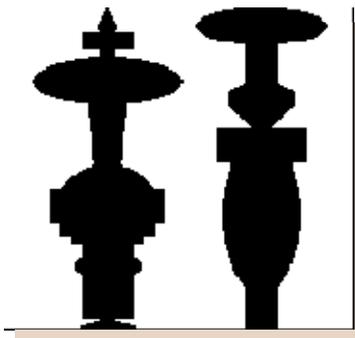
A fifth principle of perceptual organization is that of *smallness*. *Smaller areas tend to be seen as figures against a larger background*. In the figure below we are more likely to see a black cross rather than a white cross within the circle because of this principle.



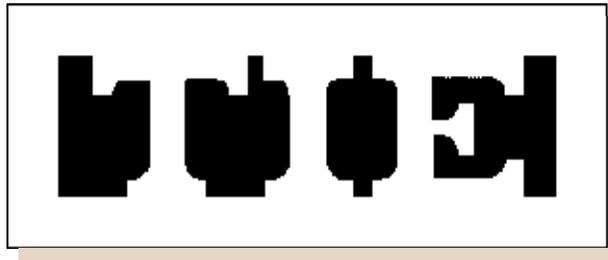
As an illustration of this Gestalt principle, it has been argued that it is easier to see Rubin's vase when the area it occupies is smaller ([Coren et al. 1994, 377](#)). The lower portion of the illustration below offers negative image versions in case this may play a part. To avoid implicating the *surroundedness* principle I have removed the conventional broad borders from the four versions. The Gestalt principle of smallness would suggest that it should be easier to see the vase rather than the faces in the two versions on the left below.



The principle of *symmetry* is that *symmetrical areas tend to be seen as figures against asymmetrical backgrounds*.



Then there is the principle of *surroundedness*, according to which *areas which can be seen as surrounded by others tend to be perceived as figures*.



Now we're in this frame of mind, interpreting the image shown above should not be too difficult. What tends to confuse observers initially is that they assume that the white area is the ground rather than the figure. If you couldn't before, you should now be able to discern the word 'TIE'.

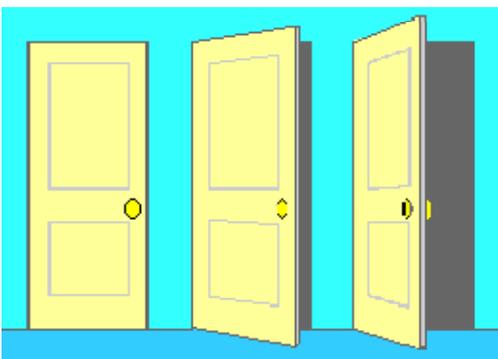
All of these principles of perceptual organization serve the overarching principle of *pragnanz*, which is that *the simplest and most stable interpretations are favoured*.

What the Gestalt principles of perceptual organization suggest is that we may be predisposed towards interpreting ambiguous images in one way rather than another by universal principles. We may accept such a proposition at the same time as accepting that such predispositions may also be generated by other factors. Similarly, we may accept the Gestalt principles whilst at the same time regarding other aspects of perception as being *learned* and culturally variable rather than innate. The Gestalt principles can be seen as reinforcing the notion that the world is not simply and objectively 'out there' but is constructed in the process of perception. As Bill Nichols comments, 'a useful habit formed by our brains must not be mistaken for an essential attribute of reality. Just as we must learn to read an image, we must learn to read the physical world. Once we have developed this skill (which we do very early in life), it is very easy to mistake it for an automatic or unlearned process, just as we may mistake our particular way of reading, or seeing, for a natural, ahistorical and noncultural given' ([Nichols 1981, 12](#)).

We are rarely aware of our own habitual ways of seeing the world. It takes deliberate effort to become more aware of everyday visual perception as a code. Its habitual application obscures the traces of its intervention. However, a simple experiment allows us to 'bracket' visual perception at least briefly. For this to be possible, you need to sit facing the same direction without moving your body for a few minutes:

Gaze blankly at the space in front of you. Avoid 'fixing' the space into objects and spaces between objects; instead, try to see it as a continuum of impressions. If the necessary degree of purposelessness is achieved, the space will lose its familiar properties. Instead of receding in depth, it will seem to float dimensionless from the bottom to the top of the field of vision. A

rectangular book, instead of lying flat on a table, will be a trapezoidal patch of a certain colour and texture rising vertically in this flattened field. ([Nichols 1981, 12](#)).



This process of bracketing perception will be more familiar to those who draw or paint who are used to converting three

dimensions into two. For those who do not, this little experiment may be quite surprising. We are routinely anaesthetized to a psychological mechanism called 'perceptual constancy' which stabilizes the relative shifts in the apparent shapes and sizes of people and objects in the world around us as we change our visual viewpoints in relation to them. Without mechanisms such as categorization and perceptual constancy the world would be no more than what William James called a 'great blooming and buzzing confusion' ([James 1890, 488](#)). Perceptual constancy ensures that 'the variability of the everyday world becomes translated by reference to less variable codes. The environment becomes a text to be read like any other text' ([Nichols 1981, 26](#)):

Key differences between 'bracketed' perception and everyday perception may be summarized as follows ([Nichols 1981, 13, 20](#)):

Bracketed Perception

A bounded visual space, oval, approximately 180° laterally, 150° vertically

Clarity of focus at only one point with a gradient of increasing vagueness toward the margin (clarity of focus corresponds to the space whose light falls upon the fovea)

Parallel lines appear to converge: the lateral sides of a rectangular surface extending away from the viewer appear to converge

If the head is moved, the shapes of objects appear to be deformed

The visual space appears to lack depth

A world of patterns and sensation, of surfaces, edges and gradients

Normal Perception

Unbounded visual space

Clarity of focus throughout

Parallel lines extend without converging: the sides of a rectangular surface extending away from the viewer remain parallel

If the head is moved, shapes remain constant

Visual space is never wholly depthless

A world of familiar objects and meaning

The conventions of codes represent a social dimension in semiotics: a code is a set of practices familiar to users of the medium operating within a broad cultural framework. Indeed, as Stuart Hall puts it, 'there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code' ([Hall 1980, 131](#)). Society itself depends on the existence of such signifying systems.

Codes are not simply 'conventions' of communication but rather procedural *systems* of related conventions which operate in certain domains. Codes organize signs into meaningful systems which correlate signifiers and signifieds. Codes transcend single texts, linking them together in an interpretative framework. Stephen Heath notes that 'while every code is a system, not every system is a code' ([Heath 1981, 130](#)). He adds that 'a code is distinguished by its coherence, its homogeneity,

its systematicity, in the face of the heterogeneity of the message, articulated across several codes' ([ibid., p.129](#)).

Codes are interpretive frameworks which are used by both producers and interpreters of texts. In creating texts we select and combine signs in relation to the codes with which we are familiar 'in order to limit... the range of possible meanings they are likely to generate when read by others' ([Turner 1992, 17](#)). Codes help to simplify phenomena in order to make it easier to communicate experiences ([Gombrich 1982, 35](#)). In reading texts, we interpret signs with reference to what seem to be appropriate codes. Usually the appropriate codes are obvious, 'overdetermined' by all sorts of contextual cues. Signs within texts can be seen as embodying cues to the [codes](#) which are appropriate for interpreting them. The medium employed clearly influences the choice of codes. Pierre Guiraud notes that 'the frame of a painting or the cover of a book highlights the nature of the code; the title of a work of art refers to the code adopted much more often than to the content of the message' ([Guiraud 1975, 9](#)). In this sense we routinely 'judge a book by its cover'. We can typically identify a text as a poem simply by the way in which it is set out on the page. The use of what is sometimes called 'scholarly apparatus' (such as introductions, acknowledgements, section headings, tables, diagrams, notes, references, bibliographies, appendices and indexes) - is what makes academic texts immediately identifiable as such to readers. Such cueing is part of the *metalingual* function of signs. With familiar codes we are rarely conscious of our acts of interpretation, but occasionally a text requires us to work a little harder - for instance, by pinning down the most appropriate signified for a key signifier (as in jokes based on word play) - before we can identify the relevant codes for making sense of the text as a whole.

Even with adequate English vocabulary and grammar, think what sense an inter-planetary visitor to Earth might make of a notice such as 'Dogs must be carried on the escalator'. Does it mean that you *must* carry a dog if you go on the escalator? Is it forbidden to use it without one? Terry Eagleton comments:

To understand this notice I need to do a great deal more than simply read its words one after the other. I need to know, for example, that these words belong to what might be called a 'code of reference' - that the sign is not just a decorative piece of language there to entertain travellers, but is to be taken as referring to the behaviour of actual dogs and passengers on actual escalators. I must mobilize my general social knowledge to recognize that the sign has been placed there by the authorities, that these authorities have the power to penalize offenders, that I as a member of the public am being implicitly addressed, none of which is evident in the words themselves. I have to rely, in other words, upon certain social codes and contexts to understand the notice properly. But I also need to bring these into interaction with certain codes or conventions of reading - conventions which tell me that by 'the escalator' is meant *this* escalator and not one in Paraguay, that 'must be carried' means 'must be carried *now*', and so on. I must recognize that the 'genre' of the sign is such as to make it highly improbable that... [certain ambiguities are] actually intended [such as that you *must* carry a dog on the escalator]... I understand the notice, then, by interpreting it in terms of certain codes which seem appropriate ([Eagleton 1983, 78](#)).

Without realizing it, in understanding even the simplest texts we draw on a repertoire of textual and social codes. Literary texts tend to make greater demands. Eagleton argues that:

In applying a code to the text, we may find that it undergoes revision and transformation in the reading process; continuing to read with this same code, we discover that it now produces a 'different' text, which in turn modifies the code by which we are reading it, and so on. This dialectical process is in principle infinite; and if this is so then it undermines any assumption that once we have identified the proper codes for the text our task is finished. Literary texts are 'code-productive' and 'code-transgressive' as well as 'code-confirming'. ([Eagleton 1983, 125](#))

Semioticians seek to identify codes and the tacit rules and constraints which underlie the production and interpretation of meaning within each code. They have found it convenient to divide codes into groups. Different theorists favour different taxonomies, and whilst structuralists often follow the 'principle of parsimony' - seeking to find the smallest number of groups deemed necessary - 'necessity' is defined by *purposes*. No taxonomy is innocently 'neutral' and devoid of ideological assumptions. One might start from a fundamental divide between analogue and digital codes, from a division according to sensory channels, from a distinction between 'verbal' and 'non-verbal', and so on. Many semioticians take human language as their starting point. The primary and most pervasive code in any society is its dominant 'natural' language, within which (as with other codes) there are many 'sub-codes'. A fundamental sub-division of language into spoken and written forms - at least insofar as it relates to whether the text is detached from its maker at the point of reception - is often regarded as representing a broad division into different codes rather than merely sub-codes. One theorist's code is another's sub-code and the value of the distinction needs to be demonstrated. Referring to the codes of film-making, Stephen Heath argues that 'codes are not in competition with one another...; there is no choice between, say, lighting and montage. Choice is given between the various sub-codes of a code, they being in a relation of mutual exclusion' ([Heath 1981, 127](#)). Stylistic and personal codes (or *idiolects*) are often described as sub-codes (e.g. [Eco 1976, 263, 272](#)). The various kinds of codes overlap, and the semiotic analysis of any text or practice involves considering several codes and the relationships between them. A range of typologies of codes can be found in the literature of semiotics. I refer here only to those which are most widely mentioned in the context of media, communication and cultural studies (this particular tripartite framework is my own).

- **Social codes**

[In a broader sense all semiotic codes are 'social codes']

- *verbal language* (phonological, syntactical, lexical, prosodic and paralinguistic subcodes);
- *bodily codes* (bodily contact, proximity, physical orientation, appearance, facial expression, [gaze](#), head nods, gestures and posture);
- *commodity codes* (fashions, clothing, cars);
- *behavioural codes* (protocols, rituals, role-playing, games).

- **Textual codes**

[Representational codes]

- *scientific codes*, including mathematics;
- *aesthetic codes* within the various expressive arts (poetry, drama, painting, sculpture, music, etc.) - including classicism, romanticism, realism;
- *genre, rhetorical and stylistic codes*: narrative (plot, character, action, dialogue, setting, etc.), exposition, argument and so on;
- *mass media codes* including photographic, televisual, filmic, radio, newspaper and magazine codes, both technical and conventional (including format).

- **Interpretative codes**

[There is less agreement about these as semiotic codes]

- *perceptual codes*: e.g. of visual perception ([Hall 1980, 132](#); [Nichols 1981, 11ff](#); [Eco 1982](#)) (note that this code does not assume intentional communication);
- *ideological codes*: More broadly, these include codes for '[encoding](#)' and '[decoding](#)' texts - dominant (or 'hegemonic'), negotiated or oppositional ([Hall 1980](#); [Morley 1980](#)). More specifically, we may list the 'isms', such as individualism, liberalism, feminism, racism, materialism, capitalism, progressivism, conservatism, socialism, objectivism, consumerism and populism; (note, however, that *all* codes can be seen as ideological).

These three types of codes correspond broadly to [three key kinds of knowledge required by interpreters of a text](#), namely knowledge of:

1. the world (social knowledge);
2. the medium and the [genre](#) (textual knowledge);
3. the relationship between (1) and (2) ([modality judgements](#)).

The 'tightness' of semiotic codes themselves varies from the rule-bound closure of logical codes (such as computer codes) to the interpretative looseness of poetic codes. Pierre Guiraud notes that 'signification is more or less *codified*', and that some systems are so 'open' that they 'scarcely merit the designation "code" but are merely systems of "hermeneutic" interpretation' ([Guiraud 1975, 24](#)). Guiraud makes the distinction that a code is 'a system of explicit social conventions' whilst 'a hermeneutics' is 'a system of implicit, latent and purely contingent signs', adding that 'it is not that the latter are neither conventional nor social, but they are so in a looser, more obscure and often unconscious way' ([ibid., 41](#)). His claim that (formal) codes are 'explicit' seems untenable since few codes would be likely to be widely regarded as wholly explicit. He refers to two 'levels of signification', but it may be more productive to refer to a descriptive spectrum based on relative explicitness, with technical codes veering towards one pole and interpretative practices veering towards the other. At one end of the spectrum are what Guiraud refers to as 'explicit, socialized codes in which the meaning is a datum of the message as a result of a formal convention between participants' ([ibid., 43-4](#)). In such cases, he argues, 'the code of a message is explicitly given by the sender' ([ibid., 65](#)). At the other end of the spectrum are 'the individual and more or less implicit hermeneutics in which meaning is the result of an interpretation on the part of the receiver' ([ibid., 43-4](#)). Guiraud refers to interpretative practices as more 'poetic', being 'engendered by the receiver using a system or systems of implicit interpretation which, by virtue of usage, are *more or less* socialized and conventionalized' ([ibid., 41](#)). Later he adds that 'a hermeneutics is a grid supplied by the receiver; a philosophical, aesthetic, or cultural grid which he applies to the text' ([ibid., 65](#)). Whilst Guiraud's distinctions may be regarded as rather too clearcut, as 'ideal types' they may nevertheless be analytical useful.

When studying cultural practices, semioticians treat as signs any objects or actions which have meaning to members of the cultural group, seeking to identify the rules or conventions of the codes which underlie the production of meanings within that culture. Understanding such codes, their relationships and the contexts in which they are appropriate is part of what it means to be a member of a particular culture. Marcel Danesi has suggested that 'a culture can be defined as a kind of "macro-code", consisting of the numerous codes which a group of individuals habitually use to interpret reality' ([Danesi 1994a, 18](#); see also [Danesi 1999, 29](#), [Nichols 1981, 30-1](#) and [Sturrock 1986](#),

87). For the interested reader, texts on intercultural communication are a useful guide to cultural codes (e.g. [Samovar & Porter 1988](#); [Gudykunst & Kim 1992](#); [Scollon & Scollon 1995](#)).

Food is a fundamental example of the cultural variability of codes, as is highlighted in *The Raw and the Cooked* by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss ([Lévi-Strauss 1970](#)). Food is a clear manifestation of the interaction of nature and culture. It is 'natural' for all animals (including humans) to consume food, but the modes of consumption employed by human beings are a distinctive part of human culture. As Edmund Leach puts it, 'cooking is... universally a means by which Nature is transformed into Culture' ([Leach 1970, 34](#)). He adds that 'men do not *have* to cook their food, they do so for symbolic reasons to show that they are men and not beasts. So fire and cooking are basic symbols by which Culture is distinguished from Nature' ([ibid., 92](#)). Unlike other animals, human beings in different cultures follow social conventions which dictate what is edible or inedible, how food should be prepared and when certain foods may be eaten. In various cultures, the eating of certain foods is prohibited either for men, women or children. Thus food categories become mapped onto categories of social differentiation. Lévi-Strauss regards such mapping between categories as of primary importance.

Referring initially to 'totemism', Lévi-Strauss notes that the classification systems of a culture constitute a code which serves to signify social differences. He argues that such systems are like interpretative 'grids' and suggests that they are built upon 'differentiating features' which are detachable from a specific content. This makes them suitable as 'codes... for conveying messages which can be transposed into other codes, and for expressing messages received by means of different codes in terms of their own system'. Such codes, he argued, constitute 'a method for assimilating any kind of content' which 'guarantee the convertibility of ideas between different levels of social reality' ([Lévi-Strauss 1974, 75-6; see also 96-7](#)). Such codes are involved in 'mediation between nature and culture' ([ibid., 90-91](#)). They are a way of encoding differences within society by analogy with perceived differences in the natural world (somewhat as in Aesop's *Fables*). They transform what are perceived as natural categories into cultural categories and serve to naturalize cultural practices. 'The mythical system and the modes of representation it employs serve to establish homologies between natural and social conditions or, more accurately, it makes it possible to equate significant contrasts found in different planes: the geographical, meteorological, zoological, botanical, technical, economic, social, ritual, religious and philosophical' ([ibid., 93](#)). In the case of the Murngin of Arnhem Land in northern Australia, the mythical system enabled equivalences to be made as in the following table:

Pure, sacred	male	superior	fertilizing (rains)	bad season
Impure, profane	female	inferior	fertilized (land)	good season

As can be seen, such systems are not without contradictions, and Lévi-Strauss argued that the contradictions within such systems generate explanatory myths - such codes must 'make sense' ([Lévi-Strauss 1974, 228](#)). Whilst 'classificatory systems belong to the levels of language' ([ibid.](#)), a framework such as this 'is something more than a mere language. It does not just set up rules of compatibility and incompatibility between signs. It is the basis of an ethic which prescribes or prohibits modes of behaviour. Or at least this consequence seems to follow from the very common association of totemic modes of representation with eating prohibitions on the one hand and rules of exogamy on

the other' ([ibid., 97](#)). Although Lévi-Strauss's analytical approach remains formally synchronic, involving no study of the historical dimension, he does incorporate the possibility of change: oppositions are not fixed and structures are transformable. He notes that we need not regard such frameworks from a purely synchronic perspective. 'Starting from a binary opposition, which affords the simplest possible example of a system, this construction proceeds by the aggregation, at each of the two poles, of new terms, chosen because they stand in relations of opposition, correlation, or analogy to it'. In this way structures may undergo transformation ([ibid., 161](#)).

Lee Thayer argues that 'what we learn is not the world, but particular codes into which it has been structured so that we may "share" our experiences of it' ([Thayer 1982, 30](#); cf. [Lee 1960](#)). Constructivist theorists argue that linguistic codes play a key role in the construction and maintenance of social realities. The [Whorfian hypothesis or Sapir-Whorf theory](#) is named after the American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. In its most extreme version the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis can be described as relating two associated principles: *linguistic determinism* and *linguistic relativism*. Applying these two principles, the Whorfian thesis is that people who speak languages with very different phonological, grammatical and semantic distinctions perceive and think about the world quite differently, their worldviews being shaped or determined by their language. Writing in 1929, Sapir argued in a classic passage that:

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. ([Sapir 1958, 69](#)).

This position was extended by his student Whorf, who, writing in 1940 in another widely cited passage, declared that:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees ([Whorf 1956, 213-4](#); his emphasis).

The extreme determinist form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is rejected by most contemporary linguists. Critics note that we cannot make inferences about differences in worldview solely on the

basis of differences in linguistic structure. Whilst few linguists would accept the Whorfian hypothesis in its 'strong', extreme or deterministic form, many now accept a 'weak', more moderate, or limited Whorfianism, namely that the ways in which we see the world may be *influenced* by the kind of language we use.

Probably the most well-known example of the cultural diversity of verbal and conceptual categories is that Eskimos have dozens of words for 'snow' - an assertion which is frequently attributed to Benjamin Lee Whorf. Actually, Whorf seems never to have claimed that Eskimos had more than five words for snow ([Whorf 1956, 216](#)). However, a more recent study - not of the Inuit but of the Koyukon Indians of the subarctic forest - does list 16 terms for snow, representing these distinctions:

- snow;
- deep snow;
- falling snow;
- blowing snow;
- snow on the ground;
- granular snow beneath the surface;
- hard drifted snow;
- snow thawed previously and then frozen;
- earliest crusted snow in spring;
- thinly crusted snow;
- snow drifted over a steep bank, making it steeper;
- snow cornice on a mountain;
- heavy drifting snow;
- slushy snow on the ground;
- snow caught on tree branches;
- fluffy or powder snow ([Nelson 1983, 262-263](#)).

This is not the place to explore the controversial issue of the extent to which the way we perceive the world may be influenced by the categories which are embedded in the language available to us. Suffice it to say that words can be found in English (as in the admittedly wordy translations above) to refer to distinctions which we may not habitually make. Not surprisingly, cultural groups tend to have lots of words (and phrases) for differences that are physically or culturally important to them - English-speaking skiers also have many words for snow. Urban myths woven around the theme of 'Eskimos' having many words for snow may reflect a desire to romanticize 'exotic' cultures. This does not, however, rule out the possibility that the categories which we employ may not only reflect our view of the world but may also sometimes exercise subtle influences upon it.

Within a culture, social differentiation is 'over-determined' by a multitude of social codes. We communicate our social identities through the work we do, the way we talk, the clothes we wear, our hairstyles, our eating habits, our domestic environments and possessions, our use of leisure time, our modes of travelling and so on ([Fussell 1984](#)). Language use acts as one marker of social identity. In 1954, A S C Ross introduced a distinction between so-called 'U and Non-U' uses of the English language. He observed that members of the British upper class ('U') could be distinguished from other social classes ('Non-U') by their use of words such as those in the following table ([Crystal 1987, 39](#)). It is interesting to note that several of these refer to food and eating. Whilst times have changed, similar distinctions still exist in British society.

U	Non-U
luncheon	dinner
table-napkin	serviette
vegetables	greens
jam	preserve
pudding	sweet
sick	ill
lavatory-paper	toilet-paper
looking-glass	mirror
writing-paper	note-paper
wireless	radio

A controversial distinction regarding British linguistic usage was introduced in the 1960s by the sociologist Basil Bernstein between so-called 'restricted code' and 'elaborated code' ([Bernstein 1971](#)). Restricted code was used in informal situations and was characterized by a reliance on situational context, a lack of stylistic variety, an emphasis on the speaker's membership of the group, simple syntax and the frequent use of gestures and tag questions (such as 'Isn't it?'). Elaborated code was used in formal situations and was characterized by less dependence on context, wide stylistic range (including the passive voice), more adjectives, relatively complex syntax and the use of the pronoun 'I'. Bernstein's argument was that middle-class children had access to both of these codes whilst working-class children had access only to restricted codes. Such clear-cut distinctions and correlations with social class are now widely challenged by linguists ([Crystal 1987, 40](#)). However, we still routinely use such linguistic cues as a basis for making inferences about people's social backgrounds.

Linguistic codes serve as indicators not only of social class but even of sexual orientation, as in the case of 'Polari', a set of 'camp' terms and expressions which used to be employed by gay men in British theatrical circles. Polari was made better known in the late 1960s by the characters 'Julian and Sandy' in the BBC radio programme, *Around the Horne*.

Polari	Standard English	Polari	Standard English
bijou	small	nanti	no, nothing, not
bold	outrageous, flamboyant	omi	man
bona	good	omi-palone	gay man

butch	masculine	palone	girl, young woman
drag	clothes, to dress	polari	speak, chat, speech, language
eek	face	riah	hair
fantabulosa	excellent	trade	casual sex
lally	leg	troll	go, walk, wander
latty	house, home, accommodation	varda	see, look, a look

Social differentiation is observable not only from linguistic codes, but from a host of non-verbal codes. A survey of non-verbal codes is not manageable here, and the interested reader should consult some of the classic texts and specialist guides to the literature (e.g. [Hall 1959](#); [Hall 1966](#); [Argyle 1969](#); [Birdwhistell 1971](#); [Argyle 1983](#); [Argyle 1988](#)). In the context of the present text a few examples must suffice to illustrate the importance of non-verbal codes.

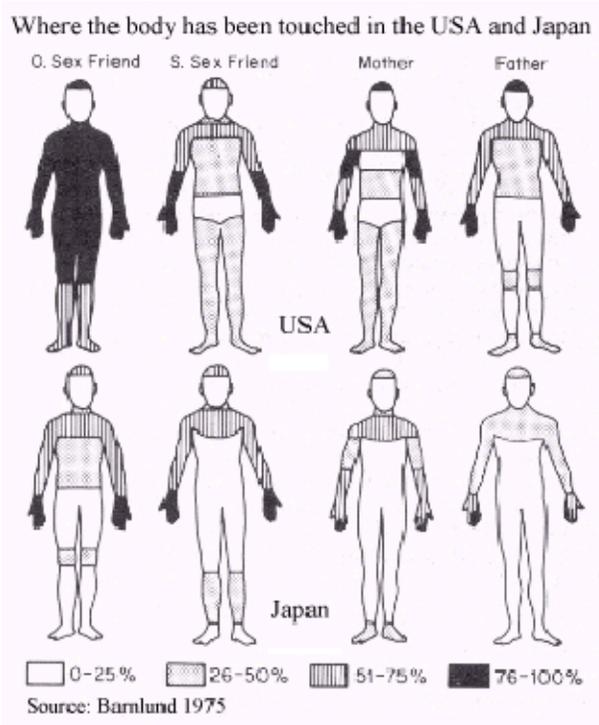
Social conventions for 'appropriate' dress are explicitly referred to as 'dress codes'. In some institutions, such as in many business organizations and schools, a formal dress code is made explicit as a set of rules (a practice which sometimes leads to subversive challenges). Particular formal occasions - such as weddings, funerals, banquets and so on - involve strong expectations concerning 'appropriate' dress. In other contexts, the wearer has greater choice of what to wear, and their clothes seem to 'say more about them' than about an occasion at which they are present or the institution for which they work. The way that we dress can serve as a marker of social background and subcultural allegiances. This is particularly apparent in youth subcultures. For instance, in Britain in the 1950s 'Teddy boys' or 'Teds' wore drape jackets with moleskin or satin collars, drainpipe trousers, crêpe-soled suede shoes and bootlace ties; the hairstyle was a greased 'D-A', often with sideburns and a quiff. Subsequent British youth subcultures such as mods and rockers, skinheads and hippies, punks and goths have also had distinctive clothes, hairstyles and musical tastes. Two classic studies of postwar British youth subcultures are Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson's *Resistance through Rituals* and Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* ([Hall & Jefferson 1976](#); [Hebdige 1979](#)). Marcel Danesi has offered a more recent semiotic account of the social codes of youth subcultures in Canada ([Danesi 1994b](#)).

Non-verbal codes which regulate a 'sensory regime' are of particular interest. Within particular cultural contexts there are, for instance, largely inexplicit 'codes of looking' which regulate how people may look at other people (including taboos on certain kinds of looking). Such codes tend to retreat to transparency when the cultural context is one's own. 'Children are instructed to "look at me", not to stare at strangers, and not to look at certain parts of the body... People have to look in order to be polite, but not to look at the wrong people or in the wrong place, e.g. at deformed people' ([Argyle 1988, 158](#)). In Luo in Kenya one should not look at one's mother-in-law; in Nigeria one should not look at a high-status person; amongst some South American Indians during conversation one should not look at the other person; in Japan one should look at the neck, not the face; and so on ([Argyle 1983, 95](#)).

The duration of the gaze is also culturally variable: in 'contact cultures' such as those of the Arabs, Latin Americans and southern Europeans, people look more than the British or white Americans, while black Americans look less (*ibid.*, 158). In contact cultures too little gaze is seen as insincere, dishonest or impolite whilst in non-contact cultures too much gaze ('staring') is seen as threatening, disrespectful and insulting ([Argyle 1988, 165](#); [Argyle 1983, 95](#)). Within the bounds of the cultural conventions, people who avoid one's gaze may be seen as nervous, tense, evasive and lacking in confidence whilst people who look a lot may tend to be seen as friendly and self-confident ([Argyle 1983, 93](#)). Such codes may sometimes be deliberately violated. In the USA in the 1960s, bigoted white Americans employed a sustained 'hate stare' directed against blacks which was designed to depersonalize the victims ([Goffman 1969](#)).

Codes of looking are particularly important in relation to gender differentiation. One woman reported to a male friend: 'One of the things I really envy about men is the right to look'. She pointed out that in public places, 'men could look freely at women, but women could only glance back surreptitiously' ([Dyer 1992, 103](#)). [Brian Pranger \(1990\)](#) reports on his investigation of 'the gay gaze':

Gay men are able to subtly communicate their shared worldview by a special gaze that seems to be unique to them... Most gay men develop a canny ability to instantly discern from the returned look of another man whether or not he is gay. The gay gaze is not only lingering, but also a visual probing... Almost everyone I interviewed said that they could tell who was gay by the presence or absence of this look. (in [Higgins 1993, 235-6](#))



Just as with codes of looking, there are 'codes of touching' which vary from culture to culture. A study by Barnlund in 1975 depicted the various parts of the body which informants in the USA and Japan reported had been touched by opposite-sex friends, same-sex friends, their mother and their father ([Barnlund 1975](#), cited in [Argyle 1988, 217-18](#)). The resulting body-maps show major differences in cultural norms in this regard, with body areas available for touch being far more restricted in Japan than in the United States. An earlier study of American students showed differences in the patterns for males and females in the amount of touching of different areas of the body by the various others ([Jourard 1966](#), cited in [Argyle 1983, 37](#)). The students reported that they had been touched most by their mothers and by friends of the opposite sex; their fathers seldom touched more than their hands. Social codes also govern the frequency of physical contact. Jourard also reported the following contacts per hour in different cities: San Juan (Puerto Rico) 180; Paris 110; Gainesville (Florida) 2; London 0

(cited in [Argyle 1969, 93](#)). We will allude to the related work of Edward T Hall on the topic of *proximity* when we discuss '[modes of address](#)'.

Codes are variable not only between different cultures and social groups but also historically. It would be interesting to know, for instance, whether the frequency of touching in various cities around the

world which was reported by Jourard in the 1960s is noticeably different now. Saussure, of course, focused on synchronic analysis and saw the development of a language as a series of synchronic states. Similarly, Roman Jakobson and his colleague Yuri Tynyanov saw the history of literature as a hierarchical system in which at any point certain forms and genres were dominant and others were subordinate. When dominant forms became stale, sub-genres took over their functions. Historical change was a matter of shifting relations within the system ([Eagleton 1983, 111](#)). Unlike Saussure, the French historian of ideas Michel Foucault focused not on the 'language system' as a homogeneous whole but on specific 'discourses' and 'discursive practices'. Each historical period has its own *épistème* - a set of relations uniting the various discursive practices which shape its epistemologies. For Foucault, specific discourses such as those of science, law, government and medicine are systems of representational codes for constructing and maintaining particular forms of reality within the ontological domain (or topic) defined as relevant to their concerns. A particular 'discursive formation' is dominant in specific historical and socio-cultural contexts and maintains its own 'regime of truth'. A range of discursive positions is available at any given time, reflecting many determinants (economic, political, sexual etc.). Foucault focused on *power relations*, noting that within such contexts, the discourses and signifiers of some interpretative communities are privileged and *dominant* whilst others are *marginalized*. The non-employment of dominant codes is a mark of those who are 'outsiders' - a category which includes both foreigners from other cultures and those who are marginalized within a culture. On the other hand people who feel marginalized are often very well-attuned to analogue nuances within dominant social codes - if you want to codify stereotypical straight male behaviour try asking a gay man to describe it.

We learn to read the world in terms of the codes and conventions which are dominant within the specific socio-cultural contexts and roles within which we are socialized. In the process of adopting a 'way of seeing' (to use John Berger's phrase), we also adopt an 'identity'. The most important constancy in our understanding of reality is our sense of who we are as an individual. Our sense of self as a constancy is a social construction which is 'over-determined' by a host of interacting codes within our culture ([Berger & Luckmann 1967](#); [Burr 1995](#)). 'Roles, conventions, attitudes, language - to varying degrees these are internalized in order to be repeated, and through the constancies of repetition a consistent locus gradually emerges: the self. Although never fully determined by these internalizations, the self would be entirely undetermined without them' ([Nichols 1981, 30](#)). When we first encounter the notion that the self is a social construction we are likely to find it counter-intuitive. We usually take for granted our status as autonomous individuals with unique 'personalities'. We will return later to the notion of our 'positioning' as 'subjects'. For the moment, we will note simply that 'society depends upon the fact that its members grant its founding fictions, myths or codes a taken-for-granted status' ([Nichols 1981, 30](#)). Culturally-variable perceptual codes are typically inexplicit, and we are not normally conscious of the roles which they play. To users of the dominant, most widespread codes, meanings generated within such codes tend to appear 'obvious' and 'natural'. Stuart Hall comments:

Certain codes may... be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed - the effect of an articulation between sign and referent - but to be 'naturally' given. Simple visual signs appear to have achieved a 'near-universality' in this sense: though evidence remains that even apparently 'natural' visual codes are culture-specific. However, this does not mean that no codes have intervened; rather, that the codes have been profoundly *naturalised*. ([Hall 1980, 132](#))

Learning these codes involves adopting the values, assumptions and 'world-views' which are built into them without normally being aware of their intervention in the construction of reality. The existence of such codes in relation to the interpretation of texts is more obvious when we examine texts which have been produced within and for a different culture, such as advertisements produced indigenously in a different country from our own for the domestic market in that country. Interpreting such texts in the manner intended may require 'cultural competency' relevant to the specific cultural context of that text's production, even where the text is largely visual ([Scott 1994a](#); [Scott 1994b](#); [McQuarrie & Mick, 1999](#)).

John Sturrock argues that:

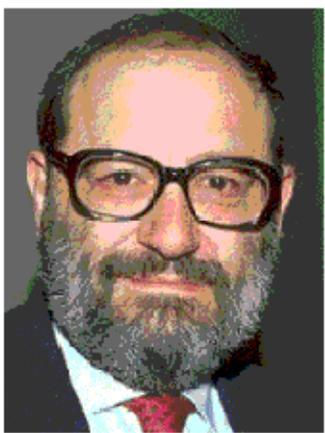
The fact that a sign *must* be conventional in order to qualify as a sign does not mean that everyone we use signs to has to be party to the convention in question. Just as we may use the signs of our native language to other natives who do not know these particular signs and so do not understand them, so we may elaborate conventions which hold between ourselves and only one other person or even with ourselves alone. 'Secret' languages are no different from language in general; they merely function as what are sometimes called 'restricted codes'... Only those already acquainted with the code can receive messages in it successfully. ([Sturrock 1986, 81, 87](#))

Understanding a sign involves applying the rules of an appropriate code which is familiar to the interpreter. This is a process which Peirce referred to as *abduction* (a form of inference along with deduction and induction) (see [Mick 1986, 199](#) and [Hervey 1982, 19-20](#)). On encountering a signifier we may hypothesise that it is an instance of a familiar rule, and then infer what it signifies from applying that rule ([Eco 1976, 131](#)). David Mick offers a useful example. Someone who is confronted by an advertisement showing a woman serving her family three nutritionally balanced meals per day can infer that this woman is a good mother by instantiating the culturally acquired rule that all women who do this are good mothers ([Mick 1986, 199](#)). As Mick notes, abduction is particularly powerful if the inference is made about someone or something about whom or which little more is known (such as a new neighbour or a fictional character in an advertisement).

The synchronic perspective of structuralist semioticians tends to give the impression that codes are static. But codes have origins and they do evolve, and studying their evolution is a legitimate semiotic endeavour. Guiraud argues that there is a gradual process of 'codification' whereby systems of implicit interpretation acquire the status of codes ([ibid., 41](#)). Codes are dynamic systems which change over time, and are thus historically as well as socio-culturally situated. Codification is a *process* whereby conventions are established. For instance, Metz shows how in Hollywood cinema the white hat became codified as the signifier of a 'good' cowboy; eventually this convention became over-used and was abandoned ([Metz 1974](#)). For useful surveys of changing conventions in cinema see [Carey 1974](#), [Carey 1982](#) and [Salt 1983](#). William Leiss and his colleagues offer an excellent history of the codes of magazine advertising ([Leiss et al. 1990, Chapter 9](#)).

In historical perspective, many of the codes of a new medium evolve from those of related existing media (for instance, many televisual techniques owe their origins to their use in film and photography). New conventions also develop to match the technical potential of the medium and the uses to which it is put. Some codes are unique to (or at least characteristic of) a specific medium or to closely-related media (e.g. 'fade to black' in film and television); others are shared by (or similar in)

several media (e.g. scene breaks); and some are drawn from cultural practices which are not tied to a medium (e.g. body language) ([Monaco 1981, 146ff](#)). Some are more specific to particular genres within a medium. Some are more broadly linked either to the domain of science ('logical codes', suppressing [connotation](#) and diversity of interpretation) or to that of the arts ('aesthetic codes', celebrating connotation and diversity of interpretation), though such differences are differences of degree rather than of kind.



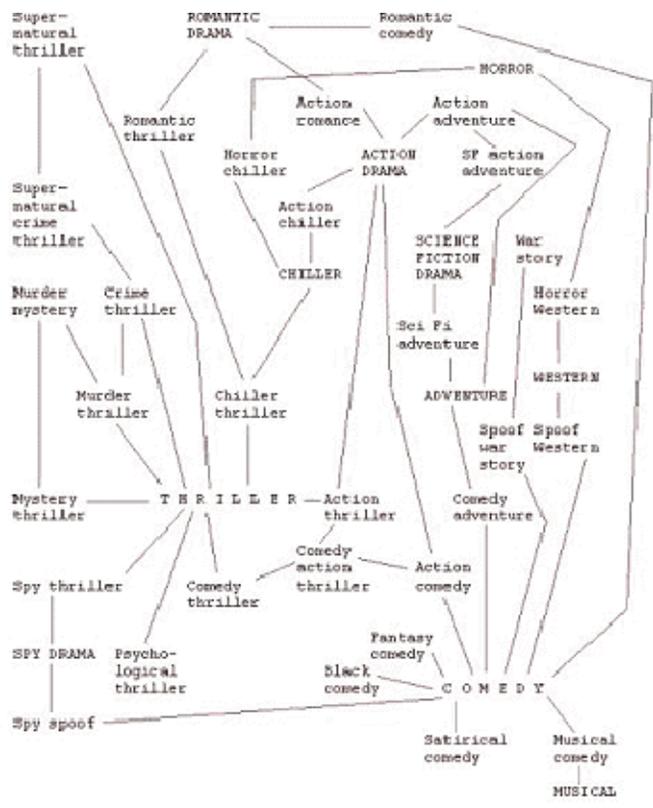
Umberto Eco

Every text is a system of signs organized according to codes and subcodes which reflect certain values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and practices. Textual codes do not *determine* the meanings of texts but dominant codes do tend to *constrain* them. Social conventions ensure that signs cannot mean whatever an individual wants them to mean. The use of codes helps to guide us towards what Stuart Hall calls 'a preferred reading' and away from what Umberto Eco calls 'aberrant decoding', though media texts do vary in [the extent to which they are open to interpretation \(Hall 1980, 134\)](#).

One of the most fundamental kinds of textual code relates to [genre](#). Traditional definitions of genres tend to be based on the notion that they constitute particular conventions of content (such as themes or settings) and/or form (including structure and style) which are shared by the texts which are regarded as belonging to them. This mode of defining a genre is

deeply problematic. For instance, genres overlap and texts often exhibit the conventions of more than one genre. It is seldom hard to find texts which are exceptions to any given definition of a particular genre. Furthermore, the structuralist concern with synchronic analysis ignores the way in which genres are involved in a constant process of change.

An overview of genre taxonomies in various media is beyond the scope of the current text, but it is appropriate here to allude to a few key cross-media genre distinctions. The organization of public libraries suggests that one of the most fundamental contemporary genre distinctions is between *fiction* and *non-fiction* - a categorization which highlights the importance of [modality judgements](#). Even such an apparently basic distinction is revealed to be far from straightforward as soon as one tries to apply it to the books on one's own shelves or to an evening's television viewing. Another binary distinction is based on the *kinds of language* used: *poetry* and *prose* - the 'norm' being the latter, as Molière's Monsieur Jourdain famously discovered: 'Good Heavens! For more than forty years I have been speaking prose without knowing it!'. Even here there are grey areas, with literary prose often being regarded as 'poetic'. This is related to the issue of how librarians, critics and academics decide what is 'literature' as opposed to mere 'fiction'. As with the typology of codes in general, no genre taxonomy can be ideologically neutral. Traditional rhetoric distinguishes between four kinds of discourse: *exposition*, *argument*, *description* and *narration* ([Brooks & Warren 1972, 44](#)). These four forms, which relate to *primary purposes*, are often referred to as different genres (e.g. [Fairclough 1995, 88](#)). However, texts frequently involve any combination of these forms and they are perhaps best thought of as 'modes'. More widely described as genres are the four 'modes of emplotment' which Hayden White adopted from Northrop Frye in his study of historiography: *romance*, *tragedy*, *comedy* and *satire* ([White 1973](#)). Useful as such interpretative frameworks can be, however, no taxonomy of textual genres adequately represents the diversity of texts.



Despite such theoretical problems, various interpretative communities (at particular periods in time) do operate on the basis of a negotiated (if somewhat loose and fluid) consensus concerning what they regard as the primary genres relevant to their purposes. Television listings magazines, for instance, invariably allocate genre labels to the films which they broadcast. The accompanying illustration shows the labels used by one such British magazine (*What's On TV*) over several months in 1993, together with the links with each other which are implied by the nomenclature. A more basic variation on the same theme is found in the labelled sections of video rental shops. Readers may care to check the genre classifications used for films in their own localities.

Whilst there is far more to a genre code than that which may seem to relate to specifically textual features it can still be useful to consider the distinctive properties attributed to a genre by its users. For instance, if we take the case of film, the textual features typically listed by theorists include:

- *narrative* - similar (sometimes formulaic) plots and structures, predictable situations, sequences, episodes, obstacles, conflicts and resolutions;
- *characterization* - similar types of characters (sometimes stereotypes), roles, personal qualities, motivations, goals, behaviour;
- basic *themes*, topics, subject matter (social, cultural, psychological, professional, political, sexual, moral) and values;
- *setting* - geographical and historical;
- *iconography* (echoing the narrative, characterization, themes and setting) - a familiar stock of images or motifs, the connotations of which have become fixed; primarily but not necessarily visual, including décor, costume and objects, certain 'typecast' performers (some of whom may have become 'icons'), familiar patterns of dialogue, characteristic music and sounds, and appropriate physical topography; and
- [filmic techniques](#) - stylistic or formal conventions of camerawork, lighting, sound-recording, use of colour, editing etc. (viewers are often less conscious of such conventions than of those relating to content).

Some film genres tend to be defined primarily by their *subject matter* (e.g. detective films), some by their *setting* (e.g. the Western) and others by their *narrative* form (e.g. the musical). Less easy to place in one of the traditional categories are *mood* and *tone* (which are key features of the *film noir*). In addition to *textual* features, different genres (in any medium) also involve different purposes, pleasures, audiences, modes of involvement, styles of interpretation and text-reader relationships. A particularly important feature which tends not to figure in traditional accounts and which is often assigned to *text-reader relationships* rather than to textual features in contemporary accounts is [mode](#)

[of address](#), which involves inbuilt assumptions about the audience, such as that the 'ideal' viewer is male (the usual categories here are class, age, gender and ethnicity). We will return to this important issue shortly.

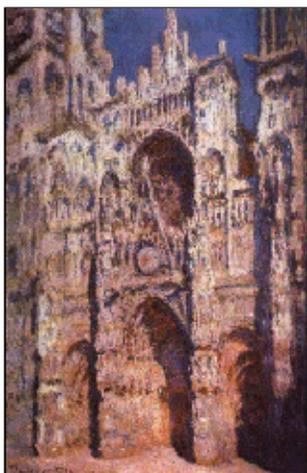
In *Writing Degree Zero*, Roland Barthes sought to demonstrate that the classical textual codes of French writing (from the mid-seventeenth century until the mid-nineteenth century) had been used to suggest that such codes were natural, neutral and transparent conduits for an innocent and objective reflection of reality (i.e. the operation of the codes was masked). Barthes argues that whilst generating the illusion of a 'zero-degree' of style, these codes served the purpose of fabricating reality in accord with the bourgeois view of the world and covertly propagating bourgeois values as self-evident ([Barthes 1953](#); [Hawkes 1977, 107-108](#)). In his essay 'Rhetoric of the Image' (1964), Barthes developed this line of argument in relation to the medium of photography arguing that because it appears to record rather than to transform or signify, it serves an ideological function. Photography 'seems to found in nature the signs of culture... masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning' ([Barthes 1977, 45-6](#)). Many theorists extend this notion to film and television. For instance, Gerard LeBlanc comments:

The true interest of the bourgeoisie is that the cinema should make up for what people do not have in life. The pseudo-satisfaction they find there may be sexual, political, emotional or metaphysical, there is something for all the different kinds of alienation engendered by capitalism. The audience tacitly delegate their power to change the world to the characters on the screen. The famous 'window' that the bourgeois cinema is supposed to open on the world is never anything other than a method of permitting the audience to live an imaginary life within a non-existent reality. (cited in [Rodowick 1994, 86](#))

Textual codes which are 'realistic' are nonetheless conventional. All representations are systems of signs: they signify rather than 'represent', and they do so with primary reference to codes rather than to 'reality'. From the Renaissance until the nineteenth century Western art was dominated by a mimetic or representational purpose which still prevails in popular culture. Such art denies its status as a signifying system, seeking to represent a world which is assumed to exist before, and independently of, the act of representation. Realism involves an instrumental view of the medium as a neutral means of representing reality. The signified is foregrounded at the expense of the signifier. Realist representational practices tend to mask the processes involved in producing texts, as if they were slices of life 'untouched by human hand'. As Catherine Belsey notes, 'realism is plausible not because it reflects the world, but because it is constructed out of what is (discursively) familiar' ([Belsey 1980, 47](#)). Ironically, the 'naturalness' of realist texts comes not from their 'reflection of reality'

but from their uses of codes which are derived from other texts. The familiarity of particular semiotic practices renders their mediation invisible. Our recognition of the familiar in realist texts repeatedly confirms the 'objectivity' of our habitual ways of seeing.

However, the codes of the various realisms are not always initially familiar. In the context of painting, the art historian Ernst Gombrich has illustrated (for instance, in relation to John Constable) how aesthetic codes which now seem 'almost photographic' to many viewers were regarded at the time of their emergence as strange and radical ([Gombrich 1977](#)). Eco adds that early viewers of Impressionist art could not recognize the subjects



Claude Monet (1894)
Rouen Cathedral: Full Sunlight
Louvre, Paris

represented and declared that real life was not like this ([Eco 1976, 254](#); [Gombrich 1982, 279](#)). Most people had not previously noticed coloured shadows in nature ([Gombrich 1982, 27, 30, 34](#)). In the cinema, 'the gestural codes and the bodily and facial expressions of actors in silent films belonged to conventions which connoted realism when they were made and watched' ([Bignell 1997, 193](#)), whereas now such codes stand out as 'unrealistic'. When the pioneering American film-maker D W Griffith initially proposed the use of close-ups, his producers warned him that the audience would be disconcerted since the rest of the actor was missing ([Rosenblum & Karen 1979, 37-8](#)). What count as 'realistic' modes of representation are both culturally and historically variable. To most contemporary western audiences the conventions of American cinema seem more 'realistic' than the conventions of modern Indian cinema, for instance, because the latter are so much less familiar. Even within a culture, over historical time particular codes become increasingly less familiar, and as we look back at texts produced centuries ago we are struck by the strangeness of their codes - their maintenance systems having long since been superseded. As Nelson Goodman put it: 'Realism is relative, determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time' ([Goodman 1968, 37](#)).

As noted earlier, Peirce referred to signs in (unedited) photographic media as being primarily *indexical* (rather than *iconic*) - meaning that the signifiers did not simply 'resemble' their signifieds but were mechanical recordings and reproductions of them (within the limitations of the medium). John Berger also argued in 1968 that photographs are 'automatic' 'records of things seen' and that 'photography has no language of its own' (cited in [Tagg 1988, 187](#)). In 'The Photographic Message' (1961), Roland Barthes famously declared that 'the photographic image... is a *message without a code*' ([Barthes 1977, 17](#)). Since this phrase is frequently misunderstood, it may be worth clarifying its context with reference to this essay together with an essay published three years later - 'The Rhetoric of the Image' ([ibid., 32-51](#)). Barthes was referring to the 'absolutely analogical, which is to say, *continuous*' character of the medium ([ibid., 20](#)). 'Is it possible', he asks, 'to conceive of an analogical code (as opposed to a digital one)?' ([ibid., 32](#)). The relation between the signifier and the thing signified is not arbitrary as in language ([ibid., 35](#)). He grants that photography involves both mechanical *reduction* (flattening, perspective, proportion and colour) and human *intervention* (choice of subject, framing, composition, optical point-of-view, distance, angle, lighting, focus, speed, exposure, printing and 'trick effects'). However, photography does not involve rule-governed *transformation* as codes can ([ibid., 17, 20-25, 36, 43, 44](#)). 'In the photograph - at least at the level of the literal message - the relationship of signifieds to signifiers is not one of "transformation" but of "recording"'. Alluding to the indexical nature of the medium, he notes that the image is 'captured mechanically' and that this reinforces the myth of its 'objectivity' ([ibid., 44](#)). Unlike a drawing or a painting, a photograph reproduces 'everything': it 'cannot intervene *within* the object (except by trick effects)' ([ibid., 43](#)). 'In order to move from the reality to the photograph it is in no way necessary to divide up this reality into units and to constitute these units as signs, substantially different from the object they communicate; there is no necessity to set up... a code, between the object and its image' ([ibid., 17](#)). In consequence, he noted, photographs cannot be reduced to words.

However, 'every sign supposes a code' and at a level higher than the 'literal' level of [denotation](#), a *connotative* code can be identified. He noted that at the 'level of production', 'the press photograph is an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional or ideological norms' and at the 'level of reception', the photograph 'is not not only perceived, received, it is *read*, connected by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs' ([ibid., 19](#)). Reading a photograph involved relating it to a 'rhetoric' ([ibid., 18, 19](#)). In addition to the

photographic techniques already noted, he refers for instance to the signifying functions of: postures, expressions and gestures; the associations evoked by depicted objects and settings; sequences of photographs, e.g. in magazines (which he refers to as 'syntax'); and relationships with accompanying text ([ibid., 21-5](#)). He added that 'thanks to the code of connotation the reading of the photograph is... always historical; it depends on the reader's "knowledge" just as though it were a matter of a real language, intelligible only if one has learned the signs' ([ibid., 28](#)).

Clearly, therefore, it would be a misinterpretation of Barthes' declaration that 'the photographic image... is a *message without a code*' to suggest that he meant that no codes are involved in producing or 'reading' photographs. His main point was that it did not (at least yet) seem possible to reduce the photographic image itself to elementary 'signifying units'. Far from suggesting that photographs are purely denotative, he declared that the 'purely "denotative" status of the photograph... has every chance of being mythical (these are the characteristics that common sense attributes to the photograph'. At the level of the analogue image itself, whilst the connotative code was implicit and could only be inferred, he was convinced that it was nonetheless 'active' ([ibid., 19](#)). Citing Bruner and Piaget, he notes the possibility that 'there is no perception without immediate categorization' ([ibid., 28](#)). Reading a photograph also depends closely on the reader's culture, knowledge of the world, and ethical and ideological stances ([ibid., 29](#)). Barthes adds that 'the viewer receives *at one and the same time* the perceptual message and the cultural message' ([ibid., 36](#)).

Barthes did not outline the *institutional* codes involved in photojournalism. Sympathetically pursuing Barthes' insights, the British sociologist Stuart Hall emphasizes the ideological character of news photographs:

News photos operate under a hidden sign marked 'this really happened, see for yourself'. Of course, the choice of *this* moment of an event as against that, of *this* person rather than that, of *this* angle rather than any other, indeed, the selection of this photographed incident to represent a whole complex chain of events and meanings is a highly ideological procedure. But by appearing literally to reproduce the event as it *really* happened news photos suppress their selective/interpretive/ideological function. They seek a warrant in that ever pre-given, neutral structure, which is beyond question, beyond interpretation: the 'real world'. At this level, news photos not only support the credibility of the newspaper as an accurate medium. They also guarantee and underwrite its *objectivity* (that is, they neutralize its ideological function) ([Hall 1981, 241-2](#)).

Most semioticians emphasize that photography involves visual codes, and that film and television involve both visual and aural codes. John Tagg argues that 'the camera is never neutral. The representations it produces are highly coded' ([Tagg 1988, 63-4](#); cf. 187). Cinematic and televisual codes include: genre; camerawork (shot size, focus, lens movement, camera movement, angle, lens choice, composition); editing (cuts and fades, cutting rate and rhythm); manipulation of time (compression, flashbacks, flashforwards, slow motion); lighting; colour; sound (soundtrack, music); graphics; and narrative style. Christian Metz added authorial style, and distinguished codes from sub-codes, where a sub-code was a particular choice from within a code (e.g. western within genre, or naturalistic or expressionist lighting subcodes within the lighting code). The syntagmatic dimension was a relation of combination between different codes and sub-codes; the paradigmatic dimension was that of the film-maker's choice of particular sub-codes within a code. Since, as Metz noted, 'a film

is not "cinema" from one end to another' (cited in [Nöth 1990, 468](#)), film and television involve many codes which are not specific to these media.

Whilst some photographic and filmic codes are relatively arbitrary, many of the codes employed in 'realistic' photographic images or films 'reproduce many of the perceptual cues used in encountering the physical world, or correlates of them' ([Nichols 1981, 35](#); see also [Messaris 1982](#) and [1994](#)). This is a key reason for their perceived 'realism'. The depiction of 'reality' even in iconic signs involves variable codes which have to be learned, yet which, with experience, come to be taken-for-granted as transparent and obvious. Eco argues that it is misleading to regard such signs as less 'conventional' than other kinds of signs ([Eco 1976, 190ff](#)): even photography and film involve conventional codes. Paul Messaris, however, stresses that the formal conventions of representational visual codes (including paintings and drawings) are not 'arbitrary' ([Messaris 1994](#)), and Ernst Gombrich offers a critique of what he sees as the 'extreme conventionalism' of Nelson Goodman's stance ([Gombrich 1982, 278-297](#)), stressing that 'the so-called conventions of the visual image [vary] according to the relative ease or difficulty with which they can be learned' ([Gombrich 1982, 283](#)) - a notion familiar from the Peircean ranking of signifier-signified relationships in terms of relative conventionality.



Semioticians often refer to 'reading' film or television - a notion which may seem strange since the meaning of filmic images appears not to need decoding at all. When we encounter a shot in which someone is looking offscreen we usually interpret the next shot as what they are looking at. Consider the following example

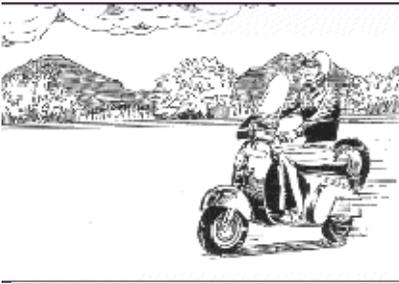
offered by Ralph Rosenblum, a major professional film editor. In an initial shot, 'a man awakens suddenly in the middle of the night, bolts up in bed, stares ahead intensely, and twitches his nose'. If we then cut to 'a room where two people are desperately fighting a billowing blaze, the viewers realize that through clairvoyance, a warning dream, or the smell of smoke, the man in bed has become aware of danger'. Alternatively, if we cut from the first shot to 'a distraught wife defending her decision to commit her husband to a mental institution, they will understand that the man in bed is her husband and that the dramatic tension will surround the couple'. If it's a Hitchcock movie 'the juxtaposition of the man and the wife will immediately raise questions in the viewers' minds about foul play on the part of the woman'. This form of editing may alert us not only to a link between the two consecutive shots but in some cases to a genre. If we cut to an image of clouds drifting before the full moon, we know that we can expect a 'wolf-man' adventure ([Rosenblum & Karen 1979, 2](#)).

Such interpretations are not 'self-evident': they are a feature of a filmic editing code. Having internalized such codes at a very young age we then cease to be conscious of their existence. Once we know the code, decoding it is almost automatic and the code retreats to invisibility. This particular convention is known as an *eyeline match* and it is part of the dominant editing code in film and television narrative which is referred to as 'the continuity system' or as 'invisible editing' ([Reisz & Millar 1972](#); [Bordwell et al. 1988, Chapter 16](#); [Bordwell & Thompson 1993, 261ff](#)). Whilst minor elements within the code have been modified over time, most of the main elements are still much the same now as when they were developed many decades ago. This code was originally developed in Hollywood feature films but most narrative films and television dramas now routinely employ it. Editing supports rather than dominates the narrative: the story and the behaviour of its characters are

the centre of attention. Whilst nowadays there may be cuts every few seconds, these are intended to be unobtrusive. The technique gives the impression that the edits are always required and are motivated by the events in the 'reality' that the camera is recording rather than the result of a desire to tell a story in a particular way. The 'seamlessness' convinces us of its 'realism', but the code consists of an integrated system of technical conventions. These conventions serve to assist viewers in transforming the two-dimensional screen into a plausible three-dimensional world in which they can become absorbed.



A major cinematic convention is the use of the *establishing shot*: soon after a cut to a new scene we are given a long shot of it, allowing us to survey the overall space - followed by closer 'cut-in' shots focusing on details of the scene. Re-establishing shots are used when needed, as in the case of the entry of a new character.



Another key convention involved in helping the viewer to make sense of the spatial organization of a scene is the so-called *180° rule*. Successive shots are not shown from both sides of the 'axis of action' since this would produce apparent changes of direction on screen. For instance, a character moving right to left across the screen in one shot is not shown moving left to right in the next shot. This helps to establish where the viewer is in relation to the action. In separate shots of speakers in a dialogue, one speaker always looks left whilst the other looks right. Note that even in telephone conversations the characters are oriented as if facing each other.



In *point-of-view (POV) shots*, the camera is placed (usually briefly) in the spatial position of a character to provide a subjective point-of-view. This is often in the form of alternating shots between two characters - a technique known as *shot/reverse shot*. Once the 'axis of action' has been established, the alternation of shots with reverse-shots allows the viewer to glance back and forth at the participants in a dialogue (*matched shots* are used in which the shot-size and framing of the subject is similar). In such sequences, some of these shots are *reaction shots*. All of the techniques described so far reflect the goal of ensuring that the same characters are always in the same parts of the screen.



Because this code foregrounds the narrative, it employs what are called

motivated cuts: changes of view or scene occur only when the action requires it and the viewer expects it. When cuts from one distance and/or angle to another are made, they are normally *matches on action*: cuts are usually made when the subject is *moving*, so that viewers are sufficiently distracted by the action to be unaware of the cut. There is a studious avoidance of *jump cuts*: the so-called *30° rule* is that a shot of the same subject as the previous shot must differ in camera angle by at least 30° (otherwise it will feel to the viewer like an apparently pointless shift in position).

This cinematic editing code has become so familiar to us that we no longer consciously notice its conventions until they are broken. Indeed, it seems so 'natural' that some will feel that it closely reflects phenomenal reality and thus find it hard to accept it as a code at all. Do we not mentally 'cut' from one image to another all of the time in everyday visual perception? This case seems strongest when all that is involved is a shift corresponding to a turn of our head or a refocusing of our eyes ([Reisz & Millar 1972, 213-16](#)). But of course many cuts would require us to change our viewing position. A common response to this - at least if we limit ourselves to moderate changes of angle or distance and ignore changes of scene - is to say that the editing technique represents a reasonable analogy to the normal mental processes involved in everyday perception. A cut to close-up can thus be seen to reflect as well as direct a purposive shift in attention. Of course, when the shot shifts so radically that it would be a physical impossibility to imitate this in everyday life, then the argument by perceptual analogy breaks down. And cuts reflect such shifts more often than not; only fleetingly does film *editing* closely reflect the perceptual experience of 'being there' in person. But of course a gripping narrative will already have led to our 'suspension of disbelief'. We thus routinely and unconsciously grant the film-maker the same 'dramatic licence' with which we are familiar not only from the majority of films which we watch but also from analogous codes employed in other media - such as theatre, the novel or the comic-strip. For an argument questioning the interpretative importance of a cinematic editing code and emphasizing real-life analogies, see the lively and interesting book by Paul Messaris on *Visual Literacy* ([Messaris 1994, 71ff](#)). However, his main focus of attack is on the stance that the cinematic editing code is *totally arbitrary* - a position which few would defend. Clearly these techniques were designed where possible to be analogous to familiar codes so that they would quickly become invisible to viewers once they were habituated to them. Messaris argues that context is more important than code; it likely that where the viewer is in doubt about the meaning of a specific cut, interpretation may be aided by applying knowledge either from other textual codes (such as the logic of the narrative) or from relevant social codes (such as behavioural expectations in analogous situations in everyday life). The interpretation of film draws on knowledge of multiple codes. Adopting a semiotic approach to cinematic editing is not simply to acknowledge the importance of conventions and conventionality but to highlight the process of naturalization involved in the 'editing out' of what 'goes without saying'.

The emphasis given to *visual* codes by most theorists is perhaps partly due to their use of printed media for their commentaries - media which are inherently biased towards the visual, and may also derive from a Western tendency to privilege the visual over other channels. We need to remind ourselves that it is not only the visual image which is mediated, constructed and codified in the various media - in film, television and radio, this also applies to *sound*. Film and television are not simply visual media but *audio-visual* media. Even where the mediated character of the visual is acknowledged, there is a tendency for sound to be regarded as largely unmediated. But codes are involved in the choice and positioning of microphones, the use of particular equipment for recording, editing and reproduction, the use of diegetic sound (ostensibly emanating from the action in the story) versus non-diegetic sound, direct versus post-synchronous (dubbed) recording, simulated sounds

(such as the highly conventionalized signifier for a punch) and so on ([Stam 2000, 212-223](#); [Altman 1992](#)). In the dominant Hollywood tradition, conventional sound codes included features such as:

- diegesis: sounds should be relevant to the story;
- hierarchy: dialogue should override background sound;
- seamless: no gaps or abrupt changes in sound;
- integration: no sounds without images or vice versa;
- readability: all sounds should be identifiable;
- motivation: unusual sounds should be what characters are supposed to be hearing. ([Stam 2000, 216-217](#)).

Any text uses not one code, but many. Theorists vary in their classification of such codes. In his book *S/Z*, Roland Barthes itemised five codes employed in literary texts: *hermeneutic* (narrative turning-points); *proairetic* (basic narrative actions); *cultural* (prior social knowledge); *semic* (medium-related codes) and *symbolic* (themes) ([Barthes 1974](#)). Yuri Lotman argued that a poem is a 'system of systems' - lexical, syntactical, metrical, morphological, phonological and so on - and that the relations between such systems generated powerful literary effects. Each code sets up expectations which other codes violate ([Lotman 1976](#)). The same signifier may play its part in several different codes. The meaning of literary texts may thus be 'overdetermined' by several codes. Just as signs need to be analysed in their relation to other signs, so codes need to be analysed in relation to other codes. Becoming aware of the interplay of such codes requires a potentially recursive process of re-reading. Nor can such readings be confined to the internal structure of a text, since the codes utilized within it extend beyond any specific text - an issue of '[intertextuality](#)' to which we will return.

One simple typology of codes was offered at the start of this section. The typologies of several key theorists are often cited and it may be useful to alert the reader briefly to them here. [Pierre Guiraud \(1975\)](#) proposed three basic kinds of codes: *logical*, *aesthetic* and *social*. Umberto Eco offered ten fundamental codes as instrumental in shaping images: codes of perception, codes of transmission, codes of recognition, tonal codes, iconic codes, iconographic codes, codes of taste and sensibility, rhetorical codes, stylistic codes and codes of the unconscious ([Eco 1982, 35-8](#)). The value of any such typologies must clearly be assessed in terms of the interpretive light which they shed on the phenomena which they are used to explore.

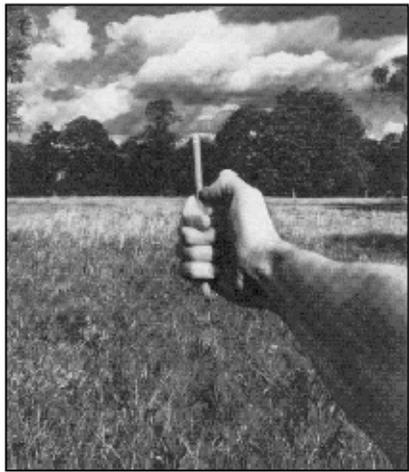
Whatever the nature of any embedded ideology, it has been claimed that as a consequence of their internalization of the codes of the medium, 'those born in the age of radio perceive the world differently from those born into the age of television' ([Gumpert & Cathcart 1985](#)). Critics have objected to the degree of [technological determinism](#) which is sometimes involved in such stances, but this is not to suggest that our use of such tools and techniques is without influence on our habits of mind. If this is so, the subtle phenomenology of new media is worthy of closer attention than is typically accorded to it. Whatever the medium, learning to notice the operation of codes when representations and meanings seem natural, obvious and transparent is clearly not an easy task. Understanding what semioticians have observed about the operation of codes can help us to *denaturalize* such codes by making their implicit conventions explicit and amenable to analysis. Semiotics offers us some conceptual crowbars with which to deconstruct the codes at work in particular texts and practices, providing that we can find some gaps or fissures which offer us the chance to exert some leverage.

Modes of Address



McLuhanite theorists have argued that the codes of dominant media may have a subtle but profound influence on the perceptual processes or 'world views' of their users. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Marshall McLuhan himself, following [Ivins \(1953\)](#), emphasized the 'impact' of print ([McLuhan 1962](#)). A different technical invention of the early Renaissance which was contemporaneous with Gutenberg's invention of movable type is often cited as having played a role in a profound shift in the Western cultural worldview. The mathematically-based technique of *linear perspective* was invented in 1425 by Filippo Brunelleschi and codified as *perspectiva artificialis* (artificial perspective) by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise, *Della pittura* (*On Painting*), published in 1435-6 ([Alberti 1966](#)). For the artist it is a rational geometrical technique for the systematic representation of objects in space which mimics the everyday visual illusion that the parallel edges of rectilinear objects converge at what we now call a 'vanishing point' on the horizon.

We need reminding that this 'style of vision' is a historical invention: 'nothing like it appears earlier in medieval painting, suggesting that men and women of earlier ages simply did not see in this fashion' ([Romanyshyn 1989, 40](#)). Linear perspective thus constituted a new way of seeing which Samuel Edgerton characterizes as 'the most *appropriate* convention for the pictorial representation of "truth" within 'the Renaissance paradigm' (a view of the world which reflected our understanding until the advent of Einstein's theory of relativity) ([Edgerton 1975, 162](#)). We have become so accustomed to reading pictures in terms of this illusionistic pictorial code that it now appears 'natural' to us to do so: we are rarely conscious of it as a code at all. In an essay on 'Perspective as Symbolic Form' published in German in the 1920s, the great art historian Erwin Panofsky generated considerable controversy by making the claim that linear perspective was a 'symbolic form' - a historically-situated system of conventions for representing pictorial space which reflected the dominant cultural worldview of the Italian Renaissance ([Edgerton 1975, 153ff](#)). Similarly, Herbert Read noted that 'we do not always realize that the theory of perspective developed in the fifteenth century is a scientific convention; it is merely one way of describing space and has no absolute validity' (cited in [Wright 1983, 2-3](#)). Critics retorted that strict geometrical perspective is scientifically 'accurate' and accused Panofsky and other heretics of 'relativism' (see [Kubovy 1986, 162ff](#)). Certainly, if we discount phenomenal reality, what William Ivins calls 'the grammar of perspective' can be seen as having an indexical character ([Ivins 1975, 10](#)). However, it can hardly be doubted that 'to close one eye and hold the head still at a single predetermined point in space is not the normal way of looking at things' ([White 1967, 274](#)).



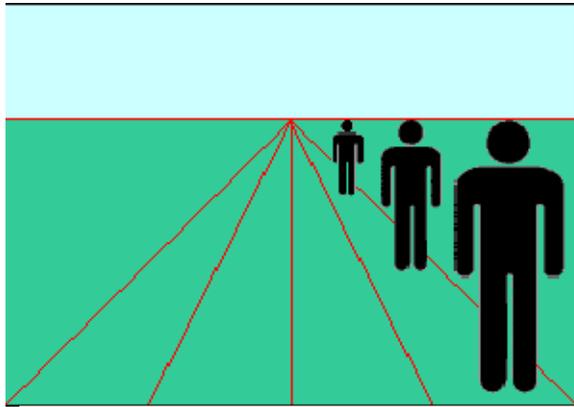
Strict linear perspective does not reflect phenomenal reality, since we are habituated to the stabilizing psychological mechanism of 'perceptual constancy' which we encountered earlier. If you are not an artist, try holding a vertical pencil at arm's length in front of you as a measuring-stick for objects within your field of view. If you have not tried this before you may be shocked to discover that some of the things which are close to you seem implausibly large. This is perhaps most noticeable in relation to the foreshortening of the human form - protruding feet can seem comically massive.



In tackling the task of depicting the foreshortened body of the dead Christ, even the great Renaissance artist Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506) clearly felt that he needed to compensate for the sacrilege of the distortion introduced by linear perspective, since he both reduced the size of the feet and enlarged the head, showing a 'sense of proportion' appropriate to his subject. Alberti had written that verisimilitude should be tempered by appropriate respect for dignity and decorum ([Alberti 1966, 72-7](#)).

Artificial perspective, in short, distorts the familiar size and shape of things. In this sense, Mantegna's representational code is closer to phenomenal reality than a photograph is. It wasn't easy even for Alberti to see things in terms of this code: he found it necessary to place a thin 'veil' or net marked out in parallels 'between the eye and the thing seen' ([ibid., 68](#)). Marshall McLuhan asserted that 'far from being a normal mode of human vision, three-dimensional perspective is a conventionally acquired mode of seeing, as much acquired as is the means of recognizing the letters of the alphabet, or of following chronological narrative' ([McLuhan 1970, 16](#)). *Artificial perspective* is a code which everyone with sufficient exposure to it can easily learn to read, although employing it effectively as an artist or architect requires far more deliberate learning. The introduction of 'artificial perspective' both reflected and promoted a preoccupation with verisimilitude; its use became an essential condition of 'realistic' pictorial representation. There is of course no doubt that this technique generates a powerful impression of depth, 'approximating the cues relating to normal perception better than any other

strategy until the emergence of photography' ([Nichols 1981, 52](#)). But its revolutionary implications were not simply representational. Robert Romanyshyn's reflections on the implications of this invention are subtle and wide-ranging, but the following extract offers some illustrative insights.



The horizon... sets the limit for the height of any object to be depicted in the painting and... it is *fixed* at the eye level of an observer imagined to be standing on a *horizontal* plane and *staring straight ahead* at the world...

The painter (and the viewer) imagines that he or she is looking at the subject to be painted (the world to be viewed) as if through a window... The condition of the window implies a *boundary* between the

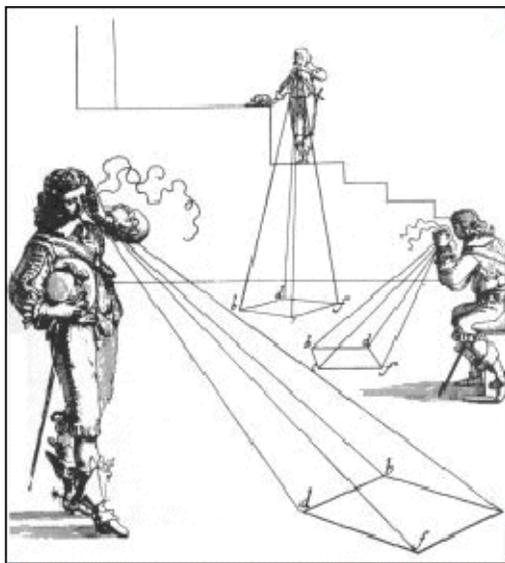
perceiver and the perceived. It establishes as a condition for perception a formal *separation* between a subject who sees the world and the world that is seen; and in doing so it sets the stage, as it were, for that retreat or withdrawal of the self from the world which characterizes the dawn of the modern age. Ensnared behind the window the self becomes an observing *subject*, a *spectator*, as against a world which becomes a *spectacle*, an *object* of vision...

In addition to this separation between perceiver and world, the condition of the window also initiates an *eclipse of the body*. Looked at from behind a window the world is primarily something to be seen. Indeed, a window between me and the world tends not only to emphasize the eye as my means of access to the world but also to de-emphasize the other senses... And with this eclipse of the body fostered by the window, the world on the other side of the window is already set to become a matter of *information*. As a spectacle, an object of vision, it is analyzable, and readable as a computer print-out, for example, or as a blip on a radar screen...

([Romanyshyn 1989, 40-41](#))

The Renaissance code of central, one-point linear perspective is thus not simply a technique for indicating depth and relative distance in a two-dimensional medium. It is a pictorial code reflecting the growing humanism of the period, presenting images from a single, subjective, individual and unique visual point-of-view. Mirroring the 'vanishing point' within the picture is the projected 'point of origin' in front of the canvas which was adopted by the artist and left vacant for the 'subject' whose position we adopt when we look at the picture ([Nichols 1981, 53](#)). From this position, the represented world is framed as if by a window on a wall. The framed image 'stands in for the world it represents as would an ordinary window if the view beyond it could somehow be imprinted on its surface' ([ibid., 159](#)). Alberti himself wrote that 'I inscribe a quadrangle of right angles, as large as I wish, which is considered to be an open window through which I see what I want to paint' ([Alberti 1966, 56](#)). Painters should 'seek to present the forms of things seen on this plane as if it were of transparent

glass' ([ibid, 51](#)). The artist Albrecht Dürer reminded us that '*perspectiva* is a Latin word which means a view through something' ([Panofsky 1970b, 123](#)).



Detail from Abraham Bosse,
Les Perspectiveurs, 1648

Yet at the same time as simulating a view of the world through a window, this clearly bounded, static and two-dimensional representation separates the viewer from the represented world. 'Seeing things in perspective' is regarded by Romanyshyn and other theorists as implicated in the development of the subject in its distancing of the knower from the known. William Ivins considered linear perspective to be part of 'the rationalization of sight' which he declared was 'the most important event of the Renaissance' ([Ivins 1975, 13](#)). Where linear perspective is very dominant in a work of art it undoubtedly gives it 'a cold effect', as John White observes ([White 1967, 274](#)). Marshall McLuhan regarded 'the detached observer' as 'the Renaissance legacy', declaring that 'the viewer of Renaissance art is systematically placed outside the frame of experience' ([McLuhan & Fiore 1967, 53](#)). 'The arbitrary selection of a single static position' for the artist and for viewers of the work requires 'a fixed point of view', which McLuhan associates with the 'private stance' of 'separate

individuals' and not just with a viewing location ([McLuhan 1962, 16, 56](#); [McLuhan & Fiore 1967, 68](#)). Looking at the represented world as through a window confirms us in our sense of ourselves as individuals with our own unique 'outlook on the world'. 'Gaining perspective' reflected 'our deeply embedded habit of regarding all phenomena from a fixed point of view' ([McLuhan & Fiore 1967, 68](#)). McLuhan attributed this not only to linear perspective but also to 'the effect of typography': 'inner direction toward remote goals is inseparable from print culture and the perspective and vanishing point organization of space that are part of it' ([McLuhan 1962, 125, 214](#)). This apparently purely technical innovation thus had subtle but profound ideological implications. Bill Nichols comments that 'the centering of and upon the subject or ego in Renaissance painting coincides with the first signs of a growing emphasis upon the individual rather than a chain of being, an emphasis that flourished with the emergence of entrepreneurial capitalism' ([Nichols 1981, 53](#)). The Renaissance code of *artificial perspective* constitutes visible testimony to the constitution of the self as subject.



Learning to read the pictorial code of linear perspective prepared us for the camera. McLuhan observed that 'photography is the mechanization of the perspective painting and of the arrested eye' ([McLuhan 1970, 11](#)). Photography offers a powerful illusion of a medium as a transparent 'window on the world'; as with paintings, photographic images are framed (even if only by their edges). In the early nineteenth century the camera obscura was fitted with a rectangular ground glass which showed only a rectangular section of the circular image from the lens (which is blurred at the edges) ([Snyder & Allen 1982, 68-9](#)). This made the camera image conform

to the dominant form of framing used for paintings. Whilst sharing the single, central viewing point of painterly *artificial perspective*, photography involves the most remorseless application of this code. Photographs sometimes exhibit even more 'distortion' of phenomenal realism than paintings do: snapshots of tall buildings exhibit a disturbingly pronounced convergence of the vertical lines (we are less accustomed to *vertical* convergence because even Renaissance artists avoided it). In 35mm photography, the illusion of depth is most striking when 'normal' lenses of about 50mm are used: we become more aware of 'distortion' when a telephoto or wide-angle lens is used ([Nichols 1981, 19](#)). 'Photorealism' has nevertheless become the standard by which 'realistic' representations in visual art are subjectively judged ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 163-164](#)).

Just as illusionism of Renaissance linear perspective performed the ideological function of 'positioning the subject', so too did the photographic image. 'The installation of the viewer as subject depends upon reserving a singular place for him or her, the reciprocal in front of the image of the vanishing point "behind" it, the point of origin from which the camera "took" its view and where we now take ours' ([Nichols 1981, 159](#)). French theorists associated with the journals *Tel Quel* and *Cinéthique* argued that since the code of linear perspective is *built into* the camera, photography and film which, whilst appearing to involve simply a neutral recording of reality, serve to reinforce 'a bourgeois ideology which makes the individual subject the focus and origin of meaning' ([Stam 2000, 137](#)). Film and television add a narrative dimension to the positioning of the subject, incorporating not only linear perspective but also dominant narrative devices specific to filmic media. Film theorists refer to the use of 'suture' (surgical stitching) - the 'invisible editing' of shot relationships which seeks to foreground the narrative and mask the ideological processes which shape the subjectivity of viewers. Some Lacanian theorists argue that in the context of conventional narrative (with its possibilities of identification and opposition), the unique character of the cinema (e.g. watching a large bright screen in the dark) offers us the seductive sense of a 'return' to the pre-linguistic 'mirror-phase' of the 'Imaginary' in which the self was constructed ([Nichols 1981, 300](#)).

'A sign... addresses somebody,' Charles Peirce declared ([Peirce 1931-58, 2.228](#)). Signs 'address' us within particular codes. A [genre](#) is a semiotic code within which we are 'positioned' as 'ideal readers' through the use of particular 'modes of address'. Modes of address can be defined as the ways in which relations between addresser and addressee are constructed in a text. In order to communicate, a producer of any text must make some assumptions about an intended audience; reflections of such assumptions may be discerned in the text (advertisements offer particularly clear examples of this).

Rather than a specifically semiotic concept, 'the positioning of the subject' is a structuralist notion - although Stuart Hall notes its absence in early structuralist discourse ([Hall 1996, 46](#)); Saussure did not discuss it. It is a concept which has been widely adopted by semioticians and so it needs to be explored in this context. The term 'subject' needs some initial explanation. In 'theories of subjectivity' a distinction is made between 'the subject' and 'the individual'. As Fiske puts it, 'the *individual* is produced by *nature*; the *subject* by *culture*... The subject... is a *social construction*, not a natural one' ([Fiske 1992, 288](#); *my emphases*). Whilst the individual is an actual person, the subject is a set of roles constructed by dominant cultural and ideological values (e.g. in terms of class, age, gender and ethnicity). Ideology turns individuals into subjects. Subjects are not actual people but exist only in relation to the interpretation of texts and are constructed through the use of signs. The psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan undermined the humanist notion of a unified and consistent subject. The individual can occupy multiple subject positions, some of them contradictory. 'Identity' can be seen as 'a matrix of subject-positions' ([Belsey 1980, 61](#)). The fluidity and fragmentation of

'identity' is highlighted in the context of the internet, where [the 'subject' need have no necessary connection to a supposed referent](#) (a specific individual in the material world); gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity or any other demographic marker may be shifted at will (subject to the social competence required to sustain such a virtual identity).

According to theorists of textual positioning, understanding the meaning of a text involves taking on an appropriate ideological identity. In order to make sense of the signs in a text the reader is obliged to adopt a 'subject-position' in relation to it. For instance, to understand an advertisement we would have to adopt the identity of a consumer who desired the advertised product. Some theorists argue that this position already exists within the structure and codes of the text. 'Narratives or images always imply or construct a position or positions from which they are to be read or viewed' ([Johnson 1996, 101](#)). What Colin MacCabe famously called the 'classic realist text' is orchestrated to effect closure: contradictions are suppressed and the reader is encouraged to adopt a position from which everything seems 'obvious' ([MacCabe 1974](#)). This stance assumes both that a text is homogeneous and that it has only one meaning - that which was intended by its makers - whereas contemporary theorists contend that there may be several alternative (even contradictory) subject-positions from which a text may make sense. Whilst these may sometimes be anticipated by the author, they are not necessarily built into the text itself. Not every reader is the 'ideal reader' envisaged by the producer(s) of the text. The phrase, 'the positioning of the subject' implies a 'necessary "subjection" to the text' ([Johnson 1996, 101](#)) and is thus problematic since there is always some freedom of interpretation. We may for instance choose to regard a poorly-translated set of instructions for assembling flat-pack furniture as a text constructed purely for our amusement.

The notion that the human subject is 'constituted' (constructed) by pre-given structures is a general feature of structuralism. It constitutes a radical opposition to the liberal humanist (or 'bourgeois') stance which presents society as 'consisting of "free" individuals whose social determination results from their pre-given essences like "talented", "efficient", "lazy", "profligate", etc.' ([Coward & Ellis 1977, 2](#)). The French neo-Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1918-1990) was the first ideological theorist to give prominence to the notion of the subject. For him, ideology was a system of representations of reality offering individuals certain subject positions which they could occupy. He famously declared that 'what is represented in ideology is... not the system of real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of these individuals to the real relations in which they live' ([Althusser 1971, 155](#)). He outlined the ideological mechanism of *interpellation*:

Ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all) or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was *really him* who was hailed' (and not someone else). ([Althusser 1971, 174](#))

The Althusserian concept of interpellation is used by [Marxist media theorists](#) to explain the political function of mass media texts. According to this view, the subject (viewer, listener, reader) is constituted by the text, and the power of the mass media resides in their ability to position the subject

in such a way that their representations are taken to be reflections of everyday reality. Such structuralist framings of positioning reflect a stance of *textual determinism* which has been challenged by contemporary social semioticians who tend to emphasise the 'polysemic' nature of texts (their plurality of meanings) together with the diversity of their use and interpretation by different audiences ('multiaccentuality'). However, a distinction may be appropriate here between *message* and *code*. Whilst resistance at the level of the message is always possible, resistance at the level of the code is generally much more difficult when the code is a dominant one. The familiarity of the codes in 'realist' texts (especially photographic and filmic texts) leads us to routinely 'suspend our disbelief' in the form (even if not necessarily in the manifest content). Recognition of the familiar (in the guise of the 'natural') repeatedly confirms our conventional ways of seeing and thus reinforces our sense of self whilst at the same time invisibly contributing to its *construction*. 'When we say "I see (what the image means)" this act simultaneously installs us in a place of knowledge and slips us into place as subject to this meaning... All the viewer need do is fall into place as subject' ([Nichols 1981, 38](#)). Falling into place in a realist text is a pleasurable experience which few would wish to disrupt with reflective analysis (which would throw the security of our sense of self into question). Thus we freely submit to the ideological processes which construct our sense of ourselves as free-thinking individuals.

A primary textual code involved in the construction of the subject is that of *genre*. Genres are ostensibly 'neutral', functioning to make *form* (the conventions of the genre) more 'transparent' to those familiar with the genre, foregrounding the distinctive *content* of individual texts. Certainly genre provides an important frame of reference which helps readers to identify, select and interpret texts (as well as helping writers to compose economically within the medium). However, a genre can also be seen as embodying certain values and ideological assumptions and as seeking to establish a particular worldview. Changes in genre conventions may both reflect and help to shape the dominant ideological climate of the time. Some Marxist commentators see genre as an instrument of social control which reproduces the dominant ideology. Within this perspective, the genre is seen as positioning the audience in order to naturalize the reassuringly conservative ideologies which are typically embedded in the text. Certainly, genres are far from being ideologically neutral. Different genres produce different positionings of the subject which are reflected in their modes of address. Tony Thwaites and his colleagues note that in many television crime dramas in the tradition of *The Saint*, *Hart to Hart*, and *Murder, She Wrote*,

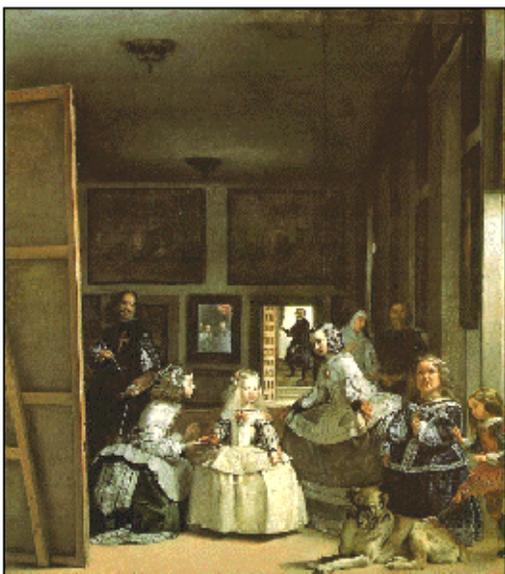
Genteel or well-to-do private investigators work for the wealthy, solving crimes committed by characters whose social traits and behaviour patterns often type them as members of a 'criminal class'... The villains receive their just rewards not so much because they break the law, but because they are entirely distinct from the law-abiding bourgeoisie. This TV genre thus reproduces a hegemonic ideology about the individual in a class society. ([Thwaites et al. 1994, 158](#)).

Thus, over and above the specific 'content' of the individual text, generic frameworks can be seen as involved in the construction of their readers.

Saussure emphasized that the language system is a 'given' which precedes its users and is beyond human control. Developing this stance, post-Saussurean structuralist theorists have argued that contrary to the notion that semiotic systems are instrumental tools which are fully subject to the control of 'the individual', the subject is *constructed* by the semiotic system of language, ideology, and myth. Such structural determinism and autonomy is reflected, for instance, in Lévi-Strauss's

declaration that 'I... claim to show, not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact' ('les mythes se pensent dans le hommes, et á leur insu') ([Lévi-Strauss 1970, 12](#)). It is similarly evident in Althusser: 'Marx observes that what determines a social formation in the last instance... is not the spirit of an essence or a human nature, not man, not even "men", but a *relation*, the relation of production' - in other words, as Coward and Ellis put it, 'man is not the origin of society, it is rather that society is the origin of man' ([Coward & Ellis 1977, 82](#), including this citation from Althusser). And the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan observed that 'man speaks, but it is only that the symbol has made him man' (cited in [Coward & Ellis 1977, 107](#)). Whilst providing the key framework from which much of structuralist (and post-structuralist) theory was derived, Saussure did not himself advance the proposition that the subject is constructed by the (language) system. In an astonishingly contemporary observation published in 1868, the co-founder of what we now know as semiotics, the logician Charles Peirce, declared in a quasi-syllogistic form that 'the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign... Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought' ([Peirce 1931-58, 5.314](#)). He went on to note that 'it is hard for man to understand this, because he persists in identifying himself with his will' ([ibid., 5.315](#)). As in several other instances, Peirce's notions find their echoes in poststructuralist theory, albeit in more dramatic forms. One hundred years later, the French historian of ideas Michel Foucault declared apocalyptically that 'as the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end' ([Foucault 1970, 387](#)).

In a famous chapter of his book, *The Order of Things*, Foucault discusses *Las Meninas* (*The Maids of Honour*) painted in 1656 by the Spanish artist Diego Velázquez. Whilst the ostensible subject of the painting is the princess, surrounded by her maids of honour, this is an extraordinarily reflexive painting about painting - or more broadly, about the business of representation. It can indeed be seen as a meditation on the role of the artist, on the depiction of reality and perhaps above all on what Ernst Gombrich refers to as 'the beholder's share' in making sense of the visual world. There is a particular irony here in the fact that it is likely that the primary spectators for the *Las Meninas* were the models whom the artist is here depicted as painting.



The painter is standing a little back from his canvas. He is glancing at his model... He is staring at a point to which, even though it is invisible, we, the spectators, can easily assign an object, since it is we, ourselves, who are at that point... The spectacle he is observing is thus doubly invisible: first, because it is not represented within the space of the painting, and, second, because it is situated precisely in that blind point, in that essential hiding-place into which our gaze disappears from ourselves at the moment of our actual looking... In appearance, this locus in a simple one: a matter of pure reciprocity: we are looking at a picture in which the painter is in turn

looking out at us... And yet... the painter is turning his eyes towards us only insofar as we happen to occupy the same position as his subject. We, the spectators, are an additional factor. Though greeted by that gaze, we are also dismissed by it, replaced by that which was always there before we were: the model itself... The great canvas with its back to us on the extreme left of the picture... prevents the relation of these gazes ever being discoverable or definitely established... Because we can see only that reverse side, we do not know who we are, or what we are doing. Seen or seeing?... We are observing ourselves being observed by the painter, and made visible to his eyes by the same light that enables us to see him...



Now as it happens, exactly opposite the spectators - ourselves - on the wall forming the far end of the room, Velásquez has represented a series of pictures; and we see that among all those those hanging canvases there is one that shines with particular brightness. Its frame is wider and darker than those of the others... But it isn't a picture: it is a mirror. It offers us at last that enchantment of the double that until now has been denied to us...

In fact, it shows nothing of what is represented in the picture itself... What it is reflecting is that which all the figures within the painting are looking at so fixedly, or at least those who are looking straight ahead; it is therefore what the spectator would be able to see if the painting extended further forward, if its bottom edge was brought lower until it included the figures the painter is using as models... At the far end of the room, ignored by all, the unexpected mirror holds in its glow the figures that the painter is looking at (the painter in his represented, objective reality, the reality of the painter at his work); but also the figures that are looking at the painter (in that material reality which the lines and the colours have laid out upon the canvas)... King Philip IV and his wife, Mariana... What all the figures in the picture are looking at are the two figures to whose eyes they too present a scene to be observed. The entire picture is looking out at a scene for which it itself is a scene...

Inversely, as far as they stand outside the picture and are therefore withdrawn from it in an essential invisibility, they [the king and his wife] provide the centre around which the entire representation is ordered; it is they who are being faced, it is towards them that everyone is turned... In the realm of the anecdote, this centre is symbolically sovereign since it is occupied by King Philip IV and his wife. But it is so above all because of the triple function it fulfils in relation to the picture. For in it there occurs an exact superimposition of the model's gaze as it is being painted, of the spectator's as he contemplates the painting, and of the painter's as he is composing the picture (not the one represented, but the one in front of us which we are discussing). These three 'observing' functions come together in a point exterior to the picture; that is, an ideal point in relation to what is represented, but a perfectly real one too, since it is also the starting-point that makes the representation possible...

Perhaps there exists, in this painting by Velásquez, the representation as it were, of Classical representation, and the definition of the space it opens up to us.

[\(Foucault 1970, 3-16\)](#)

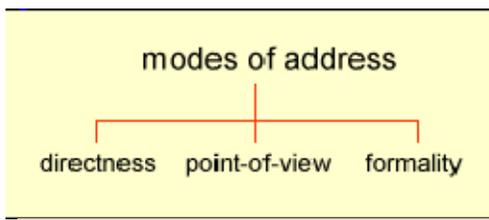
The *modes of address* employed by texts within a code are influenced primarily by three inter-related factors:

- *textual context*: the conventions of the [genre](#) and of a specific [syntagmatic structure](#);
- *social context* (e.g. the presence or absence of the producer of the text, the scale and social composition of the audience, institutional and economic factors); and
- *technological constraints* (features of the medium employed).

In this context it may be useful to consider a basic typology of modes of communication in terms of *synchronicity* - whether or not the participants can communicate 'in real time' - without significant delays. This feature ties together the presence or absence of the producer(s) and the technical features of the medium. The obvious options are:

- *synchronous interpersonal communication* through both speech and non-verbal cues (e.g. direct face-to-face interaction, videolinks); through speech alone (e.g. telephone) or primarily through text (e.g. internet chat systems);
- *asynchronous interpersonal communication* primarily through text (e.g. letters, fax, e-mail);
- *asynchronous mass communication* through text, graphics and/or audio-visual media (e.g. articles, books, television etc.).

Note that this framework seems to posit an apparently empty category of *synchronous mass communication* which is hard to imagine. Clearly such features of the mode of communication also relate to the relative numbers of participants involved, which are sometimes categorised in terms of: *one-to-one*; *one-to-many*; *many-to-one* (e.g. petitions and requests for information); and *many-to-many* (e.g. internet discussion lists and newsgroups). Once again, the limitations of such a framing should be noted - this one tends to overlook the importance of communication in small groups (which consist of neither 'one' nor 'many'). Whatever the shortcomings of any particular typology, however, all of the factors referred to here have the potential to influence the mode of address employed.



Modes of address differ in their directness, their formality and their narrative point-of-view. In relation to literature narrative *point-of-view* has received exemplary treatment in Wayne Booth's book, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, originally published in 1961 ([Booth 1983](#); see also [Genette 1972](#)).

The various narrative points-of-view in literature are as follows:

- *third-person* narration
 - *omniscient* narrator
 - intrusive (e.g. Dickens)

- self-effacing (e.g. Flaubert)
 - *selective* point-of-view of character(s) presented by self-effacing narrator (e.g. Henry James)
- *first-person* narration: narrated directly by a character (e.g. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*)

In television and film, omniscient narrative is dominant, although narrative point-of-view tends to shift. Camera treatment is called 'subjective' when the camera shows us events as if from a particular participant's visual point of view (encouraging viewers to identify with that person's way of seeing events or even to feel like an eye-witness to the events themselves). This first-person style in filmic media is rarely sustained, however (or we would never see that character). The point-of-view is *selective* when we are mainly concerned with a single character but the camerawork is not subjective. Voice-overs are sometimes used for first-person narration by a character in a drama; they are also common as a third-person narrative mode in genres such as documentary. Where first-person commentary shifts from person to person within a text, this produces 'polyvocality' (multiple voices) - contrasting strongly with the interpretative omniscience of 'univocal' narrative which offers a single reading of an event ([Stern 1998, 63](#)). Where the agency of a narrator is backgrounded, events or facts deceptively seem to 'speak for themselves'.

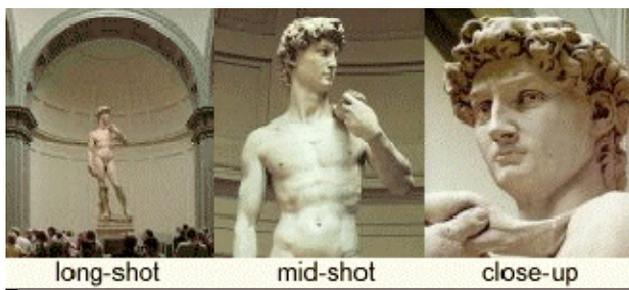


Modes of address also differ in their *directness* ([Tolson 1996, 56-65](#)). In linguistic codes, this is related to whether 'you' are explicitly addressed, which in literary modes is quite rare. In Laurence Sterne's highly 'unconventional' novel *Tristram Shandy* (1760), one chapter begins thus: 'How could you, Madam, be so inattentive in reading the last chapter?' (vol. 1, ch. 20). 'Realist' fiction avoids such 'alienatory' strategies. In representational visual codes directness is related to whether or not a depicted person appears [to look directly at the viewer](#) (in the case of television, film and photography, via the camera lens). A direct gaze simulates interaction with each individual viewer (an impossibility, of course, outside one-to-one communicative media, but a feature of 'cam-to-cam' communication on the internet or in video-conferences). In film and television, directness of address is reflected in linguistic codes as well as camerawork. Films and (especially) television

programmes within the documentary genre frequently employ a disembodied voice-over which directly addresses the audience, as do television commercials. On television, directness of address is also a matter of the extent to which participants look directly into the camera lens. In this way too, commercials frequently include direct address. As for programmes, in a book on *The Grammar of Television*, an industry professional warned: 'Never let a performer look straight into the lens of a camera unless it is necessary to give the impression that he is speaking directly to the viewer personally' ([Davis 1960, 54](#)). In television programmes, a direct mode of address is largely confined to newsreaders, weather forecasters, presenters and interviewers - which is why it seems so strange on the rare occasions when we notice an interviewee glancing at the camera lens. In short, people from outside the television industry are seldom allowed to talk to us directly on television. The head of state or the leader of a political party are amongst the few outsiders allowed to look directly at the viewer, and then typically only within special genres such as a party political broadcast or an 'address to the nation'. Direct address reflects the power of the addresser and the use of this signifier typically signifies 'authority'. Direct address is rare in the cinema, and when it is used it tends to be for comic effect. *Indirect address* is the principal mode employed in conventional narrative, masking authorial agency in the interests of foregrounding the story. Conventional film and television drama depends on

'the illusion that the represented participants do not know they are being looked at, and in which the represented participants must pretend that they are not being watched' ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 126](#)).

Additionally, the mode of address varies in its *formality* or *social distance*. Kress and van Leeuwen distinguish between 'intimate', 'personal', 'social' and 'public' (or 'impersonal') modes of address ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 130-135](#)). In relation to language, formality is quite closely tied to explicitness, so that intimate language tends to be minimally explicit and maximally dependent on non-verbal cues, whilst public language tends to reverse these features (especially in print). In usage related also to directness of address, social distance can also be established through the use of loaded quasi-synonyms to reflect ideological distinctions of 'us' from 'them', as in '*I am a patriot; you are a nationalist; they are xenophobes*'.



In visual representation, social distance is related in part to *apparent proximity*. In camerawork, degrees of formality are reflected in *shot sizes* - close-ups signifying intimate or personal modes, medium shots a social mode and long shots an impersonal mode ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 130-135](#); see also [Deacon et al. 1999, 190-94](#) and [Tuchman 1978, 116-20](#)). In visual media, the represented physical distance between the observed and the observer often reflects attempts to

encourage feelings of emotional involvement or critical detachment in the viewer. The cultural variability of the degree of formality signified by different zones of proximity was highlighted in relation to face-to-face interaction in an influential book by Edward T Hall - *The Hidden Dimension* ([Hall 1966](#)). Proximity is not the only marker of social distance in the visual media: *angles of view* are also significant. High angles (looking down on a depicted person from above) are widely interpreted as making that person look small and insignificant, and low angles (looking up at them from below) are said to make them look powerful and superior ([Messaris 1997, 34-5](#); [Messaris 1994, 158](#); [Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 146](#)). The interplay of these techniques is important. In the three photographs shown here of Michelangelo's David (1501-4, Accademia, Florence), whilst all of the shots are taken from below this gigantic figure, the close-up from below seems to me to emphasize the power of the figure in contrast to the mid-shot, in which - despite the musculature - David seems somewhat softer and more vulnerable. The closer we are the more we look upwards. Power is signified most strongly by a low angle which is also a close-up - as if, as we get closer, we become more vulnerable.

Note that whilst the significations such as those listed in relation to photographic and filmic modes of address may represent the currently dominant, conventional or 'default' linkages of signifiers and signifieds, no programmatic decoding based on a 'dictionary' of one-to-one correspondences is possible - in analogue codes in particular there is a sliding relationship between signifiers and signifieds which the codes of the particular textual systems in which they are employed may function to anchor in various ways ([Nichols 1981, 108](#)).

Textual codes construct possible reading positions for the addresser and addressee. Building upon Jakobson's model Thwaites *et al.* define 'the functions of address' in terms of the construction of such subjects and of relationships between them.

- *expressive function*: the construction of an addresser (authorial persona);
- *conative function*: the construction of an addressee (ideal reader);
- *phatic function*: the construction of a relationship between these two ([Thwaites et al. 1994, 14-15](#)).

A textual code can be defined as a set of ways of reading which its producers and readers share. Not everyone has access to the relevant codes for reading (or writing) a text. The phatic function excludes as well as includes certain readers. Those who share the code are members of the same 'interpretative community' ([Fish 1980, 167ff, 335-6, 338](#)). David Morley demonstrated differential access to the textual codes of a programme in the television 'news magazine' genre ([Morley 1980](#)). Familiarity with particular codes is related to social position, in terms of such factors as class, ethnicity, nationality, education, occupation, political affiliation, age, gender and sexuality. This argument need not reflect social determinism, since one may argue that there is still scope for variety in the ways in which individuals engage with such codes.

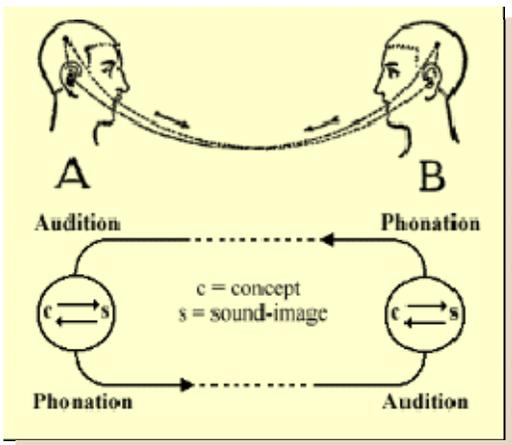
Some codes are more widespread and accessible than others. Those which are widely distributed and which are learned at an early age may seem 'natural' rather than constructed ([Hall 1980, 132](#)). John Fiske distinguishes between *broadcast* codes, which are shared by member of a mass audience, and *narrowcast* codes which are aimed at a more limited audience; pop music is a broadcast code; ballet is a narrowcast code ([Fiske 1982, 78ff](#)). Broadcast codes are learned through experience; narrowcast codes often involve more deliberate learning ([Fiske 1989, 315](#)). Following the controversial sociolinguistic theories of Basil Bernstein, what Fiske refers to as broadcast codes are described by some media theorists as 'restricted codes', with Fiske's narrowcast codes being described as 'elaborated codes' ([Bernstein 1971](#)). 'Restricted' codes are described as structurally simpler and more repetitive ('overcoded'), having what information theorists call a high degree of *redundancy*. In such codes several elements serve to emphasise and reinforce preferred meanings. In contrast, literary writing - in particular poetry - has a minimum of redundancy ([Lotman 1976](#)). The distinction between 'restricted' and 'elaborated' codes serves to stress the difference between an élite ('highbrows') and the majority ('lowbrows'). Michael Real claims that the 'most popular' culture of 'the mass market' is marked by a high degree of redundancy (notably in the use of standard conventions and 'formulas'), whilst 'higher, élite or avante-garde art' employs 'elaborated codes' which are held to involve 'more originality and unpredictability' ([Real 1996, 136](#)). Similarly, Fiske suggests that narrowcast (elaborated) codes have the potential to be more subtle; broadcast (restricted) codes can lead to cliché. Jonathan Culler suggests that 'literature continually undermines, parodies, and escapes anything which threatens to become a rigid code or explicit rules for interpretation... literary works never lie wholly within the codes that define them' ([Culler 1985, 105](#)). Insofar as such positions suggest that broadcast codes restrict expressive possibilities this arguments has affinities with [Whorfianism](#). The dangers of élitism inherent in such stances make it particularly important that the evidence is closely examined in the context of the particular code under study.

Encoding/Decoding

Structuralist semioticians tend to focus on the internal structure of the text rather than on the processes involved in its construction or interpretation. Where those working within this tradition do theorize beyond the text, they tend to argue that communication (particularly mass communication) is a primary process of reality construction and maintenance whereby positions of inequality, dominance and subservience are produced and reproduced in society and at the same time made to appear

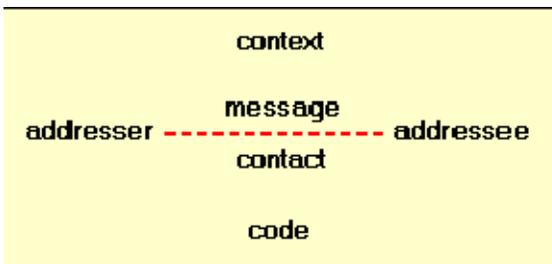
'natural'. The 'New Critics', W K Wimsatt and M C Beardsley, whilst not structuralists, advanced the formalist argument that meaning lay *within* the text and defined as 'the affective fallacy' the notion that the meaning of a poem depended on the 'subjective' responses of the reader, which they saw as 'a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*)' ([Wimsatt & Beardsley 1954, 21](#)). Such accounts tend towards 'textual determinism', assuming that texts are invariably read much as was intended by their makers, leaving little scope either for contradictions within and between texts or for variations amongst their interpreters. Monolithic theories of this kind ignore what Saussure had referred to as 'the role of signs as part of social life' ([Saussure 1983, 15](#); [Saussure 1974, 16](#)).

Contemporary semioticians refer to the creation and interpretation of texts as 'encoding' and 'decoding' respectively. This unfortunately tends to make these processes sound too programmatic: the use of these terms is of course intended to emphasize the importance of the semiotic *codes* involved, and thus to highlight social factors. For semioticians, there is no such thing as an uncoded message, so that - for those who argue that all experience is coded - even 'encoding' might be more accurately described as 'recoding' ([Hawkes 1977, 104, 106, 107](#)). In the context of semiotics, 'decoding' involves not simply basic recognition and *comprehension* of what a text 'says' but also the *interpretation* and *evaluation* of its meaning with reference to relevant codes. Where a distinction is made between comprehension and interpretation this tends to be primarily with reference to purely *verbal* text, but even in this context such a distinction is untenable; what is 'meant' is invariably more than what is 'said' ([Smith 1988, Olson 1994](#)). Everyday references to communication are based on a '[transmission model](#)' in which a sender transmits a message to a receiver - a formula which reduces meaning to 'content' which is delivered like a parcel ([Reddy 1979](#)). This is the basis of Shannon and Weaver's well-known model of communication, which makes no allowance for the importance of social contexts and codes ([Shannon and Weaver 1949](#)).



Whilst Saussure's model of oral communication is (for its time) innovatively labelled as a 'speech circuit' and includes directional arrows indicating the involvement of both participants (thus at least implying 'feedback'), it too was nevertheless a linear transmission model (albeit a 'two-track' one). It was based on the notion that comprehension on the part of the listener is a kind of mirror of the speaker's initial process of expressing a thought ([Saussure 1983, 11-13](#); [Saussure 1974, 11-13](#); [Harris 1987, 22-25, 204-218](#)). In this model there is only the briefest of allusions to the speaker's use of 'the code provided by the language', together with the implicit assumption that a fixed code is shared

([Saussure 1983, 14](#); [Saussure 1974, 14](#); [Harris 1987, 216, 230](#)).



In 1960 another structural linguist - Roman Jakobson (drawing on work by Bühler dating from the 1930s) - proposed a model of interpersonal verbal communication which moved beyond the basic transmission model of communication and highlighted the importance of the codes and social contexts involved ([Jakobson 1960](#)). He noted

elsewhere that 'the efficiency of a speech event demands the use of a common code by its

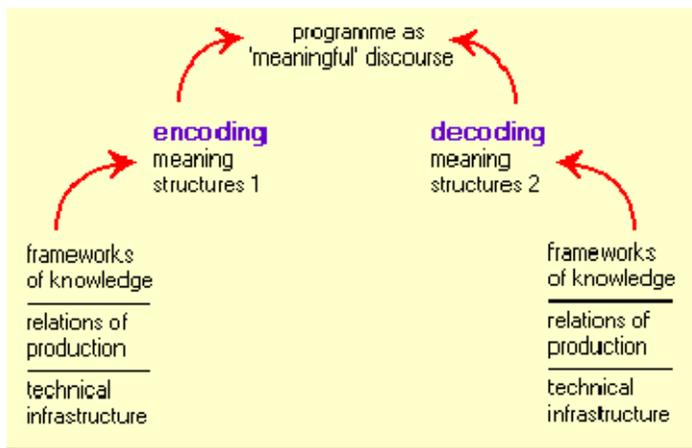
participants' ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 72](#)). He outlines what he regards as the six 'constitutive factors... in any act of verbal communication' thus:

The *addresser* sends a message to the *addressee*. To be operative the message requires a *context* referred to ('referent' in another, somewhat ambivalent, nomenclature), seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized, a *code* fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and decoder of the message); and finally, a *contact*, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to stay in communication. ([Jakobson 1960, 353](#))

Jakobson proposed that 'each of these six factors determines a different function of language' (*ibid.*):

Type	Oriented towards	Function	Example
referential	context	imparting information	It's raining.
expressive	addresser	expressing feelings or attitudes	It's bloody pissing down again!
conative	addressee	influencing behaviour	Wait here till it stops raining!
phatic	contact	establishing or maintaining social relationships	Nasty weather again, isn't it?
metalingual	code	referring to the nature of the interaction (e.g. genre)	This is the weather forecast.
poetic	message	foregrounding textual features	It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.

This model avoids the reduction of language to 'communication'. Referential content is not always foregrounded. Jakobson argued that in any given situation one of these factors is 'dominant', and that this dominant function influences the general character of the 'message'. For instance, the *poetic* function (which is intended to refer to any creative use of language rather than simply to poetry) highlights 'the palpability of signs', undermining any sense of a 'natural' or 'transparent' connection between a signifier and a referent. Jakobson's model demonstrates that messages and meanings cannot be isolated from such constitutive contextual factors. In its acknowledgement of social functions this is a model which is consonant with the structuralist theory that the subject (here in the form of the 'addresser' and the 'addressee') is constructed through discourse.



Whilst these earlier models had been concerned with *interpersonal communication*, in an essay on 'Encoding/Decoding' (Hall 1980, originally published as 'Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse' in 1973), the British sociologist Stuart Hall proposed a model of *mass communication* which highlighted the importance of active interpretation within relevant codes. Justin Wren-Lewis insists that Hall's model, with its emphasis on coding and decoding as signifying practices, is 'above all, a semiological conception' (Wren-Lewis 1983, 179). Hall rejected textual determinism, noting that 'decodings do not follow inevitably from

encodings' (Hall 1980, 136). In contrast to the earlier models, Hall thus gave a significant role to the 'decoder' as well as to the 'encoder'.

Hall referred to various phases in the Encoding/Decoding model of communication as *moments*, a term which many other commentators have subsequently employed (frequently without explanation). John Corner offers his own definitions:

- the *moment of encoding*: 'the institutional practices and organizational conditions and practices of production' (Corner 1983, 266);
- the *moment of the text*: 'the... symbolic construction, arrangement and perhaps performance... The form and content of what is published or broadcast' (*ibid.*, 267); and
- the *moment of decoding*: 'the moment of reception [or] consumption... by... the reader/hearer/viewer' which is regarded by most theorists as 'closer to a form of "construction" than to "the passivity... suggested by the term "reception"' (*ibid.*).



Stuart Hall

Hall himself referred to several 'linked but distinctive moments - production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction' (Hall 1980, 128) as part of the 'circuit of communication' (a term which clearly signals the legacy of Saussure). Corner adds that the moment of encoding and that of decoding 'are socially contingent practices which may be in a greater or lesser degree of alignment in relation to each other but which are certainly not to be thought of... as 'sending' and 'receiving' linked by the conveyance of a 'message' which is the exclusive vehicle of meaning' (Corner 1983, pp. 267-8).

Mass media codes offer their readers social identities which some may adopt as their own. But readers do not necessarily accept such codes. Where those involved in communicating do not share common codes and social positions, decodings are likely to be different from the encoder's intended meaning. Umberto Eco uses the term 'aberrant decoding' to refer

to a text which has been decoded by means of a different code from that used to encode it (Eco 1965). Eco describes as 'closed' those texts which show a strong tendency to encourage a particular interpretation - in contrast to more 'open' texts (Eco 1981). He argues that mass media texts tend to

be 'closed texts', and because they are broadcast to heterogeneous audiences diverse decodings of such texts are unavoidable.

Stuart Hall stressed the role of social positioning in the interpretation of mass media texts by different social groups. In a model deriving from Frank Parkin's 'meaning systems', Hall suggested three hypothetical interpretative codes or positions for the reader of a text ([Parkin 1972](#); [Hall 1973](#); [Hall 1980, 136-8](#); [Morley 1980, 20-21, 134-7](#); [Morley 1981b, 51](#); [Morley 1983, 109-10](#)):

- *dominant (or 'hegemonic') reading*: the reader fully shares the text's code and accepts and reproduces the *preferred reading* (a reading which may not have been the result of any conscious intention on the part of the author(s)) - in such a stance the code seems 'natural' and 'transparent';
- *negotiated reading*: the reader partly shares the text's code and broadly accepts the preferred reading, but sometimes resists and modifies it in a way which reflects their own position, experiences and interests (local and personal conditions may be seen as exceptions to the general rule) - this position involves contradictions;
- *oppositional ('counter-hegemonic') reading*: the reader, whose social situation places them in a directly oppositional relation to the dominant code, understands the preferred reading but does not share the text's code and rejects this reading, bringing to bear an alternative frame of reference (radical, feminist etc.) (e.g. when watching a television broadcast produced on behalf of a political party they normally vote *against*).

This framework is based on the assumption that the latent meaning of the text is encoded in the dominant code. This is a stance which tends to reify the medium and to downplay conflicting tendencies within texts. Also, some critics have raised the question of how a 'preferred reading' can be established. Shaun Moores asks 'Where is it and how do we know if we've found it? Can we be sure we didn't put it there ourselves while we were looking? And can it be found by examining any sort of text?' ([Moores 1993, 28](#)). Some theorists feel that the concept may be applied more easily to news and current affairs than to other mass media genres. David Morley wondered whether it might be the 'reading which the analyst is predicting that most members of the audience will produce' ([Morley 1981a, 6](#)). John Corner argues that it is not easy to find actual examples of media texts in which one reading is preferred within a plurality of possible readings ([Corner 1983, 279](#)). As Justin Wren-Lewis comments, 'the fact that many decoders will come up with the same reading does not make that meaning an essential part of the text' ([Wren-Lewis 1983, 184](#)). And Kathy Myers notes, in the spirit of a post-structuralist social semiotics, that 'it can be misleading to search for the determinations of a preferred reading solely within the form and structure' of the text ([Myers 1983, 216](#)). Furthermore, in the context of advertising, she adds that:

There is a danger in the analysis of advertising of assuming that it is in the interests of advertisers to create one 'preferred' reading of the advertisement's message. Intentionality suggests conscious manipulation and organization of texts and images, and implies that the visual, technical and linguistic strategies work together to secure one preferred reading of an advertisement to the exclusion of others... The openness of connotative codes may mean that we have to replace the notion of 'preferred reading' with another which admits a range of possible alternatives open to the audience. ([Myers 1983, 214-16](#))

Just as a reductive reading of Hall's model could lead to the reification of a medium or genre, it could also encourage the essentialising of readers (e.g. as 'the resistant reader') whereas reading positions are 'multiform, fissured, schizophrenic, unevenly developed, culturally, discursively and politically discontinuous, forming part of a shifting realm of ramifying differences and contradictions' ([Stam 2000, 233](#)).

Despite the various criticisms, Hall's model has been very influential, particularly amongst British theorists. David Morley employed it in his studies of how different social groups interpreted a television programme ([Morley 1980](#)). Morley insisted that he did *not* take a *social determinist* position in which individual 'decodings' of a text are reduced to a direct consequence of social class position. 'It is always a question of how social position, as it is articulated through particular discourses, produces specific kinds of readings or decodings. These readings can then be seen to be patterned by the way in which the structure of access to different discourses is determined by social position' ([Morley 1983, 113](#); cf. [Morley 1992, 89-90](#)). Morley's point about differential access to discourses can be related to the various kinds of 'capital' outlined by Pierre Bourdieu - notably 'cultural capital' (to which Bourdieu relates the construction of 'taste') and 'symbolic capital' (communicative repertoire). An 'interpretative repertoire' (Jonathan Potter, cited in [Grayson 1998, 40](#)) is part of the symbolic capital of members of the relevant 'interpretative community' and constitutes the textual and interpretative codes available to them (which offer them the potential to understand and sometimes also to produce texts which employ them). Morley added that any individual or group might operate different decoding strategies in relation to different *topics* and different *contexts*. A person might make 'oppositional' readings of the same material in one context and 'dominant' readings in other contexts ([Morley 1981a, 9](#); [Morley 1981b, 66, 67](#); [Morley 1992, 135](#)). He noted that in interpreting viewers' readings of mass media texts attention should be paid not only to the issue of *agreement* (acceptance/rejection) but to *comprehension, relevance* and *enjoyment* ([Morley 1981a, 10](#); [Morley 1992, 126-7, 136](#)).

The interpretation of signs by their users can be seen from a semiotic perspective as having three levels (loosely related to C W Morris's framework for branches of semiotics):

- *syntactic*: recognition of the sign (in relation to other signs);
- *semantic*: comprehension of the intended meaning of the sign;
- *pragmatic*: interpretation of the sign in terms of relevance, agreement etc.
(See also [Goldsmith 1984, 124](#), although she makes different distinctions)

The most basic task of interpretation involves the identification of what a sign represents ([denotation](#)) and may require some degree of familiarity with the medium and the representational codes involved. This is particularly obvious in the case of language, but may also apply in the case of visual media such as photographs and films. Some would not grant this low-level process the label of 'interpretation' at all, limiting this term to such processes as the extraction of a 'moral' from a narrative text. However, David Mick and Laura Politi take the stance that comprehension and interpretation are inseparable, making an analogy with [denotation and connotation](#) ([Mick & Politi 1989, 85](#)).

Justin Wren-Lewis comments that 'given the wealth of material using semiological tools for the analysis of film and television, it is remarkable that so little work has been done on the practice of decoding' ([Wren-Lewis 1983, 195](#)). Whilst social semiotics stakes a claim to the study of situated semiotic practices, research in this area is dominated by ethnographic and phenomenological

methodologies and is seldom closely allied to semiotic perspectives (though there is no necessary incompatibility). A notable exception is the research of David Mick in the field of advertising ([Mick & Politi 1989](#), [McQuarrie & Mick 1992](#), [Mick & Buhl 1992](#)).

Articulation

[Semiotic codes](#) vary in their complexity of structure or 'articulation'. The term *articulation*, as used by semioticians with reference to 'code structure', was derived from André Martinet's structural linguistics. The term can be misleading, since everyday usage might lead one to assume that it relates to how 'articulate' individuals are. Presumably because of this potential confusion, theoretical linguists have largely abandoned the use of the term articulation in the structural sense, preferring to refer to 'duality of patterning', but semioticians continue to use the term. Its semiotic usage is rather more closely related to the sense in which lorries (trucks) can be 'articulated' - that is, having separable sections which are linked together. Pierre Guiraud comments on semiotic articulation:



A message is articulated if it can be broken down into elements which are themselves significant. All semiotic elements must be significant. Thus the lorry on the traffic sign can be broken down into wheels, chassis, cabin, etc., but the presence of these elements does not modify the sign. On the other hand, the absence of a jacket or its permutation with a jersey changes the significance of the way someone is dressed. ([Guiraud 1975, 32](#))

Following the model of verbal language, an articulated code has a 'vocabulary' of basic units together with syntactical rules which can be used to generate larger meaningful combinations ([Innis 1986, 88-9, 99-102](#)). A semiotic code which has 'double articulation' (as in the case of verbal language) can be analysed into two abstract structural levels: a higher level called 'the level of first articulation' and a lower level - 'the level of second articulation' ([Nöth 1990](#); [Eco 1976, 231ff](#)). The traffic sign lacks double articulation, but rather than having no articulation, it would more commonly be referred to as having first articulation only.

At the level of *first articulation* the system consists of the *smallest meaningful units* available (e.g. morphemes or words in a language). In language this level of articulation is called the *grammatical level*. The meaningful units at this level are complete signs, each consisting of a signifier and a signified. Where codes have recurrent meaningful units (such as the Olympic sports pictograms and textile care symbols), they have first articulation. In systems with double articulation, these signs are made up of elements from the lower (*second*) level of articulation.

At the level of *second articulation*, a semiotic code is divisible into *minimal functional units* which lack meaning in themselves (e.g. phonemes in speech or graphemes in writing). These purely differential structural units (called *figurae* by Hjelmslev) are recurrent features in the code. They are *not signs in themselves* (the code must have a first level of articulation for these lower units to be combined into meaningful signs). These lower units are nonsignifying sign elements. In a code with both levels (a

'double articulated' system) the function of these lower units is purely to differentiate the minimal *meaningful* units. In language, the phonemes */b/*, */p/* and */t/* are elements of second articulation, the function of which is to distinguish between words, such as */pin/*, */bin/* and */tin/*, which are elements of the first articulation of language. In language, the level of *second articulation* is thus a *phonological* level.

Semiotic codes have either *single articulation*, *double articulation* or *no articulation*. Double articulation enables a semiotic code to form an infinite number of meaningful combinations using a small number of low-level units (offering economy and power). The infinite use of finite elements is a feature which in relation to media in general has been referred to as 'semiotic economy'. Traditional definitions ascribe double articulation only to human language, for which this is regarded as a key 'design feature' ([Hockett 1958](#); [Hockett 1960](#); [Hockett 1965](#)). Louis Hjelmslev regarded it as an essential and defining feature of language ([Hjelmslev 1961](#)). Double articulation is seen as being largely responsible for the creative economy of language. Language is a semiotic system which is highly economical - employing only a small number of signs. Amongst other advantages, linguistic economy facilitates learning and recall. As for creativity, language is infinitely productive. The English language, for instance, has only about 40 or 50 elements of second articulation (phonemes) but these can generate hundreds of thousands of words. Similarly, from a limited vocabulary we can generate an infinite number of sentences (subject to the constraint of *syntax* which governs structurally valid combinations). Consequently, as Noam Chomsky has noted, the creative economy of language gives us the power to endlessly generate sentences which we have never encountered before. It is by *combining* words in multiple ways that we can seek to render the particularity of experience. If we had individual words to represent every particularity we would have to have an infinite number of them, which would exceed our capability of learning, recalling and manipulating them. John Lyons comments that 'duality, as it operates in language, is also bound up with arbitrariness. If each phonological element in a given form had to bear an identifiable iconic relationship, whether conventional or natural, to some aspect of its meaning, it is obvious that there would be severe constraints upon the possibility of combining phonological elements with one another' ([Lyons 1977, 74](#)). Roman Jakobson observed that

In the combination of linguistic units there is an ascending scale of freedom. In the combination of distinctive features into phonemes, the freedom of the individual speaker is zero: the code has already established all the possibilities which may be utilized in the given language. Freedom to combine phonemes into words is circumscribed; it is limited to the marginal situation of word coinage. In forming sentences with words the speaker is less constrained. And finally, in the combination of sentences into utterances, the action of compulsory syntactical rules ceases, and the freedom of any individual speaker to create novel contexts increases substantially, although... the numerous stereotyped utterances are not to be overlooked. ([Jakobson & Halle 1956, 74](#))

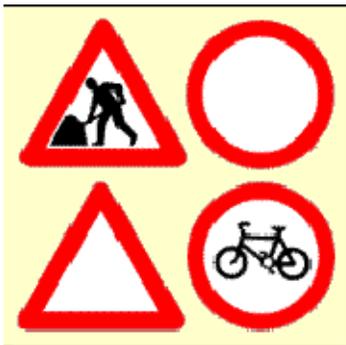
As Jakobson notes, even beyond the level of the sentence, the ways in which we use words are subject to linguistic conventions which limit the possibilities open to us. If we depart too far from the norms, we may fail to communicate.

Double articulation does not seem to occur in the natural communication systems of animals other than humans. As to other human semiotic systems with double articulation, Nöth notes that these include systematic codes used in library or warehouse catalogues, and 'many codes of data-

processing'. He adds that 'there has been much discussion about the structure of codes such as architecture, photography, film, sign language and narratives, but no convincing conclusion has been reached concerning the articulation of these codes' (e-mail 12/8/97). Susanne Langer claims that whilst visual media such as photography, painting and drawing have lines, colours, shadings, shapes, proportions and so on which are 'abstractable and combinatory', and which 'are just as capable of *articulation*, i.e. of complex combination, as words', they have no vocabulary of units with *independent* meanings ([Langer 1951, 86-7](#)).

A symbolism with so many elements, such myriad relationships, cannot be broken up into basic units. It is impossible to find the smallest independent symbol, and recognize its identity when the same unit is met in other contexts... There is, of course, a technique of picturing objects, but the laws governing this technique cannot properly be called a 'syntax', since there are no items that might be called, metaphorically, the 'words' of portraiture. ([ibid., 88](#)).

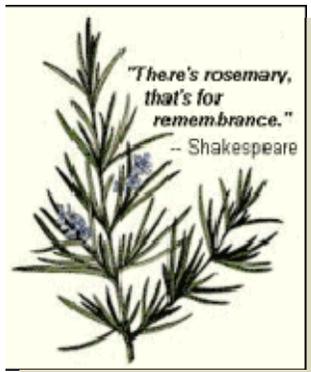
Rather than dismissing 'non-discursive' media for their limitations, however, Langer argues that they are more complex and subtle than verbal language and are 'peculiarly well-suited to the expression of ideas that defy linguistic "projection"'. She argues that we should not seek to impose linguistic models upon other media since the laws that govern their articulation 'are altogether different from the laws of syntax that govern language'. Treating them in linguistic terms leads us to 'misconceive' them: they resist 'translation' ([ibid., 86-9](#)).



Some codes have *first articulation only*. These semiotic systems consist of signs - meaningful elements which are systematically related to each other - but there is no second articulation to structure these signs into minimal, non-meaningful elements. Where the smallest recurrent structural unit in a code is meaningful, the code has first articulation only. Many semioticians argue that nonverbal communication and the various systems of animal communication have only first articulation. Nöth notes that although bird calls make use of basic units, each of these is a complete message, so bird calls have first articulation only ([Nöth 1990, 151](#)). Other examples include hotel and office room numbers where the first digit indicates the floor and

the second indicates the serial number of the room on that floor. The system of related traffic signs (with red borders, triangular or circular shapes, and standardized, stylised images) is a code with first articulation only ([Eco 1976, 232](#)). Some semioticians (such as Christian Metz) argue that codes based on [motivated signs](#) - such as film and television - lack second articulation. Metz declared that in film, 'it is impossible to break up the signifier without getting isomorphic segments of the signified' (cited in [Nöth 1990, 469](#)).

Other semiotic codes lacking double articulation have *second articulation only*. These consist of signs which have specific meanings which are not derived from their elements. They are divisible only into *figurae* (minimal functional units). Nöth suggests that 'the most powerful code with second articulation only is the binary code of information theory' (e-mail, 12/8/97): this has only 2 minimal functional units, 0 and 1, but these units can be combined to generate numbers, letters and other signs. A rather less powerful system with second articulation only is that of accession codes for books, which are simply serial numbers.



Codes *without articulation* consist of a series of signs bearing no direct relation to each other. These signs are not divisible into recurrent compositional elements. The folkloristic 'language of flowers' is a code without articulation, since each type of flower is an independent sign which bears no relation to the other signs in the code. Unarticulated codes, which have no recurrent features, are 'uneconomical'.

Some commentators have proposed more than two levels of articulation in verbal language, but Guiraud argues that:

The two articulations are not to be thought of in terms of syntactical levels. In fact, several levels can be distinguished in the first articulation: sentence, proposition, syntagm, word, morpheme; but each of these complex signs are simply successive combinations of the basic signs which carry the elements of meaning that are picked up at each level. ([Guiraud 1975, 32](#))

Umberto Eco argued that cinema has a *triple articulation*: *iconic figures*; *semes* (combinations of iconic figures); and *kinemorphs* (combinations of semes) ([Stam 2000, 114](#)).

The notion of articulation is, in short, a way of dividing a semiotic system into basic levels: in the case of verbal language the levels can be termed those of sound and meaning. This clearly relates to the Saussurean analytical division of the sign into a 'sound-image' (signifier) and a concept (signified). In a semiotic system with double articulation the levels of the signifier and of the signified are relatively autonomous.

[Denotation, connotation and myth](#) are also described semiotically in terms of levels (the 'orders of signification' of Hjelmslev and Barthes). More generally, Saussure noted that signs can themselves contain signs, as in the case of a 'complex sign' such as the word 'twenty-nine' which contains the 'simple signs' *twenty* and *nine* ([Saussure 1983, 130](#); [Saussure 1974, 131](#)). On a larger scale, an entire text is a sign which may be composed of any number of other signs ([Saussure 1983, 127](#); [Saussure 1974, 128](#)).

Related to the idea of levels of articulation in a semiotic system is the notion of *modelling systems*, since 'secondary modelling systems' are described as superstructures built upon 'primary modelling systems'. Some theorists, following Yuri Lotman, refer to language in these terms. Within this framework, writing is a secondary modelling system and written texts are built upon a primary modelling system which consists of spoken language. Secondary modelling systems are thus presented as if they constitute signs of signs or representations of representations ([Culler 1985, 122](#)). Saussure adopted this position, noting that 'a language and its written form constitute two separate systems of signs. The sole reason for the latter is to represent the former' ([Saussure 1983, 24](#); [Saussure 1974, 23](#)). Since this stance grants primacy to the spoken form, it has been criticized (notably by Jacques Derrida) as *phonocentric* ([Derrida 1976](#)). If we grant that even perception involves encoding, then speech is as 'secondary' as any other sign-system. Despite his own

phonocentrism, Marshall McLuhan emphasized the power of the written word, alluding to its basis in arbitrariness on both structural levels: 'By the meaningless sign [written letters] linked to the meaningless sound we have built the shape and meaning of Western man' ([McLuhan 1962, 50](#)). Other theorists have extended the notion of modelling systems to 'texts' in other media, seeing them as secondary modelling systems built out of a primary 'language'. Literary texts have been seen as a second order modelling system built upon the primary linguistic system or upon the modelling system of the written word ([Silverman 1983, 27](#); [Sturrock 1986, 103](#)). Cinematic texts have sometimes been seen as built upon a primary modelling system of 'graphic language' ([Altman 1999, 175](#)). However, whether a graphical 'language' has basic building blocks and what these might be has been hotly disputed.

Intertextuality

Although Saussure stressed the importance of the relationship of signs to each other, one of the weaknesses of structuralist semiotics is the tendency to treat individual texts as discrete, closed-off entities and to focus exclusively on internal structures. Even where texts are studied as a 'corpus' (a unified collection), the overall generic structures tend themselves to be treated as strictly bounded. The structuralist's first analytical task is often described as being to delimit the boundaries of the system (what is to be included and what excluded), which is logistically understandable but ontologically problematic. Even remaining within the structuralist paradigm, we may note that codes transcend structures. The semiotic notion of [intertextuality](#) introduced by Julia Kristeva is associated primarily with *poststructuralist* theorists. Kristeva referred to texts in terms of two axes: a *horizontal axis* connecting the author and reader of a text, and a *vertical axis*, which connects the text to other texts ([Kristeva 1980, 69](#)). Uniting these two axes are shared [codes](#): every text and every reading depends on prior codes. Kristeva declared that 'every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it' (cited in [Culler 1981, 105](#)). She argued that rather than confining our attention to the structure of a text we should study its 'structuration' (how the structure came into being). This involved siting it 'within the totality of previous or synchronic texts' of which it was a 'transformation' (*Le texte du roman*, cited by [Coward & Ellis 1977, 52](#)).

Intertextuality refers to far more than the 'influences' of writers on each other. For structuralists, language has powers which not only exceed individual control but also determine subjectivity. Structuralists sought to counter what they saw as a deep-rooted bias in literary and aesthetic thought which emphasized the uniqueness of both texts and authors ([Sturrock 1986, 87](#)). The ideology of individualism (with its associated concepts of authorial 'originality', 'creativity' and 'expressiveness') is a post-Renaissance legacy which reached its peak in Romanticism but which still dominates popular discourse. 'Authorship' was a historical invention. Concepts such as 'authorship' and 'plagiarism' did not exist in the Middle Ages. 'Before 1500 or thereabouts people did not attach the same importance to ascertaining the precise identity of the author of a book they were reading or quoting as we do now' ([Goldschmidt 1943, 88](#)). Saussure emphasized that language is a system which pre-exists the individual speaker. For structuralists and poststructuralists alike we are (to use the stock Althusserian formulation) 'always already' positioned by semiotic systems - and most clearly by language. Contemporary theorists have referred to the subject as being *spoken by* language. Barthes declares that 'it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is... to reach the point where only language acts, "performs", and not "me"' ([Barthes 1977, 143](#)). When writers write they are also *written*. To

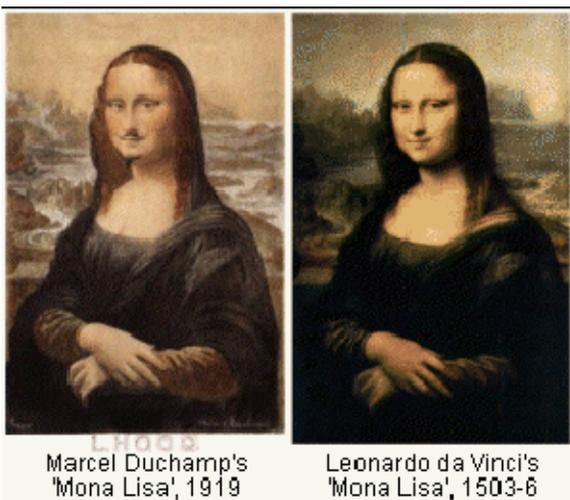
communicate we must utilize existing concepts and conventions. Consequently, whilst our intention to communicate and *what* we intend to communicate are both important to us as individuals, meaning cannot be reduced to authorial 'intention'. To define meaning in terms of authorial intention is the so-called 'intentional fallacy' identified by W K Wimsatt and M C Beardsley of the 'New Critical' tendency in literary criticism ([Wimsatt & Beardsley 1954](#)). We may, for instance, communicate things without being aware of doing so. As Michael de Montaigne wrote in 1580, 'the work, by its own force and fortune, may second the workman, and sometimes out-strip him, beyond his invention and knowledge' (*Essays*, trans. Charles Cotton: 'Of the art of conferring' III, 8). Furthermore, in conforming to any of the conventions of our medium, we act as a medium for perpetuating such conventions.

Theorists of intertextuality problematize the status of 'authorship', treating the writer of a text as the orchestrator of what Roland Barthes refers to as the 'already-written' rather than as its originator ([Barthes 1974, 21](#)). 'A text is... a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations... The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them' ([Barthes 1977, 146](#)). In his book *S/Z*, Barthes deconstructed Balzac's short story *Sarrasine*, seeking to 'de-originate' the text - to demonstrate that it reflects many voices, not just that of Balzac ([Barthes 1974](#)). It would be pure idealism to regard Balzac as 'expressing himself' in language since we do not precede language but are *produced* by it. For Barthes, writing did not involve an instrumental process of recording pre-formed thoughts and feelings (working from signified to signifier) but was a matter of working with the signifiers and letting the signifieds take care of themselves ([Chandler 1995, 60ff](#)). Claude Lévi-Strauss declared that: 'I don't have the feeling that I write my books, I have the feeling that my books get written through me... I never had, and still do not have, the perception of feeling my personal identity. I appear to myself as the place where something is going on, but there is no "I", no "me"' (cited in [Wiseman & Groves 2000, 173](#)).

One of the founding texts of semiotics, the *Cours de linguistique générale*, itself problematizes the status of authorship. Whilst the text published by Payot in Paris bears the name of Ferdinand de Saussure as its author, it was in fact not the work of Saussure at all. Saussure died in 1913 without leaving any detailed outline of his theories on general linguistics or on what he called semiology. The *Cours* was first published posthumously in 1916 and was assembled by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye ('with the collaboration of Albert Riedlinger') on the basis of the notes which had been taken by at least seven students, together with a few personal notes which had been written by Saussure himself. The students' notes referred to three separate courses on general linguistics which Saussure had taught at the University of Geneva over the period of 1906-1911. Saussure thus neither wrote nor read the book which bears his name, although we continually imply that he did by attaching his name to it. It is hardly surprising that various contradictions and inconsistencies and a lack of cohesion in the text have often been noted. Indeed, some commentators have suggested that the *Cours* does not always offer 'a faithful reflection' of Saussure's ideas - a hardly unproblematic notion ([Saussure 1983, xii](#)). On top of all this, English readers have two competing translations of the *Cours* ([Saussure 1974](#); [Saussure 1983](#)). Each translation is, of course, a re-authoring. No 'neutral' translation is possible, since languages involve different value systems - as is noted in the *Cours* itself. Nor can specialist translators be expected to be entirely disinterested. Furthermore, anyone who treats the *Cours* as a founding text in semiotics does so by effectively 'rewriting' it, since its treatment of semiology is fragmentary. Finally, we are hardly short of commentaries to bring both this

foundational text and us as readers into line with the interpreter's own theories (e.g. [Harris 1987](#); [Thibault 1997](#)).

This rather extreme but important example thus serves to highlight that every reading is always a rewriting. It is by no means an isolated example. The first critique of the ideas outlined in the *Cours* was in a book on *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* which was published in Russian in 1929 under the name Valentin Voloshinov, but it has subsequently been claimed that this book had in fact been written by Mikhail Bakhtin, and the authorship of this text is still contested ([Morris 1994, 1](#)). Readers, in any case, construct authors. They perform a kind of amateur archeology, reconstructing them from textual shards whilst at the same time feeling able to say about anyone whose writings they have read, 'I know her (or him)'. The reader's 'Roland Barthes' (for example) never existed. If one had total access to everything he had ever written throughout his life it would be marked by contradiction. The best we can do to reduce such contradictions is to construct yet more authors, such as 'the early Barthes' and 'the later Barthes'. Barthes died in 1981, but every invocation of his name creates another Barthes.



In 1968 Barthes announced 'the death of the author' and 'the birth of the reader', declaring that 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination' ([Barthes 1977, 148](#)). The framing of texts by other texts has implications not only for their *writers* but also for their *readers*. Fredric Jameson argued that 'texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through the sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or - if the text is brand-new - through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions' (cited in [Rodowick 1994, 286](#), where it was, with delicious irony in this context, cited from Tony Bennett). A famous text has a history of readings. 'All literary works... are "rewritten", if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them'

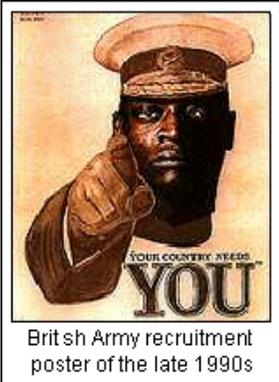
([Eagleton 1983, 12](#)). No-one today - even for the first time - can read a famous novel or poem, look at a famous painting, drawing or sculpture, listen to a famous piece of music or watch a famous play or film without being conscious of the contexts in which the text had been reproduced, drawn upon, alluded to, parodied and so on. Such contexts constitute a primary frame which the reader cannot avoid drawing upon in interpreting the text.

The concept of intertextuality reminds us that each text exists in relation to others. In fact, texts owe more to other texts than to their own makers. Michel Foucault declared that:

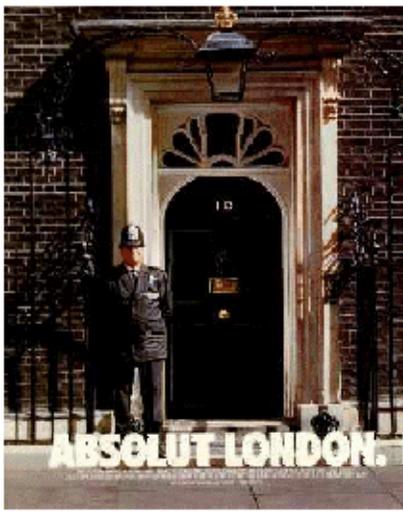
The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network... The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands... Its unity is variable and relative. ([Foucault 1974, 23](#))

Texts are framed by others in many ways. Most obvious are formal frames: a television programme, for instance, may be part of a series and part of a *genre* (such as *soap* or *sitcom*). Our understanding

of any individual text relates to such framings. Texts provide contexts within which other texts may be created and interpreted. The art historian Ernst Gombrich goes further, arguing that all art, however 'naturalistic' is 'a manipulation of vocabulary' rather than a reflection of the world ([Gombrich 1982, 70, 78, 100](#)). Texts draw upon multiple codes from wider contexts - both textual and social. The assignment of a text to a genre provides the interpreter of the text with a key intertextual framework. [Genre theory](#) is an important field in its own right, and genre theorists do not necessarily embrace semiotics. Within semiotics genres can be seen as sign systems or codes - conventionalized but dynamic structures. Each example of a genre utilises conventions which link it to other members of that genre. Such conventions are at their most obvious in 'spoof' versions of the genre. But intertextuality is also reflected in the fluidity of genre boundaries and in the blurring of genres and their functions which is reflected in such recent coinages as 'advertorials', 'infomercials', 'edutainment', 'docudrama' and 'faction' (a blend of 'fact' and 'fiction').



The debts of a text to other texts are seldom acknowledged (other than in the scholarly apparatus of academic writing). This serves to further the mythology of authorial 'originality'. However, some texts allude directly to each other - as in 'remakes' of films, extra-diegetic references to the media in the animated cartoon *The Simpsons*, and many amusing contemporary TV ads (in the UK, perhaps most notably in the ads for Boddington's beer). This is a particularly self-conscious form of intertextuality: it credits its audience with the necessary experience to make sense of such allusions and offers them the pleasure of recognition. By alluding to other texts and other media this practice reminds us that we are in a mediated reality, so it can also be seen as an 'alienatory' mode which runs counter to the dominant 'realist' tradition which focuses on persuading the audience to believe in the on-going reality of the narrative. It appeals to the pleasures of critical detachment rather than of emotional involvement.



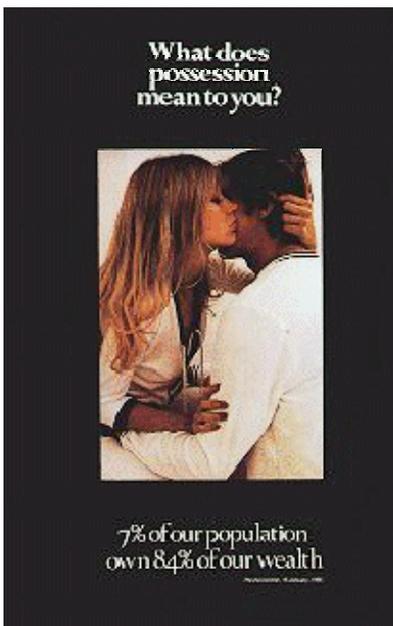
In order to make sense of the Absolut vodka advertisement shown here you need to know what to look for. Such expectations are established by reference to one's previous experience in looking at related advertisements in an extended series. Once we know that we are looking for the shape of the bottle, it is easier to perceive it here. Modern visual advertisements make extensive use of intertextuality in this way. Sometimes there is no direct reference to the product at all. Instant identification of the appropriate interpretative code serves to identify the interpreter of the advertisement as a member of an exclusive club, with each act of interpretation serving to renew one's membership.

Links also cross the boundaries of formal frames, for instance, in sharing topics with treatments within other genres (the theme of war is found in a range of genres such action-adventure film, documentary, news, current affairs). Some genres are shared by several media: the genres of *soap*, *game show* and *phone-in* are found on both television and radio; the genre of the *news report* is found on TV, radio and in newspapers; the *advertisement* appears in all mass media forms. Texts in the genre of the *trailer* are directly tied to specific texts within or outside the same medium. The genre of the *programme listing* exists within the medium of print (listings magazines, newspapers) to support the

media of TV, radio and film. TV soaps generate substantial coverage in popular newspapers, magazines and books; the 'magazine' format was adopted by TV and radio. And so on.

The notion of intertextuality problematizes the idea of a text having boundaries and questions the dichotomy of 'inside' and 'outside': where does a text 'begin' and 'end'? What is 'text' and what is 'context'? The medium of television highlights this issue: it is productive to think of television in terms of a concept which Raymond Williams called 'flow' rather than as a series of discrete texts. Much the same applies to the World Wide Web, where hypertext links on a page can link it directly to many others. However, texts in any medium can be thought of in similar terms. The boundaries of texts are permeable. Each text exists within a vast 'society of texts' in various genres and media: no text is an island entire of itself. A useful semiotic technique is comparison and contrast between differing treatments of similar themes (or similar treatments of different themes), *within* or *between* different genres or media.

Whilst the term intertextuality would normally be used to refer to allusions to other texts, a related kind of allusion is what might be called 'intratextuality' - involving internal relations within the text. Within a single code (e.g. a photographic code) these would be simply syntagmatic relationships (e.g. the relationship of the image of one person to another within the same photograph). However, a text may involve several codes: a newspaper photograph, for instance, may have a caption (indeed, such an example serves to remind us that what we may choose to regard as a discrete 'text' for analysis lacks clearcut boundaries: the notion of intertextuality emphasizes that texts have contexts).



Roland Barthes introduced the concept of *anchorage* ([Barthes 1977, 38ff.](#)). Linguistic elements can serve to 'anchor' (or constrain) the preferred readings of an image: 'to fix the floating chain of signifieds' ([ibid., 39](#)). Barthes introduced this concept of textual anchorage primarily in relation to advertisements, but it applies of course to other genres such as captioned photographs, maps, narrated television and film documentaries, and cartoons and comics ('comic books' to North Americans) with their speech and thought 'balloons'. Barthes argued that the principal function of anchorage was ideological ([ibid., 40](#)). This is perhaps most obvious when photographs are used in contexts such as newspapers. Photograph captions typically present themselves as neutral labels for what self-evidently exists in the depicted world whilst actually serving to define the terms of reference and point-of-view from which it is to be seen ([Chaplin 1994, 270](#)). For instance, 'It is a very common practice for the captions to news photographs to tell us, in words, exactly how the subject's expression *ought to be read*' ([Hall 1981, 229](#)). You may check your daily newspaper to verify this claim.

Such textual anchorages can have a more subversive function, however. For instance, in the 1970s, the photographer Victor Burgin exhibited posters in the form of images appropriated from print advertisements together with his own printed text which ran counter to the intended meaning of the original ads.

Barthes used the term *relay* to describe text/image relationships which were 'complementary', instancing cartoons, comic strips and narrative film ([ibid., 41](#)). He did not coin a term for 'the paradoxical case where the image is constructed according to the text' ([ibid., 40](#)). Even if it were true

in the 1950s and early 1960s that the verbal text was primary in the relation between texts and images, in contemporary society visual images have acquired far more importance in contexts such as advertising, so that what he called 'relay' is far more common. There are also many instances where the 'illustrative use' of an image provides anchorage for ambiguous text - as in assembly instructions for flat-pack furniture (note that when we talk about 'illustrating' and 'captioning' we logocentrically imply the primacy of verbal text over images). Awareness of the importance of intertextuality should lead us to examine the functions of those images and written or spoken text used in close association within a text not only in terms of their respective codes, but in terms of their overall rhetorical orchestration. Evelyn Goldsmith has produced a useful review of empirical research into the relationship between associated texts and images ([Goldsmith 1984](#)).

In media such as film, television and the worldwide web, multiple codes are involved. As the film theorist Christian Metz put it, codes 'are not... added to one another, or juxtaposed in just any manner; they are organized, articulated in terms of one another in accordance with a certain order, they contract unilateral hierarchies... Thus a veritable *system of intercodical relations* is generated which is itself, in some sort, another code' ([Metz 1974, 242](#)). The interaction of film and soundtrack in chart music videos offers a good example of the dynamic nature of their modes of relationship and patterns of relative dominance. The codes involved in such textual systems clearly cannot be considered in isolation: the dynamic patterns of dominance between them contribute to the generation of meaning. Nor need they be assumed to be always in complete accord with each other - indeed, the interplay of codes may be particularly revealing of incoherences, ambiguities, contradictions and omissions which may offer the interpreter scope for deconstructing the text.

The relationships between codes within a genre may shift over time, as William Leiss and his colleagues note:

The growing preponderance of visuals in ads has enhanced the ambiguity of meaning embedded in message structures. Earlier advertising usually states its message quite explicitly through the medium of written text..., but starting in the mid-1920s visual representation became more common, and the relationship between text and visual image became complementary - that is, the text explained the visual. In the postwar period, and especially since the early 1960s, the function of text moved away from explaining the visual and towards a more cryptic form, in which text appeared as a kind of 'key' to the visual.

In all, the effect was to make the commercial message more ambiguous; a 'reading' of it depended on relating elements in the ad's internal structure to each other, as well as drawing in references from the external world. ([Leiss et al. 1990, 199](#))



Claude Lévi-Strauss

Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion of the *bricoleur* who creates improvised structures by appropriating pre-existing materials which are ready-to-hand is now fairly well-known within cultural studies ([Lévi-Strauss 1974, 16-33, 35-6, 150n](#); cf. [Lévi-Strauss 1964](#)). Lévi-Strauss saw 'mythical thought' as 'a kind of bricolage' ([Lévi-Strauss 1974, 17](#)): 'it builds ideological castles out of the debris of what was once a social discourse' ([ibid., 21n](#)): The *bricoleur* works with signs, constructing new arrangements by adopting existing signifieds as signifiers and 'speaking' 'through the medium of things' - by the choices made from 'limited possibilities' ([ibid., 20, 21](#)). 'The first aspect of bricolage

is... to construct a system of paradigms with the fragments of syntagmatic chains', leading in turn to new syntagms ([ibid., 150n](#)). 'Authorship' could be seen in similar terms. Lévi-Strauss certainly saw artistic creation as in part a dialogue with the materials ([ibid., 18, 27, 29](#)). Logically (following Quintilian), the practice of *bricolage* can be seen as operating through several key transformations: addition, deletion, substitution and transposition ([Nöth 1990, 341](#)).

Gerard Genette proposed the term 'transtextuality' as a more inclusive term than 'intertextuality' ([Genette 1997](#)). He listed five subtypes:

- *intertextuality*: quotation, plagiarism, allusion;
- *paratextuality*: the relation between a text and its 'paratext' - that which surrounds the main body of the text - such as titles, headings, prefaces, epigraphs, dedications, acknowledgements, footnotes, illustrations, dust jackets, etc.;
- *architextuality*: designation of a text as part of a genre or genres (Genette refers to designation by the text itself, but this could also be applied to its framing by readers);
- *metatextuality*: explicit or implicit critical commentary of one text on another text (metatextuality can be hard to distinguish from the following category);
- *hypotextuality* (Genette's term was *hypertextuality*): the relation between a text and a preceding 'hypotext' - a text or genre on which it is based but which it transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends (including parody, spoof, sequel, translation).

To such a list, computer-based *hypertextuality* should be added: text which can take the reader directly to other texts (regardless of authorship or location). This kind of intertextuality disrupts the conventional 'linearity' of texts. Reading such texts is seldom a question of following standard sequences predetermined by their authors.

It may be useful to consider the issue of 'degrees of intertextuality'. Would the 'most intertextual' text be an indistinguishable copy of another text, or would that have gone beyond what it means to be intertextual? Would the 'most intratextual' text be one which approached the impossible goal of referring only to itself? Even if no specific text is referred to, texts are written within genres and use language in ways which their authors have seldom 'invented'. Intertextuality does not seem to be simply a continuum on a single dimension and there does not seem to be a consensus about what dimensions we should be looking for. Intertextuality is not a feature of the text alone but of the 'contract' which reading it forges between its author(s) and reader(s). Since the dominant mode of producing texts seems to involve masking their debts, *reflexivity* seems to be an important issue - we need to consider how [marked](#) the intertextuality is. Some defining features of intertextuality might include the following:

- *reflexivity*: how reflexive (or self-conscious) the use of intertextuality seems to be (if reflexivity is important to what it means to be intertextual, then presumably an indistinguishable copy goes beyond being intertextual);
- *alteration*: the alteration of sources (more *noticeable* alteration presumably making it more reflexively intertextual);
- *explicitness*: the specificity and explicitness of reference(s) to other text(s) (e.g. direct quotation, attributed quotation) (is *assuming* recognition more reflexively intertextual?);
- *criticality to comprehension*: how important it would be for the reader to *recognize* the intertextuality involved;

- *scale of adoption*: the overall scale of allusion/incorporation within the text; and
- *structural unboundedness*: to what extent the text is presented (or understood) as part of or tied to a larger structure (e.g. as part of a genre, of a series, of a serial, of a magazine, of an exhibition etc.) - factors which are often not under the control of the author of the text.

Confounding the realist agenda that 'art imitates life,' intertextuality suggests that art imitates art. Oscar Wilde (typically) took this notion further, declaring provocatively that 'life imitates art'. Texts are instrumental not only in the construction of other texts but in the construction of experiences. Much of what we 'know' about the world is derived from what we have read in books, newspapers and magazines, from what we have seen in the cinema and on television and from what we have heard on the radio. Life is thus lived through texts and framed by texts to a greater extent than we are normally aware of. As Scott Lash observes, 'We are living in a society in which our *perception* is directed almost as often to representations as it is to "reality"' ([Lash 1990, 24](#)). Intertextuality blurs the boundaries not only between texts but between texts and the world of lived experience. Indeed, we may argue that we know no pre-textual experience. The world as we know it is merely its current representation.

Criticisms of Semiotic Analysis

Other than as 'the study of signs' there is relatively little agreement amongst semioticians themselves as to the scope and methodology of semiotics. Although Saussure had looked forward to the day when semiotics would become part of the social sciences, semiotics is still a relatively loosely defined critical practice rather than a unified, fully-fledged analytical method or theory. At worst, what passes for 'semiotic analysis' is little more than a pretentious form of literary criticism applied beyond the bounds of literature and based merely on subjective interpretation and grand assertions. This kind of abuse has earned semiotics an unenviable reputation in some quarters as the last refuge for academic charlatans. Criticisms of structuralist semiotics have led some theorists to abandon semiotics altogether, whilst others have sought to merge it with new perspectives. It is difficult to offer a critique of a shifting target which changes its form so fluidly as it moves.

Semiotics is often criticized as 'imperialistic', since some semioticians appear to regard it as concerned with, and applicable to, anything and everything, trespassing on almost every academic discipline. John Sturrock comments that the 'dramatic extension of the semiotic field, to include the whole of culture, is looked on by those suspicious of it as a kind of intellectual terrorism, overfilling our lives with meanings' ([Sturrock 1986, 89](#)). Semiotic analysis is just one of many techniques which may be used to explore sign practices. Signs in various media are not alike - different types may need to be studied in different ways. As with any other [process of mediation](#), semiotics suits some purposes better than others. Semiotics does not, for instance, lend itself to quantification, a function to which *content analysis* is far better adapted (which is not to suggest that the two techniques are incompatible, as many semioticians seem to assume). The empirical testing of semiotic claims requires other methods. Semiotic approaches make certain kinds of questions easier to ask than others: they do not in themselves shed light on how people in particular social contexts actually interpret texts, which may require ethnographic and phenomenological approaches (see [McQuarrie & Mick 1992](#)).

Semioticians do not always make explicit the limitations of their techniques, and semiotics is sometimes uncritically presented as a general-purpose tool. Saussurean semiotics is based on a linguistic model but not everyone agrees that it is productive to treat photography and film, for instance, as 'languages'. Paul Messaris disputes that we need to learn to 'read' the formal codes of photographic and audio-visual media, arguing that the resemblance of their images to observable reality is not merely a matter of cultural convention: 'to a substantial degree the formal conventions encountered in still or motion pictures should make a good deal of sense even to a first-time viewer' ([Messaris 1994, 7](#)). John Corner has criticised the way in which some semioticians have treated almost anything as a code, whilst leaving the details of such codes inexplicit (particularly in the case of ideological codes) ([Corner 1980](#)).

Sometimes semioticians present their analyses as if they were purely objective 'scientific' accounts rather than subjective interpretations. Yet few semioticians seem to feel much need to provide empirical evidence for particular interpretations, and much semiotic analysis is loosely impressionistic and highly unsystematic (or alternatively, generates elaborate taxonomies with little evident practical application). Some semioticians seem to choose examples which illustrate the points they wish to make rather than applying semiotic analysis to an extensive random sample ([Leiss et al. 1990, 214](#)). William Leiss and his colleagues argue that a major disadvantage of semiotics is that 'it is heavily dependent upon the skill of the individual analyst'. Less skilful practitioners 'can do little more than state the obvious in a complex and often pretentious manner' ([Leiss et al. 1990, 214](#)). Certainly, in some cases, semiotic analysis seems little more than an excuse for interpreters to display the appearance of mastery through the use of jargon which excludes most people from participation. In practice, semiotic analysis invariably consists of individual readings. We are seldom presented with the commentaries of several analysts on the same text, to say nothing of evidence of any kind of consensus amongst different semioticians. Few semioticians make their analytical strategy sufficiently explicit for others to apply it either to the examples used or to others. Structuralist semioticians tend to make no allowance for alternative readings, assuming either that their own interpretations reflect a general consensus or that 'their text interpretations are immanent in the sign structure and need no cross-validation' ([McQuarrie & Mick 1992, 194](#)). Semioticians who reject the investigation of other people's interpretations privilege what has been called the 'élite interpreter' - though socially-oriented semioticians would insist that the exploration of people's interpretive practices is fundamental to semiotics.

Some semiotic analysis has been criticised as nothing more than an abstract and 'arid formalism' which is preoccupied with classification. Susan Hayward declares that structuralist semiotics can lead to 'a crushing of the aesthetic response through the weight of the theoretical framework' ([Hayward 1996, 352](#)). Semiotic analysis often shows a tendency to downplay the *affective* domain - though the study of [connotations](#) ought to include the sensitive exploration of highly variable and subjective emotional nuances.

In structuralist semiotics the focus is on *langue* rather than *parole* (Saussure's terms), on formal *systems* rather than on *processes* of use and production. Structuralist studies have tended to be purely textual analyses, and it has been suggested that even when semioticians move beyond textual analysis, 'they subordinate other moments to textual analysis' ([Johnson 1996, 98](#)). Semiotics can appear to suggest that meaning is purely explicable in terms of determining textual structures. Such a stance is subject to the same criticisms as [linguistic determinism](#). In giving priority to the determining power of the system it can be seen as fundamentally conservative. Purely structuralist semiotics does

not address processes of production, [audience interpretation](#) or even authorial intentions. It ignores particular practices, institutional frameworks and the cultural, social, economic and political context. Even Roland Barthes, who argues that texts are codified to encourage a reading which favours the interests of the dominant class, confines his attention to the internal textual organization and does not engage with the social context of interpretation ([Gardiner 1992, 149-50](#)). It cannot be assumed that preferred readings will go unchallenged ([Hall 1980](#)). The sociologist Don Slater has criticised the *functionalism* of structuralist semiotics, arguing that material practices such as the 'reading of texts' must be related to the social relations which give rise to the 'politics of cultural practice'. Functionalism, he comments, 'admits of thoroughly internal solutions to problems of determination' ([Slater 1983, 259](#)). David Buxton also argues that structuralist approaches 'deny... [social determination](#)' and he insists that 'the text must be related to something other than its own structure: in other words, we must explain how it comes to be *structured*' ([Buxton 1990, 13](#)). We must consider not only *how* signs signify (structurally) but also *why* (socially); structures are not causes. The relationships between signifiers and their signifieds may be ontologically arbitrary but they are not socially arbitrary. We should beware of allowing the notion of the sign as arbitrary to foster [the myth of the neutrality of the medium](#).

Dominic Strinati notes:

How can we know that a bunch of roses signifies passion unless we also know the intention of the sender and the reaction of the receiver, and the kind of relationship they are involved in? If they are lovers and accept the conventions of giving and receiving flowers as an aspect of romantic, sexual love, then we might accept... [this] interpretation. But if we do this, we do so on the basis not of the sign but of the social relationships in which we can locate the sign... The roses may also be sent as a joke, an insult, a sign of gratitude, and so on. They may indicate passion on the part of the sender but repulsion on the part of the receiver; they may signify family relations between grandparents and grandchildren rather than relations between lovers, and so on. They might even connote sexual harassment. ([Strinati 1995, 125](#)).

Feminist theorists have suggested that despite its usefulness to feminists in some respects, structuralist semiotics 'has often obscured the significance of power relations in the constitution of difference, such as patriarchal forms of domination and subordination' ([Franklin et al. 1996, 263](#)).

Synchronic analysis studies a phenomenon as if it were frozen at one moment in time; *diachronic* analysis focuses on change over time. Insofar as semiotics tends to focus on synchronic rather than diachronic analysis (as it does in Saussurean semiotics), it underplays the dynamic nature of media conventions (for instance, television conventions change fairly rapidly compared to conventions for written English). It can also underplay dynamic changes in the cultural myths which signification both alludes to and helps to shape. Purely structuralist semiotics ignores process and historicity - unlike historical theories like [Marxism](#).

As Hodge and Tripp note, there can hardly be 'an exhaustive semiotic analysis... because a "complete" analysis... would still be located in particular social and historical circumstances' ([Hodge & Tripp 1986, 27](#)). This is reinforced by the poststructuralist stance that we cannot step outside our signifying systems. Semioticians seek to distance themselves from dominant codes by strategies aimed at *denaturalization*. The notion of 'making the familiar strange, and the strange familiar' is now a recurrent feature of artistic and photographic manifestos and of creative 'brainstorming' sessions in

many fields. The phrase itself has been attributed to the German poet Novalis (1772-1801, aka Friedrich von Hardenberg), who declared that the essence of romanticism was 'to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar'. The concept is found amongst other Romantic theorists such as Wordsworth and Coleridge. The notion is also closely associated with Surrealism and with Brechtian 'alienation'. However, its adoption by semioticians probably owes most to Russian Formalist criticism ([Lemon & Reis 1965](#)). Victor Shklovsky argued in 1916 that the key function of art was *estrangement*, *defamiliarization* or 'making strange' (*ostranenie*) - i.e. renewing our perception of everyday things and events which are so familiar that our perception of them has become routinized ([Hawkes 1977, 62-67](#)). Russian Formalism was a key influence on the development of semiotics in Eastern Europe, and the legacy of 'making the familiar strange' is an important one for semiotics. However, as Simon Watney notes, the strategy of *defamiliarization* is itself, of course, ideological and has been associated with the notion that the tactic of surprise may serve to banish 'distortions' so that we may 'objectively' perceive 'reality' ([Watney 1982, 173-4](#)). Clearly the strategy of 'making the familiar strange' needs to be coupled with an awareness that whilst we may be able to bypass one set of conventions we may never escape the framing of experience by convention.



Mikhail Bakhtin

John Sturrock notes that some commentators, such as Mikhail Bakhtin - a literary theorist - have used semiotics for the 'revelatory' political purpose of 'demystifying' society, and that such approaches can lead to 'loaded' 'readings' of society simply as an ideological conspiracy by one social class against the rest ([Sturrock 1986, 91](#)). Sturrock favoured 'a more or less neutral' approach, but few theorists would be likely to accept the possibility of such neutrality. Marxist theorists in particular emphasize 'the politics of signification' - signification cannot be neutral ('value-free'). John Tagg comments that he is 'not concerned with exposing the manipulation of a pristine "truth", or with unmasking some conspiracy, but rather with the analysis of the specific "political economy" within which the "mode of production" of "truth" is operative' ([Tagg 1988, 174-5](#)). Structuralist theorists tend to assume that we can use semiotic analysis to look beyond signs to an 'underlying' pre-given reality, but post-structuralist theorists have argued that this is impossible - we cannot stand outside our sign systems.

Guy Cook argues that there is a tendency for some semioticians to represent communication as a simple process of 'decoding':

The popular phrase *Decoding Advertisements* was first used by Judith Williamson as the title of a book published in 1978, and it has been echoed widely in courses and publications ever since ([Umiker-Sebeok 1987: 249-335](#)). The essence of Williamson's approach is to unveil through analysis what she calls the 'real' meaning of the words and images of an ad, and the 'real world' to which the 'unreal' images of the ad refer ([Williamson 1978: 47](#)). In this there is a clear assumption that 'reality' is not only quite distinct from 'fiction' but also morally superior... Though the decoding approach on occasion yields interesting results (in practice often rather obvious ones), a drawback of the approach is its hasty satisfaction that such equivalences constitute a complete analysis. This leads it to jettison all consideration of what is particular to the surface of discourse, or of a particular signifier, and thus miss much of complexity, skill and humour. ([Cook 1992, 63-4](#))

Cook adds that 'a weakness of the semiotic approach is its exclusive devotion to similarities, and then an air of finality once these similarities are observed, which blinds it to what is unique' ([ibid., 70](#)).

Rosalind Coward and John Ellis also comment that 'structural analysis proved to be inadequate to account for the differences between texts' ([Coward & Ellis 1977, 5](#)). The focus on 'underlying structures' which characterizes the structural formalism of theorists such as Propp, Greimas and Lévi-Strauss neglects 'surface forms' which may be important in themselves ([Cook 1992, 71](#)). This is particularly vexatious for literary critics, since it appears to ignore issues of stylistic difference.

Varda Langholz Leymore, who herself employed a structuralist approach, argued that:

Semiological studies derive a great inspiration from linguistics, yet in most cases they fall short of complying with probably its most revolutionary aspect, the infinite creativity of the base rules. In most semiological studies the identification of structure is tantamount to creating formal schemata into which all individual members of the system may, following some rules, be reduced. However, the converse is not true. The systems are incapable of generating one single example which belongs to their universe of discourse, in the sense that Chomsky is able to generate sentences. In other words, the rules enabling one to 'transform back' from the deep structure to the surface structure, are not specified. In this sense most semiological studies are not generative but static.

([Langholz Leymore 1975, 15](#))

Some contemporary theorists have rejected a purely structuralist semiotics. But such a rejection need not involve a wholesale rejection of semiotics. Influential as it has been, structuralist analysis is but one approach to semiotics. Many of the criticisms of semiotics are directed at a form of semiotics to which few contemporary semioticians adhere. Whilst some semioticians have retained a structuralist concern with formal systems (mainly focusing on detailed studies of narrative, film and television editing and so on), many have become more concerned with 'social semiotics' ([Hodge & Kress 1988](#)). A key concern of social semioticians is with what Stephen Heath calls the 'specific signifying practices' (see [Lapsley & Westlake 1988, 55](#)). Such 'reformed' semioticians practise 'poststructuralist semiotics, focusing on what one has called 'situated social semiosis' ([Jensen 1995, 57](#)). This at least is the rhetoric of social semioticians, but the extent to which social semiotics has so far met the concerns of sociologists is debatable. However, it is early days: 'social semiotics' is still under construction. Contemporary theorists who have associated themselves with this development include Gunther Kress, Robert Hodge, Theo van Leeuwen, Klaus Bruhn Jensen, Paul J Thibault and Jay Lemke ([Hodge & Kress 1988](#); [Jensen 1995](#); [Lemke 1995](#); [Kress & van Leeuwen 1996](#); [Thibault 1997](#)).

Victor Burgin notes that, of several discourses, '[Marxism](#) and psychoanalysis [the latter particularly derived from the work of [Jacques Lacan](#)] have most informed [poststructuralist] semiotics in its moves to grasp the determinations of history and the subject in the production of meaning' ([Burgin 1982b, 144-5](#)). Strinati argues that semiotics has been used 'to render the Marxist theory of ideology less deterministic and instrumental. However, this still tends to underestimate the ways in which what is produced is itself subject to conflicts and negotiations, and how the meanings produced may not be uniform, consistent, unambiguous or reducible to a coherent dominant ideology' ([Strinati 1995, 127](#); see also [Tagg 1988, 23ff, 153-83](#)). Another inflection of semiotics is Foucauldian - emphasising 'the power effects of discursive practices' ([Tagg 1988, 22](#)).

It is only fair to note that much of the criticism of semiotics has taken the form of self-criticism by those within the field. The theoretical literature of semiotics reflects a constant attempt by many

semioticians to grapple with the implications of new theories for their framing of the semiotic enterprise. Furthermore, contemporary apologists have noted that there is nothing new about the emphasis on the social dimension of semiotics. The roots of social semiotics can be traced to the early theorists. Neither Saussure nor Peirce studied the social use of signs. However, Saussure did envisage semiotics as 'a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life'. As for Peirce, the notion of semiosis as a dialogic process is central to his thinking. Signs do not exist without interpreters, and semiotic *codes* are of course social conventions. However, it has to be acknowledged that an emphasis on the social dimension of semiotics in the form of the study of specific meaning-making *practices* is relatively recent outside of specialized academic journals and it is not yet much in evidence at the heart of the activities of many semiotic researchers.

Semiotics is not, never has been, and seems unlikely ever to be, an academic discipline in its own right. It is now widely regarded primarily as one mode of analysis amongst others rather than as a 'science' of cultural forms.

Strengths of Semiotic Analysis

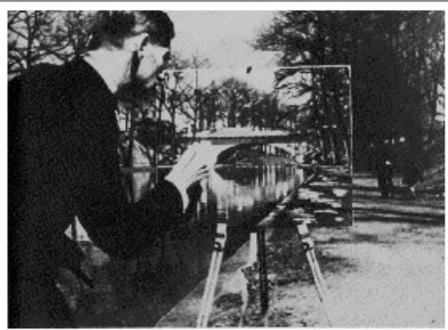
Semiotics can help to denaturalize theoretical assumptions in academia just as in everyday life; it can thus raise new theoretical issues ([Culler 1985, 102](#); [Douglas 1982, 199](#)). Whilst this means that many scholars who encounter semiotics find it unsettling, others find it exciting. Semiotic techniques 'in which the analogy of language as a system is extended to culture as a whole' can be seen as representing 'a substantial break from the positivist and empirical traditions which had limited much previous cultural theory' ([Franklin et al. 1996, 263](#)). Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress argue that unlike many academic disciplines, 'semiotics offers the promise of a systematic, comprehensive and coherent study of communications phenomena as a whole, not just instances of it' ([Hodge & Kress 1988, 1](#)). Semiotics provides us with a potentially unifying conceptual framework and a set of methods and terms for use across the full range of signifying practices, which include gesture, posture, dress, writing, speech, photography, film, television and radio. Semiotics may not itself be a discipline but it is at least a focus of enquiry, with a central concern for meaning-making practices which conventional academic disciplines treat as peripheral. As David Sless notes, 'we consult linguists to find out about language, art historians or critics to find out about paintings, and anthropologists to find out how people in different societies signal to each other through gesture, dress or decoration. But if we want to know what all these different things have in common then we need to find someone with a semiotic point of view, a vantage point from which to survey our world' ([Sless 1986, 1](#)). David Mick suggests, for instance, that 'no discipline concerns itself with *representation* as strictly as semiotics does' ([Mick 1988, 20](#); my emphasis). Semiotics foregrounds and problematizes the process of representation.

Traditional structural semiotics was primarily applied to textual analysis but it is misleading to identify contemporary semiotics with structuralism. The turn to social semiotics has been reflected in an increasing concern with the role of the reader. In either form, semiotics is invaluable if we wish to look beyond the manifest content of texts. Structuralist semiotics seeks to look behind or beneath the surface of the observed in order to discover the underlying organization of phenomena. The more obvious the structural organization of a text or code may seem to be, the more difficult it may be to see beyond such surface features ([Langholz Leymore 1975, 9](#)). Searching for what is 'hidden' beneath the 'obvious' can lead to fruitful insights. Semiotics is also well adapted to exploring

[connotative meanings](#). Social semiotics alerts us to how the same text may generate different meanings for different readers.

Semiotics can also help us to realise that whatever assertions seem to us to be 'obvious', 'natural', universal, *given*, permanent and incontrovertible are generated by the ways in which sign systems operate in our discourse communities. Art historian Keith Mosley comments that:

Semiotics makes us aware that the cultural values with which we make sense of the world are a tissue of conventions that have been handed down from generation to generation by the members of the culture of which we are a part. It reminds us that there is nothing 'natural' about our values; they are social constructs that not only vary enormously in the course of time but differ radically from culture to culture. (cited in [Schroeder 1998, 225](#))



Whereas both 'common-sense' and positivist realism insist that reality is independent of the signs which refer to it, semiotics emphasizes the role of sign systems in the construction of reality. Although things may exist independently of signs we know them only through the mediation of signs. We see only what our sign systems allow us to see.

Whilst Saussurean semioticians have sometimes been criticized for seeking to impose verbal language as a model on media which are non-verbal or not solely or primarily verbal, the virtue of adopting a

linguistic model lies in treating all signs as being to some extent arbitrary and conventional - thus fostering an awareness of the ideological forces that seek to naturalize signs ([Culler 1985, 92](#)). Semioticians argue that signs are related to their signifieds by social conventions which we learn. We become so used to such conventions in our use of various media that they seem 'natural', and it can be difficult for us to realize the conventional nature of such relationships. When we take these relationships for granted we treat the signified as [unmediated](#) or 'transparent', as when we interpret television or photography as 'a window on the world'. Semiotics demonstrates that the 'transparency' of the 'medium' is illusory.

Semiotics can help to make us aware of what we take for granted in representing the world, reminding us that we are always dealing with signs, not with an unmediated objective reality, and that sign systems are involved in the [construction of meaning](#). This is an ideological issue, since, as Victor Burgin notes, 'an ideology is the sum of taken-for-granted realities of everyday life' ([Burgin 1982a, 46](#)). Valentin Voloshinov declared: 'Whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too' ([Voloshinov 1973, 10](#)). There are no ideologically 'neutral' sign systems: signs function to persuade as well as to refer. Sign systems help to naturalize and reinforce particular framings of 'the way things are', although the operation of ideology in signifying practices is typically masked. Consequently, semiotic analysis always involves ideological analysis. If signs do not merely reflect reality but are involved in its construction then those who control the sign systems control the construction of reality. However, 'commonsense' involves incoherences, ambiguities, inconsistencies, contradictions, omissions, gaps and silences which offer leverage points for potential social change. The role of ideology is to suppress these in the interests of dominant groups. Consequently, reality construction occurs on 'sites of struggle'. As John Hartley comments, 'contending social forces seek to "fix" the meaning-potential of each sign with an evaluative accent conducive to their particular interests' and at the

same time try to present evaluative differences as differences in fact ([Hartley 1982, 23, 24](#)). For Roland Barthes various codes contribute to reproducing bourgeois ideology, making it seem natural, proper and inevitable. One need not be a Marxist to appreciate that it can be liberating to become aware of whose view of reality is being privileged in the process. Many semioticians see their primary task as being to *denaturalize* signs, texts and codes. Semiotics can thus show ideology at work and demonstrate that 'reality' can be challenged.

Whilst processes of mediation tend to retreat to transparency in our routine everyday practices, adopting a semiotic approach can help us to attend to what Catherine Belsey calls 'the construction of the process of signification' in analysing specific texts ([Belsey 1980, 47](#)). This has made it a particularly attractive approach for media educators. In the study of the mass media, semiotic approaches can draw our attention to such taken-for-granted practices as the classic Hollywood convention of '[invisible editing](#)' which is still the dominant editing style in popular cinema and television. Semiotic treatments can make us aware that this is a manipulative convention which we have learned to accept as 'natural' in film and television. More broadly, Pierre Guiraud argued that 'it is doubtless one of the main tasks of semiology to establish the existence of systems in apparently a-systematic modes of signification' ([Guiraud 1975, 30](#)). In relation to the mass media, semiotics has made distinctive theoretical contributions. In association with psychoanalysis, semiotics also introduced the theory of 'the positioning of the subject' (the spectator) in relation to the filmic text. Whilst this structuralist stance may have reinforced the myth of the irresistibility of media influence, the emphasis of social semioticians on diversity of interpretation (within social parameters) has countered the earlier tendency to equate 'content' with meaning and to translate this directly to 'media effects'.

As an approach to communication which focuses on meaning and interpretation, semiotics challenges the reductive [transmission model](#) which equates meaning with 'message' (or content). Signs do not just 'convey' meanings, but constitute a medium in which meanings are *constructed*. Semiotics helps us to realise that meaning is not passively absorbed but arises only in the active process of interpretation. In relation to printed advertisements, William Leiss and his colleagues note:

The semiological approach... suggests that the meaning of an ad does not float on the surface just waiting to be internalized by the viewer, but is built up out of the ways that different signs are organized and related to each other, both within the ad and through external references to wider belief systems. More specifically, for advertising to create meaning, the reader or the viewer has to do some 'work'. Because the meaning is not lying there on the page, one has to make an effort to grasp it. ([Leiss et al. 1990, 201-2](#))

Much the same could be said of texts in other genres and media. The meanings generated by a single sign are multiple. Semiotics highlights 'the infinite richness of interpretation which... signs are open to' ([Sturrock 1986, 101](#)). Voloshinov referred to the *multi-accentuality* of the sign - the potential for diverse interpretations of the same sign according to particular social and historical contexts ([Voloshinov 1973, 23](#)).

The romantic mythology of individual creativity and of the 'originality' of 'the author' (e.g. the *auteur* in film) has been undermined by various strands in semiotics: by the structuralist emphasis on the primacy of the semiotic system and of ourselves as produced by language; by the social semiotic emphasis on the role of the interpreters of a text; and by the post-structuralist semiotic notion of

[intertextuality](#) (highlighting what texts owe to other texts). Individuals are not unconstrained in their construction of meanings. As Stuart Hall puts it, our 'systems of signs... *speak us* as much as we speak in and through them' ([Hall 1977, 328](#)). 'Common-sense' suggests that 'I am a unique individual with a stable, unified identity and ideas of my own. Semiotics can help us to realise that such notions are created and maintained by our engagement with sign systems: our sense of identity is established through signs. We derive a sense of 'self' from drawing upon conventional, pre-existing repertoires of signs and codes which we did not ourselves create. We are thus the *subjects* of our sign systems rather than being simply instrumental 'users' who are fully in control of them. Whilst we are not *determined* by semiotic processes we are *shaped by* them far more than we realise. Pierre Guiraud goes further: 'Man [*sic*] is the vehicle and the substance of the sign, he is both the signifier and the signified; in fact, he is a sign and therefore a convention' ([Guiraud 1975, 83](#)). The postmodernist notion of fragmented and shifting identities may provide a useful corrective to the myth of the unified self. But unlike those postmodernist stances which simply celebrate radical relativism, semiotics can help us to focus on *how* we make sense of ourselves, whilst social semiotics anchors us to the study of situated practices in the construction of identities and the part that our engagement with sign systems plays in such processes. Justin Lewis notes that 'we are part of a prearranged semiological world. From the cradle to the grave, we are encouraged by the shape of our environment to engage with the world of signifiers in particular ways' ([Lewis 1991, 30](#)).

Guy Cook argues that 'forty years ago, the method was a revolutionary one, and justly captured the intellectual imagination, not only for the added complexity it could bring to analysis but also for its political and philosophical implications. Its visions of cultures and cultural artefacts, no matter how superficially different, as fundamentally similar was a powerful weapon against racism and cultural chauvinism, and held out hope of the discovery of abstract structures universal in human culture' ([Cook 1992, 70-71](#)). Feminist theorists note that structuralist semiotics has been important for feminists as a tool for critiques of reductionism and essentialism and has 'facilitated the analysis of contradictory meanings and identities' ([Franklin et al. 1996, 263](#)). Semiotics has sought to study cultural artifacts and practices of whatever kind on the basis of unified principles, at its best bringing some coherence to media and cultural studies. Whilst semiotic analysis has been widely applied to the literary, artistic and musical canon, it has been applied to the 'decoding' of a wide variety of popular cultural phenomena. It has thus helped to stimulate the serious study of popular culture.

Anthony Wilden has observed that 'all language is communication but very little communication is language' ([Wilden 1987, 137](#)). In an increasingly visual age, an important contribution of semiotics from Roland Barthes onwards has been a concern with imagistic as well as linguistic signs, particularly in the context of advertising, photography and audio-visual media. Semiotics may encourage us not to dismiss a particular medium as of less worth than another: literary and film critics often regard television as of less worth than prose fiction or 'artistic' film. To élitist literary critics, of course, this would be a weakness of semiotics. Potentially, semiotics could help us to realize differences as well as similarities between various media. It could help us to avoid the routine privileging of one semiotic mode over another, such as [the spoken over the written or the verbal over the non-verbal](#). We need to recognize, as Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen note, that 'different semiotic modes - the visual, the verbal, the gestural... have their potentialities, and their limitations' ([Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, 31](#)). Such a realization could lead to the recognition of the importance of new literacies in a changing semiotic ecology. At present, 'with regard to images, most people in most societies are mostly confined to the role of spectator of other people's productions' ([Messaris 1994, 121](#)). Most people feel unable to draw or paint, and even amongst those who own video-cameras not

everyone knows how to make effective use of them. This is a legacy of an educational system which still focuses almost exclusively on the acquisition of one kind of symbolic literacy (that of verbal language) at the expense of most other semiotic modes (in particular the iconic mode). This institutional bias disempowers people not only by excluding many from engaging in those representational practices which are not purely linguistic but by handicapping them as critical readers of the majority of texts to which they are routinely exposed throughout their lives. A working understanding of key concepts in semiotics - including their practical application - can be seen as essential for everyone who wants to understand the complex and dynamic communication ecologies within which we live. Those who cannot understand such environments are in the greatest danger of being manipulated by those who can. For Peirce, 'the universe... is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs' ([Peirce 1931-58, 5.449n](#)). There is no escape from signs. As Bill Nichols puts it, 'As long as signs are produced, we will be obliged to understand them. This is a matter of nothing less than survival' ([Nichols 1981, 8](#)).

D.I.Y. Semiotic Analysis: Advice to My Own Students

Semiotics can be applied to anything which can be seen as signifying something - in other words, to everything which has meaning within a culture. Even within the context of the mass media you can apply semiotic analysis to any media texts (including television and radio programmes, films, cartoons, newspaper and magazine articles, posters and other ads) and to the practices involved in producing and interpreting such texts. Within the Saussurean tradition, the task of the semiotician is to look beyond the specific texts or practices to the systems of functional distinctions operating within them. The primary goal is to establish the underlying conventions, identifying significant differences and oppositions in an attempt to model the system of categories, relations (syntagmatic and paradigmatic), connotations, distinctions and rules of combination employed. For instance, 'What differentiates a polite from an impolite greeting, a fashionable from an unfashionable garment?' (Culler 1985, 93); the investigation of such practices involves trying to make explicit what is usually only implicit.

A 'text' (such as a printed advertisement, an animated cartoon or a radio news bulletin) is in itself a complex sign containing other signs. Your initial analytical task is to identify the signs within the text and the codes within which these signs have meaning (e.g. 'textual codes' such as camerawork or 'social codes' such as body language). Within these codes you need to identify paradigm sets (such as *shot size*: long shot, mid shot, close up). You also need to identify the structural relationships between the various signifiers (syntagms). Finally you need to discuss the ideological functions of the signs in the text and of the text as a whole. What sort of reality does the text construct and how does it do so? How does it seek to naturalize its own perspectives? What assumptions does it make about its readers?

I strongly recommend detailed comparison and contrast of paired texts dealing with a similar topic: this is a lot easier than trying to analyse a single text. It may also help to use an example of semiotic analysis by an experienced practitioner as a model for your own analysis.

- *Identifying the text*
 - Wherever possible, include a copy of the text with your analysis of it, noting any significant shortcomings of the copy. Where including a copy is not practicable, offer a

clear description which would allow someone to recognize the text easily if they encountered it themselves.

- Briefly describe the medium used, the genre to which the text belongs and the context in which it was found.
- Consider your *purposes* in analysing the text. This will affect which questions seem important to you amongst those offered below.
 - Why did you choose this text?
 - Your purposes may reflect your values: how does the text relate to your own values?
- How does the sign vehicle you are examining relate to the [type-token distinction](#)?
 - Is it one among many copies (e.g. a poster) or virtually unique (e.g. an actual painting)?
 - How does this influence your interpretation?
- What are the important [signifiers](#) and what do they signify?
 - What is the system within which these signs make sense?
- [Modality](#)
 - What reality claims are made by the text?
 - Does it allude to being fact or fiction?
 - What references are made to an everyday experiential world?
 - What modality markers are present?
 - How do you make use of such markers to make judgements about the relationship between the text and the world?
 - Does the text operate within a realist representational code?
 - To *whom* might it appear realistic?
 - 'What does transparency keep obscure?' ([Butler 1999, xix](#))
- [Paradigmatic analysis](#)
 - To which class of paradigms (medium; genre; theme) does the whole text belong?
 - How might a change of medium affect the meanings generated?
 - What might the text have been like if it had formed part of a different genre?
 - What paradigm sets do each of the signifiers used belong to? For example, in photographic, televisual and filmic media, one paradigm might be shot size.
 - Why do you think each signifier was chosen from the possible alternatives within the same paradigm set? What values does the choice of each particular signifier connote?
 - What signifiers from the same paradigm set are noticeably absent?
 - What contrasted pairs seem to be involved (e.g. nature/culture)?
 - Which of those in each pairing seems to be the 'marked' category?
 - Is there a central opposition in the text?
 - Apply the [commutation test](#) in order to identify distinctive signifiers and to define their significance. This involves an imagined substitution of one signifier for another of your own, and assessing the effect.
- What is the [syntagmatic structure](#) of the text?
 - Identify and describe syntagmatic structures in the text which take forms such as narrative, argument or montage.
 - How does one signifier relate to the others used (do some carry more weight than others)?
 - How does the sequential or spatial arrangement of the elements influence meaning?
 - Are there formulaic features that have shaped the text?
 - If you are comparing several texts within a genre look for a shared syntagm.
 - How far does [identifying the paradigms and syntagms](#) help you to understand the text?

- [Rhetorical tropes](#)
 - - What tropes (e.g. metaphors and metonyms) are involved?
 - How are they used to influence the preferred reading?
- [Intertextuality](#)
 - Does it allude to other [genres](#)?
 - Does it allude to or compare with other *texts* within the genre?
 - How does it compare with treatments of similar *themes* within other genres?
 - Does one code within the text (such as a linguistic caption to an advertisement or news photograph) serve to 'anchor' another (such as an image)? If so, how?
- What [semiotic codes](#) are used?
 - Do the codes have [double, single or no articulation](#)?
 - Are the codes *analogue* or *digital*?
 - Which conventions of its [genre](#) are most obvious in the text?
 - Which codes are *specific* to the medium?
 - Which codes are *shared* with other media?
 - How do the codes involved relate to each other (e.g. words and images)?
 - Are the codes *broadcast* or *narrowcast*?
 - Which codes are notable by their *absence*?
 - What relationships does the text seek to establish with its readers?
 - How direct is the [mode of address](#) and what is the significance of this?
 - How else would you describe the mode of address?
 - What cultural assumptions are called upon?
 - To whom would these codes be most familiar?
 - What seems to be the *preferred reading*?
 - How far does this reflect or depart from dominant cultural values?
 - How 'open' to interpretation does the sign seem to be?
- *Social semiotics*
 - [What does a purely structural analysis of the text downplay or ignore?](#)
 - Who created the sign? Try to consider *all of those involved* in the process.
 - Whose realities does it represent and whose does it exclude?
 - For whom was it intended? Look carefully at the clues and try to be as detailed as you can.
 - How do people differ in their interpretation of the sign? Clearly this needs direct investigation.
 - On what do their interpretations seem to depend?
 - Illustrate, where possible, [dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings](#).
 - How might a change of *context* influence interpretation?
- [Benefits of semiotic analysis](#)
 - What other contributions have semioticians made that can be applied productively to the text?
 - What insights has a semiotic analysis of this text offered?
 - What other strategies might you need to employ to balance any shortcomings of your analysis?

Glossary of Key Terms

[A](#) [B](#) [C](#) [D](#) [E](#) [F](#) [G](#) [H](#) [I](#) [J](#) [K](#) [L](#) [M](#) [N](#) [O](#) [P](#) [Q](#) [R](#) [S](#) [T](#) [U](#) [V](#) [W](#) [X](#) [Y](#) [Z](#)

- [Abduction](#): This is a term used by Peirce to refer to a form of inference (alongside *deduction* and *induction*) by which we treat a [signifier](#) as an instance of a rule from a familiar [code](#), and then infer what it signifies by applying that rule.
- [Aberrant decoding](#): Eco's term referring to [decoding](#) a [text](#) by means of a different [code](#) from that used to [encode](#) it. See also: [Codes](#), [Decoding](#), [Encoding and decoding model of communication](#)
- [Absent signifiers](#): [Signifiers](#) which are absent from a [text](#) but which (by contrast) nevertheless influence the [meaning](#) of a signifier actually used (which is drawn from the same [paradigm](#) set). Two forms of absence have specific labels in English: that which is 'conspicuous by its absence' and that which 'goes without saying'. See also: [Deconstruction](#), [Paradigm](#), [Paradigmatic analysis](#), [Signifier](#)
- Address, modes of: See [Modes of address](#)
- [Addresser and addressee](#): Jakobson used these terms to refer to what, in [transmission models of communication](#), are called [the 'sender' and the 'receiver'](#) of a [message](#). Other commentators have used them to refer more specifically to constructions of these two roles within the [text](#), so that *addresser* refers to an authorial persona,

whilst *addressee* refers to an 'ideal reader'. See also: [Codes](#), [Encoding and decoding model of communication](#), [Enunciation](#), [Functions of signs](#), [Ideal reader](#), [Transmission models of communication](#)

- **Aesthetic codes:** [Codes](#) within the various expressive arts (poetry, drama, painting, sculpture, music, etc.) or [expressive](#) and [poetic functions](#) which are evoked within any kind of [text](#). These are codes which tend to celebrate [connotation](#) and diversity of interpretation in contrast to logical or scientific codes which seek to suppress these values. See also: [Codes](#), [Connotation](#), [Poetic function](#), [Realism, aesthetic](#), [Representational codes](#)
- Aesthetic realism: See [Realism, aesthetic](#)
- **Affective fallacy:** The so-called 'affective fallacy' (identified by literary theorists who regarded [meaning](#) as residing *within* the [text](#)) involves relating the meaning of a text to its [readers'](#) interpretations - which these theorists saw as a form of [relativism](#). Few contemporary theorists regard this as a 'fallacy' since most accord due importance to the reader's purposes. To regard such purposes as irrelevant to the meaning of a text is to fall victim to the '[literalist fallacy](#)' - a [textual determinist](#) stance. See also: [Decoding](#), [Interpretative community](#), [Literalism](#), [Meaning](#), [Textual determinism](#)
- 'Always-already given': See [Priorism](#)
- **Analogical signs:** Analogical signs (such as paintings in a gallery or gestures in face-to-face interaction) are signs in a form in which they are perceived as involving graded relationships on a continuum rather than as discrete units (in contrast to [digital signs](#)). Note, however, that digital technology can transform analogical signs into digital reproductions which may be perceptually indistinguishable from the 'originals'. See also: [Digital signs](#)
- **Analogue oppositions (antonyms):** Pairs of oppositional [signifiers](#) in a [paradigm](#) set representing categories with comparative grading on the same implicit dimension and which together define a complete *universe of discourse* (relevant [ontological](#) domain), e.g. good/bad where 'not good' is not necessarily 'bad' and vice versa (Leymore). See also: [Binary oppositions](#), [Converse oppositions](#)
- Analysis
 - Content: See [Content analysis](#)
 - Diachronic: See [Diachronic analysis](#)
 - Ideological: See [Ideology](#)
 - Paradigmatic: See [Paradigmatic analysis](#)
 - Poststructuralist: See [Deconstruction](#)
 - Structuralist: See [Structuralism](#)
 - Synchronic: See [Synchronic analysis](#)
 - Syntagmatic: See [Syntagmatic analysis](#)
- **Anchorage:** Roland Barthes introduced the concept of *anchorage*. Linguistic elements in a [text](#) (such as a caption) can serve to 'anchor' (or constrain) the [preferred readings](#) of an image (conversely the illustrative use of an image can anchor an ambiguous verbal text). See also: [Preferred reading](#)
- Anti-essentialism: See [Essentialism](#)
- Anti-realism: See [Realism, aesthetic](#)
- **Arbitrariness:** Saussure emphasized that the relationship between the linguistic [signifier](#) and [signified](#) is *arbitrary*: the link between them is not necessary, intrinsic or 'natural'. He was denying *extralinguistic* influences (external to the linguistic system). Philosophically, the relationship is [ontologically](#) arbitrary: initially, it makes no difference what labels we attach to things, but of course signs are *not socially or historically arbitrary* (after a sign has come into historical existence we cannot arbitrarily change signifiers). Saussure focused on *linguistic* signs, whilst Peirce dealt more explicitly with signs in any [medium](#), and noted that the relationship between signifiers and their signifieds varies in arbitrariness - from the radical arbitrariness of [symbolic](#) signs, via the perceived similarity of signifier to signified in iconic signs, to the minimal arbitrariness of indexical signs. Many semioticians argue that *all* signs are to some extent arbitrary and [conventional](#) (and thus subject to [ideological](#) manipulation). See also: [Conventionality](#), [Design features of language](#), [Modes of relationship](#), [Motivation and constraint](#), [Primacy of the signifier](#), [Relative autonomy](#)
- **Articulation of codes:** *Articulation* refers to structural levels within semiotic codes. Semiotic codes have either [single articulation](#), [double articulation](#) or [no articulation](#). A semiotic code which has 'double articulation' (as in the case of verbal language) can be analysed into two abstract structural levels: a higher level called 'the level of [first articulation](#)' and a lower level - 'the level of [second articulation](#)'. See also: [Double articulation](#), [First articulation](#), [Relative autonomy](#), [Second articulation](#), [Single articulation](#), [Unarticulated codes](#)
- **Associative relations:** This was Saussure's term for what later came to be called [paradigmatic](#) relations. The 'formulaic' associations of linguistic signs include synonyms, antonyms, similar-sounding words and words of similar grammatical function. See also: [Paradigm](#)

- [Asynchronous communication](#): Asynchronous communication is communication *other than in 'real-time'* - feedback is significantly delayed rather than potentially immediate. This feature ties together the presence or absence of the producer(s) of the [text](#) and the technical features of the [medium](#). Asynchronous [interpersonal communication](#) is primarily through verbal text (e.g. letters, fax, e-mail). Asynchronous [mass communication](#) is primarily through verbal text, graphics and/or audio-visual media (e.g. film, television, radio, newspapers, magazines etc.). See also: [Communication](#), [Synchronous communication](#)
- Audience determinism: See [Social determinism](#)
- Authorial intention: See [Intentional fallacy](#)
- Autonomy, relative: See [Relative autonomy](#)
- Axes of selection and combination: See [Combination, axis of](#), [Selection, axis of](#)



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- [Bar](#): 'The bar' is a term used by some theorists to refer to a) the horizontal line in Saussure's model of the sign which acts as a boundary marker between the levels of the [signifier](#) and the [signified](#) and/or b) the *virgule* - a punctuation mark (in computer jargon called a 'forward slash') in the form of a slanted line linking and dividing paired terms in [binary oppositions](#) (e.g. active/passive). [Poststructuralist](#) theorists criticize the clear distinction which the Saussurean bar seems to suggest between the signifier and the signified. Note that in Saussure's model the *signified* is shown *over* the *signifier* but that Jacques Lacan placed the *signifier* *over* the *signified* with the intention of highlighting the [primacy of the signifier](#). Some writers represent binary oppositions using a colon thus: *old* : *new* (rather than *old/new*). See also: [Binary oppositions](#), [Deconstruction](#), [Primacy of the signifier](#), [Relative autonomy](#)
- [Binarism/dualism](#): The [ontological](#) division of a domain into two discrete categories (*dichotomies*) or polarities. 'Binarism' is a more loaded term which critics have applied to what they regard as the obsessive dualism of [structuralists](#) such as Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson. Hjelmslev argued against binarism. Derridean [deconstruction](#) demonstrates the inescapability of binary logic. See also: [Binary oppositions](#), [Deconstruction](#), [Ontology](#)
- [Binary oppositions \(or digital oppositions\)](#): Pairs of mutually-exclusive [signifiers](#) in a [paradigm](#) set representing categories which are logically opposed and which together define a complete *universe of discourse* (relevant [ontological](#) domain), e.g. alive/not-alive. In such oppositions each term necessarily implies its opposite and there is no middle term. See also: [Analogue oppositions](#), [The bar](#), [Binarism](#), [Converse oppositions](#), [Markedness](#), [Cognitive universalism](#), [Valorization](#)
- Biographism: See [Reductionism](#)
- Bracketting the referent: See [Referent](#)
- [Bricolage](#): Lévi-Strauss's term for the appropriation of pre-existing materials which are ready-to-hand (and in the process contributing to the construction of one's own identity) is widely-used to refer to the [intertextual](#) authorial practice of adopting and adapting signs from other [texts](#). See also: [Intertextuality](#)
- [Broadcast codes](#): Fiske's term for [codes](#) which are shared by members of a mass audience and which are learned informally through experience rather than deliberately or institutionally. In contrast to [narrowcast codes](#), broadcast codes are structurally simpler, employing standard conventions and 'formulas' - so they can generate clichés and stereotypes. They are more repetitive and predictable - '[overcoded](#)' - having what information theorists call a high degree of [redundancy](#). In such codes several elements serve to emphasize and reinforce [preferred meanings](#). Following Bernstein, they are controversially described by some theorists as 'restricted codes'. Broadcast codes are heavily [intertextual](#), although the intertextuality is normally [transparent](#). See also: [Codes](#), [Intertextuality](#), [Narrowcast codes](#), [Open and closed texts](#), [Symbolic capital](#), [Textual codes](#)



[A](#) [B](#) [C](#) [D](#) [E](#) [F](#) [G](#) [H](#) [I](#) [J](#) [K](#) [L](#) [M](#) [N](#) [O](#) [P](#) [Q](#) [R](#) [S](#) [T](#) [U](#) [V](#) [W](#) [X](#) [Y](#) [Z](#)

- Capital, symbolic: See [Symbolic capital](#)
- [Categories: marked and unmarked](#): See [Markedness](#)
- Chain: See [Syntagm](#)

- **Channel:** A sensory mode utilized by a [medium](#) (e.g. visual, auditory, tactile). Available channel(s) are dictated by the technical features of the medium in which a [text](#) appears. The sensory bias of the channel limits the [codes](#) for which it is suitable. See also: [Medium](#), [Non-neutrality of medium](#), [Translatability](#)
- Cinematic codes: See [Filmic codes](#)
- Circles or schools, linguistic/semiotic: See [Copenhagen school](#), [Moscow school](#), [Paris school](#), [Prague school](#), [Tartu school](#)
- **Circuit of communication:** Stuart Hall's term for several linked but distinctive 'moments' in processes of [mass communication](#) - production, circulation, distribution/consumption and reproduction. See also: [Encoding and decoding model of communication](#), [Mass communication](#)
- Classification of signs: See [Modes of relationship](#)
- **Codes:** One of the fundamental concepts in semiotics. Semiotic codes are procedural systems of related [conventions](#) for correlating [signifiers](#) and [signifieds](#) in certain domains. Codes provide a framework within which signs make sense: they are interpretative devices which are used by [interpretative communities](#). They can be broadly divided into [social codes](#), [textual codes](#) and [interpretative codes](#). Some codes are fairly explicit; others (dubbed '[hermeneutics](#)' by Guiraud) are much looser. Within a code there may also be 'subcodes': such as stylistic and personal subcodes (or [idiolects](#)). See also: [Aesthetic codes](#), [Articulation of codes](#), [Broadcast codes](#), [Codification](#), [Dominant code](#), [Filmic codes](#), [Ideological codes](#), [Interpretative codes](#), [Interpretative community](#), [Narrowcast codes](#), [Negotiated code](#), [Oppositional code](#), [Overcoding](#), [Photographic codes](#), [Representational codes](#), [Social codes](#), [Textual codes](#), [Unarticulated codes](#)
- **Codes of textual production and interpretation:** These are classified here as a type of [ideological code](#). They are codes involved in both '[encoding](#)' and '[decoding](#)' texts - [dominant](#), [negotiated](#) or [oppositional](#).
- **Codification:** A historical social process whereby the [conventions](#) of a particular [code](#) (e.g. for a [genre](#)) become widely established (Guiraud).
- **Combination, axis of:** A [structuralist](#) term for the 'horizontal' axis in the analysis of a textual structure: the plane of the [syntagm](#) (Jakobson). See also: [Selection, axis of](#)
- **Commonsense:** 'Commonsense' represents the most widespread cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs within a given culture. It is generated by ideological forces operating through [codes](#) and [myths](#). Myths serve to ensure that certain familiar assumptions and values are taken-for-granted and unquestioned by most members of the culture, and seem entirely 'natural', 'normal' and self-evident. For instance, in western cultures, a widespread assumption is that of naive [realism](#), which regards [reality](#) as independent of the [signs](#) which refer to it. The [transmission model of communication](#) reflects commonsensical notions of what [communication](#) is. Individualism also presents itself as commonsense in insisting that 'I' am a unique individual with a stable, unified identity and with original ideas and intentions of my own. Queer theorists argue that 'heteronormativity' is the gender regime which maintains the fundamental assumption that heterosexuality is natural, universal and monolithic. Such myths are powerful since they seem to 'go without saying' and appear not to need to be deciphered or demystified. Commonsense does involve incoherences, ambiguities, paradoxes, contradictions and omissions; the role of [ideology](#) is to suppress these in the interests of dominant groups. Semiotics seeks to demonstrate that commonsense meanings are not givens, but are shaped by [ideological](#) forces. See also: [Ideology](#), [Myth](#), [Naturalization](#), [Realism \(objectivism\)](#), [Reality](#)
- **Communication:** From a semiotic perspective, communication involves [encoding](#) and [decoding texts](#) according to the [conventions](#) of appropriate [codes](#) (Jakobson). The centrality of codes to communication is a distinctive semiotic contribution which emphasizes the social nature of communication and the importance of conventions. Whilst most semioticians are concerned with communicative meaning-making, some semioticians also study the attribution of [meaning](#) even where no [intent](#) to communicate exists or where no human agency was involved in producing what is [perceived](#) as a [sign](#). See also: [Asynchronous communication](#), [Circuit of communication](#), [Encoding and decoding model of communication](#), [Interpersonal communication](#), [Mass communication](#), [Synchronous communication](#), [Transmission model of communication](#)
- Community, interpretative (or 'discourse community' or 'textual community'): See [Interpretative community](#)
- Commutability of the signified: See [Unlimited semiosis](#)
- **Commutation test:** A [structuralist](#) analytical technique used in the [paradigmatic analysis](#) of a [text](#) to determine whether a change on the level of the [signifier](#) leads to a change on the level of the [signified](#). To apply this test a particular signifier in a [text](#) is selected. Then meaningful alternatives taken from the same [paradigm](#) set are considered. The effects of each substitution are assessed in terms of how this might affect the sense made of the [sign](#). See also: [Absent signifiers](#), [Markedness](#), [Paradigmatic analysis](#), [Transformation, rules of](#)
- **Complex sign.** Saussure's term for a [sign](#) which contains other signs. A [text](#) is usually a complex sign. See also: [Simple sign](#), [Text](#)

- **Conative function:** In Jakobson's model of linguistic [communication](#) this is deemed to be one of the key [functions of a sign](#). This function involves the (usually implicit) construction of an [addressee](#) ('ideal reader'). See also: [Addressee](#), [Functions of a sign](#)
- **Condensation:** This is a concept introduced by Freud for the psychoanalytical interpretation of dreams: in condensation, several thoughts are condensed into one symbol. See also: [Displacement](#)
- **Connotation:** The socio-cultural and personal associations produced as a [reader decodes](#) a [text](#). The term also refers to the relationship between the [signifier](#) and its [signified](#). For Barthes, connotation was a second [order of signification](#) which uses the [denotative sign](#) ([signifier](#) and [signified](#)) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified. In this framework connotation is a [sign](#) which derives from the signifier of a denotative sign (so denotation leads to a chain of connotations). See also: [Aesthetic codes](#), [Denotation](#), [Orders of signification](#)
- **Constitution of the subject:** See [Subject](#) and [Interpellation](#)
- **Constraint:** See [Motivation and constraint](#)
- **Constructivism, (social) constructionism:** A philosophical (specifically [epistemological](#)) stance (with diverse labels) on 'what is real?' Constructivism can be seen as offering an alternative to the [binarism](#) involved in polarising the issue into the objectivism of naive [realists](#) versus the radical subjectivism of the [idealists](#). In contrast to realists, constructivists argue that '[reality](#)' is not wholly external to and independent of how we conceptualize the world: our sign systems (language and other [media](#)) play a major part in 'the social construction of reality'; realities cannot be separated from the sign systems in which they are experienced. Most constructivists argue that even in relation to 'physical reality', realists underestimate the social processes of mediation involved: for instance, [perception itself involves codes](#), and what count as objects, their properties and their relations vary from language to language (see [Ontology](#)). According to Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle' in quantum mechanics, even physical objects can be affected by observational processes. Constructivists differ from extreme subjectivists in insisting that realities are not limitless and unique to (or definable by) the individual; rather, they are the product of social definitions and as such far from equal in status. Realities are contested, and textual [representations](#) are thus 'sites of struggle'. Realists often criticize constructivism as extreme [relativism](#) - a position from which constructivists frequently distance themselves. Note that a constructivist stance does *not* necessarily entail a denial of the existence of physical reality. See also: [Conventionalism](#), [Correspondence theory of truth](#), [Epistemology](#), [Idealism](#), [Realism \(objectivism\)](#), [Reality](#), [Relativism](#), [epistemological](#)
- **Content analysis:** A *quantitative* form of textual analysis involving the categorization and counting of recurrent elements in the [form or content](#) of texts. This method can be used in conjunction with semiotic analysis (semiotic textual analysis being a *qualitative* methodology).
- **Content and form:** See [Form and content](#)
- **Content, plane of:** See [Plane of content](#)
- **Contiguity:** In ordinary use, this term refers to something which touches or adjoins something else; some semioticians use it to refer to something which is in some sense part of (or part of the same domain as) something else. Contiguity may be causal, cultural, spatial, temporal, physical, conceptual, formal or structural. For instance, at the level of the [signified](#), [metonymy](#) is said to be based on contiguity - in contrast to [metaphor](#) (which involves *transposition* from one domain to another) since metonyms stand for things to which they are regarded as 'belonging' (in some [ontological](#) framework): metonymy may thus seem more '[realistic](#)' than metaphor. At the level of the [signifier](#), [syntagms](#), unlike [paradigms](#), are based on formal contiguity (adjacency within the same text). See also: [Metonymy](#)
- **Conventionalism:** This term is used by [realists](#) to describe a position which they associate with [epistemological relativism](#) and the denial of the existence of any knowable [reality](#) outside [representational](#) conventions. They associate it with the 'severing' of [signs](#) from 'real world' [referents](#) and with the notion that reality is a construction of language or a product of theories. They regard 'conventionalists' (or [constructivists](#)) as reducing reality to nothing more than [signifying practices](#). They criticize as 'extreme conventionalism' the stance that theories (and the worlds which they construct) are incommensurable. See also: [Constructivism](#), [Conventionality](#), [Realism \(objectivism\)](#), [Reality](#), [Relativism](#), [epistemological](#), [Relativism](#), [linguistic](#), [Whorfianism](#)
- **Conventionality:** A term often used in conjunction with the term [arbitrary](#) to refer to the relationship between the [signifier](#) and the [signified](#). In the case of a [symbolic](#) system such as verbal language this relationship is purely conventional - dependent on social and cultural conventions (rather than in any sense 'natural'). The conventional nature of [codes](#) means that they have to be *learned* (not necessarily formally). Thus some semioticians speak of learning to 'read' photographs, television or film, for instance. See also: [Arbitrariness](#), [Conventionalism](#), [Modes of relationship](#), [Primacy of the signifier](#), [Relative autonomy](#)

- **Converse oppositions:** Pairs of mutually-exclusive [signifiers](#) in a [paradigm](#) set representing categories which do *not* together define a complete *universe of discourse* (relevant [ontological](#) domain), e.g. sun/moon (Leymore). See also: [Analogue oppositions](#), [Binary oppositions](#)
- **Copenhagen school:** This was a [structuralist](#) and [formalist](#) group of linguists founded by the Danish linguists Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1966) and Viggo Brondal (1887-1953). Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) was associated with this group from 1939-1949. Influenced by Saussure, its most distinctive contribution was a concern with 'glossematics'. Whilst Hjelmslev did accord a privileged status to language, his glossematics included both linguistics and 'non-linguistic languages' - which Hjelmslev claimed could be analysed independently of their [material substance](#). It is a formalist approach in that it considers semiotic systems without regard for their social context. Hjelmslev's theories strongly influenced Algirdas Greimas (1917-1992), and to a lesser extent the French cultural theorist Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and the film theorist Christian Metz (1931-1993). See also: [Moscow school](#), [Paris school](#), [Structuralism](#)
- **Correspondence theory of truth:** [Realism](#) depends on a correspondence theory of truth, on comparing propositions with an independent and external [reality](#). For [constructivists](#), reality is a construction of [discourse](#), so all we can compare is one discourse with another. Realists insist that things exist in the external world independently of our modes of apprehending them. See also: [Constructivism](#), [Epistemology](#), [Realism \(objectivism\)](#), [Reality](#), [Relativism, epistemological](#)
- Cultural materialism: See [Materialism](#)
- **Cultural relativism/relativity:** Cultural relativism is the view that each culture has its own worldview and that none of these can be regarded as more or less privileged or 'authentic' in its [representation](#) of 'reality' than another. Cultural worldviews are historically-situated social [constructions](#). Cultural relativists tend also to be [linguistic relativists](#), arguing that dominant cultural worldviews are reflected in [ontologies](#) which are built into the language of that culture. Cultural relativism is a fundamental assumption involved in [Whorfianism](#). Anthropologists and others who study [signifying practices](#) within a culture can be seen as cultural relativists insofar as they seek to understand each culture in its own terms. However, as with [epistemological relativism](#) (with which it is closely associated), the label is often used as a criticism, being equated with extreme [idealism](#) or nihilism. See also: [Constructivism](#), [Conventionalism](#), [Relativism, epistemological](#), [Linguistic relativism](#), [Social determinism](#), [Universalism, cognitive](#), [Whorfianism](#)



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- **Decoding:** The comprehension and interpretation of [texts](#) by decoders with reference to relevant [codes](#) (Jakobson). Most commentators assume that the [reader](#) actively constructs [meaning](#) rather than simply 'extracting' it from the text (see [Literalism](#)). See also: [Aberrant decoding](#), [Affective fallacy](#), [Code](#), [Encoding](#), [Intentional fallacy](#), [Literalism](#)
- **Deconstruction:** This is a [poststructuralist](#) strategy for textual analysis which was developed by Jacques Derrida. Practitioners seek to dismantle the rhetorical structures within a [text](#) to demonstrate how key concepts within it depend on their unstated oppositional relation to [absent signifiers](#) (this involved building on the [structuralist](#) method of [paradigmatic analysis](#)). Texts do not 'mean what they say'. Contradictions can be identified within texts in such backgrounded features as footnotes, recurrent concepts or tropes, casual allusions, paradoxical phrases, discontinuities and omissions. Searching for inexplicit oppositions can reveal what is being *excluded*. That which has been repressed can be used as a key to an [oppositional reading](#) of the text. Poststructuralists insist that no hierarchy of meanings can ever be established and no solid underlying structural foundation can ever be located. Derrida aimed to undermine what he called the 'metaphysics of presence' in Western culture - the bias towards what we fondly assume to be '[unmediated](#)' [perception](#) and [interaction](#). This bias involves [phonocentrism](#) (including that of Saussure) and the myth of the '[transcendent signified](#)'. Other deconstructionists have also exposed culturally-embedded conceptual [oppositions](#) in which the initial term is privileged, leaving 'term B' negatively '[marked](#)'. Radical deconstruction is not simply a *reversal* of the [valorization](#) in an opposition but a demonstration of the instability of the opposition (since challenging the valorization alone may be taken to imply that one nevertheless accepts an [ontological division](#) along the lines of the opposition in question). Indeed, the most radical deconstruction challenges both the framework of the relevant opposition and [binary frameworks in general](#). Deconstructionists acknowledge that their own [texts](#) are open to further deconstruction: there is no definitive [reading](#); all texts contain contradictions, gaps and disjunctions - they undermine themselves. More broadly, deconstructive cultural criticism involves demonstrating how signifying practices [construct](#), rather than

simply [represent](#) social [reality](#), and how [ideology](#) works to make such practices seem [transparent](#). See also: [Absent signifiers](#), [The bar](#), [Denaturalization](#), [Différance](#), [Erasure, writing under](#), [Markedness](#), [Ontology](#), [Oppositions](#), [Paradigmatic analysis](#), [Postmodernism](#), [Poststructuralism](#), [Priorism](#), [Valorization](#)

- Deep structure: See [Structuralism](#)
- [Denaturalization, defamiliarization](#): One of the goals of semioticians is *denaturalization*: revealing the socially coded basis of phenomena which are taken-for-granted as 'natural'. The concept was borrowed from Shklovsky's [Formalist](#) notion of *defamiliarization*, according to which *ostranenie* ('estrangement') was the key function of art - we need to 'make the familiar strange' - to look afresh at things and events which are so familiar that we no longer truly see them. The formalists favoured [texts](#) which drew attention to their constructedness and to the processes involved in their construction. As a literary technique, Shklovsky advocated the (surrealistic) practice of placing things in contexts in which they would not normally be found. A feature of many [postmodern](#) texts is a parodic use of [intertextual](#) references which functions to denaturalize the normally [transparent representational](#) conventions of '[realistic](#)' [textual codes](#). The semiotician seeks to *denaturalize* [signs](#) and [codes](#) in order to make more explicit the underlying rules for [encoding](#) and [decoding](#) them, and often also with the intention of revealing the usually invisible operation of [ideological](#) forces. See also: [Deconstruction](#), [Foregrounding, stylistic](#), [Formalism](#), [Naturalization](#), [Poetic function](#), [Reflexivity](#), [Transparency](#)
- [Denotation](#): The term refers to the relationship between the [signifier](#) and its [signified](#). *Denotation* is routinely treated as the definitional, 'literal', 'obvious' or '[commonsense](#)' meaning of a [sign](#), but semioticians tend to treat it as a signified about which there is a relatively broad *consensus*. For Barthes, a denotative sign existed within what he called the *first order of signification*. In this framework [connotation](#) is a further sign (or signs) deriving from the signifier of a denotative sign. However, no clear distinction can be made between denotation and [connotation](#). See also: [Connotation](#), [Orders of signification](#)
- [Design features of language](#): Charles Hockett defined a number of key design features of human language, including [double articulation](#), *productivity* (see [Semiotic economy](#)), [arbitrariness](#) and [displacement](#) (language enables us to refer to things even if they are displaced in space and time). See also: [Arbitrariness](#), [Displacement](#), [Double articulation](#), [Semiotic economy](#)
- Determinism
 - Audience: See [Social determinism](#)
 - Linguistic: See [Linguistic determinism](#)
 - Media: See [Technological determinism](#)
 - Social: See [Social determinism](#)
 - Structural: See [Structural determinism](#)
 - Technological: See [Technological determinism](#)
 - Textual: See [Textual determinism](#), [Literalism](#) and [Overdetermination](#)
- Devalorization: See [Valorization](#)
- [Diachronic analysis](#): Diachronic analysis studies change in a phenomenon (such as a [code](#)) over time (in contrast to [synchronic analysis](#)). Saussure saw the development of language in terms of a series of synchronic states. Critics argue that this fails to account for how change occurs. See also: [Langue and parole](#), [Synchronic analysis](#)
- [Différance](#): Derrida coined this term to allude simultaneously to 'difference' and 'deferral'. He deliberately ensured that (in French) the distinction from the word for 'difference' was apparent only in writing. Adding to Saussure's notion of [meaning](#) being differential (based on differences between [signs](#)), the term is intended to remind us that signs also defer the presence of what they signify through endless substitutions of [signifiers](#). Every [signified](#) is also a signifier: there is no escape from the sign system. Meaning depends upon *absence* rather than presence. See also: [Deconstruction](#), [Transcendent\(al\) signified](#), [Unlimited semiosis](#)
- Differential meaning: See [Meaning](#)
- [Digital signs](#): Digital signs involve discrete units such as words and numerals, in contrast to [analogical signs](#). Note, however, that digital technology can transform analogical signs into digital reproductions which may be perceptually indistinguishable from the 'originals', and that [texts](#) generated in a digital [medium](#) can be 'copies without originals' (e.g. a word-processed text). See also: [Simulacrum](#), [Tokens and types](#)
- [Directness of address](#): [Modes of address](#) differ in their directness. This is reflected in the use of language ('you' may be directly addressed), and in the case of television and photography, in whether or not someone looks directly into the camera lens. See also: [Modes of address](#)
- [Discourse](#): The use of the term discourse by theorists generally reflects an emphasis on [parole rather than langue](#). Many contemporary theorists influenced by Michel Foucault treat language not as a monolithic system but as structured into different discourses such as those of science, law, government, medicine, journalism and morality. A discourse is a system of [representation](#) consisting of a set of [representational codes](#) (including a

distinctive [interpretative repertoire](#) of concepts, [tropes](#) and [myths](#)) for constructing and maintaining particular forms of [reality](#) within the [ontological](#) domain (or topic) defined as relevant to its concerns. Representational codes thus reflect relational principles underlying [the symbolic order](#) of the 'discursive field'. According to Foucault, whose primary concern was the analysis of 'discursive formations' in specific historical and socio-cultural contexts, a particular discursive formation maintains its own 'regime of truth'. He adopted a stance of [linguistic determinism](#), arguing that the dominant tropes within the discourse of a particular historical period determine what can be known - constituting the basic [episteme](#) of the age. A range of [discursive positions](#) is available at any given time, reflecting many determinants (economic, political, sexual etc.). Foucault focused on power relations, noting that within such contexts, the discourses and signifiers of some [interpretative communities](#) (e.g. 'law', 'money', 'power') are privileged and *dominant* whilst others are *marginalized*. [Structuralists](#) deterministically see the [subject](#) as the product of the available discourses whilst [constructivists](#) allow for the possibility of [negotiation](#) or [resistance](#). [Poststructuralists](#) deny any [meaning](#) (or more provocatively any reality) outside of discourses. See also: [Episteme](#), [Interpretative community](#), [Interpretative repertoire](#), [Representation](#), [Representational codes](#), [Signifying practices](#), [Symbolic order](#)

- Discourse community: See [Interpretative community](#)
- Discursive formations: See [Discourse](#)
- Discursive positioning: See [Subject](#)
- Discursive practices: See [Signifying practices](#)
- [Displacement \(Linguistic\)](#): This refers to the power of words to refer to things in their absence. Displacement was identified by Hockett as a key '[design feature](#)' of language. It enables signs to be more than simply [indexical](#) and facilitates reflective thought and [communication](#) using [texts](#) which can be detached from their authors. See also: [Design features of language](#)
- [Displacement \(Freud\)](#): This is a concept introduced by Freud for the psychoanalytical interpretation of dreams: in displacement unconscious desire is displaced into another symbol. See also: [Condensation](#)
- [Dominant \(or 'hegemonic'\) code and reading](#): Within Stuart Hall's framework, this is an [ideological code](#) in which the [decoder](#) fully shares the text's [code](#) and accepts and reproduces the [preferred reading](#) (a reading which may not have been the result of any conscious intention on the part of the author(s)) - in such a stance the [textual code](#) seems 'natural' and '[transparent](#)'. See also: [Preferred reading](#), [Ideological codes](#), [Negotiated code and reading](#), [Oppositional code and reading](#), [Transparency](#)
- [Double articulation](#): A semiotic [code](#) which has 'double articulation' (as in the case of verbal language) can be analysed into two abstract structural levels: a higher level called 'the level of [first articulation](#)' and a lower level - 'the level of [second articulation](#)'. At the *level of first articulation* the system consists of the smallest meaningful units available (e.g. morphemes or words in a language). These meaningful units are complete [signs](#), each consisting of a [signifier](#) and a [signified](#). At *the level of second articulation*, a semiotic code is divisible into minimal functional units which lack meaning in themselves (e.g. phonemes in speech or graphemes in writing). They are not signs in themselves (the code must have a first level of articulation for these lower units to be combined into meaningful signs). Theoretical linguists have largely abandoned the use of the term *articulation* in the structural sense, preferring to refer to 'duality of patterning'. See also: [Articulation](#), [Design features of language](#), [First articulation](#), [Second articulation](#), [Single articulation](#)
- Dualism: See [Binarism](#)
- [Duality of patterning](#): See [Double articulation](#)
- [Dyadic model of sign](#): A dyadic model of the [sign](#) is based on a division of the sign into *two* necessary constituent elements. [Saussure's model of the sign](#) is a dyadic model (note that Saussure insisted that such a division was purely analytical). See also: [Models of the sign](#), [Triadic model](#)



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- Economism: See [Reductionism](#)
- Economy, semiotic: See [Semiotic economy](#)
- [Elaborated codes](#): See [Narrowcast codes](#)
- [Élite interpreter](#): Semioticians who reject the investigation of other people's interpretations privilege what has been called the 'élite interpreter' - though [socially-oriented semioticians](#) would insist that the exploration of people's interpretative practices is fundamental to semiotics.

- **Empty signifier:** An 'empty' or 'floating' [signifier](#) is variously defined as a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent [signified](#). Such signifiers mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even *any* signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean. Those who posit the existence of such signifiers argue that there is a radical disconnection between signifier and signified. For a [Saussurean semiotician](#) no signifier can exist without a corresponding signified - to qualify as a [sign](#) *something* must be signified. See also: [Signifier](#), [Simulacrum](#), [Transcendent signified](#)
- **Encoding:** The production of [texts](#) by encoders with reference to relevant [codes](#) (Jakobson). Encoding involves [foregrounding](#) some [meanings](#) and backgrounding others. See also: [Codes](#), [Decoding](#), [Encoding and decoding model of communication](#)
- **Encoding and decoding model of communication:** Following Jakobson's model of [interpersonal communication](#) which moved beyond the basic [transmission model of communication](#) Stuart Hall proposed a model of [mass communication](#) which underlined the importance of active interpretation within relevant [codes](#) and a social context. See also: [Codes](#), [Circuit of communication](#), [Decoding](#), [Encoding](#), [Transmission models of communication](#)
- **Enunciation/énonciation:** In some contexts, an *énoncé* is an utterance and *énonciation* is the act of uttering it. In [his model, Saussure](#) chose to ignore the circumstances of enunciation (see [Langue and parole](#)). In structural linguistic theory, enunciation refers specifically to the aspect of an utterance which addresses and positions its '[receivers](#)'. In film theory, Benveniste's distinction between 'the speaking subject' and 'the subject of speech' have been treated as analogous to a distinction between production factors (the 'level of enunciation') and narrative ('the level of fiction'). In '[realist](#)' texts the act of enunciation is backgrounded: for instance, Metz argued that (realist) cinematic [modes of address](#) mask their own enunciation, implying no [addresser or addressee](#). See also: [Addresser and addressee](#), [Functions of signs](#), [Modes of address](#), [Narration or narrative voice](#), [Realism, aesthetic](#)
- **Episteme:** Foucault uses the term *épistème* to refer to the total set of relations within a particular historical period uniting the [discursive practices](#) which generate its [epistemologies](#). See also: [Discourse](#), [Interpretative community](#)
- **Epistemic community:** See [Interpretative community](#)
- **Epistemology:** A branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge. The term refers to how 'the world' can be known and what can be known about it. [Realism](#), [idealism](#) and [constructivism](#) are all epistemological stances regarding what is 'real'. Epistemologies embody [ontological](#) assumptions. Thomas Kuhn referred to '[epistemic](#)' ([epistemological](#)) [communities](#) which were characterized by shared texts, interpretations and beliefs. See also: [Constructivism](#), [Correspondence theory of truth](#), [Idealism](#), [Ontology](#), [Realism \(objectivism\)](#), [Relativism](#), [epistemological](#)
- **Erasure, writing under:** Derrida adopted from Heidegger the strategy of writing 'sous rature' which involved printing a word with crossed lines through it, leaving the original word legible, thus: ~~Being~~. This was intended to indicate that although the term was deeply problematic it was still necessary to use it. It alludes to the issue of [linguistic determinism](#). See also: [Deconstruction](#), [Linguistic determinism](#)
- **Essentialism:** Essentialists argue that certain [signifieds](#) are distinct, autonomous entities which have an objective existence and essential properties and which are definable in terms of some kind of absolute, universal and transhistorical 'essence'. These signifieds (such as 'Reality', 'Truth', 'Meaning', 'Facts', 'Mind', 'Consciousness', 'Nature', 'Beauty', 'Justice', 'Freedom') are granted an [ontological](#) status in which they exist '[prior to](#)' language. In relation to people, the term refers to the stance that human beings (or a specified category of people, such as 'women') have an inherent, unchanging and distinctive nature which can be 'discovered' (to say this of women or men, for instance, is *biological essentialism*). The stance known as 'humanism' (which is deeply embedded in Western culture) is essentialist, based on the assumption that the individual has an 'inner self' ('personality', 'attitudes' and 'opinions') which is stable, coherent, consistent, unified and autonomous and which determines our behaviour. Bourgeois [ideology](#) is essentialist in characterizing society in terms of 'free' individuals whose pre-given essences include 'talent', 'efficiency', 'laziness' or 'profligacy'. *Anti-essentialists* such as [relativists](#) and [structuralist](#) and [poststructuralist](#) semioticians deny that things have essential properties which are independent of our ways of defining and classifying them - they emphasize the *contingency* of signifieds ([social semioticians](#) note in particular the socio-cultural and historical processes involved). For [constructivists](#) many signifieds which '[commonsense](#)' regards as having essential properties are socially constructed. 'Nature vs. Nurture' debates reflect essentialist vs. constructionist positions. Essentialism is a form of [idealism](#). [Materialism](#) is an anti-essentialist position which counters essentialist abstraction and [reification](#) with a focus on the material conditions of lived existence. See also: [Constructivism](#), [Idealism](#), [Materialism](#), [Nomenclaturism](#), [Priorism](#), [Realism \(objectivism\)](#), [Reductionism](#), [Reification](#), [Relativism, epistemological](#), [Transcendent\(al\) signified](#)
- **Estrangement:** See [Denaturalization](#)
- **Expression, plane of:** See [Plane of expression](#)

- [Expressive function](#): In Jakobson's model of linguistic [communication](#) this is deemed to be one of the key [functions of a sign](#). This function involves the (usually implicit) construction of an [addressee \(ideal reader\)](#). See also: [Addressee](#), [Functions of a sign](#)
- Extracinematic codes: See [Filmic codes](#)



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- Fallacies (*their status as such depends on point of view*)
 - Affective: See [Affective fallacy](#)
 - Conventionalism: See [Conventionalism](#)
 - Dualism: See [Binarism](#)
 - Intentional: See [Intentional fallacy](#)
 - Literalism: See [Literalism](#)
 - Metonymic: See [Metonymic fallacy](#)
 - Neutrality: See [Non-neutrality of medium](#)
 - Referential: See [Referential fallacy](#)
 - Relativism: See [Relativism](#)
 - Reproductive: See [Reproductive fallacy](#)
 - Synecdochic: See [Metonymic fallacy](#)
 - Transparency: See [Transparency](#)
- *Figurae*: See [Second articulation](#)
- [Filmic codes](#): Cinematic and televisual [codes](#) include: [genre](#); camerawork (shot size, focus, lens movement, camera movement, angle, lens choice, composition); editing (cuts and fades, cutting rate and rhythm); manipulation of time (compression, flashbacks, flashforwards, slow motion); lighting; colour; sound (soundtrack, music); graphics and narrative style. *Extracinematic codes* are codes used within film which are not unique to the [medium](#), such as language, narrative, gesture and costume. See also: [Codes](#), [Grande syntagmatique](#), [Imaginary signifier](#), [Mise-en-scène](#), [Montage](#)
- [First articulation](#): At the (higher) structural level of *first articulation* a semiotic system consists of the smallest *meaningful* units available (e.g. morphemes or words in a language). See also: [Articulation](#), [Double articulation](#), [Second articulation](#), [Single articulation](#)
- [Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness](#): Within his triadic model of the [sign](#), Peirce referred to the sign as an instance of 'Firstness', its object as an instance of 'Secondness' and the interpretant as an instance of 'Thirdness'. See also: [Peircean model of the sign](#)
- Floating signifier: See [Empty signifier](#)
- [Foregrounding, stylistic](#): This term, derived from the Gestalt psychologists' distinction between *figure* and *ground* [background], was used by the [Prague school](#) linguists to refer to a stylistic feature in which [signifiers](#) in a [text](#) attract attention to themselves rather than simulating [transparency](#) in representing their [signifieds](#). This primarily serves a '[poetic](#)' [function](#) (being used 'for its own sake') rather than a '[referential](#)' [function](#). See also: [Denaturalization](#), [Poetic function](#), [Prague school](#), [Reflexivity](#), [Transparency](#)
- [Form and content](#): A distinction sometimes equated to Saussure's distinction between the [signifier](#) (seen as *form*) and the [signified](#) (seen as *content*). However, the [metaphor](#) of form as a 'container' is problematic, tending to support the equation of content with *meaning*, implying that [meaning](#) can be 'extracted' without an active process of interpretation and that form is not in itself meaningful. In '[realistic](#)' [codes](#), content is [foregrounded](#) whilst form retreats to [transparency](#). See also: [McLuhanism](#), [Translatability](#)
- [Form and substance](#): Hjelmslev introduced the notion that both expression and content have substance and form. In this framework signs have four dimensions: substance of content; form of content; substance of expression; form of expression. See [Plane of content](#), [Plane of expression](#)
- [Formalism](#): Russian formalism was a structuralist, anti-[realist](#) aesthetic doctrine whose proponents included Victor Shklovsky (see [Denaturalization](#)). The [Prague school](#) linguists were also structural formalists. Formalism represented a linguistic focus on literary uses of language. As the name suggests, the primary focus of the formalists was on [form, structure, technique or medium rather than on content](#). They saw literary language as language '[made strange](#)' and their model was [poetry](#) rather than prose. They were particularly interested in literary 'devices' such as rhyme, rhythm, metre, imagery, syntax and narrative techniques - favouring writing which 'laid bare' its devices. The term 'formalism' is sometimes used critically (especially by [realists](#)) to refer to what they

regard as an [idealist reduction](#) of referential [content](#) and of [material substance](#) and practices to abstract systems. As also for structuralists, the '[meaning](#) of a [text](#)' was *immanent* - it lay *within* it: the text itself told you everything you needed to know. The formalists did not relate meaning to [authorial intentions](#). Formalism evolved into [structuralism](#) in the late 1920s and 1930s. 'New Criticism' - a formalist school of literary criticism which was not directly related to Russian formalism - flourished in Britain and the USA from the 1930s to the 1950s (see [Intentional Fallacy](#) and [Affective Fallacy](#)). An explicitly semiotic form of Russian formalism emerged in the 1960s. See also: [Copenhagen school](#), [Denaturalization](#), [Form and content](#), [Form and substance](#), [Idealism](#), [Moscow school](#), [Poetic function](#), [Prague school](#), [Structuralism](#), [Tartu school](#)

- [Formality of address](#): [Modes of address](#) differ in their formality or social distance. Following Edward T Hall, a distinction is often made between 'intimate', 'personal', 'social' and 'public' (or 'impersonal') modes of address. In camerawork this is reflected in *shot sizes* - *close-ups* signifying intimate or personal modes, *medium shots* a social mode and *long shots* an impersonal mode. See also: [Modes of address](#)
- Formation, discursive: See [Discourse](#)
- Foundationalism: See [Priorism](#)
- [Functionalism](#): Functionalism in the broadest sense is a perspective on society and culture which emphasizes the interdependent functions of all of the parts in relation to the whole system. It was established by the sociologists Herbert Spencer and Émile Durkheim and was later adopted by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and the sociologists Talcott Parsons and Robert K Merton. It has been criticized for failing to account for conflict and change. In linguistics functionalism is the view that the structure of language is determined by the functions that it serves. Consequently, functionalist linguists focus on the function of linguistic forms. Linguists within this tradition include the Russian [formalists](#) (including Propp, Volosinov and Bakhtin), the [Prague school](#) linguists (including Jakobson), Louis Hjelmslev, André Martinet, [Sapir and Whorf](#), M A K Halliday and Teun van Dijk. Functionalism has been criticized for neglecting social change and as being ahistorical. It is closely allied with [structuralism](#) which has been criticized for being functionalist in its emphasis on internal structures at the expense of social relations. See also: [Formalism](#), [Functions of a sign](#), [Prague school](#), [Structuralism](#)
- [Functions of signs](#): In Jakobson's model of linguistic [communication](#) the dominance of any one of six factors within an utterance reflects a different linguistic function. *referential*: oriented towards the *context*; *expressive*: oriented towards the *addresser*; *conative*: oriented towards the *addressee*; *phatic*: oriented towards the *contact*; *metalingual*: oriented towards the *code*; *poetic*: oriented towards the *message*. In any given situation one of these factors is 'dominant', and this dominant function influences the general character of the '*message*'. See also: [Conative function](#), [Expressive function](#), [Functionalism](#), [Metalingual function](#), [Phatic function](#), [Poetic function](#), [Referential function](#)



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- [Genre](#): Conventional definitions of genres tend to be based on the notion that they constitute particular [conventions](#) of [form and content](#) which are shared by the [texts](#) which are regarded as belonging to them. However, an individual text within a genre rarely if ever has all of the characteristic features of the genre and texts often exhibit the conventions of more than one genre. Semiotic redefinitions of genre tend to focus on the way in which the formal features of texts within the genre draw on shared [codes](#) and function to '[position](#)' [readers](#) using particular [modes of address](#). [Postmodernist](#) theorists tend to blur distinctions between genres. See also: [Codes](#), [Intertextuality](#), [Modes of address](#)
- Givens: See [Priorism](#)
- Glossematics: See [Copenhagen school](#)
- '[Grammar](#)' of a medium: Some semioticians refer to the 'grammar' of [media](#) other than language, in particular in relation to visual media, whilst others have challenged this application of a linguistic model to media which move beyond the verbal. See also: [Language of a medium](#), [Medium](#), [Syntagmatic analysis](#)
- Grammar of the plot: See [Narratology](#)
- [Graphocentrism](#): *Graphocentrism* or *scriptism* is a typically unconscious interpretative bias in which writing is privileged over speech. Biases in favour of the written or printed word are closely associated with the ranking of sight above sound, the eye above the ear, which has been called 'ocularcentrism'. See also: [Channel](#), [Logocentrism](#), [Phonocentrism](#)
- [Grande syntagmatique](#): This was the term by which Metz referred to his elaborate scheme for describing [syntagmatic](#) categories for narrative film. See also: [Filmic codes](#), [Syntagm](#)



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- [Hegemonic code](#): See [Dominant code](#)
- [Hermeneutics](#): Hermes was the Greek god who delivered and interpreted messages. The term hermeneutics is often used to refer to the interpretation of texts. Guiraud uses it to refer to a relatively open, loose and often unconscious system of implicit interpretative practices, in contrast to the more formal and explicit character of a [code](#). See also: [Code](#), [Interpretative codes](#)
- [Historicity](#): Historical context. Insofar as [structuralist](#) semiotics tends to focus on [synchronic](#) rather than [diachronic analysis](#), critics have argued that it is *ahistorical* - that it ignores *process* and historicity. See also: [Diachronic analysis](#)
- Homology: See [Isomorphism](#)
- Horizontal axis: See [Combination, axis of](#)
- Humanism: See [Essentialism](#)
- Hypostasis: See [Reification](#)



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- [Iconic](#): A mode in which the [signifier](#) is perceived as resembling or imitating the [signified](#) (recognizably looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling like it) - being similar in possessing some of its qualities (e.g. a portrait, a diagram, a scale-model, onomatopoeia, metaphors, 'realistic' sounds in music, sound effects in radio drama, a dubbed film soundtrack, imitative gestures) (Peirce). See also: [Indexical](#), [Isomorphism](#), [Modes of relationship](#), [Symbolic](#)
- ['Ideal readers'](#): This is a term often used to refer to the roles in which [readers](#) of a [text](#) are 'positioned' as [subjects](#) through the use of particular [modes of address](#). For Eco this term is not intended to suggest a 'perfect' reader who entirely echoes any authorial intention but a 'model reader' whose reading could be justified in terms of the text. Note that not every reader takes on the reader's role which may have been envisaged by the producer(s) of the text. See also: [Addresser and addressee](#), [Modes of address](#), [Preferred reading](#), [Subject](#)
- [Idealism \(subjectivism\)](#): A philosophical (specifically [epistemological](#)) stance on 'what is real?' in which, in its extreme form, it is argued that [reality](#) is purely subjective and is constructed in our use of [signs](#). [Constructivists](#) criticize the blindness of idealism to the social dimension. Divorcing texts from their social contexts is sometimes referred to as 'textual idealism'. Left-wing critics in particular object that idealism ignores the material conditions of human existence. Idealism is most strongly opposed by [materialists](#), who associate it with [essentialism](#) because a notion of humanity as a pre-given essence is based on 'transcendental consciousness' as the source of meaning. Note that the belief that nothing exists except oneself and one's own mental states is referred to as *solipsism*. See also: [Constructivism](#), [Epistemology](#), [Essentialism](#), [Materialism](#), [Realism \(objectivism\)](#), [Relativism](#), [epistemological](#)
- [Ideological codes](#): One of the types of [interpretative codes](#), notably, the 'isms', such as: individualism, capitalism, liberalism, conservatism, feminism, materialism, consumerism and populism. Also includes [codes of textual production and interpretation](#) ([dominant](#), [negotiated](#) and [oppositional](#)). Note, however, that *all* codes can be seen as ideological. See also: [Code](#), [Dominant codes](#), [Ideology](#), [Negotiated codes](#), [Oppositional codes](#)
- [Ideology](#): There are no [ideologically 'neutral' sign systems](#): [signs](#) function to persuade as well as to refer. Modern semiotic theory is often allied with a Marxist approach which stresses the role of ideology. Ideology constructs people as [subjects](#) through the operation of [codes](#). According to the theory of textual positioning, understanding the [meaning](#) of a [text](#) involves taking on an appropriate ideological identity (see ['Ideal readers'](#)). For Althusser, ideology was a system of [representation](#) involving ['transparent myths'](#) which functioned to induce in the [subject](#) an 'imaginary' relation to the 'real' conditions of existence. For those inclined towards [realism](#) ideology involves a 'distortion' of an 'objective' ['reality'](#). Barthes argues that the [orders of signification](#) called [denotation](#) and [connotation](#) combine to produce ideological myths. Ideological forces seek to [naturalize](#) codes - to make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs seem 'natural', 'self-evident' and ['common-sense'](#), although the operation of ideology in [signifying practices](#) is typically made to appear transparent. Barthes saw myth as serving the ideological interests of the bourgeoisie. Semiotic analysis involves ideological analysis and seeks to [denaturalize](#) codes. See also: [Commonsense](#), [Denaturalization](#), [Ideological codes](#), [Naturalization](#)

- **Idiolect**: A term from sociolinguistics referring to the distinctive ways in which language is used by individuals. In semiotic terms it can refer more broadly to the stylistic and personal *subcodes* of individuals (see [codes](#)). See also: [Interpretative community](#), [Sociolect](#), [Symbolic capital](#)
- Illusionism: See [Realism, aesthetic](#)
- **Imaginary, The**: 'The Imaginary' is Lacan's term for a realm in which the construction of the Self as [subject](#) is initiated. Initially the infant has no centre of identity and there are no clear boundaries between itself and the external world. Lacan argues that in 'the mirror phase' (at the age of six- to eighteen-months, before the acquisition of speech), seeing one's mirror image induces a strongly-defined illusion of a coherent and self-governing personal identity. In the realm of images, we find our sense of self reflected back by an Other with whom we identify (who is paradoxically both Self and Other). For Althusserian theorists, the 'imaginary' refers to [representations](#) which mask the historical and [material](#) conditions of existence (e.g. the heterosexual imaginary [naturalizes](#) heterosexuality and conceals its [constructedness](#), making homosexuality a [marked](#) category). See also: [Imaginary signifier](#), [Subject](#), [Symbolic order](#)
- **Imaginary signifier**: This term was used by Christian Metz to refer to the cinematic [signifier](#). The term is used in more than one sense. The cinematic signifier is 'imaginary' by virtue of an apparent perceptual [transparency](#) which suggests the [unmediated presence](#) of its absent [signified](#) - a feature widely regarded as the key to the power of cinema. Whilst 'imaginary' in the usual sense alludes to the fictional status of what is signified, the term is also related to Lacan's term, '[the Imaginary](#)' - which refers to a phase in the experience of the '[subject](#)' which is dominated by *identification* - the cinematic signifier is theorized as inducing identifications similar to those of 'the mirror stage'. See also: [Filmic codes](#), [Imaginary, The](#), [Signifier](#), [Transparency](#)
- Immanent meaning: See [Meaning](#)
- **Indexical**: A mode in which the [signifier](#) is *not* purely [arbitrary](#) but is directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the [signified](#) - this link can be observed or inferred (e.g. smoke, weathercock, thermometer, clock, spirit-level, footprint, fingerprint, knock on door, pulse rate, rashes, pain) (Peirce). See also: [Iconic](#), [Modes of relationship](#), [Photographic signs](#), [Symbolic](#)
- **Intentional fallacy**: The intentional fallacy (identified by literary theorists Wimsatt and Beardsley) involves relating the [meaning](#) of a [text](#) to its author's intentions. Although these theorists regarded meaning as residing *within* the text, some other theorists not sharing their [literalist](#) standpoint have also dismissed the author's intentions in relation to meaning. Privileging the author's intentions is a stance which has several flaws, in particular: it assumes that authors are always aware of their own intentions; it underestimates the debt of the author to other sources (see [Intertextuality](#)); and it ignores the importance of [readers'](#) purposes (which Wimsatt and Beardsley *also* dismissed as '[the affective fallacy](#)'). The intentional fallacy implicitly involves a [transmission model of communication](#) which privileges the '[sender](#)'. An author's intentions are of no concern to [structuralist](#) analysts; [signifiers](#) are always derived from an already existing structure over which the individual sign-user has no control. For some semioticians, [communication](#) need not be intentional for something to qualify as a [sign](#). See also: [Intertextuality](#), [Literalism](#), [Meaning](#), [Preferred reading](#)
- **Interpellation (Althusser)**: Interpellation is Althusser's term to describe a mechanism whereby the human [subject](#) is 'constituted' (constructed) by pre-given structures (a [structuralist](#) stance). This concept is used by Marxist media theorists to explain the [ideological](#) function of mass media texts. According to this view, the subject (viewer, listener, reader) is constituted by the text, and the power of the mass media resides in their ability to 'position' the subject in such a way that their [representations](#) are taken to be reflections of everyday [reality](#). Such framings reflect a stance of [structural](#) or [textual determinism](#) which has been challenged by contemporary [social semioticians](#) who tend to emphasize the '[polysemic](#)' and '[multiaccentual](#)' nature of texts, together with the diversity of their uses. See also: [Structural determinism](#), [Subject](#), [Textual determinism](#)
- **Interpersonal communication**: In contrast to [mass communication](#) ('one-to-many' [communication](#)), this term is typically used to refer to 'one-to-one' communication, although this distinction tends to overlook the importance of communication in small groups (neither 'one' nor 'many'). It may be either [synchronous](#) or [asynchronous](#). *Synchronous* interpersonal communication may involve: (a) both speech and non-verbal cues (e.g. direct face-to-face interaction, videolinks); (b) speech alone (e.g. telephone); or (c) mainly text (e.g. internet chat systems). *Asynchronous* interpersonal communication tends to be primarily through text (e.g. letters, fax, e-mail). See also: [Asynchronous communication](#), [Mass communication](#), [Synchronous communication](#)
- **Interpretant**: In [Peirce's model of the sign](#), the *interpretant* is *not* an interpreter but rather the sense made of the sign. Peirce doesn't feature the interpreter directly in his [triad](#), although he does highlight the interpretative process of [semiosis](#). See also: [Peircean model of the sign](#), [Unlimited semiosis](#)
- **Interpretative codes**: Although many semiotic [codes](#) can be seen as interpretative codes, this can be seen as forming one major group of codes, alongside [social codes](#) and [textual codes](#). In the current classification,

interpretative codes include: [perceptual codes](#) and [ideological codes](#). Interpretative codes can be seen as forming a basis for [modality judgements](#), drawing on [textual codes](#)/knowledge and [social codes](#)/knowledge. There is less agreement among semioticians about the status of interpretative codes as semiotic codes than about the other kinds of codes, partly because they are relatively loose and inexplicit (see [hermeneutics](#)). See also: [Code](#), [Hermeneutics](#), [Ideological codes](#), [Interpretative community](#), [Interpretative repertoire](#), [Perceptual codes](#)

- [Interpretative community](#): Those who share the same [codes](#) are members of the same 'interpretative community' - a term introduced by the literary theorist Stanley Fish to refer to both '[writers](#)' and '[readers](#)' of particular [genres](#) of [texts](#) (but which can be used more widely to refer to those who share any code). Linguists tend to use the [logocentric](#) term, 'discourse community'. Thomas Kuhn used the term 'textual community' to refer to epistemic (or [epistemological](#)) communities with shared texts, interpretations and beliefs. [Constructivists](#) argue that interpretative communities are involved in the construction and maintenance of [reality](#) within the [ontological](#) domain which defines their concerns (see [Discourse](#)). The conventions within the codes employed by such communities become [naturalized](#) amongst its members. Individuals belong simultaneously to several interpretative communities. See also: [Code](#), [Discourse](#), [Episteme](#), [Interpretative codes](#), [Interpretative repertoire](#), [Representational codes](#), [Signifying practices](#), [Sociolect](#), [Symbolic capital](#), [Textual codes](#)
- [Interpretative repertoire](#): This term, used by Jonathan Potter, refers to the [interpretative codes](#) and [textual codes](#) available to those within [interpretative communities](#) which offer them the potential to *understand* and also - where the code-user has the appropriate [symbolic capital](#) - to *produce texts* which employ these codes. An interpretative repertoire is part of the symbolic capital of members of the relevant [interpretative community](#). The term is sometimes used synonymously with the term [discourse](#). See also: [Discourse](#), [Interpretative codes](#), [Interpretative community](#), [Symbolic capital](#), [Textual codes](#)
- Interpreter, élite: See [Élite interpreter](#)
- [Intertextuality](#): The semiotic notion of intertextuality introduced by Kristeva is associated primarily with [poststructuralist theorists](#). Intertextuality refers to the various links in [form and content](#) which bind a [text](#) to other texts. Each text exists in relation to others. Although the debts of a text to other texts are seldom acknowledged, texts owe more to other texts than to their own makers. Texts provide contexts such as [genre](#) within which other texts may be created and interpreted. The notion of intertextuality problematizes the idea of a text having boundaries: where does a text begin and end? See also: [Bricolage](#), [Genre](#), [Intratextuality](#), [Postmodernism](#), [Reflexivity](#)
- [Intratextuality](#): Whilst the term [intertextuality](#) would normally be used to refer to links to other [texts](#), a related kind of link is what might be called 'intratextuality' - involving internal relations *within* the text. Within a single [code](#) (e.g. a [photographic code](#)) these would be simply [syntagmatic](#) relationships (e.g. the relationship of the image of one person to another within the same photograph). However, a text may involve several codes: a newspaper photograph, for instance, may have a caption (see [Anchorage](#)). See also: [Anchorage](#), [Intertextuality](#)
- [Irony](#): Irony is a rhetorical [trope](#). It is a kind of double [sign](#) in which the 'literal sign' combines with another sign typically to signify the opposite meaning. However, understatement and overstatement can also be ironic. See also: [Metaphor](#), [Metonymy](#), [Postmodernism](#), [Reflexivity](#), [Synecdoche](#), [Trope](#)
- [Isomorphism](#): The term is used to refer to correspondences, parallels, or similarities in the properties, patterns or relations of a) two *different structures*; b) structural *elements* in two *different structures* and c) structural *elements* at different levels *within the same structure*. Some theorists use the term *homology* in much the same way. Structuralists seek to identify such patterns and note homologies between structures at all levels within a system because all structural units are generated from the same basic [rules of transformation](#). [Narratologists](#) note homologies between [semantic](#) structures (e.g. narrative) and [syntactic](#) structures (e.g. the structure of a sentence) in particular [texts](#). Isomorphic relationships are said to exist where certain structural features of a [signifier](#) are judged to resemble those of the [signified](#) to which it refers. In this sense, [iconicity](#) involves isomorphism. [Nomenclaturism](#) is closely associated with *language-world* isomorphism - the belief that the categories of language 'mirror' the structure of the physical world. Lévi-Strauss interpreted certain cultural practices as serving the function of establishing patterned homologies between cultural structures and those perceived to exist within 'nature'. [Linguistic relativism](#) involves a rejection of *language-language* isomorphism. The concept of [perceptual codes](#) suggests *non-isomorphism* between mental representations and sensory data (*mind-world*). Perceived isomorphism gives '[realistic](#)' [representations](#) high [modality](#) status. Critics note that at a high level of abstraction *any* two structural elements could be described as isomorphic. See also: [Iconic](#), [Nomenclaturism](#), [Nominal Realism](#), [Structuralism](#), [Transformation, rules of](#), [Transparency](#)



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- Language, design features of: See [Design features of language](#)
- ['Language' of a medium](#): Media such as television and film are regarded by some semioticians as being like 'languages' (though this is hotly contested by others). Semioticians commonly refer to films, television and radio programmes, advertising posters and so on as ['texts'](#), and to ['reading'](#) media such as television and photographs. The linguistic model often leads semioticians to a search for units of analysis in audio-visual media which are analogous to those used in linguistics. Others dispute that such basic units can be found in such media. See also: ['Grammar' of medium](#), [Medium](#)
- [Langue and parole](#): These are Saussure's terms. *Langue* refers to the abstract system of rules and [conventions](#) of a signifying system - it is independent of, and pre-exists, individual users. *Parole* refers to concrete instances of its use. To the [Saussurean semiotician](#), what matters most are the underlying structures and rules of a semiotic system as a whole rather than [specific performances or practices](#) which are merely instances of its use. Whilst Saussure did not concern himself with *parole*, the structure of *langue* is of course revealed by the study of *parole*. Applying the notion to semiotic systems in general rather than simply to language, the distinction is one between the semiotic system and its usage in specific [texts](#) and practices. For instance, in a semiotic system such as cinema, any specific film can be seen as the *parole* of the underlying system of cinema ['language'](#) (although note that the eminent film theorist Christian Metz rejected the idea of a cinematic *langue*). Saussure emphasized the importance of studying the 'language-state' [synchronically](#) - as it exists as a relatively stable system during a certain period - rather than [diachronically](#) (studying its evolution). See also: [Diachronic analysis](#), [Synchronic analysis](#)
- Levels of signification: See [Orders of signification](#)
- Linguistic circles or schools: See [Copenhagen school](#), [Moscow school](#), [Paris school](#), [Prague school](#), [Tartu school](#)
- [Linguistic determinism](#): According to linguistic determinists our thinking (or 'worldview') is determined by language - by the very use of verbal language and/or by the grammatical structures, semantic distinctions and inbuilt [ontologies](#) within a language. A more moderate stance is that thinking may be 'influenced' rather than unavoidably 'determined' by language: it is a two-way process, so that the kind of language we use is also influenced by the way we see the world. Critics who are [socially-oriented](#) emphasize the social context of language use rather than purely linguistic considerations; any influence is ascribed not to 'Language' as such (which would be to [reify](#) language) but to usage in particular contexts (see [langue and parole](#)) and to particular kinds of [discourse](#) (e.g. a [sociolect](#)). Both [structuralists](#) and [poststructuralists](#) give [priority](#) to the determining power of the language system: language patterns our experience and the [subject](#) is constructed through [discourse](#). See also: [Discourse](#), [Langue and parole](#), [McLuhanism](#), [Poststructuralism](#), [Priorism](#), [Relativism](#), [linguistic](#), [Social determinism](#), [Structural determinism](#), [Structuralism](#), [Technological determinism](#), [Textual determinism](#), [Whorfianism](#)
- Linguistic relativism: See [Relativism, linguistic](#)
- Linguistic universalism: See [Universalism, linguistic](#)
- [Literalism](#): The fallacy that the [meaning](#) of a [text](#) is contained within it and is completely [determined by it](#) so that all the [reader](#) must do is to 'extract' this meaning from the [signs](#) within it. This stance ignores the importance of 'going beyond the information given' and limits comprehension to the [decoding](#) (in the narrowest sense) of textual properties (without even reference to [codes](#)). See also: [Affective fallacy](#), [Decoding](#), [Meaning](#), [Textual determinism](#)
- [Logocentrism](#): Derrida used this term to refer to the 'metaphysics of presence' in Western culture - in particular its [phonocentrism](#), and its foundation on a mythical ['transcendent signified'](#). Logocentrism can also refer to a typically unconscious interpretative bias which privileges linguistic [communication](#) over the revealingly named 'non-verbal' forms of communication and expression, and over un verbalized feelings; logocentrism privileges both the eye and the ear over other sensory modalities such as touch. See also: [Channel](#), [Graphocentrism](#), [Phonocentrism](#), [Translatability](#)



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- Making the familiar strange: See [Denaturalization](#)
- [Markedness](#): The concept of markedness introduced by Jakobson can be applied to the poles of a [paradigmatic opposition](#) (e.g. male/female). Paired [signifiers](#) (such as *male/female*) consist of an 'unmarked' form (in this case, the word *male*) and a 'marked' form (in this case the word *female*). The 'marked' signifier is distinguished by some special semiotic feature (in this case the addition of an initial *fe-*). A marked or unmarked status applies not only to signifiers but also to their [signifieds](#). With many of the familiarly paired terms, the two signifieds are [valorized](#) - accorded different values. The marked form (typically the second term) is presented as 'different' and is (implicitly)

negative. The unmarked form is typically dominant (e.g. statistically within a text or corpus) and therefore seems to be 'neutral', 'normal' and 'natural'. The concept of markedness can be applied more broadly than simply to paradigmatically paired terms. Whether in textual or social practices, the choice of a marked form 'makes a statement'. Where a text deviates from conventional expectations it is 'marked'. Conventional, or ['over-coded'](#) text (which follows a fairly predictable formula) is unmarked whereas unconventional or ['under-coded'](#) text is marked. See also: [Absent signifiers](#), [Deconstruction](#), [Ontology](#), [Oppositions](#), [Paradigm](#), [Transcendent signified](#), [Valorization](#)

- [Mass communication](#): In contrast to [interpersonal communication](#) ('one-to-one' communication), this term is typically used to refer to 'one-to-many' communication, although this distinction tends to overlook the importance of communication in small groups (neither 'one' nor 'many'). Whilst mass communication may be 'live' or recorded, it is primarily [asynchronous](#) - live two-way communication through a mass medium occurs only in such special cases as radio or television 'phone-ins' (which involve [interpersonal communication](#) which is then broadcast). Mass communication is conducted through verbal text, graphics and/or audio-visual media (e.g. film, television, radio, newspapers, magazines etc.). See also: [Asynchronous communication](#), [Circuit of communication](#), [Communication](#), [Interpersonal communication](#)
- [Materialism](#): Materialism is an anti-idealist and anti-essentialist position which criticizes [essentialist](#) abstraction and [reification](#) and the [formalist reduction](#) of [substance](#) to forms and relations. It is [realist](#) in that the world is seen as having a recalcitrant being of its own which resists our intentions. Materialists (sometimes called *cultural materialists*) emphasize such things as the textual [representation](#) of the material conditions of social [reality](#) (such as poverty, sickness and exploitation), the socio-cultural and historical contingency of [signifying practices](#), and the specificity and [physical properties of media and signs](#) (suppressed in the [transparency](#) of dominant codes of [aesthetic realism](#)). [Texts](#) themselves are part of the world. In a naive realist form, materialism posits a materiality ['prior to' signification](#) and attributes to it causal primacy. Critics often refer to materialism as ['reductive'](#). Marxist materialism is a version of epistemological realism which emphasizes the 'relations of production'. For Marx, the material conditions of existence determine human consciousness, and not vice versa. See also: [Essentialism](#), [Idealism](#), [Materiality of the sign](#), [Realism \(objectivism\)](#)
- [Materiality of the sign](#): Although signs may be discerned in the material form of words, images, sounds, acts or objects, such things have no intrinsic [meaning](#) and become signs only when we invest them with meaning. Signs as such have no material existence: only the [sign vehicle](#) has material substance. Whilst nowadays the ['signifier'](#) is commonly interpreted as the material (or physical) form of the sign (something which can be seen, heard, touched, smelt or tasted), this is more materialistic than [Saussure's own model](#). For Saussure, both the signifier and the signified were ['form' rather than substance](#). However, the material form of the sign can itself be a signifier - the same written [text](#) might be interpreted somewhat differently depending on whether it was handwritten or word-processed, and it might even generate different [connotations](#) if it were in one typeface rather than another. So too, whether the text was an 'original' or a 'copy' might affect the sense made of the text (see [tokens and types](#)) - not everyone would appreciate a photocopied love-letter! The basic material properties of the text may be shaped by constraints and affordances of the [medium](#) employed, which may also generate connotations. Some ['reflexive'](#) aesthetic practices [foreground](#) their 'textuality' - the signs of their production (the materials and techniques used) - thus reducing the [transparency](#) of their style. For instance: 'painterly' painters draw our attention to the form and texture of their brushstrokes and to the qualities of the paint; [poetry](#) involves being playful with words; and music (without words) can only offer us sounds rather than propositions or arguments. In texts reflecting such practices, signifiers refer intratextually and [intertextually](#) to other signifiers more than to extratextual [signifieds](#). In 'art for art's sake', ['the medium is the message'](#). However, when our prime purpose is instrumental (i.e. when we use the sign, text or medium as a means to an end) we are seldom conscious of the materiality of the sign, which retreats to transparency as we [foreground the plane of content](#) rather than the [plane of expression](#) (or more specifically, rather than the *substance of expression*). See also: [Channel](#), [Materialism](#), [McLuhanism](#), [Medium](#), [Plane of expression](#), [Primacy of the signifier](#), [Reflexivity](#), [Tokens and types](#), [Sign vehicle](#), [Translatability](#), [Transparency](#)
- [McLuhanism](#): Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) was a Canadian literary scholar who enjoyed international cult status as a media guru in the 1960s. 'McLuhanism' is a term sometimes used to refer to his notion that 'the [medium](#) is the [message'](#), which had at least four apparent meanings: a) that the medium shapes its content (i.e. that the nature of any medium has implications for the kinds of experience which can be best handled with it); b) that using a medium is important in itself (e.g. watching television or reading books are experiences in themselves regardless of explicit content); c) that the 'message' of a medium is the 'impact' it has on society; d) that the 'message' of a medium is its transformation of the perceptual habits of its users. McLuhan was a [technological determinist](#) who adopted the 'hard determinist' stance that [communication](#) technologies such as television, radio, printing and writing profoundly transformed both society and 'the human psyche'. The technologies (or media)

which he discussed reflected his very broad definition of 'media'. This stance (sometimes known more specifically as 'media determinism') can be seen as an application of extreme [Whorfianism](#) to the nature of media in general. Just as Whorf argued that different languages shape our perception and thinking differently, McLuhan argued that all media do this. Clearly for McLuhan, the medium was far from [neutral](#). See also: [Form and content](#), [Medium](#), [Non-neutrality of medium](#), [Linguistic determinism](#), [Technological determinism](#), [Whorfianism](#)

- [Meaning](#): Saussure's conception of meaning was purely *structural, relational* and *differential* - the meaning of signs was seen as lying in their systematic relation to each other. In contrast, *referential meaning* is the [representation](#) of [referents](#) in [signs](#) and [texts](#). In the [transmission model of communication](#), meaning is equated with *content*. Similarly, for both [formalists](#) and [structuralists](#), 'the meaning of the text' is 'immanent' - that is, it is regarded as lying *within* the text (socio-historical context, [authorial intention](#) and readers' purposes are excluded from consideration). Social semioticians reject this '[literalist](#)' notion - meaning does *not* reside *within* a text. They emphasize [meaning-making practices](#) and the interpretative importance of [codes](#). Many semioticians would define meaning in terms of the [denotative](#) and [connotative](#) associations produced as a [reader decodes](#) a text with relation to [textual codes](#). See also: [Affective fallacy](#), [Intentional fallacy](#), [Literalism](#), [Preferred reading](#), [Signifying practices](#), [Value](#)
- Media determinism: See [McLuhanism](#) and [Technological determinism](#)
- [Mediation](#): Semioticians emphasize the mediatedness of experience, reminding us that we are always dealing with [signs](#) and [codes](#), not with an unmediated objective [reality](#). We become so used to [conventions](#) in '[realistic](#)' texts such as those in audio-visual media that they seem 'natural' - the [signifieds](#) seem unmediated and the [medium](#) seems '[transparent](#)', as when we interpret television or photography as 'a window on the world'. See also: [Constructivism](#), [Idealism](#), [Realism \(objectivism\)](#), [Reality](#)
- [Medium](#): The term 'medium' is used in a variety of ways by different theorists, and may include such broad categories as speech and writing or print and broadcasting or relate to specific technical forms within the *media of mass communication* (radio, television, newspapers, magazines, books, photographs, films and records) or the *media of interpersonal communication* (telephone, letter, fax, e-mail, video-conferencing, computer-based chat systems). A medium is typically treated instrumentally as a [transparent](#) vehicle of [representation](#) by [readers](#) of [texts](#) composed within it, but the medium used may itself contribute to [meaning](#): a hand-written letter and a word-processed circular could carry the same verbal text but generate different [connotations](#). [Signs](#) and [codes](#) are always anchored in the material form of a medium - each of which has its own constraints and affordances. A medium may be [digital](#) or [analogical](#). [Postmodernist](#) theorists tend to blur distinctions between one medium and another. Marshall [McLuhan](#) famously declared that 'the medium is the [message](#)'. See also: [Channel](#), [Form and content](#), '[Grammar](#)' of medium, [Language of a medium](#), [Materiality of sign](#), [McLuhanism](#), [Non-neutrality of medium](#), [Plane of expression](#), [Sign vehicle](#), [Translatability](#)
- Medium and message: See [McLuhanism](#)
- [Message](#): This term variously refers either to a [text](#) or to the [meaning](#) of a text - [referents](#) which [literalists](#) tend to conflate. See also: [Literalism](#), [McLuhanism](#), [Meaning](#), [Text](#)
- 'Message without a code': See [Photographic codes](#)
- [Metalingual function](#): In Jakobson's model of linguistic [communication](#) this is deemed to be one of the key [functions of a sign](#). This function refers to the [codes](#) within which the sign may be interpreted. See also: [Code](#), [Functions of a sign](#)
- Metaphysics of presence: See [Deconstruction](#)
- [Metaphor](#): Metaphor expresses the unfamiliar (known in literary jargon as the 'tenor') in terms of the familiar (the 'vehicle'). The *tenor* and the *vehicle* are normally unrelated: we must make an imaginative leap to recognize the resemblance to which a fresh metaphor alludes. In semiotic terms, a metaphor involves one [signified](#) acting as a [signifier](#) referring to a rather different signified. Metaphors initially seem unconventional because they apparently disregard 'literal' or [denotative](#) resemblance. Metaphor can thus be seen as involving a [symbolic](#) as well as an [iconic](#) quality. Metaphoric signifiers tend to [foreground](#) the signifier rather than the signified. [Deconstructionists](#) have sought to demonstrate how dominant metaphors function to privilege [unmarked](#) signifieds. See also: [Irony](#), [Metonymy](#), [Poetic function](#), [Synecdoche](#), [Trope](#)
- [Metonymic \(synecdochic\) fallacy](#): This term refers to a tendency for the [represented](#) part to be taken as an accurate reflection of the whole of that which it is taken as standing for. It might more accurately be referred to as the [synecdochic](#) fallacy. See also: [Metonymy](#), [Synecdoche](#)
- [Metonymy](#): A metonym is a figure of speech involving using one [signified](#) to stand for another signified which is directly related to it or closely associated with it in some way, notably the substitution of effect for cause. It is sometimes considered to include the functions ascribed by some to [synecdoche](#). Metonymy simulates an

[indexical](#) mode. Metonymic [signifiers foreground](#) their signifieds and background themselves. See also: [Contiguity](#), [Irony](#), [Synecdoche](#), [Metaphor](#), [Metonymic fallacy](#), [Trope](#)

- [Mimesis](#): The mimetic purpose in [representation](#) involves an attempt to closely imitate or simulate observable features of an external [reality](#) as if this is being experienced directly and without [mediation](#). Whilst the notion derives from classical Greece, mimesis came to be the primary goal of a nineteenth century '[realist](#)' movement in art and literature concerned with the 'accurate' observation and representation of the world. See also: [Naturalism](#), [Realism](#), [aesthetic](#), [Representation](#), [Transparency](#)
- Mirror phase: See [Imaginary](#), [The](#)
- [Mise-en-scène](#): Film theorists use this term to refer to the visual composition of individual shots. It includes camera position and angle, setting, costume and lighting, the relation of people and objects and also movement within the compositional frame. Theorists note that it is an *extracinematic code* since it is not unique to cinema: it was adopted from theatre, where it referred to 'staging'. It is distinguished from [montage](#). See also: [Filmic codes](#), [Montage](#)
- [Modality](#): Modality refers to the reality status accorded to or claimed by a [sign](#), [text](#) or [genre](#). Peirce's [classification of signs](#) in terms of the mode of relationship of the [sign vehicle](#) to its [referent](#) reflects their modality - their apparent [transparency](#) in relation to '[reality](#)' (the [symbolic](#) mode, for instance, having low modality). In making sense of a text, its interpreters make 'modality judgements' about it. They assess what are variously described as the plausibility, reliability, credibility, truth, accuracy or facticity of texts within a given genre as [representations](#) of some recognizable [reality](#). For instance, they assign it to fact or fiction, actuality or acting, live or recorded, and they assess the possibility or plausibility of the events depicted or the claims made in it. In doing so, they draw upon their knowledge of the world (and [social codes](#)) and of the [medium](#) (and [textual codes](#)). Such judgements are made in part with reference to cues within texts which semioticians (following linguists) call 'modality markers', which include features of [form and content](#). See also: [Ontology](#), [Reality](#)
- [Modelling systems, primary and secondary](#): 'Secondary modelling systems' are described, following Lotman, as semiotic superstructures built upon 'primary modelling systems'. Within this framework, writing is a secondary modelling system and written texts are built upon a primary modelling system which consists of verbal language. Since this stance grants primacy to the spoken form, it has been criticized as [phonocentric](#). Other theorists have extended this notion to '[texts](#)' in other [media](#), seeing them as secondary modelling systems built out of a primary '[language](#)'. Cinematic texts, for instance, have sometimes been seen as built upon a primary modelling system of 'graphic language'. However, whether such a 'language' has basic building blocks and what these might be has been hotly disputed. See also: [Language of a medium](#)
- [Models of communication](#): See [Encoding and decoding model of communication](#), [Transmission model of communication](#)
- [Models of the sign](#): See [Peircean model](#), [Saussurean model](#)
- [Modernism](#): Modernism refers to a movement across the arts in the West which can be traced to the late nineteenth century, was at its height from around 1910 to 1930, and persisted until around the late 1970s. It was characterized most broadly by a rejection of tradition and of art as imitation. It involved considerable cross-fertilization between the arts and between its various forms in different countries. In the visual arts it included Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Futurism. In painting modernism typically involved the abandonment of direct [representation](#). In music it was reflected in the abandonment of melody and harmony in favour of atonality. In architecture it is associated with the Bauhaus school; traditional materials and forms were rejected in favour of functional geometrical forms and new materials. In literature, [realism](#) in the novel was replaced by fragmentation and stream-of-consciousness and free verse became dominant in poetry. See also: [Postmodernism](#)
- [Modes of address](#): Implicit and explicit ways in which aspects of the style, structure and/or content of a text function to 'position' [readers](#) as [subjects](#) ('[ideal readers](#)') (e.g. in relation to class, age, gender and ethnicity). Aspects of this include degrees of [directness](#) and of [formality](#), [narrative point of view](#) and the [markedness](#) of one form of address compared with another. See also: [Directness of address](#), [Enunciation](#), [Formality of address](#), [Functions of signs](#), [Narration](#)
- [Modes of relationship](#): This is Terence Hawkes's term to refer to Peirce's classification of signs in terms of the degree of [arbitrariness](#) in the relation of [signifier](#) to [signified](#) (to use Saussurean rather than Peircean terminology). These are (in order of decreasing arbitrariness) the [symbolic](#), [iconic](#) and [indexical](#) modes. It is easy to slip into referring to Peirce's three forms as 'types of signs', but they are not necessarily mutually exclusive: a sign can be an icon, a symbol and an index, or any combination. Whether a sign is symbolic, iconic or indexical depends primarily on the way in which the sign is used, so the 'typical' examples which are often chosen to illustrate the various modes can be misleading. The same signifier may be used iconically in one context and

symbolically in another. Signs cannot be classified in terms of the three modes without reference to the purposes of their users within particular contexts. See also: [Arbitrariness](#), [Conventionality](#), [Relative autonomy](#)

- **'Moments' of communication:** See [Circuit of communication](#)
- **Montage:** This [cinematic code](#), taken from the French *monter* ('to assemble'), is used in various ways in film theory. The most general usage refers to editing, to the process of editing shots into a sequence or to editing sequences into the form of a complete film. It sometimes refers to the use of many short shots to portray action or to a sequence of shots representing a condensed series of events. It is distinguished from [mise-en-scène](#) and is regarded as specific to the filmic [medium](#). See also: [Filmic codes](#), [Mise-en-scène](#), [Syntagm](#)
- **Moscow school:** The Moscow Linguistics Circle was co-founded in 1915 by the Russian linguists Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) and Pjotr Bogatyrev (1893-1971). Together with the Petrograd Society for the Study of Poetic Language (Opoyaz) - which included Victor Shklovsky (1893-1984), Yuri Tynyanov (1894-1943) and Boris Eikhenbaum (1886-1959) - the Moscow school was the origin of Russian [Formalism](#) (a term initially used perjoratively by critics). When Formalist criticism was suppressed in the early 1930s by the Russian government, Jakobson emigrated to Czechoslovakia and became part of the [Prague Linguistic Circle](#). See also: [Formalism](#), [Prague school](#)
- Moscow-Tartu school: See [Tartu school](#)
- **Motivation and constraint:** The term 'motivation' (used by Saussure) is sometimes contrasted with 'constraint' in describing the extent to which the [signified](#) determines the [signifier](#). The more a signifier is constrained by the signified, the more 'motivated' the sign is: [iconic signs](#) are highly motivated; [symbolic signs](#) are unmotivated. The less motivated the sign, the more learning of an agreed [code](#) is required. See also: [Arbitrariness](#)
- **Multiaccentuality of the sign:** this term is used to refer to the diversity of the use and interpretation of [texts](#) by different audiences (Volosinov).
- **Myth:** Barthes argues that the [orders of signification](#) called [denotation](#) and [connotation](#) combine to produce [ideology](#) in the form of *myth* - which has been described as a *third* order of signification. Popular usage of the term 'myth' suggests that it refers to beliefs which are demonstrably false, but the semiotic use of the term does not necessarily suggest this. Semioticians in the Saussurean tradition treat the relationship between nature and culture as relatively [arbitrary](#); myths operate through [codes](#) and serve the ideological function of [naturalization](#). See also: [Ideology](#), [Orders of signification](#)



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- **Narration or narrative voice:** *Narration* is the act and process of producing a [narrative](#). [Modes of address](#) differ in their narrative *point-of-view*. Written narratives may employ third-person omniscient narration ('telling') or first-person 'subjective' narration ('showing'). In television and film, camera treatment is called 'subjective' when the camera shows us events as if from a particular participant's visual point of view (encouraging viewers to identify with that person's way of seeing events or even to feel like an eye-witness to the events themselves). In academic writing, third person narrative has traditionally been regarded as more 'objective' and ['transparent'](#) than first-person narrative; critics note that this style obscures authorial agency - 'facts' and events appear to 'speak for themselves'. See also: [Enunciation](#), [Modes of address](#), [Polyvocality](#), [Textual codes](#), [Univocality](#)
- **Narrative:** A narrative is a [representation](#) of a 'chain' of events. In the orderly Aristotelian narrative form, *causation* and *goals* turn *story* (chronological events) into *plot*: events at the beginning cause those in the middle, and events in the middle cause those at the end. See also: [Narration](#), [Narratology](#), [Syntagm](#), [Syntagmatic analysis](#)
- **Narratology:** Narratology (or narrative theory) is a major interdisciplinary field in its own right, and is not necessarily framed within a semiotic perspective. Semiotic narratology is concerned with narrative in any mode - literary or non-literary, fictional or non-fictional, verbal or visual - but tends to focus on minimal narrative units and the 'grammar of the plot'. See also: [Syntagmatic analysis](#)
- **Narrowcast codes:** In contrast to [broadcast codes](#), narrowcast [codes](#) are aimed at a limited audience, structurally more complex, less repetitive and tend to be more subtle, original and unpredictable. Following Bernstein, they are controversially described by some theorists as 'elaborated codes'. See also: [Broadcast codes](#), [Code](#), [Symbolic capital](#)
- **Naturalism:** In some contexts *naturalism* is regarded as a [reductionist](#) form of [realism](#) which offers detailed but superficial representations of the *appearance* of things (*verisimilitude*), in contrast to a mode which reflects a deeper, more profound understanding of their ['essential'](#) nature (less specific and more 'typical'). However, another use of the term (originating in the late nineteenth century) refers to a focus on psychological or 'inner'

reality. 'Photo-realism' or 'photographic naturalism' is the dominant contemporary form of visual naturalism for which [modality](#) judgements tend to be based on standards derived from 35mm colour [photography](#). See also: [Mimesis](#), [Realism](#), [aesthetic](#)

- [Naturalization](#): [Codes](#) which have been naturalized are those which are so widely distributed in a culture and which are learned at such an early age that they appear not to be constructed but to be 'naturally' given. [Myths](#) serve the [ideological](#) function of naturalization - making the cultural seem 'natural', 'normal', 'self-evident' 'common-sense', and thus 'taken-for-granted'. [Denotation](#) can be seen as no more of a 'natural' meaning than [connotation](#) but rather as a part of a process of naturalization. See also: [Commonsense](#), [Denaturalization](#), [Ideology](#), [Valorization](#)
- [Negotiated code and reading](#): Within Stuart Hall's framework, this is an [ideological code](#) in which the reader partly shares the [text's code](#) and broadly accepts the [preferred reading](#), but sometimes resists and modifies it in a way which reflects their own social position, experiences and interests (local and personal conditions may be seen as exceptions to the general rule) - this position involves contradictions. See also: [Dominant code and reading](#), [Ideological codes](#), [Oppositional code and reading](#)
- [Nomenclaturism](#): According to this naive [realist](#) philosophical position, language is simply a nomenclature - words are simply names for pre-existing things (for some, this may include imaginary things and concepts as well as physical objects). It is a [reductionist](#) stance: reducing language to the purely [referential function](#) of naming things. See also: [Essentialism](#), [Isomorphism](#), [Meaning](#), [Nominal realism](#), [Realism \(objectivism\)](#), [Referent](#), [Referential fallacy](#), [Reification](#)
- [Nominal realism](#): Jean Piaget uses this term to refer to the way in which young children sometimes appear to have difficulty in separating the labels which we give to things from the things themselves, as if such [signifiers](#) were an essential part of their [referents](#). Even with adults, certain signifiers are regarded by some as far from 'arbitrary', acquiring almost magical power - as in relation to 'graphic' swearing and issues of prejudice - highlighting the point that signifiers are not *socially* arbitrary. As Korzybski declared, 'the word is not the thing' (the [signifier](#) is not the [referent](#)), a reminder which is particularly apposite with reference to visual rather than linguistic [signs](#). See also: [Essentialism](#), [Isomorphism](#), [Nomenclaturism](#), [Realism \(objectivism\)](#), [Referent](#), [Reification](#)
- [Non-neutrality of the medium](#): Marshall McLuhan's notion that 'the [medium](#) is the [message](#)' can be seen as a semiotic concern: to a semiotician the medium is not 'neutral'. Each medium has its own technical constraints, affordances and cultural [connotations](#). The [signified](#) itself may be altered by a change of the medium used for the [sign vehicle](#). See also: [Channel](#), [Graphocentrism](#), [Logocentrism](#), [Materiality of the sign](#), [McLuhanism](#), [Technological determinism](#), [Translatability](#), [Transparency](#)



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- [Object](#): Term used in [Peirce's triadic model of the sign](#) to describe the [referent](#) of the sign - what the sign 'stands for'. Note that unlike Saussure's abstract [signified](#), the referent is an object in the world. This need not exclude the reference of signs to abstract concepts and fictional entities as well as to physical objects, but Peirce's model allocates a place for an physical [reality](#) which Saussure's model did not feature (though Peirce was not a naive [realist](#), and argued that all experience is [mediated](#) by signs). See also: [Peircean model of the sign](#)
- Objectivism: See [Realism \(objectivism\)](#)
- Ocularcentrism: See [Graphocentrism](#)
- Ontological arbitrariness: See [Arbitrariness](#)
- [Ontology](#): This philosophical term (from *metaphysics*) refers to assertions or assumptions about the nature of [reality](#): about what 'the real world' is like and what exists in it. It concerns what Foucault called 'the order of things' - a system of dividing up reality into discrete entities and substances. There are often hierarchical relations within an ontology: certain entities may be assigned [prior](#) existence, higher [modality](#) or some other privileged status. Ontologies are necessarily defined in words, which in itself [transparently](#) assigns a privileged status to words. Furthermore, naive theorists tend to assume that an order of things in the world can be adequately represented in words. Ontologies are tied to [epistemological](#) frameworks. The term *ontological status* is sometimes used to refer to the relationships between [signifieds](#). [Semantic oppositions](#) such as between *physical* and *mental* or between [form and content](#) are ontological distinctions. The principle of *ontological parsimony* or economy (also known as 'Ockham's razor') is that the entities posited by a formal ontology should be limited in number to those which are essential for an adequate explanation. Advancing the theory of *ontological relativity*, [Whorfian](#) theorists argue that different languages carve up the world differently and have different in-built ontologies, so that some concepts

may not be [translatable](#). [Realists](#) deny *ontological validity* to things which they do not regard as part of the external, objective world. For realists, there is an ontological bond between the [signifier](#) and the [signified](#) in media which are both [indexical](#) and [iconic](#) (such as photography, film and television) which are thus seen as capable of directly reflecting 'things as they are'. See also: [Binary oppositions](#), [Deconstruction](#), [Epistemology](#), [Markedness](#), [Modality](#), [Priorism](#), [Reification](#), [Relativism](#), [linguistic](#)

- [Open and closed texts](#): Eco describes as 'closed' those [texts](#) which show a strong tendency to encourage a particular interpretation - in contrast to more 'open' texts. He argues that mass media texts tend to be 'closed texts', and because they are broadcast to heterogeneous audiences diverse [decodings](#) of such texts are unavoidable. See also: [Broadcast codes](#), [Polysemy](#)
- [Oppositional code and reading](#): Within Stuart Hall's framework, this is an [ideological code](#) in which the reader, whose social situation places them in a directly oppositional relation to the [dominant code](#), understands the [preferred reading](#) but does not share the text's [code](#) and rejects this reading, bringing to bear an alternative [ideological code](#). See also: [Dominant code and reading](#), [Ideological codes](#), [Negotiated code and reading](#), [Oppositional code and reading](#)
- [Oppositions, semantic](#): See [Analogue oppositions](#), [Binary oppositions](#) and [Converse oppositions](#)
- [Order of things](#): See [Ontology](#)
- [Order, symbolic](#): See [Discourse](#)
- [Orders of signification](#): Barthes adopted from Hjelmslev the notion that there are different orders of [signification](#) (levels of meaning) in semiotic systems. The *first order of signification* is that of [denotation](#): at this level there is a [sign](#) consisting of a [signifier](#) and a [signified](#). [Connotation](#) is a *second-order of signification* which uses the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified. Barthes argues that the orders of signification called denotation and connotation combine to produce [ideology](#) in the form of [myth](#) -which has been described as a *third order of signification*. Differences between the three orders of signification are not clear-cut. See also: [Connotation](#), [Denotation](#), [Myth](#)
- [Overcoding](#): 'Overcoding' refers to structurally simple, conventional and repetitive [texts](#) having what information theorists call a high degree of [redundancy](#). These are alleged to be features of [broadcast codes](#). Under-coding is a feature of texts using less conventional [narrowcast codes](#). Overcoding may lead to an 'overdetermined' reading of the texts which employ broadcast codes - to a stronger [preferred reading](#). See also: [Broadcast codes](#), [Overdetermination](#), [Preferred reading](#), [Redundancy](#), [Textual determinism](#)
- [Overdetermination](#): A phenomenon is said to be overdetermined when it can be attributed to multiple determining factors. Overdetermined readings of [texts](#) are those in which the [preferred reading](#) is very clear from the use of [overcoded broadcast codes](#) and the familiarity of the [representational](#) practices involved. See also: [Overcoding](#), [Textual determinism](#)



[A](#) [B](#) [C](#) [D](#) [E](#) [F](#) [G](#) [H](#) [I](#) [J](#) [K](#) [L](#) [M](#) [N](#) [O](#) [P](#) [Q](#) [R](#) [S](#) [T](#) [U](#) [V](#) [W](#) [X](#) [Y](#) [Z](#)

- [Paradigmatic analysis](#): Paradigmatic analysis is a [structuralist](#) technique which seeks to identify the various [paradigms](#) which underlie the 'surface structure' of a [text](#). This aspect of structural analysis involves a consideration of the positive or negative [connotations](#) of each [signifier](#) (revealed through the use of one signifier rather than another), and the existence of 'underlying' thematic paradigms (e.g. [binary oppositions](#) such as *public/private*). See also: [Commutation test](#), [Paradigm](#), [Selection, axis of](#), [Syntagmatic analysis](#)
- [Paradigm](#): A paradigm is a set of associated [signifiers](#) which are all members of some defining category, but in which each signifier is significantly different. In natural language there are grammatical paradigms such as verbs or nouns. In a given context, one member of the paradigm set is structurally replaceable with another. The use of one signifier (e.g. a particular word or a garment) rather than another from the same paradigm set (e.g. adjectives or hats) shapes the [preferred meaning](#) of a [text](#). *Paradigmatic relations* are the [oppositions](#) and contrasts between the signifiers that belong to the same paradigm set from which those used in the text were drawn. See also: [Associative relations](#), [Paradigmatic analysis](#), [Selection, axis of](#), [Syntagm](#)
- **Paris school**: This is a school of [structuralist](#) semiotic thinking established by Algirdas Greimas (1917-1992), a Lithuanian by origin. Strongly influenced by Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1966), it seeks to identify basic structures of [signification](#). Greimas focused primarily on the semantic analysis of textual structures but the Paris School has expanded its rigorous (critics say arid) structural analysis to cultural phenomena such as gestural language, legal discourse and social science. It is formalist in treating semiotic systems as autonomous rather than exploring the importance of social context. See also [Copenhagen school](#), [Formalism](#), [Structuralism](#)

- *Parole*: See [Langue](#)
- [Peircean model of the sign](#): Peirce's model of the sign had *three* elements - the [representamen](#), an [interpretant](#) and an [object](#). It is thus a [triadic](#) model. See also: [Saussurean model](#)
- Parsimony, ontological: See [Ontology](#)
- [Perceptual codes](#): These is classified here as a type of [interpretative code](#). Some semioticians regard sensory perception as a [code](#). Various arguments are encountered, in particular: a) that interpretation cannot be separated from perception; b) that human perceptual apparatus differs from that of other organisms and so presumably different species inhabit different perceptual realities; and/or c) that even within the human species, that there are socio-cultural, sub-cultural and environmental differences in perception. Perceptual codes must thus be learnt. As a semiotic code, perception involves [representation](#). Unlike most codes, the notion of a perceptual code does not assume intentional [communication](#) (there need be no 'sender'). See also: [Code](#)
- [Phatic function of signs](#): In Jakobson's model of linguistic [communication](#) this is deemed to be one of the key [functions of a sign](#). This function refers to its construction of a *relationship* between [addresser and addressee](#). See also: [Addresser and addressee](#), [Functions of a sign](#)
- Phenomenal reality: See [Reality](#)
- [Phonocentrism](#): Phonocentrism is a typically unconscious interpretative bias which privileges speech over writing (and consequently) the oral-aural over the visual). See also: [Channel](#), [Graphocentrism](#), [Logocentrism](#)
- [Photographic codes](#): On one occasion, Barthes asserted that a photograph is 'a [message](#) without a code'. However, even though photographs are [indexical](#) (as well as [iconic](#)) photography involves a translation from three dimensions into two, as well as many variable representational practices. Consequently, some semioticians refer to 'reading photographs'. Photographic [codes](#) include [genre](#), camerawork (lens choice, focus, aperture, exposure, camera position), composition (framing, distance, angle, lighting), film (quality, type, colour), developing (exposure, treatments) and printing (paper, size, cropping). See also: [Codes](#), [Naturalism](#), [Photographic signs](#), [Representational codes](#)
- Photographic naturalism: See [Naturalism](#)
- [Photographic signs](#): Unedited photographic and filmic images are [indexical](#) rather than simply [iconic](#) - though you could call them 'iconic indexes (or indices)'. A photographic image is an index of the effect of light on photographic emulsion. The indexical character of photographs encourages interpreters to treat them as 'objective' and [transparent](#) records of '[reality](#)'. In this [medium](#) there is less of an obvious gap between the [signifier](#) and its [signified](#) than with non-photographic media. We need to remind ourselves that a photograph does not simply record and reproduce an event, but is only one of an infinite number of possible [representations](#). Representational practices are always involved in selection, composition, lighting, focusing, exposure, processing and so on. Photographs are 'made' rather than 'taken'. [Digital](#) photography leaves no trace of any editing, so that a digital photograph may lose its indexical status whilst retaining a compelling illusion of indexicality. Note that in a photograph the [syntagms](#) are spatial (or conceptual) relationships rather than sequential ones. See also: [Indexical signs](#), [Photographic codes](#)
- Photo-realism: See [Naturalism](#)
- [Plane of content](#): For Hjelmslev and Barthes, the [signifieds](#) on the plane of *content* were: *substance of content* (which included 'human content', textual world, subject matter and [genre](#)) and *form of content* (which included [semantic](#) structure and thematic structure - including narrative). See also: [Plane of expression](#)
- [Plane of expression](#): For Hjelmslev and Barthes, the [signifiers](#) on the plane of *expression* were: *substance of expression* (which included physical materials of the [medium](#) - e.g. images and sounds) and *form of expression* (which included formal [syntactic](#) structure, technique and style). See also: [Materiality of the sign](#), [Plane of content](#)
- Plane of the *paradigm*: See [Selection, axis of](#)
- Plane of the *syntagm*: See [Combination, axis of](#)
- [Poetic or aesthetic function](#): In Jakobson's model of linguistic [communication](#) the dominance of any one of six factors within an utterance reflects a different linguistic function. In utterances where the poetic function is dominant (e.g. in literary [texts](#)), the language tends to be more '[opaque](#)' than conventional prose in emphasizing the [signifier](#) and [medium](#) (and their [materiality](#)), or the form, style or [code](#) at least as much as any [signified](#), content, '[message](#)' or referential [meaning](#). Such texts [foreground](#) the act and form of expression and undermine any sense of a 'natural' or '[transparent](#)' connection between a signifier and a [referent](#). In this sense, where the poetic function dominates, the text is *self-referential*: [form is content](#) and '[the medium \[of language\] is the message](#)'. Some later adaptations of Jakobson's model refer to the poetic function as the [formal function](#). The poetic function is generally more [metaphorical](#) than [metonymic](#), more [connotative](#) than [denotative](#). See also: [Aesthetic codes](#), [Conative function](#), [Encoding and decoding model](#), [Expressive function](#), [Foregrounding](#), [Functions of a sign](#), [Metalingual function](#), [Phatic function](#), [Referential function](#), [Reflexivity](#), [Transparency](#)

- **Polysemy:** Those who reject [textual determinism](#) (such as [poststructuralists](#)) emphasize the 'polysemic' nature of [texts](#) - their plurality of meanings.
- **Polyvocality:** In contrast to [univocality](#), this is the use of multiple voices as a [narrative mode](#) within a [text](#), typically in order to encourage diverse readings rather than to promote a [preferred reading](#). See also: [Narration](#), [Univocality](#)
- Positioning of the subject: See [Subject](#)
- **Postmodernism:** This slippery term, which ostensibly refers to an era succeeding [modernism](#), is philosophically allied with [poststructuralism](#), [deconstruction](#), radical scepticism and [relativism](#) - with which it shares an [anti-foundationalist](#) stance. Ironically postmodernism could almost be defined in terms of *resisting definition*. Postmodernism does not constitute a unified 'theory' (though many postmodernist theorists grant no access to any [reality](#) outside [signification](#)). Nor is there a 'postmodernist' aesthetic 'movement'; postmodernism is highly fragmented and eclectic. However, characteristic features of postmodern [texts](#) and practices are the use of *irony* and a highly [reflexive intertextuality](#) - blurring the boundaries of texts, [genres](#) and [media](#) and drawing attention to the text's constructedness and processes of construction. Postmodernism differs from modernism in embracing popular culture and 'bad taste'. The postmodernist trend is sometimes dated from Jean-François Lyotard's book, *The Postmodern Condition*, first published in 1979, which characterized postmodernist theory in terms of 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. See also: [Deconstruction](#), [Intertextuality](#), [Modernism](#), [Poststructuralism](#), [Reflexivity](#),
- **Poststructuralism:** Whilst poststructuralism is often interpreted simply as 'anti-structuralism', it is worth noting that the label refers to a school of thought which developed *after*, out of, and in relation to [structuralism](#). Poststructuralism built on and adapted structuralist notions in addition to problematising many of them. For instance, whilst Saussure argued for the [arbitrariness](#) of the relationship between the [signifier](#) and the [signified](#) and the [primacy of the signifier](#), many poststructuralists have taken this notion further, asserting the total disconnection of the signifier and the signified (see [Empty signifier](#)). (they tend to be [idealists](#), granting no access to any [reality](#) outside [signification](#)). Both schools of thought are built on the assumption that we are the [subjects](#) of language rather than being simply instrumental 'users' of it, and poststructuralist thinkers have developed further the notion of 'the constitution of the subject', challenging [essentialist](#) romantic individualism (the notion that we are autonomous and creative agents with stable, unified 'personalities' and 'original' ideas). Poststructuralist semiotics is post-Saussurean semiotics; it involves a rejection of Saussure's hopes for semiotics as a systematic 'science' which could reveal some stable, underlying master-system - any such system would always involve exclusions and contradictions. For poststructuralists there are no fundamental 'deep structures' underlying forms in an external world. Whilst some semioticians have retained a structuralist concern with [the analysis of formal systems](#), poststructuralist semioticians insist that no such analysis can ever be exhaustive or final. Many poststructuralist semioticians are involved in [deconstruction](#), emphasizing the instability of the relationship between the [signifier](#) and the [signified](#) and the way in which the dominant [ideology](#) seeks to promote the illusion of a [transcendental signified](#). Some poststructuralist semioticians are [social semioticians](#) who are concerned with '[signifying practices](#)' in specific social contexts. Such semioticians have extended Saussure's emphasis on [meaning](#) as *relational* to include not only relationships within a self-contained linguistic system, but also the interpretative importance of such broader contexts of language use. Poststructuralist theorists include Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva and the later Barthes. Poststructuralism is closely allied with [postmodernism](#) and the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. See also: [The bar](#), [Deconstruction](#), [Intertextuality](#), [Postmodernism](#), [Primacy of the signifier](#), [Semiotics](#), [Transcendental signified](#), [Structuralism](#)
- Practices, representational: See [Representational codes](#)
- Practices, signifying: See [Signifying practices](#)
- **Pragmatics:** Morris divided [semiotics](#) into three branches: [syntactics](#), [semantics](#) and pragmatics. *Pragmatics* refers to the study of the ways in which [signs](#) are used and interpreted. The interpretation of signs by their users can also be seen as levels corresponding to these three branches - the *pragmatic* level being the interpretation of a sign in terms of relevance, agreement etc. See also: [Semantics](#), [Semiotics](#), [Syntactics](#)
- **Prague school:** This influential structuralist and functionalist group of linguists/semioticians was established in 1926 in Prague by Czech and Russian linguists, although the term 'Prague school' was not used until 1932. Principal members of this group included: Vilem Mathesius (1882-1946), Bohuslav Havránek (1893-1978), Jan Mukarovsky (1891-1975), Nikolai Trubetzkoy (1890-1938) and Roman Jakobson (1896-1982). It was [functionalist](#) in analysing semiotic systems in relation to social functions such as [communication](#) rather than treating them purely as autonomous forms (in contrast to Saussure and Hjelmslev). Whilst they are known for their identification of the 'distinctive features' of language, these theorists also explored culture and aesthetics. With the emergence of Nazism, some, including Jakobson, emigrated to the USA. See also: [Moscow school](#), [Structuralism](#)

- **Preferred reading:** This is a term which Stuart Hall originally used in relation to television news and current affairs programmes but which is often applied to other kinds of text. [Readers](#) of a [text](#) are guided towards a preferred reading and away from ['aberrant decoding'](#) through the use of [codes](#). A preferred reading is not necessarily the result of any conscious intention on the part of the producer(s) of a [text](#). The term is often used as if it refers to a [meaning](#) which is in some way 'built into' the [form and/or content](#) of the text - a notion which is in uneasy accord with a [textual determinism](#) which Hall rejected. Hall himself seemed to assume that (in relation to television news and current affairs programmes) such meanings were invariably encoded in the [dominant code](#), but such a stance tends to [reify](#) the [medium](#) and to downplay conflicting tendencies within texts. Nor is it clear how we may establish what any such preferred meaning in a text might be. Does it constitute the most common reading by members of the audience? Even if it proves to be so, can it be said to reside 'within' the text? In the context of the [polysemic](#) nature of relatively open-ended texts, the notion of a preferred reading may be too limiting. The extent to which there may be a preferred reading is related in part to how [open or closed](#) the text is judged to be. See also: [Dominant code](#), [Ideal readers](#), [Ideology](#), [Intentional fallacy](#), [Meaning](#), [Overcoding](#), [Overdetermination](#), [Textual determinism](#), [Univocality](#)
- Presence, metaphysics of: See [Deconstruction](#)
- **Primacy of the signifier:** The argument that ['reality'](#) or 'the world' is at least partly created by the language (and other media) we use insists on *the primacy of the signifier* - suggesting that the [signified](#) is shaped by the signifier rather than *vice versa*. Some theorists stress the [materiality of the signifier](#). Others note that the same signifier can have different signifieds for different people or for the same person at different times. Lévi-Strauss emphasized the primacy of the signifier, initially as a strategy for structural analysis. [Poststructuralist](#) theorists such as Lacan, Barthes, Derrida, Foucault have developed this notion into a metaphysical presupposition of the [priority](#) of the signifier, but its roots can be found in Saussure and [structuralism](#). See also: [Arbitrariness](#), [Constructivism](#), [Conventionality](#), [Idealism](#), [Linguistic determinism](#), [Materiality of the sign](#), [Poststructuralism](#), [Priorism](#), [Relative autonomy](#)
- **Priorism/foundationalism:** Priorist or foundationalist theories grant [ontological](#) priority to certain 'foundational' entities which are regarded as 'givens' or first principles. Various theorists assign causal priority to God, material reality, perception, 'human nature', language, society, ideology, technology and so on, raising the problem of how we are to explain these entities and their origins. ['Commonsense'](#) suggests that [reality](#) exists 'prior to' and 'outside' [signification](#). In a naive [realist](#) form, [materialism](#) posits a materiality prior to signification and attributes to it causal primacy. [Essentialism](#) grants an ontological status prior to and independent of language to certain key [signifieds](#) (which Derrida refers to as [transcendental signifieds](#)). Althusser declared that [ideology](#) was 'always-already given' (*toujours-déjà-donné*). [Structuralism](#) involved an attack on foundationalism, emphasizing that 'reality' is a construct and that there is no way in which we can stand outside language. However, both structuralists and [poststructuralists](#) thus give priority and determining power to language - which pre-exists all individuals. This is sometimes expressed as the [primacy of the signifier](#). [Social determinists](#) reject the causal priority given to language by [linguistic determinists](#) and to technology by [technological determinists](#). Derrida dismissed as 'metaphysical' any conceptual hierarchy which is founded on an sacrosanct first principle and his [deconstructive strategy](#) was directed against such priorism. Some theorists would argue that whilst we may become more conscious of priorism it may nevertheless be as inescapable as 'which came first - the chicken or the egg?' See also: [Deconstruction](#), [Essentialism](#), [Linguistic determinism](#), [Ontology](#), [Primacy of the signifier](#), [Realism \(objectivism\)](#), [Reductionism](#), [Relativism, epistemological](#), [Structural determinism](#)
- Psychology: See [Reductionism](#)



A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

- **Readers and writers, reading and writing texts:** Whilst these terms appear to be [graphocentric](#) and [logocentric](#), they are often used in semiotics to refer broadly to ['texts'](#) and their users, regardless of [medium](#). Writers and readers are sometimes referred to as [encoders](#) and [decoders](#); a few commentators also use the terms *makers* and *users* in this broad sense (to avoid privileging a particular medium). Some semioticians refer to 'reading' (making sense of) visual media such as [photographs](#), [television and film](#): this is intended to emphasize the involvement of [codes](#) which are learned (largely by informal but regular exposure to the [medium](#)). See also: [Text](#)
- Reading, dominant, negotiated and oppositional: See [Dominant code](#), [Negotiated code](#), [Oppositional code](#)

- [Real, the \(Lacan\)](#): For Lacan, 'the Real' is a primal realm where there is no absence, loss or lack. Here, the infant has no centre of identity and experiences no clear boundaries between itself and the external world. See also: [Imaginary, The, Subject, Symbolic order](#)
- [Realism, aesthetic](#): The usage of this term varies mainly in relation to the various aesthetic movements, theoretical frameworks and [media](#) with which it is associated - so there are many different 'realisms', though a common realist goal is 'to show things as they really are' (a meaningless notion to a [constructivist](#)). In everyday usage 'realistic' [representations](#) are those which are interpreted as being in some sense 'true to life'. Realism tends to be defined in opposition to other terms (especially romanticism, idealization, artifice, abstraction) and in turn gives rise to the negatively defined notion of 'anti-realism'. Realist art seeks to represent a world which is assumed to exist before, and independently of, the act of representation. Whilst a function of aesthetic realism (especially in visual media such as [photography, film and television](#)) is that the [signifier](#) comes to seem identical with the [signified](#) (the signified is [foregrounded](#) at the expense of the signifier), 'realistic' [texts](#) even in such media involve [representational codes](#) which are historically and culturally variable. Realism seeks to [naturalize](#) itself. [Readers](#) learn realist [codes](#) at an early age - in the case of audio-visual media, through repeated exposure to an enjoyable personal learning process but without ever being *taught* to do so (in contrast to the learning of purely [symbolic](#) codes such as that of written language). Familiarity (from endless repetition) leads experienced viewers of photographic and audio-visual media to take realist representational codes in these media for granted so that these codes retreat to [transparency](#), leaving the illusion of the text as a '[message](#) without a code'. Realism involves an *instrumental* view of the medium as a neutral means of representing reality. Realist representational practices tend to mask the *processes* involved in producing texts, as if they were slices of life 'untouched by human hand'. Aesthetic realism leaves a compelling sense that 'the camera never lies', that television is a 'window on the world' and so on. *Psychological realism* refers to the coherence and plausibility of characters and their motivations within narratives. Critics of some forms of realism refer to it as 'illusionism'. Anti-realist aesthetics involves the principle that 'progressive' texts should [reflexively](#) foreground their own construction, their own processes of [signification](#). See also: [Aesthetic codes, Mimesis, Naturalism, Realism \(objectivism\), Reality, Representational codes](#)
- Realism, nominal: See [Nominal realism](#)
- [Realism \(objectivism\)](#): A philosophical (specifically [epistemological](#)) stance on 'what is real?' For those drawn towards philosophical realism, an objective and knowable [reality](#) exists indisputably 'outside' us and independently of our means of apprehending it - there are well-defined objects in the world which have inherent properties and fixed relations to each other at any instant. Realists usually acknowledge that 'social reality' is more subjective than 'physical reality' (which is seen as objective). They argue that truth (in the form of facts) can be generated by testing beliefs or theories against external reality, which involves physical constraints on the [idealism](#) of reality being purely a mental construction. Naive realists assume the possibility of 'direct perception' of the world whilst their critics argue that our experience of the world is unavoidably '[mediated](#)'. Some realists accept that our perception of reality may be 'distorted' by the [media](#) which we use to apprehend it but deny that such media play any part in 'constructing' reality. Realism involves an assumption that the accurate description of reality is possible. It is reflected in the routine assumptions of '[commonsense](#)' (even in the everyday practices of [constructivists!](#)). Marxist [materialism](#) is a version of epistemological realism. Realists tend to criticize constructivist stances as extreme [conventionalism](#) or [relativism](#). See also: [Commonsense, Constructivism, Conventionalism, Correspondence theory of truth, Epistemology, Essentialism, Idealism, Materialism, Nominal realism, Priorism, Realism, aesthetic, Relativism, epistemological](#)
- [Reality/realities](#): Whilst '[commonsense](#)' suggests that reality exists [prior](#) to, and outside [signification](#), according to [constructivists](#) (who refer to 'the construction of reality'), 'reality has authors' and what we experience as reality is a set of [codes](#) which represent the world; realities are made, not given or 'discovered'. 'Reality' is constructed in [representations](#). Some semioticians, following Barthes, refer to reality as an 'effect' of the [sign](#). Many pluralize the term or bracket it with quotation marks to emphasize their rejection of the '[realist](#)' notion of a single, objective, knowable, external reality. [Social semioticians](#) acknowledge that not all realities are equal, and are interested in [texts](#) as 'sites of struggle' in which realities are contested. They are also interested in institutional practices of reality maintenance. *Phenomenal reality* refers to the psychologically subjective 'lived experience' of individuals ('how things seem to me' - which is typically assumed to be universally shared and equivalent to 'the ways things are'). See also: [Commonsense, Constructivism, Conventionalism, Idealism, Mediation, Realism \(objectivism\), Representation](#)
- 'Receiver' and 'sender': See [Sender and receiver](#)
- [Reductionism/reductivism](#): Reductionism involves the reduction of explanatory factors involved in some phenomenon to a single primary function or cause. For instance, [nomenclaturism](#) reduces language to the purely [referential function](#) of naming things; [technological determinism](#) reduces social change to a single cause;

[transmission models](#) of communication reduce [meaning](#) to 'content'. Algirdas employed 'semiotic reduction' as a technique, reducing multiple 'functions' of narrative to three types of [syntagms](#). However, 'reductionism' is typically a negative label. [Realists](#) criticize what they see as the reduction of [reality](#) by '[conventionalists](#)' to nothing more than signifying practices. [Materialists](#) criticize [formalism](#) as an [idealist](#) reduction of referential [content](#) and [material substance](#) to abstract systems. But materialists are also accused by their critics of being reductionist. Disciplinary perspectives are often attacked as reductionist: sociologists tend to criticize *psychologism* (reduction to individual psychology) whilst psychologists tend to criticize *sociologism* ([social determinism](#)). Some other 'isms' which have been criticized as reductionist include *economism* (*economic determinism*) and *biographism* (reduction of textual meaning to authorial biography). See also: [Essentialism](#), [Priorism](#)

- [Redundancy](#): [Broadcast codes](#) have what information theorists call a high degree of redundancy - texts using such codes are structurally simple and repetitive ('[overcoded](#)'). See also: [Broadcast codes](#), [Open and closed texts](#)
- [Referent](#): What the sign 'stands for'. In [Peirce's triadic model of the sign](#) this is called the [object](#). In [Saussure's dyadic model of the sign](#) a referent in the world is not explicitly featured - only the [signified](#) - a concept which may or may not refer to an object in the world. This is sometimes referred to as 'bracketing the referent'. Note that referents can include ideas, events and material objects. Anti-[realist](#) theorists such as Foucault reject the concreteness of referents, regarding them as products of language. See also: [Essentialism](#), [Nomenclaturism](#), [Realism \(objectivism\)](#), [Referential fallacy](#), [Representation](#)
- [Referential fallacy or illusion](#): This term has been used to refer to the assumption that a) it is a necessary condition of a [sign](#) that the signifier has a [referent](#) (in particular, a material object in the world) or b) that the meaning of a sign lies purely in its referent. Such assumptions are flawed because many signifiers do *not* have referents (e.g. a connective such as 'and' in language). The existence of a sign is no guarantee of the existence in the world of a corresponding referent. The reference in [texts](#) is primarily - [poststructuralists](#) say that *it can only be* - to other texts (see [Intertextuality](#)) rather than to 'the world' (see '[Reality](#)'). The fallacy is reflected in judgements that the (referential) [Peircean model of the sign](#) is superior to the (non-referential) [Saussurean model](#). Reducing language to a purely [referential function](#) is called [nomenclaturism](#) - a stance associated with naive [realism](#). See also: [Nomenclaturism](#), [Realism \(objectivism\)](#), [Referent](#), [Referential function](#)
- [Referential function](#): In Jakobson's model of linguistic [communication](#) this is deemed to be one of the key [functions of a sign](#). This function of a sign refers to [content](#). See also: [Functions of a sign](#), [Nomenclaturism](#), [Referential fallacy](#)
- [Reflexivity](#): Some 'reflexive' aesthetic practices [foreground](#) their 'textuality' - the signs of their production (the [materials](#) and techniques used) - thus reducing the [transparency](#) of their style. [Texts](#) in which the [poetic function](#) is dominant [foreground](#) the act and form of expression and undermine any sense of a 'natural' or '[transparent](#)' connection between a signifier and a [referent](#). Anti-[realist](#) aesthetics involves the principle that 'progressive' texts should reflexively foreground their own construction, their own processes of [signification](#). [Postmodernism](#) often involves a highly *reflexive* [intertextuality](#). See also: [Denaturalization](#), [Foregrounding](#), [Materiality of the sign](#), [Poetic function](#), [Postmodernism](#)
- [Reification](#): To reify (or 'hypostasize') is to 'thingify': treating a relatively abstract [signified](#) as if it were a single, bounded, undifferentiated, fixed and unchanging thing, the [essential](#) nature of which could be taken for granted (see [Essentialism](#)). It is a [representational practice](#) which functions to establish the self-evident '[reality](#)' of the concept in question, treating it as if it has the [ontological status](#) of a specific physical thing in an objective material world. Reification suppresses the human intervention involved in the defining process as if the [signifier](#) were [neutral](#) and had been an integral part of a pre-existing thing in the world (see [Nominal realism](#) and [Nomenclaturism](#)). Reification makes no allowance for the cultural and [ideological](#) frameworks which produced the signifier. Just because we have a word for something such as the 'self' or the 'mind' does not make it a 'real' entity, and yet the widespread and routine use of a signifier can appear to validate the existence of the signified as a taken-for-granted thing in itself. [Perception](#) itself may unavoidably involve reification. [Technological determinists](#) are often criticized for reifying 'Technology' in general or a particular [medium](#) such as 'Television' or 'The Computer'. Reification is a difficult charge to avoid, since any use of linguistic categorization (including words such as 'society' or 'culture') could be attacked as reification. Whilst reification is a strong criticism for [realists](#), to those whose stance acknowledges the role of language and other media in constructing realities ([constructivists](#) and [idealists](#)), reification seems less meaningful as a criticism, since things are to some extent what we make with words. However, even constructivists sometimes treat concepts as if they were 'things in the world'. See also: [Essentialism](#), [Nomenclaturism](#), [Nominal realism](#), [Transcendent\(al\) signified](#)
- Relational meaning: See [Meaning](#)
- Relations, syntagmatic and paradigmatic: See [Paradigmatic relations](#), [Syntagmatic relations](#)
- Relationship, modes of: See [Modes of relationship](#)

- **Relative autonomy:** This is a term adopted from Althusserian Marxism, where it refers to the relative independence of the 'superstructure' of society (including [ideology](#)) from the economic (or techno-economic) 'base' (in contrast to the orthodox marxist stance that the latter determines the former - a stance similar to that of [technological determinism](#)). In the context of semiotics, [Saussure's model of the sign](#) assumes the relative autonomy of language in relation to ['reality'](#) (it does not directly feature a 'real world' [referent](#)); there is no essential bond between words and things. In a semiotic system with [double articulation](#) the levels of the [signifier](#) and of the [signified](#) are relatively autonomous. The signifier and the signified in a [sign](#) are autonomous to the extent that their relationship is [arbitrary](#) (commentators also speak of 'relative arbitrariness' or 'relative conventionality'). See also: [Arbitrariness](#), [Articulation](#), [The bar](#), [Constructivism](#), [Conventionality](#), [Idealism](#), [Modes of relationship](#), [Nomenclaturism](#), [Primacy of the signifier](#)
- Relativism/relativity, cultural: See [Cultural relativism](#)
- **Relativism, epistemological:** The term 'relativism' is frequently either a term of abuse used by critics of [constructivism](#) (notably [realists](#), for whom it may refer to any [epistemological](#) stance other than realism) or by constructivists themselves referring to a position whereby 'anything goes' with which they do not want to be associated. Critics associate relativism with an extreme [idealism](#) or *nihilism* denying the existence of a real [material](#) world - which it does not necessarily entail. Since few theorists choose to label themselves relativists it is difficult to define the term adequately. One characterization is as the stance that there are numerous alternative versions of [reality](#) which can only be assessed in relation to each other and not in relation to any 'absolute', fixed and universal truth, reality, meaning, knowledge or certainty. Such categories are *contingent* - temporary, provisional and dependent on context and circumstances. Any defence of absolutes tends to be denounced as 'metaphysics'. There can be no 'value-free' facts. Relativism is in tune with the emphasis in Saussurean structuralism on the relative position of signs within a signifying system rather than on 'things'. Relativism is an [anti-essentialist](#) position. The semiotic stance which problematizes 'reality' and emphasizes [mediation](#) and [representational convention](#) in the form of [codes](#) is criticized as relativism (or extreme [conventionalism](#)) by those veering towards realism. Such critics often object to what they see as a sidelining of referential concerns which are [foundational](#) in realist [discourse](#) - such as truth, facts, accuracy, objectivity, bias and distortion. Even in relation to the interpretation of a [text](#), the stance that [meaning](#) depends on how [readers](#) interpret it rather than residing 'within' the text has been criticized by [literalists](#) as relativism (see [Affective fallacy](#)). Critics sometimes note that relativists cannot logically make any general statements even about relativism. See also: [Constructivism](#), [Conventionalism](#), [Cultural relativism](#), [Epistemology](#), [Essentialism](#), [Idealism](#), [Priorism](#), [Realism](#), [Reality](#), [Relativism](#), [linguistic](#), [Representation](#), [Universalism](#), [cognitive](#), [Whorfianism](#)
- **Relativism/relativity, linguistic:** Linguistic relativism is the view that every language is a unique system of relations and, more radically, that the phonological, grammatical and semantic distinctions in different languages are completely [arbitrary](#). Thus, on the semantic level, [reality](#) is divided up into arbitrary categories by every language and different languages have different in-built [ontologies](#). Concepts may not be [translatable](#). Linguistic relativism emphasizes the contingency of [signifieds](#). It is closely associated with [epistemological relativism](#) and is a fundamental assumption involved in [Whorfianism](#). An opposing viewpoint is that of [linguistic universalism](#). Both linguistic relativism and [linguistic universalism](#) are compatible with [Structuralism](#). See also: [Cultural relativism](#), [Relativism, epistemological](#), [Translatability](#), [Universalism, linguistic](#), [Whorfianism](#)
- Relativism/relativity, ontological: See [Ontology](#)
- **Representamen:** The *representamen* is one of the three elements of [Peirce's model of the sign](#) and it refers to the form which the sign takes (not necessarily [material](#)). When it refers to a *non-material form* it is comparable to Saussure's [signifier](#); whereas when it refers to *material form* it is what some commentators refer to as the [sign vehicle](#). See also: [Peircean model of the sign](#), [Signifier](#)
- **Representation:** In general usage, this term refers to the depiction of something in any [medium](#) in the form of a [text](#). However, as standard dictionaries remind us, a representation is something which stands for or in place of something else - which is of course what semioticians call a [sign](#). Semiotics [foregrounds](#) and problematizes the process of representation. It is a widespread semiotic stance that reality is always represented - what we treat as 'direct' experience is 'mediated' by [perceptual codes](#) - perception involves mental representation. Representation always involves 'the construction of reality'. All texts, however ['realistic'](#) they may seem to be (as in audio-visual media), are constructed representations rather than simply [transparent](#) 'reflections', recordings, transcriptions or reproductions of a pre-existing reality. Except in the case of [digitally-sourced](#) reproductions, [texts are constructed from different materials](#) from that which they represent, and representations cannot be replicas. Whether through 'direct' perception or mediated texts, what we experience as realities always involve [codes](#). Representations which become familiar through constant re-use come to feel 'natural' and [unmediated](#), and can even shape what we accept as reality (at least within a [genre](#)). In our daily behaviour we routinely act on the basis that some representations of reality are more reliable than others - we make [modality judgements](#) about them.

Representations require *interpretation*. Realities are contested, and textual representations are thus 'sites of struggle'. Representation is unavoidably selective, foregrounding some things and backgrounding others. Every representation is motivated and historically contingent. [Realists](#) focus on the 'correspondence' of representations to 'objective' reality (in terms of 'truth', 'accuracy' and 'distortion'), whereas [constructivists](#) focus on *whose realities* are being represented and whose are being denied. [Structuralist](#) semioticians often explore how [subjects](#) are positioned within systems of representation. Both structuralist and [poststructuralist](#) theories lead to 'reality' and 'truth' being regarded as the products of particular systems of representation. [Social semioticians](#) focus on how representations are produced and interpreted. Some [postmodern](#) theorists avoid the term 'representation' completely because the [epistemological](#) assumptions of realism seem embedded in it. See also: [Mimesis](#), [Realism, aesthetic](#), [Reality](#), [Referent](#), [Relativism](#), [epistemological](#), [Representational codes](#)

- [Representational codes](#): These are [textual codes](#) which represent [reality](#). Those which are perceived as '[realistic](#)' (especially in [film and television](#)) are routinely experienced as if they were recordings or direct reproductions of reality rather than as [representations](#) in the form of [codes](#). See also: [Aesthetic codes](#), [Discourse](#), [Reality](#), [Realism, aesthetic](#), [Representation](#), [Textual codes](#)
- [Reproductive fallacy](#): André Bazin refers to this fallacy as being that the only kind of [representation](#) which can show things 'as they really are' is one which is (or appears to be) exactly like that which it represents in every respect. Since [texts](#) are almost invariably constructed out of [different materials](#) from that which they represent, exact replicas are impossible. For Bazin, [aesthetic realism](#) depended on a broader 'truth to [reality](#)'. See also: [Reality](#), [Realism, aesthetic](#), [Representation](#)
- Restricted codes: See [Broadcast codes](#)
- Rules of transformation: See [Transformation, rules of](#)



[A](#) [B](#) [C](#) [D](#) [E](#) [F](#) [G](#) [H](#) [I](#) [J](#) [K](#) [L](#) [M](#) [N](#) [O](#) [P](#) [Q](#) [R](#) [S](#) [T](#) [U](#) [V](#) [W](#) [X](#) [Y](#) [Z](#)

- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: See [Whorfianism](#)
- [Saussurean model of the sign](#): In Saussure's model, the [sign](#) consisted of *two* elements: a [signifier](#) and a [signified](#) (though he insisted that these were inseparable other than for analytical purposes). This [dyadic](#) model makes no direct reference to a [referent](#) in the world, and can be seen as supporting the notion that language does not 'reflect' [reality](#) but rather [constructs](#) it. It has been criticized as an [idealist](#) model. Saussure stressed that signs only made sense in terms of their *relationships* to other signs within the same signifying system (see [Value](#)). See also: [Peircean model](#), [Sign](#)
- Schools or circles, linguistic/semiotic: See [Copenhagen school](#), [Moscow school](#), [Paris school](#), [Prague school](#), [Tartu school](#)
- Scriptism: See [Graphocentrism](#)
- [Second articulation](#): At the (lower) structural level of *second articulation*, a semiotic [code](#) is divisible into minimal functional units which lack meaning in themselves (e.g. phonemes in speech or graphemes in writing). These lower units are nonsignifying sign elements - purely differential structural units (called *figurae* by Hjelmslev). They are recurrent features in the code. See also: [Articulation](#), [Double articulation](#), [First articulation](#), [Single articulation](#)
- Secondness: See [Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness](#)
- [Selection, axis of](#): A [structuralist](#) term for the 'vertical' axis in the analysis of a textual structure: the plane of the [paradigm](#) (Jakobson). See also: [Combination, axis of](#)
- Self-referentiality: See [Poetic function](#)
- [Semantics](#): Morris divided [semiotics](#) into three branches: [syntactics](#), [semantics](#) and [pragmatics](#). *Semantics* refers to the study of the [meaning](#) of [signs](#) (the relationship of signs to what they stand for). The interpretation of signs by their users can also be seen as levels corresponding to these three branches - the *semantic* level being the comprehension of the [preferred reading](#) of the sign. See also: [Pragmatics](#), [Semiotics](#), [Syntactics](#)
- [Semiology](#): Saussure's term *sémiologie* dates from a manuscript of 1894. 'Semiology' is sometimes used to refer to the study of signs by those within the Saussurean tradition (e.g. Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, Kristeva and Baudrillard), whilst 'semiotics' sometimes refers to those working within the Peircean tradition (e.g. Morris, Richards, Ogden and Sebeok). Sometimes 'semiology' refers to work concerned primarily with textual analysis whilst 'semiotics' refers to more philosophically-oriented work. Saussure's semiotics embraced only [intentional communication](#) - specifically *human* communication using [conventionalized](#), artificial sign systems. Nowadays the term '[semiotics](#)' is widely used as an umbrella term to include 'semiology' and (to use Peirce's term) 'semiotic'. See also: [Semiotics](#)

- **Semiosis:** This term was used by Peirce to refer to the *process* of 'meaning-making'. See also: [Signification](#), [Signifying practices](#), [Unlimited semiosis](#)
- Semiosis, unlimited: See [Unlimited semiosis](#)
- **Semiosphere:** The Russian cultural semiotician Yuri Lotman coined this term to refer to 'the whole semiotic space of the culture in question' - it can be thought of as a semiotic ecology in which different languages and media interact.
- **Semiotic economy:** The infinite use of finite elements is a feature which in relation to [media](#) in general has been referred to as 'semiotic economy'. The structural feature of [double articulation](#) within a semiotic system allows an infinite number of meaningful combinations to be generated using a small number of low-level units. This key [design feature](#) is held to be the basis of the productivity and creative economy of verbal language. The English language has only about 40 or 50 elements of '[second articulation](#)' (phonemes) but these can generate hundreds of thousands of language [signs](#). See also: [Design features of language](#), [Double articulation](#)
- Semiotic schools or circles: See [Copenhagen school](#), [Moscow school](#), [Paris school](#), [Prague school](#), [Tartu school](#)
- **Semiotic square:** Greimas introduced the semiotic square as a means of mapping the logical conjunctions and disjunctions relating key [semantic](#) features in a [text](#). If we begin by drawing a horizontal line linking two familiarly paired terms such as 'beautiful' and 'ugly', we turn this into a semiotic square by making this the upper line of a square in which the two other logical possibilities - 'not ugly' and 'not beautiful' occupy the lower corners. The semiotic square reminds us that this is not simply a [binary opposition](#) because something which is not beautiful is not necessarily ugly and that something which is not ugly is not necessarily beautiful. Occupying a position within such as framework invests a [sign](#) with [meanings](#). The semiotic square can be used to highlight 'hidden' underlying themes in a text or practice.
- **Semiotic triangle:** [Peirce's triad](#) is a semiotic triangle; other semiotic triangles can also be found. The most common alternative changes only the unfamiliar Peircean terms, and consists of the [sign vehicle](#), [the sense](#) and the [referent](#). See also: [Peircean model](#)
- **Semiotics, definition of:** Loosely defined as 'the study of signs' or 'the theory of signs', what Saussure called '[semiology](#)' was: 'a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life'. Saussure's use of the term *sémiologie* dates from 1894 and Peirce's first use of the term *semiotic* was in 1897. Semiotics has not become widely institutionalized as a formal academic discipline and it is not really a science. It is not purely a method of textual analysis, but involves both the theory and analysis of [signs](#) and [signifying practices](#). Beyond the most basic definition, there is considerable variation amongst leading semioticians as to what semiotics involves, although a distinctive concern is with *how* things signify, and with [representational](#) practices and systems (in the form of [codes](#)). In the 1970s, semioticians began to shift away from purely [structuralist](#) (Saussurean) semiotics concerned with the structural analysis of formal semiotic systems towards a '[poststructuralist](#)' '[social semiotics](#)' - focusing on 'signifying practices' in specific social contexts. See also: [Poststructuralism](#), [Pragmatics](#), [Semantics](#), [Semiology](#), [Sign](#), [Social semiotics](#), [Structuralism](#), [Syntactics](#)
- '**Sender**' and '**receiver**': Within [transmission models of communication](#), these terms are used to refer to the participants in acts of communication (communication being presented as a linear process of 'sending' '[messages](#)' to a 'receiver'). Semioticians usually regard such models as [reductionist](#) (reducing *meaning* to 'content'); the main semiotic objection is usually that transmission models do not feature the semiotic concept of a [code](#), but related objections refer to the model's neglect of the potential significance of purposes, relationships, situations and the medium. See also [Addresser and addressee](#), [Intentional fallacy](#), [Transmission model of communication](#)
- **Sense:** In some [semiotic triangles](#), this refers to the sense made of the sign (what Peirce called the [interpretant](#)). See also: [Interpretant](#), [Semiotic triangles](#)
- **Sign:** A sign is a meaningful unit which is interpreted as 'standing for' something other than itself. Signs are found in the physical form of words, images, sounds, acts or objects (this physical form is sometimes known as the [sign vehicle](#)). Signs have no *intrinsic meaning* and become signs only when sign-users invest them with meaning with reference to a recognized [code](#). [Semiotics](#) is the study of signs. See also: [Analogical signs](#), [Complex sign](#), [Digital signs](#), [Functions of signs](#), [Modes of relationship](#), [Models of the sign](#), [Photographic signs](#), [Signification](#), [Simple sign](#)
- **Sign vehicle:** A term sometimes used to refer to the [physical or material form of the sign](#) (e.g. words, images, sounds, acts or objects). For some commentators this means the same as the [signifier](#) (which for Saussure himself did *not* refer to *material* form). The Peircean equivalent is the [representamen](#): the form which the sign takes, but even for Peirce this was not necessarily a material form. Note that the specific material form used (e.g. a word written in one typeface rather than another) may generate [connotations](#) of its own. See also: [Materiality of the sign](#), [Medium](#), [Plane of expression](#), [Representamen](#), [Signifier](#), [Tokens and types](#)

- **Signification:** In Saussurean semiotics, the term *signification* refers to the relationship between the [signifier](#) and the [signified](#). It is also variously used to refer to:
 - the defining function of signs (i.e. that they signify, or 'stand for' something other than themselves);
 - the *process* of signifying ([semiosis](#));
 - signs as part of an overall semiotic *system*;
 - *what* is signified ([meaning](#));
 - the reference of language to [reality](#);
 - a [representation](#).

See also: [Modes of relationship](#), [Orders of signification](#), [Semiosis](#), [Value](#)

- **Signified (*signifié*):** For Saussure, the signified was one of the two parts of the [sign](#) (which was indivisible except for analytical purposes). Saussure's *signified* is the mental *concept* represented by the [signifier](#) (and is *not* a [material](#) thing). This does not exclude the reference of signs to physical objects in the world as well as to abstract concepts and fictional entities, but the signified is not itself a [referent](#) in the world (in contrast to Peirce's *object*). It is common for subsequent interpreters to equate the *signified* with 'content' (matching the *form* of the signifier in the familiar dualism of [form and content](#)'). See also: [Modes of relationship](#), [Referent](#), [Saussurean model of the sign](#), [Signifier](#), [Transcendent\(al\) signified](#)
- **Signified, transcendent:** See [Transcendent signified](#)
- **Signifier (*signifiant*):** For Saussure, this was one of the two parts of the [sign](#) (which was indivisible except for analytical purposes). In the Saussurean tradition, the signifier is the *form* which a sign takes. For Saussure himself, in relation to linguistic signs, this meant a non-material form of the spoken word - 'a sound-image' ('the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression it makes on our senses'). Subsequent semioticians have treated it as the [material \(or physical\) form of the sign](#) - something which can be seen, heard, felt, smelt or tasted (also called the [sign vehicle](#)). See also: [Absent signifiers](#), [Empty or floating signifier](#), [Imaginary signifier](#), [Modes of relationship](#), [Primacy of signifier](#), [Representamen](#), [Saussurean model of the sign](#), [Sign vehicle](#), [Signified](#)
- Signifier, imaginary: See [Imaginary signifier](#)
- **Signifying practices:** These are the meaning-making behaviours in which people engage (including the production and [reading of texts](#)) following particular conventions or rules of construction and interpretation. [Social semioticians](#) focus on signifying practices in specific socio-cultural contexts - on [parole rather than langue](#), and tend towards [diachronic](#) rather than [synchronic](#) analysis - in contrast to [structuralist](#) semioticians who focus on the formal structure of sign systems. [Realists](#) criticize what they see as the [reduction of reality](#) by '[conventionalists](#)' to nothing more than signifying practices. See also: [Representational codes](#), [Interpretative community](#), [Social semiotics](#)
- **Simple sign:** A [sign](#) which does *not* contain any other signs, in contrast to a [complex sign](#). See also: [Complex sign](#), [Sign](#)
- **Simulacrum:** This was Baudrillard's term (borrowed from Plato); 'simulacra' are 'copies without originals' - the main form in which we encounter [texts](#) in [postmodern](#) culture. More broadly, he used the term to refer to a [representation](#) which bears no relation to any [reality](#). See also: [Digital signs](#), [Empty signifier](#), [Tokens and types](#)
- **Single articulation, codes with:** Semiotic [codes](#) have either single articulation, [double articulation](#) or [no articulation](#). Codes with single articulation have either first articulation or second articulation only. Codes with *first articulation only* consist of signs - meaningful elements which are systematically related to each other - but there is no second articulation to structure these signs into minimal, non-meaningful elements. Where the smallest recurrent structural unit in a code is meaningful, the code has first articulation only. The system of related traffic signs (with red borders, triangular or circular shapes, and standardized, stylized images) is a code with first articulation only. Other semiotic codes lacking double articulation have *second articulation only*. These consist of signs which have specific meanings which are not derived from their elements. They are divisible only into *figurae* (minimal functional units). The most powerful code with second articulation only is binary code: this has only 2 minimal functional units, 0 and 1, but these units can be combined to generate numbers, letters and other signs. See also: [Articulation](#), [Double articulation](#), [First articulation](#), [Second articulation](#), [Unarticulated codes](#)
- Sites of struggle: See [Constructivism](#), [Reality](#), [Representation](#), [Social semiotics](#)
- **Social codes:** Whilst all semiotic codes are in a broad sense social codes, *social codes* can also be seen as forming a major sub-group of codes, alongside [textual codes](#) and [interpretative codes](#). Social codes in this narrower sense concern our tacit knowledge of the social world and include unwritten codes such as bodily codes, commodity codes and behavioural codes. See also: [Code](#)
- Social construction: See [Constructivism](#)

- **Social determinism:** Social determinism is a stance which asserts the primacy of social and political factors rather than the autonomous influence of the medium (whether this is language or a technology). Social determinists reject the causal [priority](#) given to language by [linguistic determinists](#) and to technology by [technological determinists](#). Those who emphasize social determination focus on such issues as the circumstances of production, modes of use, values, purposes, skill, style, choice, control and access rather than on the structure of the text or code or the technical features of the medium. An extreme social determinist position relating to the [decoding](#) of [texts](#) (sometimes called, more specifically, *audience determinism*) would reduce individual decodings to a direct consequence of social class position. A more moderate stance would stress that access to different codes is influenced by social position. [Structuralist](#) semiotics tends to be allied with [textual determinism](#) and to ignore social determination. See also: [Linguistic determinism](#), [Technological determinism](#), [Textual determinism](#)
- **Social semiotics:** Whilst some semioticians have retained a [structuralist](#) concern with formal systems (mainly focusing on detailed studies of narrative, film and television editing and so on), many have become more concerned with social semiotics. A key concern of social semioticians is with ['signifying practices'](#) in specific socio-cultural contexts. Social semioticians acknowledge that not all realities are equal, and are interested in 'sites of struggle' in which realities are contested. The roots of social semiotics can be traced to the early theorists. Saussure himself wrote of semiotics as 'a science that studies the life of signs within society'. Signs do not exist without interpreters, and semiotic [codes](#) are of course social [conventions](#). See also: [Semiotics](#), [Social determinism](#)
- **Sociolect:** A term from sociolinguistics referring to the distinctive ways in which language is used by members of a particular social group. In semiotic terms can refer more broadly to *subcodes* shared by members of such groups (see [codes](#)). See also: [Idiolect](#), [Interpretative community](#), [Symbolic capital](#)
- Sociologism: See [Reductionism](#)
- Solipsism: See [Idealism](#)
- Square, semiotic: See [Semiotic square](#)
- **Structural determinism:** This is the stance that the pre-given structure of some signifying system - such as [language](#) or any kind of textual system - determines the [subjectivity](#) (or at least behaviour) of individuals who are subjected to it. Louis Althusser was a structural determinist in this sense (see [Interpellation](#)). See also: [Interpellation](#), [Linguistic determinism](#), [Priorism](#), [Social determinism](#), [Structuralism](#), [Technological determinism](#), [Textual determinism](#)
- Structural meaning: See [Meaning](#)
- **Structuralism:** Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, was a pioneer of structuralist thinking - his was the linguistic model which inspired the European structuralists. Other key structuralists include Nikolai Trubetzkoy, Roman Jakobson, Louis Hjelmslev and Algirdas Greimas in linguistics, Claude Lévi-Strauss in anthropology, Louis Althusser in political science, Roland Barthes in literary criticism and Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis (although the theories of Barthes and Lacan evolved into [poststructuralist](#) ones). Michel Foucault, a historian of ideas, is often seen as a structuralist, although he rejected this label; his ideas are also closely allied with poststructuralism. Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* was published in 1916; although the words 'structure' and 'structuralism' are not mentioned, it is the source of much of the terminology of structuralism. [Formalism](#) was a key tributary leading to structuralism in the late 1920s and 1930s. The birth of European structuralism is usually associated with a conference of the [Prague school](#) linguists in The Hague in 1928. The first English translation of Saussure's *Course* was published in 1959, and structuralism flourished in academic circles in the 1960s and 1970s (though it continued to be influential in the 1980s). The primary concern of the Structuralists is with systems or structures rather than with referential [meaning](#) or the specificities of usage (see [Langue and parole](#)). Structuralists regard each language as a relational system or structure and give [priority](#) to the [determining power of the language system](#) (a principle shared by poststructuralists). They seek to describe the overall organization of sign systems as 'languages' - as with Lévi-Strauss and myth, kinship rules and totemism, Lacan and the unconscious and Barthes and Greimas and the 'grammar' of narrative. The primary emphasis is on the *whole* system - which is seen as 'more than the sum of its parts'. Structuralists engage in a systematic search for 'deep structures' underlying the surface features of phenomena (such as language, society, thought and behaviour). Their textual analysis is [synchronic](#), seeking to delineate the [codes](#) and rules which underlie the production of [texts](#) by comparing those perceived as belonging to the same system (e.g. a [genre](#)) and identifying invariant constituent units. The analysis of specific texts seeks to break down larger, more abstract units into 'minimal significant units' by means of the [commutation test](#), then [groups these units by membership of paradigms](#) and [identifies the syntagmatic relations](#) which link the units. The search for underlying semantic [oppositions](#) is characteristic of structuralist textual analysis. Contemporary [social semiotics](#) has moved beyond structuralist analysis of the internal relations of parts within a self-contained system. See also: [Combination](#), [axis](#)

[of](#), [Commutation test](#), [Copenhagen school](#), [Formalism](#), [Functionalism](#), [Langue and parole](#), [Paradigmatic analysis](#), [Paris school](#), [Poststructuralism](#), [Prague school](#), [Selection, axis of](#), [Semiotics](#), [Structural determinism](#), [Synchronic analysis](#), [Syntagmatic analysis](#), [Tartu school](#), [Transformation, rules of](#)

- Struggle, sites of: See [Constructivism](#), [Reality](#), [Representation](#), [Social semiotics](#)
- Stylistic foregrounding: See [Foregrounding, stylistic](#)
- **Subject**: In theories of subjectivity a distinction is made between 'the subject' and 'the individual'. Whilst the individual is an actual person, the *subject* is a set of *roles* constructed by dominant cultural and [ideological](#) values (e.g. in terms of class, age, gender and ethnicity). The [structuralist](#) notion of the '*positioning of the subject*' refers to the 'constitution' (construction) of the subject by the [text](#). According to this theory of textual (or discursive) positioning, the reader is obliged to adopt a 'subject-position' which already exists within the structure and [codes](#) of the text. Subjects are thus constructed as '[ideal readers](#)' through the use of codes. For the linguist Benveniste the subject has no existence outside specific discursive moments - the subject is constantly reconstructed through [discourse](#). For some theorists, the power of the mass media resides in their ability to position the subject in such a way that media [representations](#) are taken to be reflections of everyday [reality](#). The notion of the positioning of the subject assumes that a text has only one [meaning](#) - that which was [intended](#) by its makers - whereas contemporary theorists contend that there may be several alternative (even contradictory) subject-positions from which a text may make sense, and these are not necessarily built into the text itself (or intended). [Poststructuralist](#) theorists critique the concept of the unified subject. *Suture* is a term used by film theorists to refer to filmic processes (particularly *shot relationships*) which shape the subjectivity of their viewers whilst invisibly 'stitching together' cinematic [signifiers](#) to [foreground](#) the narrative. See also: [Addresser and addressee](#), [Ideal reader](#), [Imaginary, The](#), [Interpellation](#), [Modes of address](#), [Preferred reading](#), [Structural determinism](#), [Symbolic order](#), [Textual determinism](#)
- Subjectivism: See [Idealism](#)
- Subjectivity, theories of: See [Subject](#)
- **Substance, form and**: See [Form and substance](#)
- Suture: See [Subject](#)
- **Symbolic**: A mode in which the [signifier](#) does *not* resemble the [signified](#) but which is [arbitrary](#) or purely [conventional](#) - so that the relationship must be learnt (e.g. the word 'stop', a red traffic light, a national flag, a number) (Peirce). See also: [Arbitrariness](#), [Iconic](#), [Indexical](#), [Modes of relationship](#)
- **Symbolic capital**: Pierre Bourdieu outlined various inter-related kinds of 'capital' - economic, cultural, social and symbolic. 'Symbolic capital' refers to the communicative repertoire of an individual or group, which is related in part to educational background. In semiotic terms, symbolic capital reflects differential access to, and deployment of, particular [codes](#). See also: [Broadcast codes](#), [Interpretative codes](#), [Interpretative community](#), [Interpretative repertoire](#), [Narrowcast codes](#)
- **Symbolic order**: 'The Symbolic' is Lacan's term for the phase when the child gains mastery within the public realm of verbal language - when a degree of individuality and autonomy is surrendered to the constraints of linguistic conventions and the Self becomes a more fluid and ambiguous relational [signifier](#) rather than a relatively fixed entity. [Structuralists](#) focus on the Symbolic order rather than [the Imaginary](#), seeing language as [determining subjectivity](#). See also: [Imaginary, The](#), [Subject](#), [Discourse](#)
- **Synchronic analysis**: Synchronic analysis studies a phenomenon (such as a [code](#)) as if it were frozen at one moment in time. [Structuralist](#) semiotics focuses on synchronic rather than [diachronic analysis](#) and is criticized for ignoring [historicity](#). See also: [Langue and parole](#), [Structuralism](#)
- **Synchronous communication**: Synchronous communication is [communication](#) in which participants can communicate 'in real time' - without significant delays. This feature ties together the presence or absence of the producer(s) of the [text](#) and the technical features of the [medium](#). Synchronous communication is invariably [interpersonal communication](#). See also: [Asynchronous communication](#), [Interpersonal communication](#)
- **Synecdoche**: A figure of speech involving the substitution of part for whole, genus for species or vice versa. Some theorists do not distinguish it from [metonymy](#). See also: [Irony](#), [Metaphor](#), [Metonymic fallacy](#), [Metonymy](#), [Trope](#)
- **Syntactics**: Morris divided [semiotics](#) into three branches: *syntactics* (or *syntax*), [semantics](#), and [pragmatics](#). *Syntactics* refers to the study of the structural relations between [signs](#). The interpretation of signs by their users can also be seen as levels corresponding to these three branches - the *syntactic* level being the recognition of the sign (in relation to other signs). Such recognition depends on the [reader's](#) access to an appropriate [repertoire](#) of [codes](#) (see [Symbolic capital](#)). See also: [Pragmatics](#), [Semantics](#), [Semiotics](#)
- **Syntagm**: A syntagm is an orderly combination of interacting [signifiers](#) which forms a meaningful whole (sometimes called a 'chain'). In language, a sentence, for instance, is a syntagm of words. *Syntagmatic relations* are the various ways in which constituent units within the same [text](#) may be structurally related to each other. A

signifier enters into syntagmatic relations with other signifiers of the same structural level within the same text. Syntagmatic relationships exist both between [signifiers](#) and between [signifieds](#). Relationships between *signifiers* can be either *sequential* (e.g. in film and television narrative sequences), or *spatial* (e.g. montage in posters and photographs). Relationships between *signifieds* are *conceptual* relationships (such as argument). Syntagms are created by the linking of signifiers from [paradigm](#) sets which are chosen on the basis of whether they are conventionally regarded as appropriate or may be required by some [syntactic](#) rule system (e.g. grammar). See also: [Combination, axis of](#), [Grande syntagmatique](#), [Paradigmatic analysis](#), [Syntactics](#), [Syntagmatic analysis](#)

- [Syntagmatic analysis](#): Syntagmatic analysis is a [structuralist](#) technique which seeks to establish the 'surface structure' of a [text](#) and the relationships between its parts. The study of syntagmatic relations reveals the rules or [conventions](#) underlying the production and interpretation of texts. See also: [Combination, axis of](#), [Paradigmatic analysis](#), [Syntagm](#)



A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

- **Tartu school**: What is sometimes called the 'Moscow-Tartu school of semiotics' was founded in the 1960s by Yuri Lotman (1922-1993), who worked in Tartu University, Estonia. Lotman worked within the tradition of [formalist structuralist](#) semiotics but broadened his semiotic enterprise by establishing 'cultural semiotics', his goal being to develop a unified semiotic theory of culture. See also: [Formalism](#), [Structuralism](#)
- [Technological or media determinism](#): The term 'technological determinism' was coined by Thorstein Veblen. Nowadays, it is used to refer to the common assumption that new technologies are the *primary cause* of: major social and historical changes at the *macrosocial* level of social structure and processes; *and/or* subtle but profound social and psychological influences at the *microsocial* level of the regular use of particular kinds of tools. Whatever the specific technological 'revolution' may be, technological determinists present it as a dramatic and 'inevitable' driving force, the 'impact' of which will 'lead to' deep and 'far-reaching' 'effects' or 'consequences'. Technology is presented as [autonomous](#). Technological determinism is often associated with a belief in the 'neutrality' of technology, but is sometimes linked with the notion of the [non-neutrality of technology](#) in the form of the stance that we cannot merely 'use' technology without also, to some extent, being 'used by' it. Very broad claims about the 'impact' of technology (such as those of [McLuhan](#)) are open to the criticism of [reification](#). Where technological determinism focuses on communications media in particular (as with McLuhan) it is sometimes referred to as 'media determinism'. A moderate version of technological determinism is that our regular use of particular tools or media may have subtle influences on us, but that it is the social context of use which is crucial. See also: [Linguistic determinism](#), [McLuhanism](#), [Non-neutrality of medium](#), [Social determinism](#), [Whorfianism](#)
- Televisual codes: See [Filmic codes](#)
- Tenor: See [Metaphor](#)
- [Text](#): Most broadly, this term is used to refer to anything which can be '[read](#)' for [meaning](#); to some theorists, 'the world' is 'social text'. Although the term appears to privilege written texts (it seems [graphocentric](#) and [logocentric](#)), to most semioticians a 'text' is an system of [signs](#) (in the form of words, images, sounds and/or gestures). It is constructed and interpreted with reference to the [conventions](#) associated with a [genre](#) and in a particular [medium](#) of communication. The term is often used to refer to *recorded* (e.g. written) texts which are independent of their users (used in this sense the term excludes unrecorded speech). A text is the product of a process of [representation](#) and 'positions' both its makers and its readers (see [Subject](#)). Typically, readers tend to focus mainly on what is represented in a text rather than on the processes of [representation](#) involved (which usually seem to be [transparent](#)). See also: [Complex sign](#), [Representation](#), [Textual codes](#)
- [Textual codes](#): Whilst many semiotic [codes](#) are treated by some semioticians as 'textual' codes (reading 'the world' through the metaphor of a 'text'), this can be seen as forming one major group of codes, alongside [social codes](#) and [interpretative codes](#). In the current classification, textual codes relate to our knowledge of [texts](#), [genres](#) and [media](#), and include: scientific and [aesthetic codes](#), [genre](#), rhetorical and stylistic codes and mass media codes. See also: [Aesthetic codes](#), [Broadcast codes](#), [Directness of address](#), [Formality of address](#), [Filmic codes](#), [Modes of address](#), [Narrowcast codes](#), [Photographic codes](#), [Representational codes](#), [Narration](#), [Text](#)
- Textual community: See [Interpretative community](#)
- [Textual determinism](#): This is a stance that the [form and content](#) of a [text](#) determines how it is [decoded](#). Critics of this stance argue that decoders may bring to the text [codes](#) of their own which may not match those used by the [encoder\(s\)](#), and which may shape their decoding of it. See also: [Aberrant decoding](#), [Affective fallacy](#), [Literalism](#), [Overcoding](#), [Overdetermination](#), [Polysemy](#), [Preferred reading](#), [Social determinism](#)

- Textual idealism: See [Idealism](#)
- Textuality: See [Materiality of the sign](#)
- Thirdness: See [Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness](#)
- [Tokens and types](#): Peirce made a distinction between *tokens* and *types*. In relation to words in a [text](#), a count of the tokens would be a count of the total number of words used (regardless of type), whilst a count of the types would be a count of the *different* words used (ignoring any repetition). The type-token distinction in relation to signs is important in [social semiotic](#) terms not as an absolute property of the sign vehicle but only insofar as it matters on any given occasion (for particular purposes) to those involved in using the sign. The [medium](#) used may determine whether a text is a type which is its own sole token (unique original) or simply one token amongst many of its type ('a copy without an original'). See also: [Digital signs](#), [Simulacrum](#)
- [Transcendent\(al\) signified](#): Derrida argued that dominant [ideological discourse](#) relies on the metaphysical illusion of a transcendental [signified](#) - an ultimate [referent](#) at the heart of a signifying system which is portrayed as 'absolute and irreducible', stable, timeless and [transparent](#) - as if it were *independent of* and *prior to* that system. All other signifieds within that signifying system are subordinate to this dominant central signified which is the final [meaning](#) to which they point. Derrida noted that this privileged signified is subject to historical change, so that Neo-Platonism focused on 'the Monad', Christianity focused on God, Romanticism focused on consciousness and so on. Without such a foundational term to provide closure for meaning, every signified functions as a [signifier](#) in an [endless play of signification](#). See also: [Deconstruction](#), [Différance](#), [Discourse](#), [Empty signifier](#), [Essentialism](#), [Markedness](#), [Poststructuralism](#), [Reification](#)
- [Transformation, rules of](#): Analogously to Chomsky's notion of 'transformational grammar', European [structuralists](#) such as Lévi-Strauss argued that new structural patterns within a culture are generated from existing ones through formal 'rules of transformation' based on systematic [similarities, equivalences or parallels](#), or alternatively, symmetrical inversions. The patterns on different levels of a structure (e.g. within a myth) or in different structures (e.g. in different myths) are seen as logical transformations of each other. Rules of transformation enable the analyst to reduce a complex structure to some more basic constituent units. Lévi-Strauss claimed that the structure of relations underlying the practices of one particular culture is a transformation of other possible structures belonging to a universal set. Structures can be transformed by a systematic change in structural relationships. By applying transformation rules the analyst could reconstruct a whole structure from a fragment and later stages from earlier ones. See also: [Commutation test](#), [Isomorphism](#), [Structuralism](#)
- [Translatability](#): [Linguistic universalists](#) argue that we can say whatever we want to say in any language, and that whatever we say in one language can always be translated into another. For [linguistic relativists](#) translation between one language and another is at the very least, problematic, and sometimes impossible. Some commentators also apply this to the 'translation' of un verbalized thought into language. Even *within a single language*, some relativists suggest that any reformulation of words has implications for [meaning](#), however subtle: it is impossible to say exactly the same thing in different words; reformulating something transforms the ways in which meanings may be made with it, and in this sense, [form and content](#) are inseparable and the use of the [medium](#) contributes to shaping the meaning. In the context of the written word, the 'untranslatability' claim is generally regarded as strongest in the expressive arts and weakest in the case of formal scientific papers. Within the literary domain, 'untranslatability' was favoured by Romantic literary theorists, for whom the [connotative](#) meanings of words were crucial. The [formalist](#) New Criticism in literary theory also condemned 'the heresy of paraphrase'. Translatability is an issue concerning [the relation between semiotics and linguistics](#): the issue being whether [texts](#) in 'non-verbal' systems can be translated into verbal language or *vice versa* (where [logocentric](#) theorists argue that non-verbal texts *can* generally be translated into language but that linguistic texts can seldom be translated into non-verbal forms). Benveniste argued that the 'first principle' of semiotic systems is that they are not 'synonymous': we cannot say 'the same thing' in systems based on different units: we *cannot* directly translate from one [medium](#) or [code](#) to another without transforming [meaning](#). See also: [Channel](#), [Language of a medium](#), [Logocentrism](#), [Medium](#), [Non-neutrality of medium](#), [Universalism, linguistic](#), [Relativism, linguistic](#), [Whorfianism](#)
- [Transmission model of communication](#): Everyday references to [communication](#) are based on a 'transmission' model in which a '[sender](#)' '[transmits](#)' a '[message](#)' to a 'receiver' - a formula which reduces [meaning](#) to 'content' (delivered like a parcel) and which tends to support the [intentional fallacy](#). This is also the basis of Shannon and Weaver's well-known model of communication, which makes no allowance for the importance of social context. Semioticians, by contrast, emphasize the importance of [codes](#). See also: [Communication](#), [Encoding and decoding model of communication](#), [Intentional fallacy](#), [Sender and receiver](#)
- [Transparency](#): We become so used to familiar [conventions](#) in our everyday use of various [media](#) that the [codes](#) involved often seem 'transparent' and the medium itself seems [neutral](#). The medium is characterized by

instrumentalist thinking as purely a means to an end when the text is regarded as a 'reflection', a '[representation](#)' or an 'expression'. The status of the text as text - its 'textuality' and [materiality](#) - is minimized. [Commonsense](#) tells us that the [signified](#) is [unmediated](#) and the [signifier](#) is 'transparent' and purely [denotative](#), as when we interpret television or photography as 'a window on the world'. The importance accorded to transparency varies in relation to [genre](#) and function: as the [formalists](#) noted, [poetic language](#) tends to be more 'opaque' than conventional prose. In '[realistic](#)' texts, the authorial goal is for the medium, codes and [signs](#) to be discounted by [readers](#) as transparent and for the makers of the text to retreat to invisibility. [Unmarked terms](#) and forms - such as the [dominant code](#) - draw no attention to their invisibly privileged status. Semioticians have sought to demonstrate that the apparent transparency of even the most 'realistic' [signifier](#), text, genre or medium is illusory, since [representational codes](#) are always involved. Anti-realist texts do not seek to be transparent but are [reflexive](#). See also: [Foregrounding](#), [stylistic](#), [Imaginary signifier](#), [Mediation](#), [Mimesis](#), [Naturalization](#), [Non-neutrality of medium](#), [Realism](#), [aesthetic](#), [Reflexivity](#), [Representation](#), [Materiality of the sign](#)

- [Triadic model of sign](#): A triadic model of the [sign](#) is based on a division of the sign into *three* necessary constituent elements. [Peirce's model of the sign](#) is a triadic model. See also: [Dyadic model](#), [Semiotic triangle](#)
- Triangle, semiotic: See [Semiotic triangle](#)
- [Trope](#): Tropes are rhetorical 'figures of speech' such as [metaphor](#), [metonymy](#), [synecdoche](#) and [irony](#). [Poststructuralist](#) theorists such as Derrida, Lacan and Foucault have accorded considerable importance to tropes. See also: [Irony](#), [Metaphor](#), [Metonymy](#), [Synecdoche](#),
- Types and tokens: See [Tokens and types](#)



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- [Unarticulated codes](#): [Codes](#) without [articulation](#) consist of a series of [signs](#) bearing no direct relation to each other. These signs are not divisible into recurrent compositional elements. The folkloristic 'language of flowers' is a code without articulation, since each type of flower is an independent sign which bears no relation to the other signs in the code. Unarticulated codes, which have no recurrent features, are '[uneconomical](#)'. See also: [Articulation of codes](#)
- [Universalism, cognitive](#): [Structuralists](#) such as Lévi-Strauss argues that there is a universal mental structure based on certain fundamental [binary oppositions](#). This structure is transformed into universal structural patterns in human culture through [universal linguistic](#) categories. See also: [Cultural relativism](#), [Universalism](#), [linguistic](#)
- [Universalism, linguistic](#): This term refers to the view that, whilst languages vary in their surface structure, every language is based on the same underlying universal structure or laws. In contrast to [linguistic relativists](#), universalists argue that we can say whatever we want to say in any language, and that whatever we say in one language can always be translated into another. Both linguistic universalism and [linguistic relativism](#) are compatible with [Structuralism](#). See also: [Cultural relativism](#), [Relativism, linguistic](#), [Translatability](#), [Whorfianism](#)
- [Univocality](#): In contrast to [polyvocality](#), this is the use of a single voice as a [narrative mode](#) within a [text](#). Univocal texts offer a [preferred reading](#) of what they [represent](#). By obscuring agency, this mode of narration, in association with third-person narrative, tends to be associated with the apparently 'unauthored' [transparency](#) of [realism](#). See also: [Narration](#), [Polyvocality](#)
- [Unlimited semiosis](#): Whilst Saussure established the general principle that signs always relate to other signs, within his model the relationship between [signifier](#) and [signified](#) was stable and predictable. Umberto Eco coined the term 'unlimited semiosis' to refer to the way in which, for Peirce (via the '[interpretant](#)'), for Barthes (via [connotation](#)), for Derrida (via 'free play') and for Lacan (via 'the sliding signified'), the signified is endlessly commutable - functioning in its turn as a signifier for a further signified. See also: [Différance](#), [Interpretant](#), [Transcendent\(al\) signified](#)
- Unmarked categories: See [Markedness](#)
- Untranslatability: See [Translatability](#)



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- [Valorization](#): Loosely, the term refers to the attribution of value, but it is also used more specifically to refer to its attribution to members of [binary semantic oppositions](#), where one [signifier](#) and its [signified](#) is [unmarked](#) (and

positively valorized) whilst the other is marked (and negatively valorized). Valorization is part of a process of [naturalization](#) whilst *devalorization* (or *revalorization*) is part of an attempt to [deconstruct](#) the [ideological assumptions](#) built into the oppositional framework (a process of [denaturalization](#)). See also: [Binary oppositions](#), [Deconstruction](#), [Markedness](#), [Naturalization](#), [Ontology](#)

- [Value](#): For Saussure language was a relational system of 'values'. He distinguished the value of a [sign](#) from its [signification](#) or referential meaning. A sign does not have an 'absolute' value in itself - its value is dependent on its relations with other signs within the signifying system as a whole. Words in different languages can have equivalent referential [meanings](#) but different values since they belong to different networks of associations. There is some similarity here to the distinction between [denotation](#) ('literal' meaning) and [connotation](#) (associations). See also: [Meaning](#), [Saussurean model of the sign](#), [Signification](#), [Structuralism](#)
- [Vehicle in metaphor](#): See [Metaphor](#)
- Vehicle, sign: See [Sign vehicle](#)
- Vertical axis: See [Selection, axis of](#)
- Virgule: See [The bar](#)



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- [Whorfianism](#): In its most extreme version 'the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis' can be described as relating two associated principles: [linguistic determinism](#) and [linguistic relativism](#). Applying these two principles, the Whorfian thesis is that people who speak different languages perceive and think about the world quite differently, their worldviews being shaped or [determined by the language](#) of the culture (a notion rejected by [social determinists](#)). Critics note that we cannot make inferences about differences in worldview solely on the basis of differences in linguistic structure. Whilst few linguists would accept the Whorfian hypothesis in its 'strong', extreme or deterministic form, many now accept a 'weak', more moderate, or limited Whorfianism, namely that the ways in which we see the world may be *influenced* by the kind of language we use. See also: [Conventionalism](#), [Cultural relativism](#), [Linguistic determinism](#), [McLuhanism](#), [Non-neutrality of the medium](#), [Ontology](#), [Relativism](#), [epistemological](#), [Relativism, linguistic](#), [Social determinism](#), [Technological determinism](#), [Translatability](#), [Universalism](#), [cognitive](#), [Universalism, linguistic](#)
- Writing 'under erasure': See [Erasure, writing under](#)

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