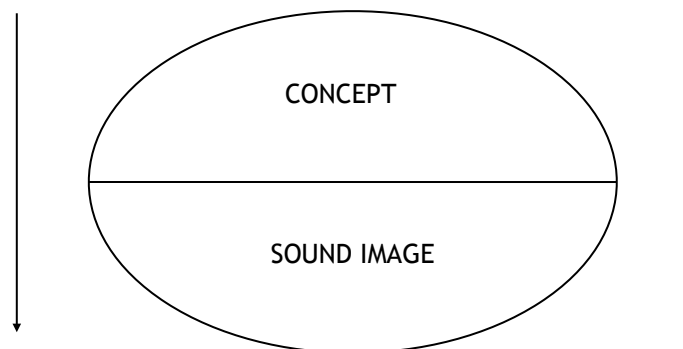


Notes on Semiotics: Introduction

Review of Structuralism and Poststructuralism

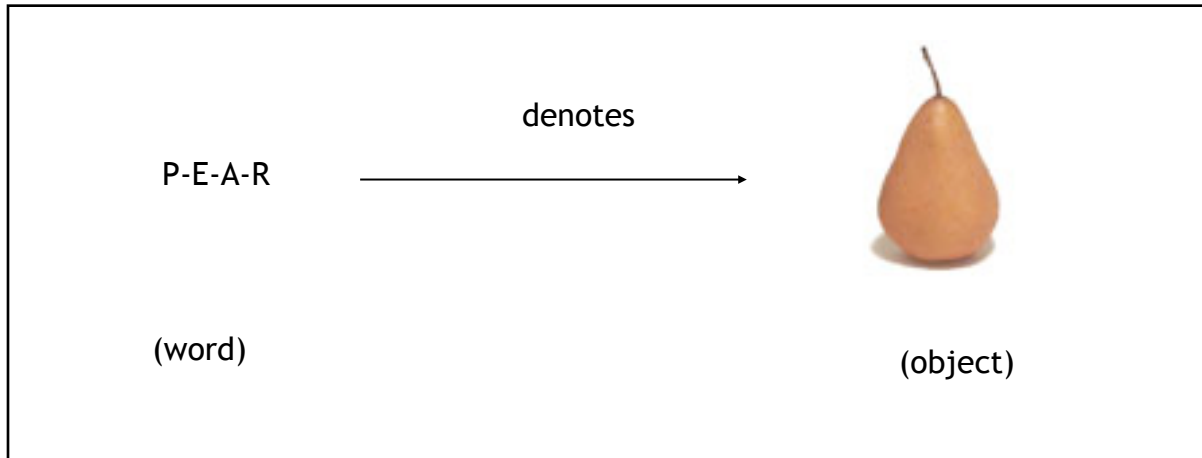
1. Meaning and Communication: Some Fundamental Questions
 - a. Is meaning a private experience between individuals?
 - b. Is it determined by the psychological state or intention of the speaker?
 - c. How is meaning communicated?
 - d. What are the limits of our common sense understanding of language?
2. Saussure: Language is a **shared** system of communication.
3. Saussure's Basic Concepts
 - a. synchronic
 - b. diachronic
 - c. *langue*
 - d. *parole*
4. Problem of Denotation
 - a. What do words **denote**? To what do they **refer**?
 - b. Objects in the real world? When you consider general nouns ("tree", "hat", "virtue", etc.) and verbs ("ask", "linger", "wait") it becomes clear that a simple word-to-object relation breaks down. (Problem of Reference)
5. This provides one reason for Saussure to bracket the object ("referent") and limit his analysis to the relation between **word** and **concept**.
6. Saussure introduced a new terminology:

SIGN = SIGNIFIER (SOUND-IMAGE) + SIGNIFIED (CONCEPT)



7. What's the nature of the signified (concept)? What is it and how is it distinct from the signifier?

PRE-STRUCTURALIST LINGUISTIC MODEL



STRUCTURALIST MODEL



8. Given that the concept of a thing varies, perhaps considerably, from person to person, Saussure had yet another reason for bracketing the real (external) world. This reduces the complexity and makes it easier to develop a workable **theoretical model**.

9. The "Arbitrariness" of the Sign—**Conventionalism**

- a. No **natural** connection or **resemblance** between words and things.
- b. Note that this holds for **ordinary language**, but not necessarily for **images**.

10. **Codes** (Sign-Systems) and Social Values

- a. The things that matter to a community of people are distinguished and articulated in the signs they use to communicate and express themselves.
- b. In this sense, social and cultural **values and interests** are incorporated into codes.
- c. Thus, receiving and understanding a message is the goal of a process that is **active** as well as **socially and culturally conditioned**.

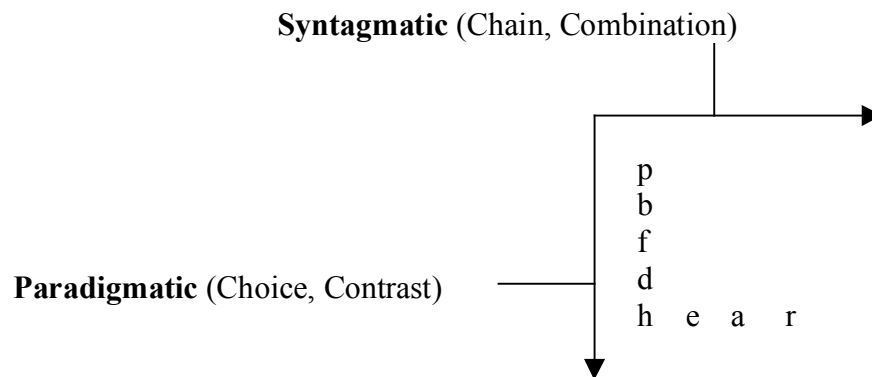
11. The "**Value**" of a Sign

- a. This is a more precise and technical term for Saussure.
- b. It correlates closely with "**exchange value**".
- c. It refers to what a sign can express in a given language.
- d. Example: "mouton" signifies *sheep* (the animal) in French; the same word is used to refer to *lamb* (the meat). In English, "sheep" refers to the animal and "mutton" refers to the meat derived from sheep (which is less desirable than lamb, i.e. meat derived from young sheep). Thus, "mouton" and "mutton" have different (exchange) **values** in the two languages.
- e. Cf. Eskimo words for *snow*.
- f. Saussure claims that the value of a given sign is determined by its relation to other similar values and signs.

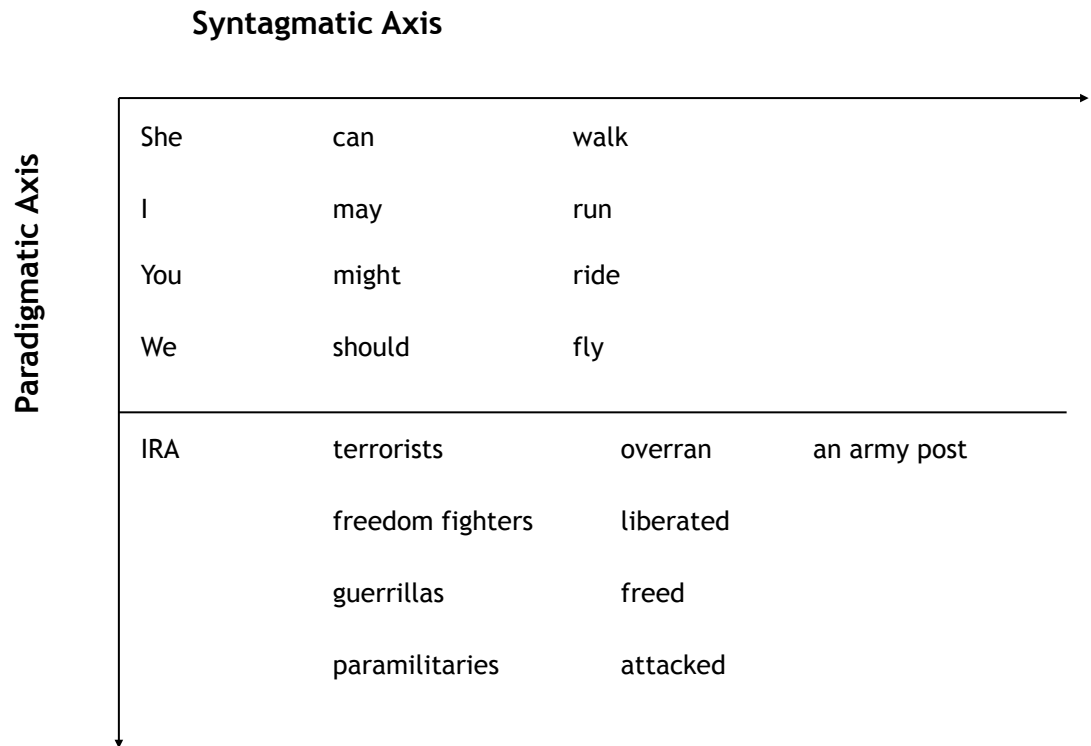
Semiotics

12. Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Relations and Substitutions

At the level of the **word**:



At the level of the **sentence**:



- a. Signs related to one another in a **linear**, chain-like fashion (as in "she-can-walk") are said to be **syntagms**. Syntagmatic analysis deals with the **narrative** dimension of expression.
- b. Signs related to one another as synonyms or alternative signs located within a syntagmatic chain are called **paradigms** (e.g. "he", "she", or "it" in "__-can-walk").
- c. These relations exist among **all types of signs**—pictorial as well as linguistic. [Cf. a photograph, transitions (cut, fade, dissolve, wipe) between shots from a film or TV commercial, items of clothing in an outfit, and items on a menu and the meanings that arise from the alternatives chosen.]

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)¹

- d. One very useful, albeit subjective, technique of paradigmatic analysis is the "commutation test", i.e. substituting signifiers to test for a change in meaning.

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.² 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'.³

- e. Note that the **photograph** is constructed out of **spatial** syntagms, while the **film** is constructed from both **spatial** (*mise-en-scène*, the composition of individual frames) and **temporal** syntagms (montage or temporal sequencing of shots). Chandler lists the sorts of distinctions relevant to spatial analyses.

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).⁴
- f. But how do you determine the signs that belong to a given paradigm? This must be done contextually. One needs to identify the **whole system** or **code** in order to determine the range of appropriate syntagms and paradigms.

13. Denotation and Connotation

14. Iconic, Indexical, and Symbolic Signs (Peirce)

- a. The **iconic** signifier resembles its signified. Thus, there may be a "natural" relation between the two.
- b. The **symbolic** signifier has a purely **conventional**, not a natural, relationship to its signified.
- c. The **indexical** signifier acquires significance by means of a **causal** relation to its object. We learn to link the signifier to what it signifies, e.g. smoke and fire, or tree rings and the age of the tree.

In old movies, when they need to show the passing of time, they may typically show the sheets bearing the days of the month being torn off a calendar—that is iconic, because it looks like sheets being torn off a calendar; the numbers 1, 2, 3 etc., the names January, February etc. are symbols—they are purely arbitrary; the whole sequence is indexical of the passing of time—we associate the removal of the sheets with the passing of time.⁵

15. Signification

- a. The objects, actions, and practices that make up our social and cultural worlds are governed by systems of signs and take on meaning and significance within those systems.
- b. "Everything in our social life has *the potential to mean*." [Underwood]
- c. Since meaning is determined relative to particular codes or systems of signs which embody values and interests, it follows that signifying practices and discursive acts are value-laden.
- d. They also have the capacity to express and maintain power relations.
- e. If discourse is constitutive of reality, then "those who control the discourse control the reality".

16. Orders of Signification

Example: Clothing as signifier
("fashion statement")

signifier = a cut of fabric (form)
signified = jeans

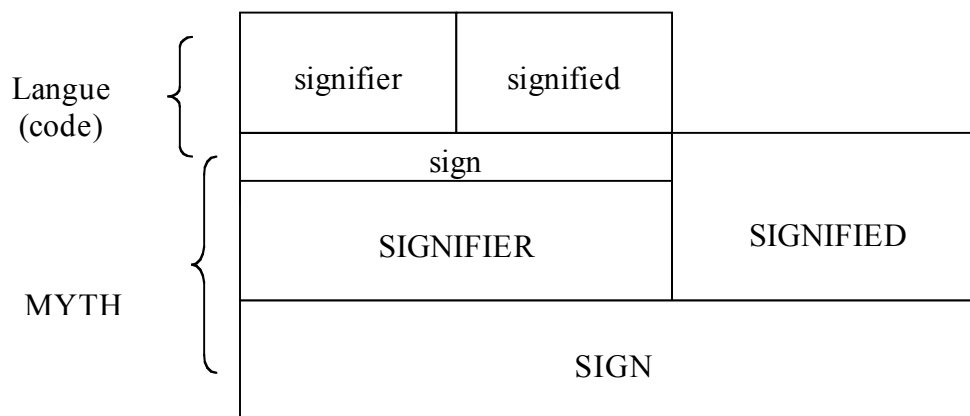
signified (connotations) =
casualness, work, "the
American frontier",
independence, etc.



signifier = irregular diagonal red leather container (form)
signified = high-heel shoe

signified (connotations) = femininity, sexuality, wildness, etc.

All takes place within a context—western, 20th century **discourse** of fashion.



- first level ~ denotation
- second level ~ connotation ("myth"; ideology - cultural values invoked)

17. Critique of Semiotics

- a. Semiotics mistakes description for explanation. It suggests that the structure of a sign system is the cause of social phenomena. But all that a formal analysis is capable of doing is showing **how** meaning is sustained, not **why** a particular phenomenon exists. Semiotics is not the proper tool for providing social (scientific) explanations.
- b. Semiotic analyses are typically impressionistic and unsystematic. When they **are** systematic, they often go to the opposite extreme of positing an elaborate array of categories, albeit with no sense for their usefulness or applicability. In general, there seem to be no clear criteria for determining the accuracy or value of individual interpretations.
- c. Ordinary language is fundamentally different from other signifying systems and cannot be understood and explained in the same way. The innate capacities associated with language acquisition may not be analogous to those used in visual perception and the understanding of visual codes.

T. R. Quigley
Revised 14 Mar 09

¹ Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics for Beginners*, "Paradigms and Syntagms", <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem03.html> (1 Jan 04)

² See Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers & Colin Smith, London: Jonathan Cape, 1967, III, 2.3. Also Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward & Richard Howard, London: Jonathan Cape, 1985.

³ Chandler, op. cit.

⁴ Chandler, op. cit.

⁵ Michael Underwood, "Introduction to Semiotics", <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/semiomean/semio1.html> (1 Jan 04).