Introduction to Semiotics by Daniel Chandler

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Preface

This documents aims to explain to you what a science "semiotics" is about. I'm demonstrating from which directions the science starts on. I'm also talking about the basics in the theory of semiotics and how to practice this methodology on all the kinds of everyday things.

What is semiotics about? Is it linguistic turn or two visions in semiology? (Slide 3, 4)

If you were wondering sometime how to define what semiotics is about – it would not be so easy to offer a simple definition, which is of much use nowadays. Semiotics could be anywhere. Human beings recognize patterns of information and organize them to generate meaning. Collections of these organized patterns form the languages that humans use when they communicate.

The shortest definition is that it is the study of signs itself and the way they work. The name of this science goes from the Greek seme?on, "sign". The next question appears automatically "What is the sign?" 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. Now, you can probably assume that semiotics is about "visual signs".

But, that is not so true.

We use certain "signs" among ourselves that do not point to anything in our actual surroundings. They take the place of things that we have perceived in the past, or even things that we can merely imagine by combining memories, things that might be in the past or future experience. They serve to let us develop a characteristic attitude toward objects, which is called "thinking of" or "referring to" what is not here.

As an approach to textual analysis, semiotics treats the language of which texts are composed as a system of signs and symbols, which convey meaning to the reader.

Linguistics, the scientific study of language, is only one branch of this general science and has seen a quite extraordinary expansion.

This interest in linguistics mostly has been originated with the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, from whose work French theorists developed 'structuralism', out of which grew "post-structuralism", both of which have placed enormous influence on language and both of which have had a formative influence on cultural studies. This emphasis on language is often referred to as 'the linguistic turn' in philosophy.

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.

Semiotics began to become a major approach to cultural studies in the late 1960s, partly as a result of the work of Roland Barthes. Barthes declared that "semiology aims to take in any system of signs: images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these". 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". Semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as 'signs' in everyday speech, but also of anything, which 'stands for' something else.

Basic issues in semiotics
(**Slide 5**)

General

Semiotics is considered as the theory of the production and interpretation of meaning.

Meaning is made by the deployment of acts and objects which function as "signs" in relation to other signs. In general meaning is not believed to reside within any particular object, text or process. Rather, meaning arises during the communication process itself.

Social

It examines semiotics practices, specific to a culture and community, for the making of various kinds of texts and meanings in contexts of culturally meaningful activity

Multimedia

It is based on the principle that all meaning making necessarily overflows the analytical boundaries between distinct, idealized semiotic resource systems such as language, gesture, depiction and action

Sign / What does it mean? (1/10)
(**Slide 6**)

Sign is loosely defined as "a pattern of data which, when perceived, brings to mind something other than itself," the notion of the sign is central to the semiotic approach to the study of communication. The term can refer to the relationship among the elements of the semiotic model, or it can be used to indicate the first of the three elements, i.e., the physical thing perceived.

All the individuals are meaning-makers. Distinctively, we make meanings through our creation and interpretation of "signs". Signs take the form of different objects, but such things have no any meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning. Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as 'signifying' something - referring to or standing for something other than itself.

Sign / Dyadic model (2/10)
(**Slide 7**)

Saussure proposed a theory of signification (a "dyadic" or two-part model of the sign). He defined a sign as being composed of:

The "**signified**" - the idea being represented

The "**signifier**" - the word doing the representing.

Thus, the sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is referred to as "signification" (it is noteworthy that Saussure always refers to the signified as an "idea"), and this is represented in this diagram by the arrows. The horizontal line marking the two elements of the sign is referred to as "the bar".

Sign / Signification example (3/10)

An image of tree is signified.
A word "tree" is signifier.

Sign / Arbitrariness (4/10)

When we say something is "arbitrary", we mean that there's no good reason for it (choice randomness). If you make an "arbitrary choice" between two things, then you choose for no good reason; you probably don't care which one you choose. By saying that signs are arbitrary, Saussure was saying that there is no good reason why we use the sequence of sounds 'sister' to mean a female sibling. We could just as well use different sound patterns of this word in different languages.

Sign / Arbitrariness examples (5/10)

Saussure argued that signs refer primarily to each other. Within the language system, "everything depends on relations". Both signifier and signified are purely relational entities. Let me to return to our "tree" example. An individual word "tree" does have some meaning for us, but it's meaning depends on its context in relation to the other words with which it is used.

Reminder:
An image of tree is signified.
A word "tree" is signifier.

Sign / Syntagm (6/10)

Language is linear: we produce one sound after another and words follow one another:
SHE + CAN + GO (in language, coming one after another)
Syntagm is interlinking signs sequentially during constructing sentences.
But
At the same time as we produce the se signs linked to one another, we also choose a sign from a whole range of alternative signs.
By choosing appropriate sign we are defining **paradigmatic relationships between signs.**
Paradigm - A set/group from which a choice is made and only one unit may be chosen.
Syntagm - Once a unit is chosen from a paradigm it is normally combined with other units.
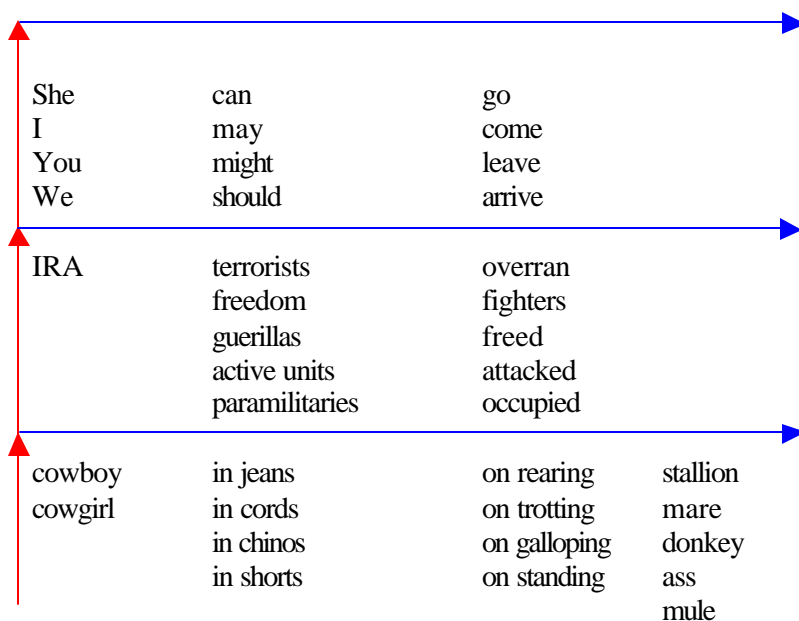So, when a journalist writes:

IRA terrorists overran an army post in Londonderry in Northern Ireland

She chooses each sign from a range of alternatives. She could say:

"IRA scum", "IRA active units", "IRA paramilitaries", "IRA freedom fighters", "IRA lunatics"

When we look at this range of possibilities, we are examining a **paradigm**. We are examining the paradigmatic relationship between signs. Not uncommonly, syntagm and paradigm may be conceived of as two axes:

She	can	go	
I	may	come	
You	might	leave	
We	should	arrive	

IRA	terrorists	overran	
	freedom	fighters	
	guerillas	freed	
	active units	attacked	
	paramilitaries	occupied	

cowboy	in jeans	on rearing	stallion
cowgirl	in cords	on trotting	mare
	in chinos	on galloping	donkey
	in shorts	on standing	ass
			mule

Blue color axis – syntagmatic axis
Red color axis – paradigmatic axis

The important aspect of syntagm is the rules or conventions by which the combination of units is made.

A sign has no "absolute" value independent of this context. The sign is more than the sum of its parts. The value of a sign is determined by the relationships between the sign and other signs within the system as a whole.

Sign / Denotation, Connotation & Myth (8/10)
(Slide 14)

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 signified: a denotative signified and a connotative signified. Meaning includes both denotation and connotation.
Most signs have at least one normal, "common sense" meaning. This meaning, called the sign's denotation, is shared among many people and is the most widely used meaning of the sign. But signs also may have many different "subjective" meanings

that arise from each individual's personal experiences. These are called the connotations of the sign.

The denotation of a sign represents an agreement among a group of people that they will share that meaning of the sign among themselves. Meanings of this type are said to arise through social convention.

A sign may have more than one denotational meaning. In cases when a person must choose one meaning from a number of options he or she looks to the context of the sign to make the decision.

Signs 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. They express and serve the ideological function of naturalization. Their function is 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". 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) 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.

The term "myth" refers to the unconscious, collective meaning that a society makes from a semiotic process

Sign / Typology (9/10); (10/10)
(Slide 15, 16)

It is common to divide signs into three types:

Icon
An icon is a sign, which is linked to its object by qualitative characteristics. For example, a map is an icon because it shares some quality (spatial organization) with its object. A photograph is iconic because it is linked to its object

Index
An index denotes its object by being physically linked to it, or affected by it. For example, smoke is an index of fire, and a knock at the door is an index of someone's presence on the other side.

Symbols
A symbol has no qualitative or physical link to its object. It is "conventional"; that is to say that it is defined by social convention. Most words are symbols. For example, if the word "dog" was replaced in English by the word "cat" and vice versa, there would be no change to the meanings we could convey. However it would be impossible to use a photograph of a dog to mean "cat".

Modality and visual representation (1/2), (2/2)
(Slide 17, 18)

Whilst semiotics is often encountered in the form of textual analysis, it also involves studying representations and the "reality" always involves representation.

Modality refers to the reality status accorded to or claimed by a sign, text or genre. 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. 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.

The Belgian surrealist Rene Magritte (1898-1967) painted a side-on view of a smoker's pipe and the text "This is not a pipe". Each "realistically" depicts an object, which we easily recognize. 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.

Codes (1/4)
(Slide 19)

Some theorists argue that even our perception of the everyday world around us involves codes. Simultaneously, a 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". According to the Gestalt psychologists 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 on a black background or silhouetted profiles on a white background? Perceptual

set operates in such cases and we tend to favor 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.

Codes (2/4)

The Gestalt law outlined what seemed to be the universal principles of perceptual organization. The main ones are as follows: proximity, similarity, good continuation, closure, smallness, surroundness and symmetry.

Proximity

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**.

Similarity

We do tend to see alternating columns of circles and squares. The principle of similarity is that **features, which look similar, are associated**.

Continuity

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

Closure is that interpretations, which produce "closed" rather than "open" figures are favored.

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.

Symmetry

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

Surroudness

The principle of surroundness is that the areas, which can be seen as surrounded by others, tend to be perceived as figures.

Codes (3/4)

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 signifiers. Codes transcend single texts, linking them together in an interpretative framework. Stephen Heath stated, "While every code is a system, not every system is a code". 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". In reading texts, we interpret signs with reference to what seem to be appropriate codes.

Codes (4/4)

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
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)
> Behavioral codes (protocols, rituals, role-playing, games)

Textual 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), exposition, argument and so on;
> Mass media codes including photographic, television, filmic, radio, newspaper and magazine codes, both technical and conventional

Interpretative codes
> Perceptual codes: e.g. of visual perception
> Ideological codes such as individualism, liberalism, feminism, racism, materialism, capitalism, progressivism, conservatism, socialism, objectivism, consumerism and populism.

These three types of codes correspond broadly to three key kinds of knowledge required by interpreters of a text, namely knowledge of:
> The world (social knowledge);
> The medium and the genre (textual knowledge);
> The relationship between (1) and (2) (modality judgments).

Articulation / "Duality of patterning"

Semiotic codes vary in their complexity of structure or "articulation". The object can be "articulated" when having separable sections, which are linked together.

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.

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 A semiotic code which has "double articulation" can be analyzed into two abstract structural levels: a higher level called "the level of first articulation" and a lower level – "the level of second articulation". 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, 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 single articulation, double articulation or no articulation.

Some codes have first articulation only. These semiotic systems consist of signs - meaningful elements that 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. 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, stylized images) is a code with first articulation only (Eco 1976, 232).

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 figure (minimal functional units). N?th 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".

Intertextuality (1/2)
(Slide 24)

Julia Kristeva introduced the semiotic definition of what intertextuality is about. 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.

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'. The framing of texts by other texts has implications not only for their writers but also for their readers. Fredric Jameson argued "texts come before us as the always-already-read. A famous text has a history of readings. "All literary works… are "rewritten", if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them". 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.

Intertextuality / Genette's typology (2/2)
(Slide 25)

It may be useful to consider the issue of "degrees (classification) 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 writer(s) and reader(s).

Gerard Genette proposed the term 'transtextuality' as a more inclusive term than "intertextuality". 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

Metatextuality**: explicit or implicit critical commentary of one text on another text**

Hypotextuality: the relation between a text and a proceeding "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).

To the reader's attention:
The semiotic model

The Semiotic Model provides a coordinated way of talking about how the thoughts in our minds can be expressed in terms of the world outside of our minds. The model contains three basic entities:

The **sign**: something which is perceived, but which stands for something else,

The **concept**: the thoughts or images that are brought to mind by the perception of the sign,

The **object**: the "something else" in the world to which the sign refers.

The model is most often represented as the **semiotic triangle** .

SIGN

perception   convention

CONCEPT   experience   OBJECT
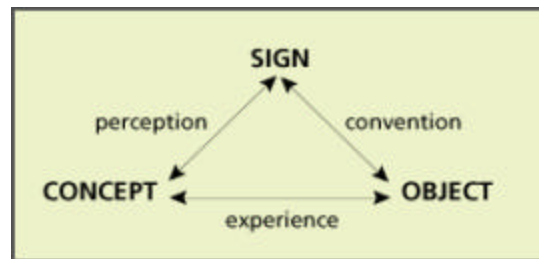
This version of the semiotic model is adapted from the work of the American philosopher Charles S. Pierce. Pierce is generally acknowledged as an important pioneer in the study of signs.

Notice that

The sign and the concept are connected by the person's perception,

The concept and the object are connected by the person's experience,

The sign and the object are connected by the conventions, or the culture, of the social group within which the person lives.

These connections are important to the study of how meaning arises during the daily encounters with the many signs that fill the human environment.

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