Role of Semiotics in Linguistics

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Abstract: Semiotics is the study of signs. 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). The two dominant models of a sign are the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. This paper attempts to study the role of semiotics in linguistics. How signs play an important role in studying the language?

Index: Semiotics- theory of signs and symbols
Semantics- study of sentences
Denotata- an actual object referred to by a linguistic expression
Divergent- move apart in different directions
Linguistics- scientific study of language

Introduction: Semiotics or semiology is the study of sign processes or signification and communication, signs and symbols. It is divided into the three following branches:

- **Semantics**: Relation between signs and the things to which they refer; their denotata
- **Syntaxics**: Relations among signs in formal structures
- **Pragmatics**: Relation between signs and their effects on people who use them

**Syntaxics** is the branch of semiotics that deals with the formal properties of signs and symbols. It deals with the rules that govern how words are combined to form phrases and sentences. According to Charles Morris “**semantics** deals with the relation of signs to their designate and the objects which they may or do denote” (Foundations of the theory of science, 1938); and, **pragmatics** deals with the biotic aspects of semiosis, that is, with all the psychological, biological and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs. The term, which was spelled semeiotics was first used in English by Henry Stubbes in a very precise sense to denote the branch of medical science relating to the interpretation of signs.

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’ (A Theory of Semiotics, 1979). 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’, (Nature of the linguistics sign, 1916) for the philosopher Charles Pierce ‘semiotic’ was the ‘formal doctrine of signs’ which was closely related to logic. For him, ‘a sign… is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity’. He declared that ‘every thought is a sign.’

**Literature review**: 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. 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 or gestures interpreted with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication.

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. 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.

In the early development of semiotics, the American philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce and later Charles William Morris, who developed a behaviourist semiotics. Leading modern semiotic theorists include Roland Barthes, Algirdas Greimas, Yuri Lotman, Christian Metz, Umberto Eco and Julia Kristeva. A number of linguists other than Saussure have worked within a semiotic framework, such as Louis Hjelmslev and Roman Jakobson. It is difficult to disentangle European semiotics from structuralism in its origins; major structuralists include not only Saussure but also Claude Levi Strauss in anthropology and Jacques Lacan 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 Levi 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.

Roland 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’. (The Rustle of Language, 1989)

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 Pierce. The work of Louis Hjelmslev, Roland Barthes, Claude Levi Strauss, Julia Kristeva, Christian Metz and Jean Baudrillard follows in the ‘semiological’ tradition of Saussure whilst that of Charles W Morris, Ivor A Richards, Charles K Ogden and Thomas Sebeok is in the ‘semiotic’ tradition of Pierce.

**Significance:** Saussure argued that ‘nothing is more appropriate than the study of languages to bring out the nature of the semiological problem’. (Nature of the Linguistics Sign, 1916) 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. Saussure referred to language as ‘the most important’ of all of the systems of signs. 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, place or events in the past, present or future, whether actual or possible, real or imaginary’. (Cultural Anthropology, 2006) Perhaps language is indeed fundamental: Emile Benveniste observed that ‘language is the interpreting system of all other systems, linguistic and non-linguistic’, whilst Claude Levi Strauss noted that ‘language is the semiotic system par excellence; it cannot but signify and exists only through signification’. (Structural analysis in linguistics and anthropology, 1963)

Semioticians commonly refer to films, television and radio programmes, advertising posters and so on as ‘texts’, and to ‘reading television’. 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.

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. 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.’ 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 ‘synchronously’ 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 or whether usage precedes and determines the system. The structuralist dichotomy between usage and system has been criticised for its rigidity, splitting process from product, subject from structure. The prioritisation of structure over usage fails to account for changes in structure.
Language is seldom treated as a static, closed and stable system which is inherited from preceding generations but as constantly changing. 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 transgresses 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 which constitutes 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 Pierce, is expanded by Eco to designate the process by which a culture produces signs or attributes meaning to signs. Although for Umberto 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 post-structuralist, 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 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.

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.

We make meanings through our creation and interpretation of ‘signs’. Indeed, according to Pierce, ‘we think only in signs’. 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 Pierce. 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’ (significant) – the form which the sign takes
- A ‘signified’ (signifies) – the concept it represents.

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’. If we take a linguist 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. 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’.

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 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’. 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 was focusing on the linguistic sign and he phono-centrically privileged the
spoken word, referring specifically to the sound image or sound pattern, seeing writing as a
separate, secondary, dependent but comparable sign system. Within the system of writing
signs, a signifier such as the written letter ‘t’ signified a sound in the primary sign system of
language. 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.
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. Like most contemporary commentators, Langer uses the term ‘symbol’ to refer to the linguistic sign: ‘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. Behavior towards conceptions is what words normally evoke; this is the typical process of thinking’. (Linguistic Purism in the Germanic languages, 2005) 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.’

Thus, for Saussure the linguistic sign is wholly immaterial- although he disliked referring to it as ‘abstract’. 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. Several reasons could be offered for this.

Saussure noted that his choice of the terms signifier and signified helped to indicate the distinction which separates each from the other. Saussure stressed that sound and thought were as inseparable as the two sides of a piece of paper. They were ‘intimately linked’ in the mind ‘by an associative link’- ‘each triggers the other’. Saussure presented these elements as wholly interdependent, neither pre-existing the other. Within the context of spoken language, a sign could not consist of sound without sense or of sense without sound. Some theorists have argued that ‘the signifier is always separated from the signified and has a real autonomy.’ 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’. 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’ (Archaeological Semiotics, 2010) to refer to the signifier and signified respectively. 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.

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. 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’. No sign makes sense on its own but only in relation to other signs. Both signifier and signified are purely relational entities. 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.
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’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.’ As John Sturrock points out, ‘a one-term language is impossibility because its single term could be applied to everything and differentiate nothing; it requires at least one other term to give it definition’. (Structuralism, 2003) 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.’

Saussure emphasized in particular negative, oppositional differences between signs, and the key relationships in structuralist analysis are binary oppositions. 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. 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 be 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. 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.’ (Nature of the Linguistics sign, 1916)

Although the signifier is treated by its users as ‘standing for’ the signified, Saussurean semioticians emphasise that there is no necessary, intrinsic, direct or inevitable relationship between the signifier and the signified. Saussure stressed the arbitrariness of the sign- more specifically the arbitrariness of the link between the signifier and the signified. 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- arbitrariness was identified later by Charles Hockett as a key ‘design feature’ of language. The feature of arbitrariness may indeed help to account for the extraordinary versatility of language. 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 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. 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.

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.’ 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’. ‘That
which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet’, as Shakespeare put it. (Romeo
and Juliet, 1882) 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. 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’.

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. 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. This suited Lacan’s purpose of emphasising
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’. 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’. 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.

The arbitrary aspect of signs does help to account for the scope for their interpretation. 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 and one signified may be referred to by many signifiers. Some commentators are critical of the stance that the relationship of the signifier to the signified, even in language, is always completely arbitrary. 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.

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’. Indeed, ‘it is because the linguistic sign is arbitrary that it knows no other law than that of tradition and because it is founded upon tradition that it can be arbitrary’. 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’. 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-although he later problematises the term. The ontological arbitrariness which it involves becomes invisible to us as we learn to accept it as ‘natural’.

**Conclusion:** 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.’ 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 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’.
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.’ Semiotics is a huge field and no treatment of it can claim to be comprehensive. This particular account focuses on Saussurean and post-Saussurean semiotics. Semiotics is far more than a method of analyzing texts in a variety of media.

References


