

# Semiotics: A Primer for Designers

## Overview

In its simplest form **Semiotics** can be described as the study of signs. Not signs as we normally think of signs but signs in a much broader context that includes anything capable of standing for or representing a separate meaning.

Paddy Whannel offered a slightly different definition, "Semiotics tells us things we already know in a language we will never understand." Paddy's definition is partly right. The language used by semioticians can often be overkill and indeed semiotics involves things we already know, at least on an intuitive level. Still, semiotics is important for designers as it allows us to understand the relationships between signs, what they stand for and the people who must interpret them-the people we design for.

The science of **Semiology** (from the Greek *semeîon*, 'sign') seeks to investigate and understand the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Semiotics represents a range of studies in art, literature, anthropology and the mass media rather than an independent academic discipline. The disciplines involved in semiotics include linguists, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, literary, aesthetic and media theorists, psychoanalysts and educationalists.

## Origins of Semiotics

Swiss linguist **Ferdinand de Saussure** is considered to be the founder of *linguistics* and *semiotics*. Saussure postulated the existence of this general science of signs, or Semiology, of which linguistics would form only one part. Semiology therefore aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not *languages*, at least *systems of signification*.

## Language of Language

**Structuralism** is an analytical method used by many semioticians. Structuralists seek to describe the overall organization of sign systems as languages. They search for the deep and complex structures underlying the surface features of phenomena.

**Social Semiotics** has taken the structuralist concern with the internal relations of parts within a self-contained system to the next level, seeking to explore the use of signs in specific social situations.

Semiotics and the branch of linguistics known as semantics have a common concern with the meaning of signs. Semantics focuses on what words mean while semiotics is concerned with how signs mean. Semiotics embraces semantics, along with the other traditional branches of linguistics as follows:

- **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.

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. 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*.

Saussure made what is now a famous distinction between language and speech. **Language** refers to the system of rules and conventions which is independent of, and pre-exists, individual users; **Speech** 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*.

The structuralist dichotomy between usage and system has been criticized for its stiffness, separating process from product, subject from structure. The prioritization of structure over usage fails to account for changes in structure. Valentin Voloshinov proposed a reversal of the Saussurean priority, language over speech: "The sign is part of organized social intercourse and cannot exist, as such, outside it, reverting to a mere physical artifact." 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. Voloshinov 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.' As it turns out, both are correct.

In other words, if take a very simple example--the word *live*. The fact that the 'L' is next to 'I' is next to "V" is next to "E" is important. Without those characters in that order we wouldn't have the word *live*. But it is also important that the word *live* is being viewed on July 3, 2003 and that the context is 'on a concert ticket', so that we may imply that the music is indeed being played *live*! The study of semiotics needs to account for the relationship of the symbols and the social context or context of use.

### Understanding Design as a Dialogue

In Semiotics for Beginners, Daniel Chandler sums up precisely why we as designers must be well versed in semiotics.

*"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."*

Semiotics teaches us as designers that our work has no meaning outside the complex set of factors that define it. These factors are not static but rather constantly changing because we are changing and creating them. The deeper our understanding and awareness of these factors, the better our control over the success of the work products we create.

Semiotics also helps us not to take reality for granted as something that simply exists. It helps us to understand that reality depends not only on the intentions we put into our work but also the interpretation of the people who experience our work. Meaning is not contained in the world or in books, computers or audio-visual media. It is not simply transmitted--it is actively created according to a complex interplay of systems and rules of which we are normally unaware.

Becoming aware of these systems and rules and learning to master them is the true power of visual communication and design.

## Terms & Definitions

**Semiotics, Semiosis, Semiology:** The noun form of the study of signs and signification, the process of attaching signifieds to signifiers, the study of signs and signifying systems.

### Signs

- **Symbol:** Stands in place of an object - flags, the crucifix, bathroom door signs.
- **Index:** Points to something - an indicator, such as words like "big" and arrows.
- **Icon:** A representation of an object that produces a mental image of the object represented. For example, a picture of a tree evokes the same mental image regardless of language. The picture of a tree conjures up "tree" in the brain.

**Signifier:** Is in some ways a substitute or stand-in. Words, both oral and written, are signifiers. The brain then exchanges the signifier for a working definition. The word "tree", for example, is a signifier. You can't make a log cabin out of the word "tree." You could, however, make a log cabin out of what the brain substitutes for the input "tree" which would be some type of signified.

**Signified:** What the signifier refers to (see signifier). There are two types of signifieds:

- **Connotative:** Points to the signified but has a deeper meaning. An example provided by Barthes is "Tree" = luxuriant green, shady, etc.
- **Denotative:** What the signified actually is, quite like a definition, but in brain language.

**Slippage:** When meaning moves due to a signifier calling on multiple signifieds. Also known as "skidding."

**Discourse:** Messages that serve a communicative function and are usually more complex than simple signs.

**Mythic Signs:** Messages that "go without saying" that reinforce the dominant values of their culture. These messages don't raise questions or inspire critical thinking.

**Denotative System:** A signifier, signified, and sign that together form a meaning.

**Second-Order Semiological System:** Connotative system that incorporate the sign of an initial system which becomes the signifier of the second system.

**Taxonomy:** A kind of structural analysis where features of a semiotic system are classified.

### *Other Terms*

**Exegesis:** Critical interpretation of a text. Interpretation of content only that searches for meaning connotatively.

**Hermeneutics:** Differs from exegesis in that it is less "practical." It is the text that postpones and even breaks with itself to shift meaning through slippage or skidding.

**Readerly Text:** (from the *Pleasure of the Text*) Discourse that stabilizes and meets the expectations of the reader.

**Writerly Text:** is a text that discomforts the reader and creates a subject position for him/her that is outside of his/her mores or cultural base.