

WAYS OF SEEING

Semiotic Research

The world is full of signs and symbols broadcast by brands and consumers in the mass media. Semiotics is a theory that can be used to uncover hidden meanings in the messages through 'Decoding'.

We all practice semiotics every day because we are always unconsciously interpreting the meaning of signs around us – from traffic lights, advertising billboards, the architecture of buildings and the design of food packaging.

And signs aren't only visual – they can be sounds or words too, such as the sound of an ambulance siren which is often heard before the vehicle is seen.


Seeing and interpreting (or decoding) these signs allows us to navigate our daily life and society as a whole.



KEY IDEAS

Semiotics is an important area of study and its theories can be applied to communication. One of the fathers of semiotics is Swiss-French, Fernand de Saussure, who in the late c1800 thought that 'communication systems' or 'ways of communicating', particularly verbal languages such as English or Welsh, were not there to simply classify things but often had different meanings. He stated that signs were made up of two elements: the signifier and the signified, which together equal a sign. Roland Barthes applied the Saussurian model of 'signifier + signified = sign' to Advertising. With many media channels broadcasting over 5,000 messages a day to the typical urban consumer, Barthes' studies and observations are very important when applied to messaging that is broadcast through mass media.

A 'signifier' can be a word, so if I said 'D.O.G.' then what is 'signified' in your mind is what you would see: 'an animal with 4 legs and a tail.' Then the sign would be what you would associate with a dog, it could be a specific type of dog such as a Poodle or Labrador. So together:

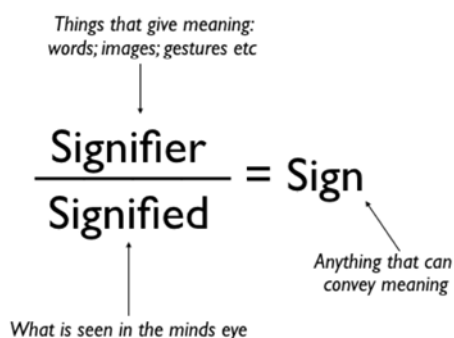
'signifier + signified = sign', which is 'dog +  = corgi'

The relationship between 'signifier' and 'signified' is called 'denotation' which is basically the literal meaning of a sign. The word "rose" literally signifies a kind of flower. So, a denotation is what the signifier actually is. A rose has many meanings. So, it will depend on where the rose is placed, or the situation it is seen in, and that will decide on how the rose 'as a sign' is interpreted. This is called 'connotation.' It is important to note that different signs are interpreted 'in people's heads' differently by different humans based on their background: culture, age, gender, education. Not everyone interprets a sign with the same meaning.

ACTIVITIES

1. How many different connotations can you think of for a simple rose?
2. Think of a word or image and fill out this formula:
'signifier + signified = sign'.
3. Search for an advertisement or article, in a magazine or newspaper, and look for an image or word that has at least 2 or more meanings.

Remember:



KEY READINGS

Chandler, D. (2019). *Semiotics*. Available from: bit.ly/2HkqM3f.

Cobley, P. and Litza J. (1997). *Semiotics for Beginners*. Cambridge: Icon.

Jones, C. (2012). *How and why future communications can increase precise messaging by appropriating advertising tools and techniques used to construct historic global brands*. Available from: bit.ly/2VgMyZm.



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