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CHAPTER 1

The Science of Signs

Everything we do sends messages about us in a variety of codes, semiologists contend. We are also on the receiving end of innumerable messages encoded in music, gestures, foods, rituals, books, movies, or advertisements. Yet we seldom realize that we have received such messages and would have trouble explaining the rules under which they operate.

Maya Pines, "How They Know What You Really Mean," *San Francisco Chronicle*,
Oct. 13, 1982

The basic unit of semiotics is the *sign*, defined conceptually as something that stands for something else, and, more technically, as a spoken or written word, a drawn figure, or a material object unified in the mind with a particular cultural concept. The sign is this unity of word-object, known as a *signifier* with a corresponding, culturally prescribed content or meaning, known as a *signified*. Thus our minds attach the word "dog," or the drawn figure of a "dog," as a signifier to the idea of a "dog," that is, a domesticated canine species possessing certain behavioral characteristics. If we came from a culture that did not possess dogs in daily life, however

unlikely, we would not know what the signifier “dog” means. . . . When dealing with objects that are signifiers of certain concepts, cultural meanings, or ideologies of belief, we can consider them not only as “signs,” but also as *sign vehicles*. Signifying objects carry meanings with them. . . .

Mark Gottdiener, *The Theming of America: Dreams, Visions, and Commercial Spaces*

The Greek root for semiology and for semiotics—the two terms used for the sciences that deal with signs—is *sēmeion*, which means sign. These sciences have a long history, dating back more than two thousand years. The “father of medicine,” Hippocrates (460–377 BC) was interested in signs and their relation to medical symptoms; philosophers and scholars after him, such as Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, and Locke, also dealt with signs in their writings.

It is generally held that modern semiotics (the term now in favor) started with the work of two authors: Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), a linguistics professor at the University of Geneva, who called his approach “semiology,” and Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914), a philosopher at Harvard University, who called his science “semiotics.”

Jonathan Culler, a biographer of Saussure, explains the importance of semiotics in his book *Ferdinand de Saussure* (1976:4):

The notion that linguistics might be useful in studying other cultural phenomena is based on two fundamental insights: first, that social and cultural phenomena are not simply material objects or events but objects and events with meaning, and hence signs; and second, that they do not have essence but are defined by a network of relations.

These ideas have been enormously influential, and Saussure’s book is now considered one of the most important works of the

twentieth century. In this chapter I will provide an introduction to some of the more important concepts of semiotics so that you will be able to understand how semioticians arrive at their insights. For those interested in pursuing the subject further, I have listed a number of books in the bibliography on the subject. There are some fifty books on the subject available at Amazon.com and 560,000 websites found on Google that deal with semiotics.

The Semiotic Theories of Saussure and Peirce: An Overview

Saussure’s book, *Course in General Linguistics*, published posthumously in 1915, is made of notes from his students that were collected and put together by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehayé. He offered an important insight into the roles of signs in society in his *Course in General Linguistics* when he wrote (1966:16):

Language is a system of signs that expresses ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc. But it is the most important of these systems.

A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it *semiology* (from Greek *sēmeion* “sign”). Semiology would show what constitutes a sign, what laws govern them.

For Saussure signs have two parts: a sound-image or *signifier* and a concept or *signified*; it is crucially important to understand that the relation between the *signifier* and *signified* is not natural but arbitrary and based on convention. This means that the meaning of signs can change over time. According to him, signs can be studied two ways: synchronically, at a given



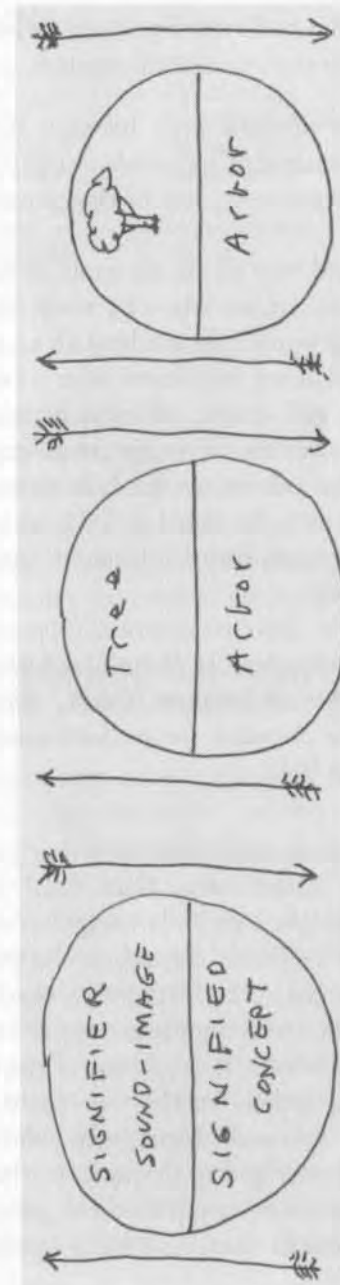
Ferdinand de Saussure

point in time, and diachronically, as they develop or evolve over time.

Saussure offered an important insight about concepts, based on the nature of language. Concepts, he explained, are defined differentially; that is, in terms of what they aren't. He explained that it is the relative position of signs in a statement that determines their meaning, not their intrinsic value. No sign, then, has meaning by itself, and its meaning is always a function of its relationship with other signs. What this means is that when we are dealing with concepts, because of the nature of language we tend to think in terms of polar oppositions such as cheap and expensive, rich and poor, happy and sad. Words are signs, and the meaning of a word depends upon the context in which it is found.

As Jonathan Culler explains in his book *Ferdinand de Saussure: Revised Edition* (1986:34):

The fact that these concepts, or signifieds, are arbitrary divisions of a continuum means that they are not autonomous entities, each of which is defined by some kind of essence.



They are members of a system and are defined by their relations to the other members of that system.

So there aren't any intrinsic links between signifiers and signifieds, and the meaning of signifieds or concepts is explained negatively and tied to their place in the system in which they are found.

Saussure explained why the mind tends to function in terms of contrasts and oppositions when he wrote that concepts are purely differential. It sounds like double-talk to say this, but what Saussure argues is that we only know what a concept means by knowing what it doesn't mean, and more particularly, by knowing its opposite. It is because of the nature of language that when it comes to concepts, our minds think in terms of oppositions. These oppositions have to be related or tied to something they have in common; for example, sexual orientation (gay or straight) or wealth (rich and poor).

That's why writers often use contrasts (oppositions) and comparisons to help clarify ideas. In Robert Jay Lifton's essay, "Who Is More Dry? Heroes of Japanese Youth," found in his book *History and Human Survival*, we see how contrasts and comparisons work (1974:104):

In postwar Japan, especially among young people, it is good to be "dry" (or *durai*) rather than "wet" (or *wetto*). This means—in the original youth language, as expanded by the mass media—to be direct, logical, to the point, pragmatic, casual, self-interested, rather than polite, evasive, sentimental, nostalgic, dedicated to romantic causes, or bound by obligation in human relations; to break out of the world of cherry blossoms, haiku, and moon-viewing into a modern era of bright sunlight, jazz, and Hemingway (who may be said to have been the literary god of dryness). Intellectual youth, of course, disdain these oversimplified categories. But they too have made the words *durai* and *wetto* (typical examples of

Durai (Dry)	Wetto (Wet)
Young	Old
Direct	Evasive
Logical	Romantic causes
To the point	Polite
Pragmatic	Sentimental
Self-interested	Bound by obligations
Sunlight	Moon viewing
Hemingway	Haiku

Figure 1.1 Wet and Dry in Japan

postwar Japanized English) part of their everyday vocabulary, and they find dry objects of admiration in an interesting place: in American films about cowboys and gunmen.

Lifton analyzes the concept of "dryness" in Japanese culture and helps readers understand it by contrasting its opposite, "wetness."

In figure 1.1, which is based upon the material in the quotation above, we can elicit the oppositions in Lifton's text more clearly.

Saussure suggests that it is the nature of language that makes us use contrasts and comparisons, and this passage from Lifton is based on a set of oppositions he finds in Japanese culture. It is often a good idea to use charts and tables in situations where you wish to deal with complicated ideas and relationships. Quoting the text from Lifton and also offering the chart enables readers to Lifton's points see more clearly.

Some Contemporary Semiotic Theorists

Umberto Eco, an Italian semiotician and novelist and a professor of semiotics at the University of Bologna, explains in his book *A Theory of Semiotics* that signs are anything that can be used to substitute for something else. That something else doesn't have to exist or be somewhere, he adds, which means that semiotics studies anything that can be used to lie, for if something cannot be used to lie, Eco writes, it can't be used to tell the truth or communicate anything.

As Eco writes in *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976:7):

Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands for it. Thus semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth; it cannot in fact be used "to tell" at all. I think that the definition of a "theory of the lie" should be taken as a pretty comprehensive program for a general semiotics.

We may say that signs have a double valence and people can and often do lie with signs; for example, women and men with brown or black hair who dye their hair blonde or women and men who cross-dress. Eco would say that because we can “lie” with signs, we can use signs to find truths.

Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980) is not generally considered a semiotician but I would argue that his book *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, written in 1951, is a semiotically informed study of American commercial culture, even though he didn’t use the term “semiotics” in it. He writes in his preface that he wanted “to apply the method of art analysis to the critical evaluation of society” (1951:vi). In *The Mechanical Bride*, McLuhan discusses comic strips, the front pages of newspapers, and a number of advertisements for such products as RCA radios, GE lamps, Clark Grave Vaults, Thor Automatic Gladirons, Life Savers, the Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company, and Squibb Cod Liver Oil. He deconstructs these advertisements and shows how advertisers sell products and services by manipulating people and capitalizing upon their basic values.

The French semiologist Roland Barthes (1915–1980) was one of the most important contemporary semioticians of consumer culture. His book, *Mythologies*, published in French in 1957 and in English in 1972, offered a semiotically informed dissection of French media and commercial culture. As he explained in the preface to the 1970 edition (1972:9),

I had just read Saussure and as a result acquired the conviction that by treating “collective representations” as sign-systems, one might...account *in detail* for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature.

In *Mythologies*, Barthes offered a semiological/semiotic analysis of topics such as margarine, toys, soap powders and detergents,

milk, wine, plastic, and the new Citroen. What Barthes did was to show how semiotics, in combination with Marxist theory, could explain how these products were being presented to the French public and the different mystifications and hidden ideologies found in these presentations. In the second half of the book he dealt with myth, including his discussion of myth as a semiological system. *Mythologies* is considered one of the classic examples of the semiotic analyses of consumer cultures. Barthes wrote another book, *Empire of Signs*, in which he used semiotics to analyze certain aspects of Japanese culture that interested him, and wrote many other books on a variety of subjects using semiotic theory.

An American semiotician, Marshall Blonsky, titled his book *American Mythologies*, which suggests that his book would do for American culture what Barthes’ *Mythologies* did for France.



Roland Barthes

Blonsky's book is highly self-reflexive and autobiographical, but it does deal with certain aspects of consumer culture, such as clothing, food, automobiles, and advertising.

Symbols

Symbols are a complicated matter. Saussure believed that symbols are never completely arbitrary, suggesting that there is usually some kind of quasi-arbitrary or rudimentary bond between symbolic signifiers and what they signify. He uses the example of a symbol of justice, a pair of scales, and says this symbol cannot be replaced by any symbol, such as a chariot, and still convey its meaning. A more popular symbol of justice involves a blind goddess holding scales to signify impartiality. The problem is we have to learn to associate the scales with justice. Just seeing a set of scales or a blind goddess with scales does not automatically make us think of justice.

Semiotically speaking, symbols are things with important historical and cultural meanings, such as the cross for Christians, the Star of David for Jews, and the American flag for Americans. These symbols are tied to history and play important roles in every society. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz discussed symbols in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973:45):

Thinking consists not of "happenings in the head" (though happenings there and elsewhere are necessary for it to occur) but of a traffic in what have been called, by G. H. Mead and others—significant symbols—words for the most part but also gestures, drawings, musical sounds, mechanical devices like clocks, or natural objects like jewels—anything, in fact, that is disengaged from its mere actuality and used to impose meaning upon experience. From the point of view of any particular individual, such symbols are largely given. He finds them already current in the community in which is he

is born and they remain, with some additions, subtractions, and partial alterations he may or may not have had a hand in, in circulation when he dies.

Geertz argued that we learn the meaning of symbols as we grow up in a certain culture or subculture and that the symbol's importance is enhanced by historical events and other happenings in that culture. Symbols help us make sense of things and play an important role in shaping our behavior in many areas: religion (the cross), nationalism (the flag), status (the kind of car we drive).

Denotation and Connotation

Semiotic theorists are interested in the difference between denotation and connotation. Denotation involves a literal and detailed description of the meaning of a word or the measurements of objects. Connotation, on the other hand, involves the cultural meanings and myths connected to words and to things. As Rosalind Coward and John Ellis explain in their book *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject* (1977:28):

The mechanism of myth is the way that habitual representations tangle themselves up in everyday objects and practices so that these ideological meanings come to seem natural, the common-sense reality of that object or practice. There are therefore two systems of meaning: the denotative and the connotative, the "object language" (the film, the toy, the meal, the car inasmuch as they signify) and the myth which attaches itself to it, which takes advantage of the form of this denotative language to insinuate itself.

One of the most important insights semioticians offer us is that ideologies seek to present themselves and their theories as natural

rather than historical, which means that since they are natural, and part of the scheme of things, they cannot be changed. If they were created by people they could be changed by them, as conditions changed.

Let us consider an important American cultural artifact—the Barbie doll. From a denotation perspective, a Barbie doll is 11.5 inches tall, and has the following measurements: 5.25 inches by 3 inches by 4 inches. It was invented in 1959. This material is all factual and is denotation. The connotations of Barbie dolls are more complicated, for here we are dealing with what these dolls reflect about American culture and society and their symbolic and mythic significance. Sociologist Charles Winick, in his book *Desexualization in American Life*, provides a psychological and cultural interpretation of Barbie dolls and other similar dolls. He suggests that Barbie dolls reflect a basic change in manner in which the United States (and other countries where Barbie dolls are popular) deal with the way children are socialized. Little girls now learn how to become sexually attractive and practice having romantic relations with boys instead of rehearsing for motherhood by playing with baby dolls. They also learn how to be consumers. If Winick is right, Barbie dolls have changed the way little girls develop and have profoundly affected relationships, when the girls grow up, between men and women.

Metaphor and Metonymy

Technically speaking, metaphors are figures of language that communicate by analogy and use some form of the verb “to be”; that is, we understand what something is by comparing it to something else that is similar to it in certain respects. Thus, if we say “my love is a rose,” we are comparing our loved one to a beautiful flower, a rose. There is a weaker form of metaphor called a simile, which uses “like” or “as” in its comparison.

Saying “my love is like a rose” is a simile, and isn’t as strong a comparison.

Metaphor: My love is a rose

Simile: My love is like a rose

Metaphors, it turns out, are an important component of our thinking. As linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980:3):

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as a characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphoric in nature. The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, what we experience and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.

Metaphors, then, play an important role in determining the way we perceive the world and act in it because our concepts govern the way we behave.

We use metaphors because it is through analogies, including comparisons and contrasts, that we make sense of the world. If you are writing about something and can use a metaphor to help

describe or explain it, you will be helping your readers by giving them an orientation that will help them better understand what you've written. Metaphors all have implications or what we might describe as "hidden imperatives" that come with them, even though we may not be aware of them.

For example, take the metaphor "Love is a game." That notion carries a number of implications about games that apply to love:

People cheat at games.
 People get tired of playing games and they eventually end.
 Games are not serious but diversions.
 Games have rules.

You can see that if you accept the metaphor "Love is a game" as true, the logical implications of that notion are troubling.

In many cases, we use metaphors to provide information about something we don't know about. If a friend fixes you up with a blind date and you ask the friend what the woman he's fixed you up with looks like, he can provide some information to you by saying, "She looks a lot like Marilyn Monroe" or some other movie star or celebrity or person you know. If you want to know what goat meat tastes like, you can ask someone who has eaten goat and if he or she says "it tastes a lot like chicken," you have a pretty good idea of what goat meat tastes like.

The other important kind of figurative language is metonymy, which communicates by association. As we grow up and become imprinted with culture codes, we learn all kinds of associations, which means that metonymy can rely on information we already have in our heads (i.e., conventional associations) to convey information. For example, we know that people who own Rolls Royce automobiles are very rich, which means that when advertisers want to suggest a product is very upscale and high end, they often use Rolls Royces or other expensive automobiles to help people make the connections. I call this phenomenon "gilt by association."

There is a weaker form of metonymy called synecdoche, which uses a part to stand for a whole. For example, using the Pentagon to stand for the U.S. military or the American flag to stand for the United States of America is metonymic. Lakoff and Johnson explain the differences between metaphor and metonymy in *Metaphors We Live By* as follows (1980:36):

Metaphor and metonymy are different *kinds* of processes. Metaphor is principally a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another, and its primary function is understanding. Metonymy, on the other hand, has primarily a referential function, that is, allows us to use one entity to *stand for* another. But metonymy is not merely a referential device. It also serves the function of providing understanding.

We can see, then, that metaphor and metonymy are very important devices for helping us understand relationships among things, which means they also play an important role in shaping our thinking.

Because they provide shortcuts to generating information, advertisers use metaphor and metonymy a great deal. Metaphor allows advertisers to convey information very quickly, and metonymy allows advertisers to use information stored in our heads, in the form of codes, for their particular purposes. These kinds of figurative language can also be expressed in images in advertisements and commercials, which means they often have a powerful emotional impact on us.

Tony Schwartz, a media theorist, has argued that the standard "transportation" theory of media is inadequate and suggests a different one, which he calls the "responsive chord" theory. He writes in his book *Media: The Second God* (1983:24–25):

Many of our experiences with electronic media are coded and stored in the same way they are perceived. Since they do not undergo a symbolic transformation, the original experience is more directly available to us when it is recalled.

Also, since the experience is not stored in a symbolic form, it cannot be retrieved by symbolic cues. It must be evoked by a stimulus that is coded the same way as the stored information is coded.

The critical task is to design our package of stimuli so that it resonates with information already stored within an individual and thereby induces the desired learning or behavioral effect. Resonance takes place when the stimuli put into our communication evoke *meaning* in a listener or viewer.

What this means is that advertisers can use the information stored in our heads for their purposes and don't have to convey information to us, just strike a chord that resonates with what we already know. It is a much quicker and much more effective process. As I suggested earlier, since everyone knows that Rolls Royces are very expensive cars, advertisers can use associations with these automobiles if they want to suggest that their product is "high quality" and the kind of product used by wealthy people who are "in the know" about what products are good. If an advertiser used a very expensive sports car like a Ferrari, it would convey different associations in the minds of audiences of advertisements than a Rolls Royce does.

Language and Speech

We must distinguish between language, which is a social institution that has rules about how words are to be used (found in dictionaries), and speech, which is the way individuals use language. Saussure explained the differences between language and speech in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1966:14):

Language is a well-defined object in the heterogeneous mass of speech facts. It can be localized in the limited segment of the speaking-circuit where an auditory image becomes associated with a concept. It is the social side of speech,

outside the individual who can never create or modify it by himself; it exists only by virtue of a sort of contract signed by the members of the community. Moreover, the individual must always serve an apprenticeship in order to learn the functioning of a language; a child assimilates it only gradually.

We may say, then, that language is a social institution that expresses ideas by using signs, whose meanings are based on convention. As we grow up in any society, we learn and are taught the codes and rules that govern language use. If we do not abide by these rules, we will not speak or write the language correctly. But speech affects language, which explains why dictionaries are always being revised, to deal with new words that come into being through speech. Dictionaries, we must remember, record how language is used conventionally.

We can see the difference between language and speech in the world of fashion. Fashion—by which I mean the clothes we wear—is the equivalent of speech and represents all the clothes available to us, just as language represents all the words available to us, as found in dictionaries. What we choose to wear is the equivalent of speech. We may think of what we wear each day as the equivalent of a sentence, and of various rules about what goes with what as analogous to fashion codes.

The food we eat can also be considered the equivalent of speech and all the food that is available as the equivalent of language. There are certain codes we learn, as we grow up in various nationalities, ethnic groups, religious groups, and subcultures that involve the way we think about food. Observant Jews, for example, only eat Kosher beef and do not eat pork, shrimp, or lobster. They also do not have milk and meat at the same time, due to a prohibition against doing so in the Bible. Muslims do not eat pork due to a prohibition against it in their religious texts. So, gastronomically speaking, we find that we are at the Tower of Babel level and that people have many different kinds of speech reflected in their food choices, and these are based on codes we all learn as we grow up.

Language	Speech
Social institution	Personal choices
All foods available	What an individual eats
Dialects	Ethnic and national cuisines
Sentence	Each day's meals
Grammar	Culinary codes
Dictionaries	Cookbooks

Figure 1.2 Language and Speech as They Relate to Food

We can see the relationships between language and speech as they relate to food figure 1.2.

What is interesting to notice is that in many families nowadays, the meals that are served don't change that much from week to week, and people eat a rather limited number of foods on a weekly basis. We tend to eat the same things over and over again, which is analogous, when it comes to language, to saying the same things over and over again. At the same time, most families have a number of cookbooks, which contain thousands of recipes but only a few of which tend to be used. Many people, when they want to sample different foods, do so by going to ethnic restaurants, which explains why there are so many Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, Italian, and French restaurants in most cities and, in my case, within ten miles of where I live.

Saussure said that in language there are only differences. The same applies to foods, and for many people it is different national and ethnic cuisines that they desire when they go to restaurants. Unless there are unusual reasons, why should a family go out to eat if they're going to get the same food they have at home?

In his book *The Culture Code*, Clotaire Rapaille, who is from France, discusses the difference between American and French attitudes toward cheese. He writes (2006:25):

The French Code for cheese is ALIVE. This makes perfect sense when one considers how the French choose and

store cheese. They go to a cheese shop and poke and prod the cheeses, smelling them to learn their ages. When they choose one they take it home and store it at room temperature in a cloche... The American code for cheese is DEAD. Again, this makes sense in context. Americans "kill" their cheese through pasteurization (unpasteurized cheeses are not allowed into this country), select hunks of cheese that have been prewrapped—mummified if you will—in plastic (like body bags), and store it, still wrapped airtight, in a morgue also known as a refrigerator.

This is not quite correct, for in gourmet stores and upscale markets, one can buy cheeses from America and all over the world that are "alive" and not wrapped in plastic, but most Americans don't buy these cheeses and instead store cheese in refrigerators. So culture codes tell us how to think about cheese and many other foods.

Codes

I have already mentioned codes and dealt with them in passing, but the subject demands more attention. What we call culture can be seen as a collection of codes that tell us what to eat, how to dress, and how to relate to others. As Rapaille mentioned above, notes, most of these codes are imprinted on children as they grow up in a family in a region of some country. Some codes are national, others are regional, and others stem from smaller entities such as parts of a city or a family's socioeconomic, ethnic, and religious identity.

Rapaille adds that "Once an imprint occurs, it strongly conditions our thought processes and shapes our future actions. Each imprint helps make us more of who we are. The combination of imprints defines us" (2006:6). Because we are exposed to codes at an early age—the process takes place until we are seven years old, Rapaille suggests—and either pick them up by osmosis or

are learn them by observation, we internalize them and thus are unaware of the role they play in our lives. They seem to be a natural part of our experience, even though they are, in fact, socially constructed. If the codes we learn when we are children do, in fact, shape our behavior in profound ways, we can understand Freud's suggestion that "the child is the father of the man." He meant it psychologically, but we can also suggest it applies to our national cultures.

Rapaille mentions the goal he set for himself as a decoder of cultures. He writes (2006:9,10):

If I could get to the source of these imprints—if I could somehow "decode" elements of culture to discover the emotions and meanings attached to them—I would learn a great deal about human behavior and how it varies across the planet. This set me on the course of my life's work. I went off in search of the Codes hidden within the unconscious of every culture.

Learning to understand culture codes, then, becomes a means of understanding human behavior, keeping in mind, Rapaille cautions, that although all human beings share certain needs, people in different countries are quite different, since they all have different imprintings and culture codes. There are, Rapaille suggests, three different kind of unconscious: the Freudian individual unconscious, the Jungian collective unconscious, and a cultural (by which he means national) unconscious, and they all shape our behavior. It is the national or cultural codes that interest Rapaille most, since his work involved figuring out how to market products to people in different countries.

Daniel Chandler, a British semiotician, deals with codes in his book *Semiotics: The Basics*. As he explains (2002:147–148):

Since the meaning of a sign depends on the code within which it is situated, codes provide a framework within which

signs make sense. Indeed, we cannot grant something the status of a sign if it does not function within a code... The conventions of codes represent a social dimension in semiotics: a code is a set of practices familiar to users of the medium operating with a broad cultural framework. Indeed, as Stuart Hall puts it, "there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code..." Society itself depends on the existence of such signifying systems. When studying cultural practices, semioticians treat as signs any objects or actions which have meaning to the members of a cultural group, seeking to identify the rules or conventions of the codes which underlie the production of meaning within that culture.

This means that one of the main purposes of semiotics is to identify the hidden codes that shape our beliefs and the way we find meaning in the world. One of the most important things that semioticians do is to "decode" various aspects of a culture, whether it be signs found in advertisements, rituals, food practices, or fashion. Codes shape our behavior as individuals and as members of groups, societies, nations, and cultures.

Chandler suggests that there are three basic kinds of codes: social codes (involving language, our bodies, commodities we use, and our behavior), textual codes (involving scientific practices, aesthetics, genres, and the mass media), and interpretive codes (involving perception, aesthetics, and ideologies). In figure 1.3, drawn from his writing, we find correlations between his three kinds of codes and the kinds of knowledge required of semioticians.

The important thing to recognize about codes is that they pervade our lives; you can think of them as culturally specific rule books that we have internalized that tell us how to make sense of the world and how to behave in all the different situations in which we find ourselves. Codes affect everything from how we think about cheese, what we wear, what we find suitable for eating, how we relate to others, how we raise children, what gestures

Kind of Code	Knowledge Required
Social codes:	The world
Textual codes	Media and genres
Interpretive codes	The relationship between social and textual codes

Figure 1.3 Chandler on Kinds of Codes

we use, and how we look at other people, to how we are to be buried after we die.

As Chandler explains (2002:154):

Within a culture, social differentiation is “over-determined” by a multitude of social codes. We communicate our social identities through the work we do, the way we talk, the clothes we wear, our hairstyles, our eating habits, our domestic environments and possessions, our use of leisure time, our modes of traveling and so on. Language is a key marker of social identity.

He mentions the work of the British sociologist Basil Bernstein, whose research suggested that there are differences between the way children in the working classes and middle classes speak in Britain. He called the working-class use of language a “restricted” code and the middle-class use of language an “elaborated” code.

We can see the difference between these two codes in figure 1.4, taken from Bernstein’s writings but constructed by myself.

These codes are important because the codes the children learned played an important role in their future development and adult life. Bernstein’s work suggests that the way we use language shapes our perception of the world, so in this context too, the codes functioned as a matrix through which the ideas and thoughts of the children were filtered. We also know that the accents people have give us impressions about them, and the way we think about a person from Britain who

Restricted Code	Elaborated Code
Working-class people	Middle-class people
Grammatically simple	Grammatically complex
Simple sentence structure	Complex sentence structure
Uniform vocabulary	Varied vocabulary
Few adjectives, adverbs	Many adjectives, adverbs
Low level of conceptualization	High level of conceptualization
Few qualifications used	Many qualifications used
Users unaware of code	Users aware of code

Figure 1.4 Basil Bernstein on Restricted and Elaborated Codes

uses the “received pronunciation” (found in royalty and the upper classes) usually differs considerably from someone with a Cockney accent.

Acura: An Example of Applied Semiotic Analysis

To see how semiotic codes affect consumer culture, let’s take the case of the Acura motor car. Marcel Danesi, a prominent Canadian semiotician, discusses the naming of the Acura in his book *Understanding Media Semiotics*. He writes (2002:43):

A common strategy of the mass media is to build “coded meanings” into representations—i.e. to fashion something on the basis of some hidden code or codes. Take, as an example, the name “Acura” given to a Japanese automobile first built in the 1990s. This name has been fashioned, clearly, to be culturally ambiguous—it is imitative of both the structure of some Japanese words (such as *tempura*) and of most Italian words, which end typically in a vowel. This inbuilt ambiguity generates a system of connotations that are based on two sets of perceptions: (1) the popular view that Japanese technology and manufacturing is *accurate* and advanced; and (2) the common view of Italian as a language of “love,” “poetry,” and “song,” and of Italians generally as

“artistic,” “romantic,” and “friendly.” These are the “coded meanings” that are built into the name “Acura.” Like a recipe, they provide “hidden directions” for interpreting the name at a connotative level.

It would be interesting to know what the manufacturers of the automobile thought when they decided to name their car “Acura.” Often products are named by companies that are paid huge amounts of money to think up names for automobiles and other products. I think it is a bit of a stretch to suggest that people who are thinking of buying an upscale car like the Acura resonate with the notion of accuracy in a car or that they connect it with Italian culture, since it ends in an “a.” A lot of Japanese words also end with an “a” (such as “tempura”), and people purchasing the Acura generally know that it is manufactured by the Honda Motor Company and competes with other luxury automobiles such as the Toyota Lexus and various cars made by BMW and Mercedes Benz. But Danesi is correct in calling attention to the fact that a great deal of thinking goes into naming products and creating brands, and some people might see a connection between the name Acura and the word “accurate.” We must also keep in mind, as I’ve pointed out a number of times in this discussion, that many of these processes operate at the unconscious level.

No Sign as a Sign

This process involves our not getting signs when we expect them, so no sign then becomes a sign. For example, if we are walking and come across someone we know and say “hello,” but the person we greeted doesn’t respond, that lack of response is a sign. We have to decide what it means. This process is important when we are dealing with expectations we have or with things that should happen but don’t. Another example would be answering your phone, saying “hello,” and not getting a response from anyone.

There is a famous Sherlock Holmes case that was solved because a dog didn’t bark. A killer entered the grounds of an estate to murder someone but the dog guarding it didn’t bark, which Holmes interpreted to mean that the dog knew the person and thus didn’t bark.

We are led to conclude, then, that in some cases no sign functions as a sign—though we are often at a loss to interpret what the “no sign” response means. If we answer a phone and nobody responds, we tend to assume the person calling dialed the wrong number, but it could be a criminal planning to rob our house calling to see whether anyone is home or someone checking up on us for one reason or another. Not getting a “sign” when we expect one is generally disturbing. In our everyday interactions, not doing something expected of you is an example of “passive-aggressive” behavior, a form of aggression that involves not doing something you have been asked to do or are expected to do.

Signs within Signs

It is often the case that small signs are part of a larger sign system or collection of signs. Take the advertisement for Fidji perfume. In that advertisement, we find a number of important signs—what I call signemes. There is a snake coiled around a woman’s neck, which from a Freudian perspective is a phallic symbol, and there is an orchid in the ear of the woman, flowers being symbols of women’s genitals. And there are the words in the French language, which commonly is seen as being a signifier of sophistication. Most print advertisements contain a number of what I call signemes—small signs that are part of the larger sign system. It’s interesting to know that in some countries this advertisement was run without the snake around the woman’s neck.

Signs That Lie

I have already mentioned Umberto Eco’s notion that semiotics is the science that deals with our ability to lie. He says that if

something cannot be used to lie, it cannot be used to tell the truth. In our daily interactions, we often encounter people who are “lying” with signs, though in most cases we are unaware that this is occurring. If we see a blonde person with brown roots showing, we can be pretty confident that the “blonde” person is really a brunette. It has become stylish lately, for a reason that escapes me, for people to show the roots of their hair. It may be a way for “blondes” to acknowledge that they are playing with their identities by dyeing their hair. It is also possible to wear a wig and seem to be a blonde or redhead or have whatever hair color one wants.

Impersonators are people who appropriate someone else's identity by using that person's signs, as best they can. There are comedians who impersonate famous politicians and others, but their impersonations are overtly “lying” with signs, and the humor comes from the fact that a person seems so much like the person being impersonated. The most famous impersonation in recent years involve Tina Fey impersonating Sarah Palin, the Republican candidate for vice president. Fey brilliantly appropriated Palin's hairstyle, brand of eyeglasses, and way of talking as a means of ridiculing Palin. She often quoted Palin word for word, which added to the humor.