

### 3 COMMUNICATION, MEANING, AND SIGNS

The models we have considered so far have all, in varying degrees, emphasized the *process* of communication. They assume basically that communication is the transfer of a message from A to B. Consequently, their main concerns are with medium, channel, transmitter, receiver, noise, and feedback, for these are all terms relating to this process of sending a message. We now turn our attention to a radically different approach to the study of communication. Here the emphasis is not so much on communication as a process, but on communication as the generation of meaning. When I communicate with you, you understand, more or less accurately, what my message means. For communication to take place I have to create a message out of signs. This message stimulates you to create a meaning for yourself that relates in some way to the meaning that I generated in my message in the first place. The more we share the same codes, the more we use the same sign systems, the closer our two 'meanings' of the message will approximate to each other.

This places a different emphasis on the study of communication, and we will have to familiarize ourselves with a new set of terms. These are terms like sign, signification, icons, index, denote, connote – all terms which refer to various ways of creating meaning. So these models will differ from the ones just discussed in that they are not linear: they do not contain arrows indicating the flow of the message. They are *structural* models, and any arrows indicate *relationships* between elements in this creation of meaning. These models do not assume a series of steps or stages through which a message passes: rather they concentrate on analysing a structured set of relationships which enable a message to signify something; in other words, they concentrate on what it is that makes marks on paper or sounds in the air into a *message*.

**Semiotics**

At the centre of this concern is the sign. The study of signs and the way they work is called semiotics or semiology, and this will provide the alternative focus in this book. Semiotics, as we will call it, has three main areas of study:

1. The sign itself. This consists of the study of different varieties of signs, of the different ways they have of conveying meaning, and of the way they relate to the people who use them. For signs are human constructs and can only be understood in terms of the uses people put them to.
2. The codes or systems into which signs are organized. This study covers the ways that a variety of codes have developed in order to meet the needs of a society or culture, or to exploit the channels of communication available for their transmission.
3. The culture within which these codes and signs operate. This in turn is dependent upon the use of these codes and signs for its own existence and form.

Semiotics, then, focuses its attention primarily on the text. The linear, process models give the text no more attention than any other stage in the process: indeed, some of them pass it over almost without comment. This is one major difference between the two approaches. The other is the status of the receiver. In semiotics, the receiver, or reader, is seen as playing a more active role than in most of the process models (Gerbner's is an exception). Semiotics prefers the term 'reader' (even of a photograph of a painting) to 'receiver' because it implies both a greater degree of activity and also that reading is something we learn to do; it is thus determined by the cultural experience of the reader. The reader helps to create the meaning of the text by bringing to it his or her experience, attitudes, and emotions.

In this chapter I wish to start by looking at some of the main approaches to this complex question of meaning. I shall then go on to consider the role played by signs in generating this meaning, and to categorize signs into different types according to their different ways of performing this function.

**Signs and meaning***Basic concepts*

All the models of meaning share a broadly similar form. Each is concerned with three elements which must be involved in some way or other in any study of meaning. These are: (1) the sign, (2) that to which it refers, and (3) the users of the sign.

A sign is something physical, perceivable by our senses; it refers to something other than itself; and it depends upon a recognition by its users that it *is* a sign. Take our earlier example: pulling my earlobe as a sign to an auctioneer. In this case the sign refers to my bid, and this is recognized as such by both the auctioneer and myself. Meaning is conveyed from me to the auctioneer: communication has taken place.

In this chapter we shall study the two most influential models of meaning. The first is that of the philosopher and logician C. S. Peirce (we will also look at the variant of Ogden and Richards), and the second is that of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.

Peirce (and Ogden and Richards) see the sign, that to which it refers, and its users as the three points of a triangle. Each is closely related to the other two, and can be understood only in terms of the others. Saussure takes a slightly different line. He says that the sign consists of its physical form plus an associated mental concept, and that this concept is in its turn an apprehension of external reality. The sign relates to reality only through the concepts of the people who use it.

Thus the word CAR (marks on paper or sounds in air) has a mental concept attached to it. Mine will be broadly the same as yours, though there may be some individual differences. This shared concept then relates to a class of objects in reality. This is so straightforward as to seem obvious, but there can be problems. My wife and I, for example, frequently argue over whether something is blue or green. We share the same language, we are looking at the same piece of external reality: the difference lies in the concepts of blueness or greenness that link our words to that reality.

*Further implications**C. S. Peirce*

Peirce (1931-58) and Ogden and Richards (1923) arrived at very similar models of how signs signify. Both identified a triangular relationship

between the sign, the user, and external reality as a necessary model for studying meaning. Peirce, who is commonly regarded as the founder of the American tradition of semiotics, explained his model simply:

A sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. (In Zeman, 1977)

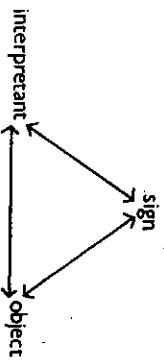


Figure 12 Peirce's elements of meaning

Peirce's three terms can be modelled as in figure 12. The double-ended arrows emphasize that each term can be understood only in relation to the others. A *sign* refers to something other than itself — the *object*, and is understood by somebody: that is, it has an effect in the mind of the user — the *interpretant*. We must realize that the interpretant is not the user of the sign, but what Peirce calls elsewhere 'the proper signficare effect': that is, it is a mental concept produced both by the sign and by the user's experience of the object. The interpretant of the word (sign) SCHOOL in any one context will be the result of the user's experience of that word (*s/he* would not apply it to a technical college), and of his or her experience of institutions called 'schools', the object. Thus it is not fixed, defined by a dictionary, but may vary within limits according to the experience of the user. The limits are set by social convention (in this case the conventions of the English language); the variation within them allows for the social and psychological differences between the users.

One additional difference between the semiotic and the process models is relevant here. This is that the semiotic models make no distinction between encoder and decoder. The interpretant is the mental concept of the user of the sign, whether this user be speaker or listener, writer or reader, painter or viewer. Decoding is as active and creative as encoding.

### Ogden and Richards (1923)

Ogden and Richards were British workers in this area who corresponded regularly with Peirce. They derived a very similar triangular model of meaning. Their referent corresponds closely to Peirce's object, their reference to his interpretant, and their symbol to his sign. In their model, referent and reference are directly connected; so too are symbol and reference. But the connection between symbol and referent is indirect or impured. This shift away from the equilateral relationship of Peirce's model brings Ogden and Richards closer to Saussure (see below). He, too, relegated the relationship of the sign with external reality to one of minimal importance. Like Saussure, Ogden and Richards put the symbol in the key position: our symbols direct and organize our thoughts or references; and our references organize our perception of reality. Symbol and reference in Ogden and Richards are similar to the signifier and signified in Saussure.

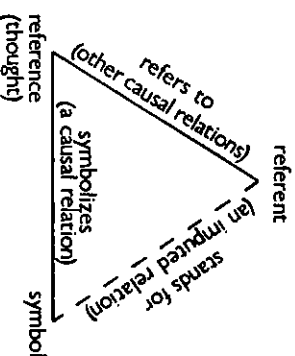


Figure 13 Ogden and Richards's elements of meaning

### Saussure

If the American logician and philosopher C. S. Peirce was one of the founders of semiotics, the other was undoubtedly the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Peirce's concern as a philosopher was with our understanding of our experience and of the world around us. It was only gradually that he came to realize the importance of *semiotics*, the act of signifying, in this. His interest was in meaning, which he found in the structural relationship of signs, people, and objects.

Saussure, as a linguist, was primarily interested in language. He was more concerned with the way signs (or, in his case, words) related to other signs than he was with the way they related to Peirce's 'object'. So Saussure's basic model differs in emphasis from Peirce's. He focuses his

attention much more directly on the sign itself. The sign, for Saussure, was a physical object with a meaning; or, to use his terms, a sign consisted of a *signifier* and a *signified*. The signifier is the sign's image as we perceive it – the marks on the paper or the sounds in the air; the signified is the mental concept to which it refers. This mental concept is broadly common to all members of the same culture who share the same language.

We can see immediately similarities between Saussure's signifier and Peirce's sign, and Saussure's signified and Peirce's interpretant. Saussure, however, is less concerned than Peirce with the relationship of those two elements with Peirce's 'object' or external meaning. When Saussure does turn to this he calls it *signification* but spends comparatively little time on it. So Saussure's model may be visualized as in figure 14.

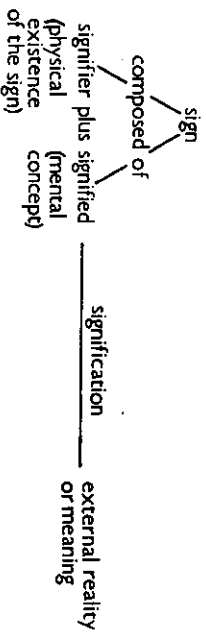


Figure 14 Saussure's elements of meaning

For illustration, I might make two marks on the paper, thus:

O X

These might be the first two moves in a game of noughts and crosses (or tick-tack-toe), in which case they remain as mere marks on the paper. Or they might be read as a word, in which case they become a sign composed of the signifier (their appearance) and the mental concept (oxness) which we have of this particular type of animal. The relationship between my concept of oxness and the physical reality of oxen is 'signification': it is my way of giving meaning to the world, of understanding it.

I stress this, because it is important to remember that the signifieds are as much a product of a particular culture as are the signifiers. It is obvious that words, the signifiers, change from language to language. But it is easy to fall into the fallacy of believing that the signifieds are universal and that translation is therefore a simple matter of substituting a French word, say, for an English one – the 'meaning' is the same. This is not so. My mental concept of oxness must be very different from that of an Indian farmer, and teaching me the sound of the Hindu word (signifier) for ox does not get me any nearer to sharing his concept of 'oxness'. The

signification of an ox is as culture-specific as is the linguistic form of the signifier in each language.

### Sign and system

The deceptively simple question is 'What is an ox?', or, to put it more linguistically or semiotically, 'What do we mean by the sign *ox*?' For Saussure the question can be answered only in the light of what we do *not* mean by that sign.

This is a new approach to the question of how signs signify. The similarity between Saussure and Peirce here is that they both seek meaning in structural relationships, but Saussure considers a new relationship – that between the sign and other signs in the same system: that is, the relationship between a sign and other signs that it could conceivably be, but is not. Thus the meaning of the sign *man* is determined by how it is differentiated from other signs. So *man* can mean *not animal* or *not human* or *not boy* or *not master*.

When Chanel chose the French star Catherine Deneuve to give their perfume an image of a particular kind of sophisticated traditional French chic, she became a sign in a system. And the meaning of Catherine-Deneuve-as-sign was determined by other beautiful stars-as-signs that she was not. She was not Susan Hampshire (too English); she was not Twiggy (too young, trendy, *changeably* fashionable); she was not Brigitte Bardot (too unsophisticatedly sexy); and so on.

According to this model of meaning, the signifieds are the mental concepts we use to divide reality up and categorize it so that we can understand it. The boundaries between one category and another are artificial, not natural, for nature is all of a piece. There is no line between man and boy until we draw one, and scientists are constantly trying to define more accurately the boundary between humans and other animals. So signifieds are made by people, determined by the culture or subculture to which they belong. They are part of the linguistic or semiotic system that members of that culture use to communicate with each other.

So, then, the area of reality or experience to which any one signified refers, that is the signification of the sign, is determined not by the nature of that reality/experience, but by the boundaries of the related signifieds in the system. Meaning is therefore better defined by the relationships of one sign to another than by the relationship of that sign to an external reality. This relationship of the sign to others in its system is what Saussure calls *value*. And for Saussure *value* is what primarily determines meaning.

*Semiotics and meaning*

Semiotics sees communication as the generation of meaning in messages – whether by the encoder or the decoder. Meaning is not an absolute, static concept to be found neatly parcelled up in the message. Meaning is an active process: semioticians use verbs like create, generate, or negotiate to refer to this process. Negotiation is perhaps the most useful in that it implies the to-and-fro, the give-and-take between person and message. Meaning is the result of the dynamic interaction between sign, interpretant, and object: it is historically located and may well change with time. It may even be useful to drop the term ‘meaning’ and use Peirce’s far more active term ‘semiosis’ – the act of signifying.

**Categories of signs***Basic concepts*

Peirce and Saussure both tried to explain the different ways in which signs convey meaning. Peirce produced three categories of sign, each of which showed a different relationship between the sign and its object, or that to which it refers.

In an *icon* the sign resembles its object in some way: it looks or sounds like it. In an *index* there is a direct link between a sign and its object: the two are actually connected. In a *symbol* there is no connection or resemblance between sign and object: a symbol communicates only because people agree that it shall stand for what it does. A photograph is an icon, smoke is an index of fire, and a word is a symbol.

Saussure was not concerned with indexes. Indeed, as a linguist, he was really concerned only with symbols, for words are symbols. But his followers have recognized that the physical form of the sign (which Saussure called the signifier) and its associated mental concept (the signified) can be related in an *iconic* or an *arbitrary* way. In an iconic relationship, the signifier looks or sounds like the signified; in an arbitrary relationship, the two are related only by agreement among the users. What Saussure terms *iconic* and *arbitrary relations* between signifier and signified correspond precisely to Peirce’s *icons* and *symbols*.

*Further implications*

Though Saussure and Peirce were working in the different academic traditions of linguistics and philosophy respectively, they none the less

agreed on the centrality of the sign to any understanding of semiotics. They also agreed that the first task was to categorize the variety of signs in terms of the way that, for Saussure, the signifier related to the signified, or, for Peirce, the way that the sign related to the object.

*Peirce and the sign*

Peirce divided signs into three types – icon, index, and symbol. Once again, these can be modelled on a triangle (figure 15). Peirce felt that this was the most useful and fundamental model of the nature of signs. He writes:

every sign is determined by its object, either first, by partaking in the character of the object, when I call the sign an *Icon*; secondly, by being really and in its individual existence connected with the individual object, when I call the sign an *Index*; thirdly, by more or less approximate certainty that it will be interpreted as denoting the object in consequence of a habit . . . when I call the sign a *Symbol*. (In Zeman, 1977)

An *icon* bears a resemblance to its object. This is often most apparent in visual signs: a photograph of my aunt is an icon; a map is an icon; the common visual signs denoting ‘ladies’ and gentlemen’s lavatories are icons. But it may be verbal: onomatopoeia is an attempt to make language iconic. Tennyson’s line ‘The hum of bees in immemorial elms’ makes the sound of the words resemble the sound of the bees. It is iconic. Beethoven’s ‘Pastoral’ Symphony contains musical icons of natural sounds. We might think that some perfumes are artificial icons of animal smells indicating sexual arousal. Peirce’s model of sign-object-interpretant is an icon in that it attempts to reproduce in concrete form the abstract structure of the relationship between its elements.

An *index* is equally simple to explain. It is a sign with a direct existential connection with its object. Smoke is an index of fire; a sneeze

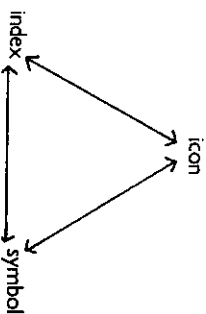


Figure 15 Peirce's categories of sign-types

is an index of a head cold. If I arrange to meet you and tell you that you will recognize me because I am bearded and will wear a yellow rose in my buttonhole, then my beard and yellow rose are indexes of me.

A *symbol* is a sign whose connection with its object is a matter of convention, agreement, or rule. Words are, in general, symbols. The red cross is a symbol. Numbers are symbols – there is no reason why the shape 2 should refer to a pair of objects: it is only by convention or rule in our culture that it does. The Roman number II is, of course, iconic.

These categories are not separate and distinct. One sign may be composed of various types. Take the road sign in figure 16, for example. The red triangle is a symbol – by the rule of the Highway Code it means 'warning'. The cross in the middle is a mixture of icon and symbol: it is iconic in that its form is determined partly by the shape of its object, but it is symbolic in that we need to know the rules in order to understand it as 'crossroads' and not as 'church' or 'hospital'. And the sign is, in real life, an index in that it indicates that we are about to reach a crossroads. When printed in the Highway Code, or in this book, it is not indexical in that it is not physically or spatially connected with its object.

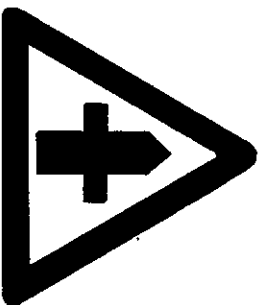


Figure 16 *Icon-index-symbol*

### Analysis

We might test the explanatory power of Peirce's sign categories by analysing the cartoons in plates 2 and 3. Cartoons are examples of messages which attempt to convey a wealth of information by simple, direct means – they use simple signifiers for complex signifieds.

Plate 2 uses the traditional cartoon convention of two men in conversation to convey a message about the Irish Troubles, industrial unrest in the Midlands, law and order, and the attitudes of the Liberal government of the day.



Plate 2 ASQUITH (to his sturdy henchman): 'No – don't worry too much about those Ulster Orangemen, but, of course, keep your eye on the Black Country. We have determined there shall be no bloodshed and violence tolerated in this country save that which is offered in the name of the Christian religion!' Will Dyson, the *Daily Herald*, 19 June 1913

The figure on the right is Asquith, the Prime Minister. We recognize him by the way his face is drawn: it is *iconic*, which means that the form it takes is determined by the appearance of the *object* (Asquith himself). The hands in the pockets, however, are a different sort of sign. They, together with the upright posture with the weight back on the heels, may be taken to indicate nonchalance. The physical posture is an *index* of emotional attitude, in the way that smoke is an index of fire, or spots of measles. The confident hemisphere of his belly is also an index, though with a slight difference. It is an index that is approaching a metonymy (see below, p. 95). A photograph of a starving baby can be an index of a

Third World famine, and in the same way a fat belly can be an index of prosperity and consumption (if the striking producers in the Black Country had been portrayed they would presumably have been thin and hungry). But Asquith was, himself, portly. So the belly has an iconic dimension as well. I think, too, that the receding chin is an iconic index of the same sort, indicating a moral weakness or decadence. This is my interpretation of the sign, but I feel less confident that you will share it with me than I am of my interpretation of the belly.

Dyson, the cartoonist, is exploiting an important property of icons and indexes. Because these types of sign are both connected to their objects directly, though differently, they appear to bring reality with them. They seem to say 'The object really *is* like this; your interpretant is formed by your experience of the object rather than by my sign. My sign is merely reminding you of, or is bringing you a reflection of, the object itself.' They imply that Asquith really is nonchalant, complacent, prosperous, in a more imperative way than a *symbolic* description would, such as a verbal one. Our study of news photographs in chapter 6 will develop this notion further.

Martin Walker (1978), from whom the cartoons in this chapter are taken, comments on the 'dumb stupidity and awesome backside of the policeman'. You might like to consider the way that iconic and indexical relations between the sign and the object combine with the reader's social experience of the police to produce the interpretant.

Gould's cartoon (plate 3) will also repay close analysis. Kaiser Bill is shown as a burglar stealing the family silver (Serbia and Belgium). At the window, about to catch him, is a policeman whose silhouetted mutton-chop whiskers identify him as John Bull. Britain, the policeman, is going to keep Europe safe from thieving Germany.

The silver is clearly a symbol of Serbia and Belgium. But there is no pre-existing agreement of this relationship between sign and object. So Gould has to use other *symbols*, the words SERBIA and BELGIUM, to create it. These words, of course, only communicate because their users agree that they do refer to specific countries in Europe. The mutton-chops, however, are an *index* of John Bull, and John Bull is a *symbol* of Britain (in this case, of course, the agreement does exist – we all agree that John Bull stands for Britain).

This cartoon is a complex combination of icons, indexes, and symbols that will repay much closer analysis than I have given it here. You should also return to it after reading chapter 6, when you will be able to compare Peirce's sign categories with Jakobson's theory of metaphor and metonymy.

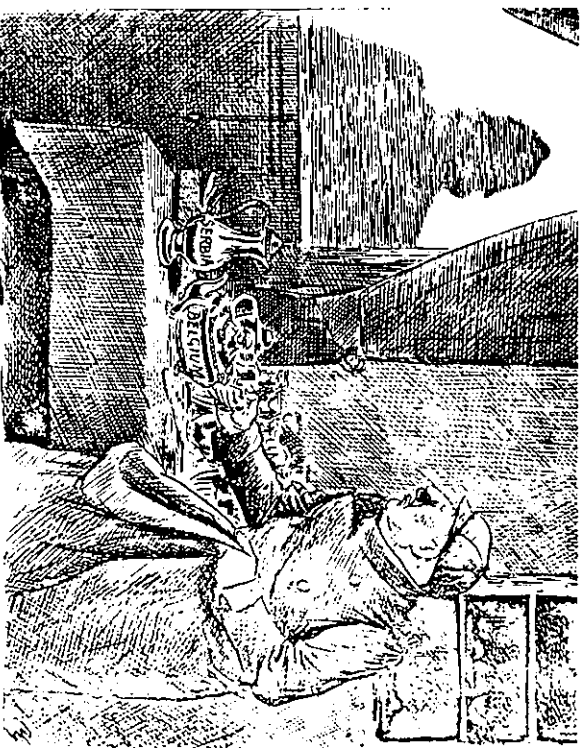


Plate 3 'Kaiser Bill'. Francis Gould, the *Westminster Gazette*, August 1914

### Saussure and the sign

Saussure's analysis of the sign relegates 'signification', the relationship of the signified to reality or of Peirce's sign to object, to second place. He is concerned primarily with the relationship of signifier to signified and with one sign to others. Saussure's term 'signified' has similarities with Peirce's 'interpretant', but Saussure never uses the term 'effect' to relate signifier to signified; he does not extend his interest into the realm of the user.

Saussure's interest in the relationship of signifier with signified has developed into a major concern within the European tradition of semiotics. Saussure himself concentrated on articulating a linguistic theory and made merely a passing mention of a possible area of study that he called semiology:

We can therefore imagine a science which would study the life of signs within society . . . . We call it *semiology*, from the Greek *semeion* ('sign'). It would teach us what signs consist of, what laws govern them. Since it does not yet exist we cannot say what it will be: but it has a right to

existence; its place is assured in advance. Linguistics is only a part of this general science; and the laws which semiology discovers will be applicable to linguistics, which will thus find itself attached to a well-defined domain of human phenomena. (*Course*, 16; *Conti*, 33)

It has been left to his followers to work out more fully this science of signs. (Incidentally, they have worked mainly in France and tend to use the term *semiology*.)

### Motivation of the sign

Two of Saussure's followers who have developed his ideas have been Pierre Guiraud (1975) and Roland Barthes (1968, 1973). To follow their analysis we shall need to learn a new set of terms. (One of the hardest aspects of any developing area of study is the amount of jargon it creates. New writers tend to coin new words, and it is only when a science becomes well established that its terminology settles down and becomes fairly widely agreed. In our case authorities cannot even agree on the name of the science itself.) The main terms used in studying the relationship between the signifier and the signified are *arbitrary*, *iconic*, *motivation*, and *constraint*, and they are all closely interconnected.

The arbitrary nature of the sign was for Saussure the heart of human language. By this he meant that there was no necessary relationship between signifier and signified: the relationship was determined by convention, rule, or agreement among the users. In other words, the signs that he called *arbitrary* correspond exactly to those that Peirce called *symbols*. Like Peirce, Saussure thought that this was the most important and highly developed category.

The term *iconic* is already familiar. Saussureans use it in the Peircean sense: that is, an iconic sign is one where the form of the signifier is determined to some extent by the signified.

The terms *motivation* and *constraint* are used to describe the extent to which the signified determines the signifier: they are almost interchangeable. A highly motivated sign is a very iconic one: a photograph is more highly motivated than a road sign. An arbitrary sign is unmotivated. Or we can use the term *constraint* to refer to the influence which the signified exerts on the signifier. The more motivated the sign is, the more its signifier is constrained by the signified.

A photograph of a man is highly motivated, for what the photograph (the signifier) looks like is determined mainly by what the man himself looks like. (The photographer's influence — framing, focus, lighting,

camera angle, etc. — produces an arbitrary element in the final sign.) A painted portrait is, or can be, less iconic or more arbitrary than a photograph — it is less motivated. A cartoon (for example, that of Asquith, plate 2) is still less motivated: the cartoonist has more freedom to make the subject appear the way he wants him to; he is less constrained. If we are looking for less motivated, more arbitrary signs for 'man' that still have an iconic element, we might turn to a child's matchstick drawing, or the symbol on gentlemen's lavatories. An unmotivated, arbitrary sign is the word MAN itself, or the symbol ♂. Plate 4 illustrates this point with a collage of signs of varying degrees of motivation. The less motivated the sign is, the more important it is for us to have learnt the conventions agreed amongst the users: without them the sign remains meaningless, or liable to wildly *aberrant denoting* (see below, p. 78).

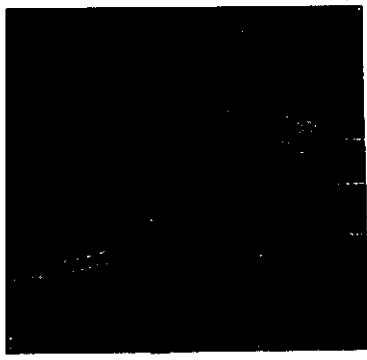
### Convention

Convention, or habit in Peirce's terms, plays an important variety of roles in communication and signification. At its most formal level it can describe the rules by which arbitrary signs work. There is a formal convention that the sign CAT refers to a four-legged feline animal and not an article of clothing. There is a formal convention that fixes the meaning of three signs in this order with this grammatical form: CATS HUNT RATS: we agree that the first word chases the third. It is also conventional that a final -s means plurality.

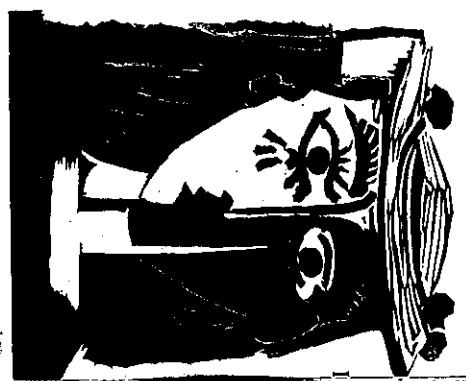
But there are also less formal, less explicitly expressed, conventions. We have learnt by experience that slow motion on television 'means' one of two things: either analysis of skill or error (particularly in sports programmes), or appreciation of beauty. Sometimes, as in women's gymnastics, it means both. Our experience of similar signs, that is our experience of the convention, enables us to respond appropriately — we know that it does not mean that people have suddenly started running slow laps; and our experience of the content tells us whether we are meant to appreciate the beauty or evaluate the skill of the movement.

Sometimes it is difficult to determine the relative parts played by convention and iconicity in a sign — that is, how highly motivated or constrained a sign actually is. A television camera zooming into close-up on someone's face conventionally means that that person is experiencing a strong emotion of some sort. We know, by convention, that it does not mean that we have suddenly pushed our face to within inches of his or hers. But that zoom also has an iconic element in that it represents, or





**WOMEN**



*WOMEN*



Plate 4 Signs of women

reproduces, the focusing of our interest upon a person at such a moment.

Convention is necessary to the understanding of any sign, however iconic or indexical it is. We need to learn how to understand a photograph or even a life-size waxwork. Convention is the social dimension of signs (see also p. 77): it is the agreement amongst the users about the appropriate uses of and responses to a sign. Signs with no conventional dimension are purely private and thus do not communicate. So it may be of more help to consider the distinction between arbitrary and iconic signs or between symbols and icons/indexes as a scale, not as separate categories. At one end of the scale we have the purely arbitrary sign, the symbol. At the other end we have the notional pure icon, which cannot, of course, exist in practice. We can visualize the scale as in figure 17.

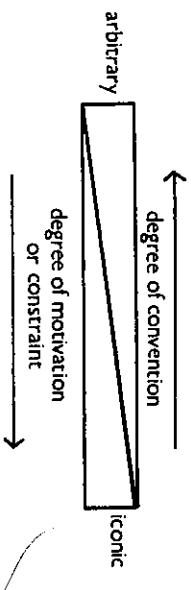


Figure 17 Scale of motivation

At the left-hand end of the scale are the signs that are 100 per cent arbitrary, conventional, unmotivated, unconstrained. In the middle are mixed signs, placed according to their degree of motivation. Thus the cross indicating a crossroads on a road sign would be further to the left than a map of a particular crossroads. The former we might estimate as 60 per cent arbitrary, 40 per cent iconic, whereas the latter may be 30/70 per cent. And we ought to chop off the last half-an-inch on the right, unless the development of holograms makes the purely iconic sign a possibility.

### The organization of signs

#### Basic concepts

Saussure defined two ways in which signs are organized into codes. The first is by *paradigms*. A paradigm is a set of signs from which the one to be used is chosen. The set of shapes for road signs — square, round, or triangular — forms a paradigm; so does the set of symbols that can go

within them. Saussure's second way is the *syntagmatic*. A syntagm is the message into which the chosen signs are combined. A road sign is a syntagm, a combination of the chosen shape with the chosen symbol. In language, we can say that the vocabulary is the paradigm, and a sentence is a syntagm. So all messages involve *selection* (from a paradigm) and *combination* (into a syntagm).

#### Further implications

We must remember that Saussure insisted that a sign's meaning was determined mainly by its relationship to other signs. It is here that his linguistic interest shows most strongly, and it is in this that he differs most radically from Peirce. The two main types of relationship which a sign can form with others are described by the terms *paradigm* and *syntagm*.

#### Paradigms

Let us take paradigms first. A paradigm is a set from which a choice is made and only one unit from that set may be chosen. A simple example is the letters of the alphabet. These form the paradigm for written language and illustrate the two basic characteristics of a paradigm:

- (i) All the units in a paradigm must have something in common: they must share characteristics that determine their membership of that paradigm. We must know that M is a letter and thus a member of the alphabetic paradigm, and we must recognize equally that 5 is not, and neither is +.
- (ii) Each unit must be clearly distinguished from all the others in the paradigm. We must be able to tell the difference between signs in a paradigm in terms of both their signifiers and their signifieds. The means by which we distinguish one signifier from another are called the *distinctive features* of a sign: this is a concept of considerable analytical importance to which we will return later. In our current example we need to say only that bad handwriting is handwriting that blurs the distinctive features of the letters.

Every time we communicate we must select from a paradigm. Words are a paradigm — the vocabulary of English is a paradigm. Words are also categorized into other, more specific paradigms: grammatical paradigms, such as nouns or verbs; paradigms of use — baby language, legal language, lovers' talk, masculine swearing; or paradigms of sound — words that

rhyme, day, may, say, etc. At a more detailed level still, the three Saussurian terms for analysing the sign form a paradigm and are frequently written Sn, Sr, Sd. Here the S indicates by convention the paradigm and the -n, -r, -d, are the distinctive features that identify the units within it.

Other examples of paradigms are: way of changing shot in television – cut, fade, dissolve, wipe, etc.; headgear – trilby, cap, beret, seresson, etc.; the style of chairs with which we furnish our living room; the type of car we drive; the colour we paint our front door. All these involve paradigmatic choices, and the meaning of the unit we choose is determined largely by the meanings of the units we did not. We can sum up by saying 'where there is choice there is meaning, and the meaning of what was chosen is determined by the meaning of what was not'.

### Syntagms

Once a unit has been chosen from a paradigm it is normally combined with other units. This combination is called a *syntagm*. Thus a written word is a visual syntagm composed of a sequence of paradigmatic choices from the letters of the alphabet. A sentence is a syntagm of words. Our clothes are a syntagm of choices from the paradigms of hats, ties, shirts, jackets, trousers, socks, etc. The way we furnish a room is a syntagm of choices from the paradigms of chairs, tables, settees, carpets, wallpapers, etc. An architect designing a house makes a syntagm of the styles of doors, windows, etc., and their positions. A menu is a good example of a complete *system*. The choices for each course (the paradigms) are given in full: each diner combines them into a meal: the order given to the waiter is a syntagm.

The important aspect of syntagms is the rules or conventions by which the combination of units is made. In language we call this grammar or syntax; in music we call it melody (harmony is a matter of paradigmatic choice); in clothes we call it good taste, or fashion sense, though there are more formal rules as well. For instance, a black bow-tie with a black jacket and white collar means a dinner guest, but the same bow-tie with a tailed coat and a white wing collar would mean a waiter. In a syntagm, then, the chosen sign can be affected by its relationship with others; its meaning is determined partly by its relationship with others in the syntagm.

For Saussure, and the structural linguists who followed him, the key to understanding signs was to understand their structural relationship with others. There are two types of structural relationship – paradigmatic, that of choice; or syntagmatic, that of combination.

### Traffic lights

Traffic lights are a simple communication system that we can use to illustrate many of the analytical concepts introduced in this chapter. Figure 18 shows how Edmund Leach (1974) models the structural relationships of traffic lights. If we analyse the signifying in full we start by identifying the paradigm – that is, of traffic lights. A red light here means STOP and not BROTHEL or RECORDING IN PROGRESS. It is arbitrary, or a symbol, but not entirely so. Red is so widespread a sign for danger that we are justified in looking for some iconic element in it. It may be because it is the colour of blood, or because in moments of extreme rage or fear, the dilation of the blood vessels in the eye literally makes us 'see red'. So red is a crisis colour. If red, by a mixture of convention and motivation, means 'stop', the rest follows logically. Green is the opposite of red on the colour spectrum, as GO is the opposite of STOP. Colour is the distinctive feature, and green is as distinctive from red as is possible. If we need a third unit in the system, we ought to go for yellow or blue, as these colours are midway between red and green in the spectrum. Blue is reserved for emergency services, so the choice is naturally yellow, or amber to give it a stronger form. Then we introduce a simple syntax: amber combined with red is a syntagm meaning that the change is in the direction of GO; amber on its own means that the change is in the direction of STOP. Other rules are that red can never be combined with green, and that red and green can never follow each other directly.

So there is a lot of redundancy built into the system. A red light is all that is strictly needed: 'on' for STOP, 'off' for GO. But even temporary traffic lights add redundancy by including a green. This prevents the possible error of decoding 'off' as 'the lights have broken down'. The full

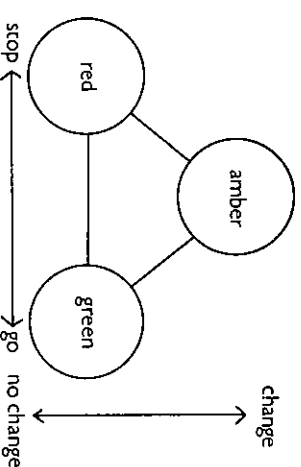


Figure 18 Traffic lights

system, of course, has high redundancy because it is vital to minimize errors of decoding and there may be a lot of 'noise' (the sun in the eyes, other traffic to concentrate on).

### Suggestions for further work

1. Apply Peirce's model to different types of sign: for example, a facial expression indicating boredom; a road sign for HALT, MAJOR ROAD AHEAD; words like *gay*, *queer*, or *homosexual*; an abstract painting; somebody's style of dress; 3 + 8 = 11. What does this tell you about the way that the interpretant is created? Does the sign or our experience of the object play the larger part in the formation of our interpretant? How does their relative importance vary? How far can my interpretant differ from yours, and how far must they be similar? Does the degree of motivation play a major part in determining the relationship and variation of meaning that you were discussing? (See Guiraud, 1975, pp. 25-7.) Discuss fully this notion of the motivation of the sign. Find examples to illustrate the range.
2. Analyse plates 5 and 6. Use Peirce's and Saussure's concepts and compare their comparative usefulness. How necessary do you think Walker's comments are? Do they help bridge the cultural gap caused by the passage of time? Are they equally helpful for each cartoon?
3. Barthes (1973), pp. 112-13 uses roses as an example of a sign: a rose is a physical object, but if I present it to my lady-love I invest it with a signified — a type of romantic passion. It has now become a signifier, and the presented rose has become a sign. Compare this with the example OX in this chapter (p. 44). How far do these examples help to explain Saussure's terms signifier, signified, and sign? Do they explain them differently than the example of a word would? If so, why?
4. Discuss fully the implications of the theory that signifieds are arbitrary and culture-specific. Does it help to clarify the idea that we see the world through our language? Read Culler (1976), pp. 18-29.
5. News photographs and magazine advertisements are frequently indexical and always iconic. Take an example of either (or both) and analyse it in Peirce's terms to test the accuracy of this assertion. (You may find that it does not apply equally well to each.) Study the way that words (symbols) are used to support the visual signs. Return to this question after you have read chapter 6. See Hawkes (1977), pp. 123-30.
6. Turn to plate 4. Arrange the signs in it in order of their degree of



Plate 5 'BRAVO BELGIUM!' F. H. Townsend, *Punch*, 12 August 1914. Walker (1978) comments: 'The villainous old bully with his sausages and his big stick leads us to hate the Germans, and the plucky, clean-cut, defiant youngster brings out all our sympathy for the Belgian allies. This cartoon idea has been used and borrowed and circulated endlessly. In July 1933, when Hitler was threatening to occupy Austria, *Punch* copied the Townsend idea, with a gallant little Austria before the same farm gate, and a bullying Hitler waving the same old stick. But they forgot the sausages.'

motivation and place them upon the scale on p. 56. Give reasons for your decisions. In your discussion you should use terms like convention, agreement, arbitrary, iconic, motivation, constraint. You may also find the terms signifier, signified, symbol, index, interpretant, and object necessary. Using the jargon helps you to familiarize yourself with it and to see the point of it. The plate is part of the paradigm 'signs of women': how much does each sign in



Plate 6 'STILL HOPE'. Hingworth, *Punch*, 21 September 1938. Walker (1978) comments: 'It is almost ungallant to *Punch* and to Chamberlain to reproduce this tribute to Appeasement. Europe had been on the brink of war: gas masks had been issued in London, and trenches dug in Hyde Park. And then came the Munich settlement and the collective sigh of relief. It is hindsight, and perhaps the prescience of prophets such as Low, which lead us to mock the Appeasers today. But the feeling that almost anything was better than war (particularly a war as long and costly as 1914-18) and that Germany did have legitimate complaints against the Peace of Versailles, was a testimony to fairness in British public life. It is, however, worth recalling that Chamberlain had taken out insurance in February 1937, when he announced a £1500 million re-armament programme. By the outbreak of war, Britain was producing each month as many tanks and more war planes as Hitler's Germany.'

- it depend for its meaning upon the reader's familiarity with the rest of the paradigm? Why is the 100 per cent icon impossible?
7. Analyse how we decode bad handwriting. You should use terms like predictability (chapter 1), perception (Gerbner's model, chapter 2), distinctive features, and signifier/signified. How far does this relate to reading a blurred photograph, or an indistinct photograph of the moon, or talking to someone in a noisy disco?
  8. Take a sentence and a photograph. Both are syntagms composed of units chosen from paradigms. How far does identifying the paradigm and the syntagm help towards an understanding of the meaning of each? (See Fiske and Hartley, 1978, pp. 50-8.)

You may find the following useful background reading: Culler (1976), pp. 18-52; Cherry (1957), pp. 112-17, 221-3, 265-9; Guiraud (1975), pp. 1-4, 22-9.