

**Ferdinand de Saussure**, a Swiss linguist developed a Course in general linguistics. (lectures published after his death in 1915)

Saussure introduces the analysis of language as a system of signs.



The signifier is the phonetic sound “tree” (when spoken) or the imprint “tree” (when written), the signified is the concept tree. Together they make the sign “tree”.

Saussure says;

“they (the signifier and the signified) cannot be separated, they are retro-verso of a single sheet of paper”

So, the signifier and the signified must always be taken together.

If we consider the signifier, it is clear that to operate as a “signifier” it needs to signify something, it needs a signified. Likewise, a signified must always be “signified” by some thing and that thing is a signifier.

Previously, the study of language was based in the historic root of the word.

But Saussure said that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary - nothing compels the word “tree” to represent a tree, they exist as a cultural convention.

Because sign systems are a set of agreed conventions, there is no “natural” sign=thing relationship between signs and “reality”. We are the active makers of meanings, the sign systems (or codes) which we use provide us with our sets of meanings.

Meaning is established through difference.

Saussure says;

“in language there is only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which difference is set up; but in language, there is only difference without positive terms”

From this there are two important points;

Value is established through the relation between one term and another, and

The terms in the language system are the product of this difference (they do not pre-exist this difference, they are this difference).

The dictionary is a good example of a sign system at work.

Each word in a dictionary establishes its meaning through a relationship with other words - when we look-up a word we are referred to other words.

Also, words can not be thought in isolation; taken outside of the language system the word is meaningless. (If you had a language system with only one word, a dictionary with only one word, how could you define that word?)

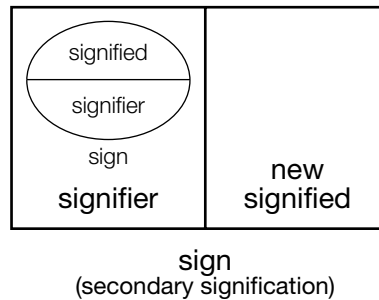
The signs we use gain their meaning, not from what they are, but what they are **not**. Their meaning is established by the signs we chose **not** to use. What defines a chair as a chair is the fact that it is not a table, it is different from a table (and a cupboard, and a person, and the carpet, and a piece of fruit).

Saussure points out that the value of signs is culture-specific. The French *mouton* may have the same meaning as the English *sheep*, but it does not have the same value. Why? Because English has the terms *mutton* and *sheep*, a distinction which is not available in French.

turn over for Barthes and semiotics...

**Roland Barthes** used semiotics to analyse popular culture. (see *Mythologies*, 1957)

Barthes introduced the idea of “secondary signification”. This is the adaptation of an existing semiotic system where the sign is encoded with new meaning (a new signified) to produce a new sign.



Barthes says that secondary signification is the production of myth. It removes reality from language and replaces it with ideology.

Barthes breaks the language system into two parts, “language-object” - the base linguistic system (Saussure’s semiotic system), and “metalanguage” - the language of myths (secondary signification).

An example of secondary signification can be read in a perfume bottle shaped like a star. The language-object sign consists of the signifier - the star shape and the signified - the concept “star”. The metalanguage or myth is the re-coding of the star as special, famous, associated with Hollywood, etc.

Barthes says;

“Myth presents itself as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system.”

The original unmotivated signifier-signified “language-object” is replaced with a new motivated signifier-signified relationship.

“...our press, our films, our theatre, our pulp literature, our rituals, our Justice, our diplomacy, our conversations, our remarks about the weather, a murder trial, a touching wedding, the cooking we dream of, the garments we wear, everything, in everyday life, is dependent on the representation which the bourgeoisie has and makes us to have of the relations between man and the world.”

Basically this means that because language is a continually shifting system, any group within society (i.e. the bourgeoisie) that holds a privileged position with respect to communication (i.e. controls the means of production) for a significant length of time will alter that societies language to reflect their own values.

There is also the possibility of this new (secondary) sign combining with yet another signified to produce a third order semiological system - and so on, a never ending multi-layered semiotic system. Myth upon myth, passing itself off as “natural”.

### **A note about Structuralism**

Semiotics is at the core of Structuralism.

Structuralism is a movement or theory that uses logical structural elements to explain complex systems. Structuralism generally implies an objective observer that applies the logical structure (i.e. semiotics) to a contained system.

Post-structuralism is a movement or theory that sees inquiry not as the objective exploration of stable structures but rather as a relative undertaking shaped by discursive and interpretive practices. Post-structuralism tells us that both objective observer and logical structure can not be separated from the system being studied.