

3

Semiotic Analysis



CHAPTER 3 FOCUS QUESTIONS

- What are the two parts of a sign according to Saussure?
- How do people use blonde hair to “lie” with signs?
- Why do semioticians argue that society is the primary reality?
- What are the components of Peirce’s trichotomy?
- What is the difference between denotation and connotation?
- How does Foucault explain changes in cultural codes?
- What important points does Rapaille make in his analysis of culture codes?
- What is the difference between a syntagmatic and paradigmatic text analysis?
- What does Ekman say about facial expressions? What do we learn from them?
- What components comprise a paradigmatic analysis of *Skyfall*?

Semiotics—the science of signs—is a vast subject that can, at times, be extremely complicated. Some of the writings of semiotic theorists are quite difficult. Yet it is possible to explain enough of the basic principles

of semiotics in this brief chapter (and offer an example or two of applied semiotic analysis) so that you can learn enough about semiotics to make your own semiotic analyses. Those of you interested in semiotics can, of course, pursue the matter in greater depth by reading some of the books on semiotics mentioned in the bibliography at the end of this chapter. Let me offer one of many definitions of the term *sign*, as defined by prominent sociosemiotician Mark Gottdiener (1997) in his book *The Theming of America: Dreams, Visions, and Commercial Spaces*:

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 *sign vehicles*. Signifying objects carry meanings with them. (pp. 8–9)

You will find that semioticians have analyzed facial expressions, hairstyles and hair colors, teeth, fashions in clothing and eyeglasses and jewelry, body piercing, and just about anything you can think of to determine how they generate meaning and what they reflect about society and culture. I analyze several signs in this chapter.

A SHORT THEATRICAL PIECE ON SEMIOTICS

Grand Inquisitor: *I've been observing students. Tell me about long hair. What does it mean?*

Arthur: Long hair used to mean counterculture, but now it's lost its meaning. Even squares have long hair now . . . and earrings, too.

Grand Inquisitor: *What about purple hair and green hair?*

Arthur: That's usually the sign of a punk.

Grand Inquisitor: *What about women with shaved hair? Are they war criminals?*

Arthur: Not now. They're just trying to be cool.

Grand Inquisitor: *But don't their heads get cold in the winter? And why do so many men wear beards all of a sudden? Even baseball players.*

Arthur: American society has become increasingly desexualized. Men wear beards to affirm their masculinity. Or to hide weak chins.

Grand Inquisitor: *Do you see that cloud over there? It looks like a camel.*

Arthur: You're right. It does look like a camel.

Grand Inquisitor: *Maybe it's more like a weasel.*

Arthur: It is backed like a weasel.

Grand Inquisitor: *Or like a whale.*

Arthur: Very like a whale.

❖ SAUSSURE'S DIVISION OF SIGNS INTO SIGNIFIERS AND SIGNIFIEDS

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) is the founder of semiology, and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce



S A U S S U R E

Ferdinand de Saussure

(1839–1914) is the founder of semiotics—both sciences are involved with how to interpret **signs**. In recent years, in part to make life simpler for ourselves, we have taken to using the term *semiotics* to stand for both methods of analyzing signs. But what is a sign? I will explain Saussure's theories first and then deal with Peirce's.

For Saussure, the important thing to remember about signs is that they are made up of sounds and **images**, what he called *signifiers*, and the concepts these sounds and images bring to mind, what he called *signifieds*. As he wrote,



I call the combination of a concept and a sound-image a *sign*, but in current usage the term generally designates only a sound-image, a word, for example. . . . I propose to retain the word *sign* [*signe*] to designate the whole and to replace *concept* and *sound-image* respectively by *signified* [*signifié*] and *signifier* [*signifiant*]; the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts. As regards *sign*, if I am satisfied with it, this is simply because I do not know of any word to replace it, the ordinary language suggesting no other. (1966, p. 67)

The relationship Saussure talked about is shown in the chart that follows:

SIGN	
<i>Signifier</i>	<i>Signified</i>
Sound-image	Concept

Example: Word *tree* Large stemmed plant . . .

Words are signs, but so are many other things, such as facial expressions, body language, clothes, haircuts—you name it. To a semi-otician, *everything* can be taken for a sign. Semiotics is, you will see, an imperialistic science. One problem with signs, however, is that they can be used for deception. Learning to interpret signs correctly and discern when people are lying with signs is one of the tasks of semiotics.



Blonde hair (not dyed blonde hair)

❖ SEMIOTICS OF BLONDENESS

Blonde hair is the most popular color used by women who dye their hair. As the saying goes, “Many a blonde dyes by her own hands.” In the United States we think that “blondes have more fun.” But there are different ways to interpret what blonde hair means, for it is also associated with coldness or innocence. D. H. Lawrence said that in American novels, blonde women are often portrayed as cold, unobtainable, and frigid while dark-haired women are shown as passionate and sexually exciting. In his book *Desexualization in American Life*, sociologist Charles Winick (1995) wrote that “for a substantial number of women, the attractiveness in bloneness is less an opportunity to have more fun than the communication of a withdrawal of emotion, a lack of passion” (p. 169). He suggested that this was why Marilyn Monroe was so popular: She didn’t come across as a temptress but, instead, as an innocent. For Winick, a brunette who dyes her hair blonde looks like a blonde but thinks like a brunette.

We can cite dyed blonde hair as an example of “lying” with signs.

Umberto Eco (1976), a prominent Italian semiotician (and author of the novel *The Name of the Rose*), has explained that if signs can be used to tell the truth, they can also be used to lie:

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 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” at all. (p. 7)

Think, for example, of brunettes who dye their hair blonde, of short men wearing elevator shoes, of bald men wearing wigs, and women dressing like men—they are all, semiotically speaking, lying with signs.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1966) said there was something very important to remember about signs: The relation between signifier and signified is based on convention, is arbitrary. The relationship that exists between the word *tree* and the large-stemmed plant for which the word *tree* stands is not natural but historical, tied to conventions and choices that people made. He distinguished symbols from signs by saying that symbols, which he saw as a subcategory of signs, are not completely arbitrary. As he wrote,

One characteristic of the symbol is that it is never wholly arbitrary; it is not empty, for there is the rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and the signified. The symbol of justice, a pair of scales, could not be replaced by just any other symbol, such as a chariot. (p. 68)

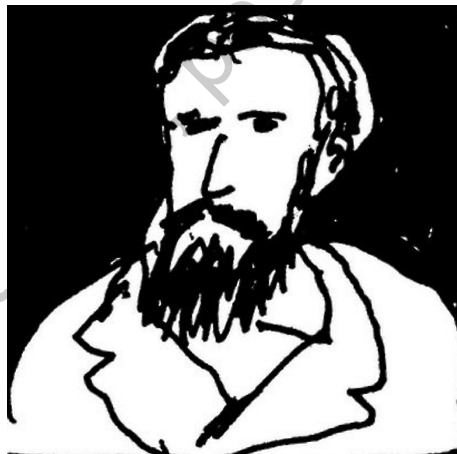
Symbols have enormous significance in our lives and play an important role in our thinking and behavior.

❖ SEMIOTICS AND SOCIETY

A relationship between signifiers and signifieds based on conventions has important implications, for it means that we need society and its institutions to teach us how to interpret signifiers. As Jonathan Culler wrote in the revised edition of his book *Ferdinand de Saussure* (1986),

For human beings, society is a primary reality, not just the sum of individual activities . . . and if one wishes to study human behavior, one must grant that there is a social reality. . . . Since meanings are a social product, explanation must be carried out in social terms. . . . Individual actions and symptoms can be interpreted psychoanalytically because they are the result of common psychic processes, unconscious defenses occasioned by social taboos and leading to particular types of repression and displacement. Linguistic communication is possible because we have assimilated a system of collective norms that organize the world and give meaning to verbal acts. Or again, as Durkheim argued, the reality crucial to the individual is not the physical environment but the social milieu, a system of rules and norms, of collective representations, which makes possible social behavior. (pp. 86–87)

What semiotic theory tells us, by implication, is that we are social animals and that the way we make sense of the world is connected to the social milieu in which we are brought up. The notion that society doesn't exist and that only individuals exist is something we learn, ironically, from society. We learn more about this matter shortly in the discussion of **culture codes**.



C. S. Peirce, who gave the study of signs, semiotics, its name

❖ PEIRCE'S TRICHOTOMY: ICON, INDEX, AND SYMBOL

Peirce had a different system. He believed there were three kinds of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols. **Icons** signify by resemblance, **indexes** signify by cause and effect, and **symbols** signify on the basis of convention. As Peirce wrote,

Every sign is determined by its objects, either first by partaking in the characters of the object, when I call a 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 (which term I use as including a natural disposition), when I call the sign a *Symbol*. (cited in Zeman, 1977, p. 36)

Their relationships are shown in the following chart:

	Icons	Indexes	Symbols
<i>Signify by:</i>	Resemblance	Cause and effect	Convention
<i>Example:</i>	Photograph	Fire and smoke	Cross
<i>Process:</i>	Can see	Can figure out	Must learn

There's a considerable difference, then, between Saussure's science of signs and Peirce's, although both were interested in signs and both theories have been very influential. Peirce said a sign "is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (cited in Zeman, 1977, p. 27). He also argued that the universe is "perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs" (cited in Sebeok, 1977, p. vi). If everything in the universe is a sign, semiotics is the "master" science!

These two interpretations of signs can be looked on as being at the foundation of the science of semiotics. There are, of course, many other aspects to semiotic thought, but with these two understandings of the sign, we can start making applied semiotic analyses. They allow us to understand how people find meaning in things. Thus, we can use semiotics to analyze and understand how meaning is generated in print advertisements, television and radio commercials, photographs, buildings, television programs, and films. The media are full of signs, both visual and acoustic, that semioticians analyze. Great filmmakers and creative artists of all kinds subconsciously understand the importance of signs, even if they've never studied semiotics. They've learned about signs the hard way—through their failures and their successes.

❖ ALLIED CONCEPTS

A number of other concepts are useful in making semiotic analyses, the more important of which are explained here.

Denotation. **Denotation** refers to the literal meaning of a term or object. It is basically descriptive. A denotative description of a Big Mac is a sandwich sold by McDonald's that weighs x number of ounces and comes with certain sauces and so on. Or let's take a Barbie Doll. The denotative meaning of a Barbie Doll is a toy doll, first marketed in 1959, that is 11.5 inches high, 5.25 inches in the bust, 3.0 inches at the waist, and 4.25 inches at the hips.

Connotation. **Connotation** deals with the cultural meanings that become attached to a term. The connotative meanings of a Big Mac come from the fact that it stands for certain aspects of American culture—fast foods, uniformity, our lack of time, our lack of interest in cooking, the mechanization of food, and so on. The connotative meanings of a Barbie Doll deal with her significance as a courtesan figure and as a consumer icon that teaches young girls to be consumers. The following chart shows the differences between denotation and connotation.

Denotation	Connotation
Literal	Figurative
Signifier	Signified
Evident	Inferred
Describes	Suggests meaning

Metaphor. **Metaphor** refers to communicating by analogy. Thus, one might say, "My love is a red rose." A great deal of our thinking, as I shortly point out, is metaphoric.

Simile. **Simile** is a weaker subcategory of metaphor, which uses *like* or *as*. For example, "My love is *like* a red rose" is a simile. Metaphor is based on identity ("my love = a red rose"), whereas simile is based on similarity ("my love is *like* a red rose").

Metonymy. **Metonymy** deals with communicating by association. We make sense of a lot of things by association, by making connections between things we know about and other things. For example, we learn that Rolls-Royce automobiles are very expensive, and this associates Rolls-Royces with wealth (and perhaps good taste).

Synecdoche. **Synecdoche** is a subcategory of metonymy in which a part is used to stand for the whole or vice versa. We use, for example,

the White House to stand for the American presidency and *the Pentagon* to stand for the American military.

Metaphor and metonymy (and their subcategories) are commonly known as “figures of speech.” We encounter them in poetry and other literary works, but they are also found in advertising and many other genres in the media. It turns out that metaphors play an important role in our everyday lives. Thus, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) have argued that metaphor is basic to our thinking:

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. (p. 3)

Sometimes, to make life more complicated, we find that something can function both metaphorically and metonymically. For example, a snake can function metaphorically as a **phallic symbol** and, at the same time, metonymically as a reference to the Garden of Eden.

Intertextuality. **Intertextuality** deals with the relation between texts and is used to show how texts borrow from one another, consciously and sometimes unconsciously. Thus, the famous Macintosh commercial “1984” was intertextually related to George Orwell’s famous dystopian novel *1984* and the biblical story of David and Goliath. Parody, in which a text makes a humorous imitation of another text, is one of the more common examples of intertextuality. Think, for example, of Woody Allen’s spoof of science fiction films, *Sleeper*. Many texts borrow stylistic elements from other texts or even use characters from other texts. The theory comes from the work of a Russian semiotician, Mikhail Bakhtin, who wrote in his book *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981):

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word. It provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself on the answer’s direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue. (p. 280)

He offered an example in his discussion of texts from the Middle Ages, quoting an authority on literature in this period who wrote (1981),

The history of medieval literature and its Latin literature in particular “is the history of the appropriation, re-working and imitation of someone else’s property. . . or, as we would say, of another’s language, another’s style, another’s word. (p. 69)

If we apply Bakhtin’s ideas to texts, rather than words in conversation, we understand how intertextuality works. All texts are influenced by texts that preceded them, even if the persons creating the texts are not aware that they are (to various extents) “borrowing” plots, themes, language, or anything else. This is because, in part, we share a common cultural heritage.

Codes. In spy stories, codes refer to ways of interpreting messages written in ways that are not easily understood or easy to “crack.” When you know the code, you can “unlock” the meaning in the message. In semiotic thought, we use **codes** to refer to structured behavior and argue that much human behavior can be seen as coded, as having secret or covert structures not easily understood or recognized.

Culture can be seen as collections of codes. To understand culture, you have to “decode” the behavior of people in the culture or subculture. Semiotics helps us interpret the meaning of forms and kinds of communication whose meaning, or in some cases whose most significant meaning, is not evident. For example, as we grow up, we learn certain codes about how to cook meat. We don’t boil porterhouse steaks or pork chops. We also have codes about what starches to eat with steaks: We usually have baked potatoes or french fries, but not boiled potatoes or rice (unless we’re Asian). We learn any number of codes but don’t think about them; because almost everyone’s behavior is shaped by them, they become invisible.

Language and speaking. Language, from a semiotic standpoint, is a social institution: We learn languages by being raised in a given community (or subculture) where the language is spoken. Saussure (1966) made an important distinction between language and speaking:

But what is language [*langue*]? It is not to be confused with human speech [*langage*], of which it is only a definite part, though certainly an essential one. It is both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty. (p. 9)

What individuals do, Saussure calls speaking (*parole*). Thus, we have three different phenomena to consider, shown in the following chart:

Langue	Langage	Parole
Language	Speech	Speaking/individual act
Institution (social) rules and conventions	Individual/social act	Individual use of rules

The term *speaking* can also include matters such as haircuts, clothes, facial expression, and other forms of individual communication. Once we understand body language, for example, we can understand the meaning of a particular gesture a person makes (for example, turning away from you while you're talking to him or her).



Michel Foucault

❖ MICHEL FOUCAULT ON CODES AND CULTURAL CHANGE

Michel Foucault (1926–1984), a French philosopher and cultural theorist, offers some insights into how codes in a culture change in his book *The Order of Things* (1973):

The fundamental codes of a culture—those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchies of its practices—establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home. At the other extremity of thought, there are the scientific theories or the philosophical interpretations which explain why order exists in general, what universal law it obeys, what principle can account for it, and why this particular order has been established and not some other. But between these two regions, so distant from one another, lies a domain which, even though its role is mainly an intermediary one, is nonetheless fundamental: it is more

confused, more obscure, and probably less easy to analyze. It is here that a culture, imperceptibly deviating from the empirical orders prescribed for it by its primary codes, instituting an initial separation from them, causes them to lose their original transparency, relinquishes its immediate and invisible powers, frees itself sufficiently to discover that these orders are perhaps not the only possible ones or the best ones. . . . It is on the basis of this newly perceived order that the codes of language, perception and practice are criticized and rendered partially invalid. (pp. xx, xxi)

This passage is important because it suggests how social change comes about, as the tension between the basic codes that create order in a culture come into a subtle conflict with scientific theories and philosophical thought and an area between these two perspectives comes into being that suggests the possibility of modifying and even changing the fundamental codes.

❖ MARCEL DANESI ON CODES AND CULTURE

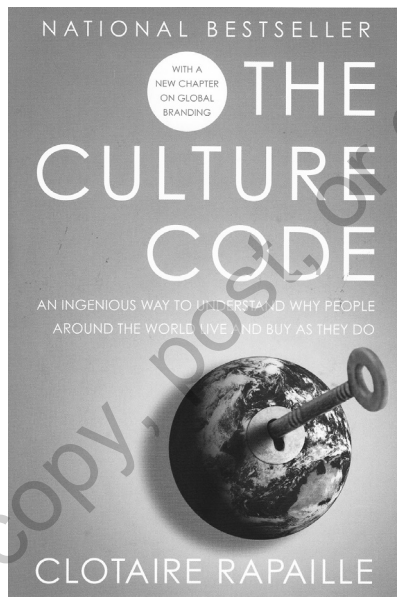
A Canadian semiotician, Marcel Danesi, offers additional insights into the nature of codes. As he explains in his book *Understanding Media Semiotics* (2nd edition) published in 2018:

Codes are “organizational systems or grids” for the recurring elements and meanings that go into the constitution of anything that humans make, including rituals, spectacles, and representations of all kinds. They can be highly formal as, for example, the code of arithmetic in which all the structures (numerals) and rules (addition, subtraction, and so on) are firmly established. Or they can be highly flexible as, for example, the code for greeting people, which varies according to who the participants in the greeting ritual are.

A code can be compared to a recipe. This consists of information (a set of directions for preparing something to eat or drink) that must be converted into another form (the actual food or drink item) by someone. Note that the end result will vary according to the user of the recipe. But all results are still recognizable as having been made from the same recipe. Generally speaking, for some particular representational need, there is an optimum code or set of codes that can be deployed. For example, the composer of a work of operatic art will need to deploy at least three code-making sources in the construction of the operatic text—the musical code, the verbal code, and the theater code (all in place at the time of the composition). Needless to say, knowledge of most codes is culture-specific, unless

they are constructed for international usage, such as mathematical and scientific codes. In these latter cases, the codes are part of a global system of education. In other words, people throughout the world have agreed on certain symbols to serve as a shorthand system for recording and recalling information (P. 51)

It is interesting to see how people in different countries have their own codes for many of the things they do and anyone who travels finds, for example, that people eat their dinners at different times, may eat different foods, and have culturally distinctive ways of doing many things.



Cover of *The Culture Code*

Source: Jacket Cover copyright © 2006 by Broadway Books, a division of Random House, Inc., from *The Culture Code: An Ingenious Way to Understand Why People Around the World Live and Buy as They Do* by Clotaire Rapaille. Used by permission of Broadway Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

❖ CLOTAIRE RAPAILLE ON CULTURE CODES

Let me expand a bit on the discussion of codes. A French psychoanalyst and marketing expert, Clotaire Rapaille, dealt with codes in his book *The Culture Code: An Ingenious Way to Understand Why People Around the World Live and Buy as They Do* (2006). Rapaille placed a great deal of

importance on what he called “imprints”: combinations of experiences and accompanying emotions. As he explained, “Once an imprint occurs, it strongly conditions our thought processes and shapes our future actions. Each imprint helps make us who we are. The combination of imprints defines us” (p. 6). These imprints influence us at the unconscious level. His work, he wrote, involved searching for our imprints so he could decode “elements of our culture to discover the emotions and meanings attached to them” (pp. 10–11). He suggested that most imprinting is done by the age of 7 because “emotion is the central force for children under the age of seven” (p. 21). As he put it, he went in search of the codes “hidden within the unconscious of every culture.”

His book deals with the imprintings and codes found in different cultures. In it, he offered an example of decoding cultures in his discussion of cheese:

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 in a cloche (a bell-shape cover with little holes to allow air in and keep insects out). The American Code for cheese, on the other hand, is DEAD. Again, this makes sense in context. Americans “kill” their cheese through pasteurization (unpasteurized cheeses are not allowed into the 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 known as a refrigerator. (p. 25)

Rapaille’s choice of language is most telling and amusing. Americans mummify their cheeses and store them in morgues. The important point to keep in mind here is that from Rapaille’s and a semiotic perspective, cultures can be seen as full of different codes that the semiotician must learn how to decode.

❖ SEMIOTICS IN SOCIETY: A REPRISE

We are now ready to use these concepts to analyze images, objects, and all kinds of other communication. Using semiotics may seem just like “common sense” except that most of the time, just using common sense doesn’t offer as complete and sophisticated an analysis of topics of interest to us. Let me offer two quotations that help explain what semiotics does.

The first, by linguist Jonathan Culler (1976), makes an important point about social and cultural phenomena:

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 or events with meaning and hence signs; and second, that they do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations. (p. 4)

We must learn to see all kinds of things as signs, and when we do, we must think about relations among these phenomena to understand their meaning. Meaning is based on relationships, to recall Saussure's notion that concepts are defined differentially.

Maya Pines (1982) made a similar point about humans as sign-creating and sign-generating creatures:

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. (p. G1)

Thus, semiotics helps us understand how to decipher the messages we are sent and better understand the messages we send about ourselves to others. We are often unaware of the messages we're sending and how others are interpreting them.



Pointy teeth are conventionally recognized signifiers of vampires.

I can offer an interesting example here. In a seminar I taught on semiotics, I asked students to bring in some object that “reflected” them somehow. They were to bring these objects in brown paper bags so nobody in the class would know who brought each one. And they were to list, on a piece of paper, what they thought the object reflected about them and put their list in the bag, as well. One woman brought a large seashell. She listed the attributes of the shell that she thought reflected her: beautiful, delicate, natural, and simple. The other members of the seminar found different attributes in the shell when I showed it to them: empty, sterile, brittle, and vacuous. The point is that we often make mistakes about the messages we think we’re sending to others.



Vladimir Propp

❖ SYNTAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF TEXTS

We can look at stories, narratives, or tales (that is, texts) as being similar to sentences, except they are stretched out and made more complicated. Semioticians use the term **syntagmatic analysis** to refer to interpretation that looks at the sequence of events that give texts meaning—in the same way that the sequence of words we use in a sentence generates meaning. (The term *syntagma* means “chain.”)

One of the outstanding figures in analyzing narratives was Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp, author of *Morphology of the*

Folktale (1928/1968), a pioneering study of the way narratives generate meaning. The term *morphology* means the study of forms or structures and how the components of something relate to each other and to the whole, of which they are all parts. Propp's book argues that narratives are best understood in terms of the functions of their main characters. He studied a group of Russian fairy tales and tried to make sense of how these tales worked and what they added up to. As he wrote,

We are undertaking a comparison of the themes of these tales. For the sake of comparison we shall separate the component parts of fairy tales by special methods; and then, we shall make a comparison of the tales according to their components. The result will be a morphology (that is, a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole). (p. 19)

Propp decided to use a morphological approach because other approaches—looking at the tales in terms of styles or kinds of heroes and other classification approaches—didn't work.

Propp suggested that the basic or minimal unit in narratives is what he called a function, which he defined as "an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of action" (p. 21). He added several other important points:

- Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.
- The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.
- The sequence of functions is always identical.
- All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure. (pp. 21–23)

In each fairy tale, Propp argued, there are 31 functions and an initial situation (in which the hero or heroine and the members of his or her family are introduced). Each function also includes many subcategories, representing different ways the function can be realized. Propp's ideas can be adapted to analyze contemporary texts and his functions modernized. A list of his functions is shown in Table 3.1 along with his list of principal characters in these Russian fairy tales.

Table 3.1 Propp's Functions

α	Initial situation	Members of family introduced or hero introduced.
β	<i>Absentation</i>	One of the members of the family absents self from home.
γ	<i>Interdiction</i>	An interdiction addressed to hero.
δ	<i>Violation</i>	An interdiction is violated.
E	<i>Reconnaissance</i>	The villain makes attempt at reconnaissance.
ζ	<i>Delivery</i>	The villain receives information about his victim.
η	<i>Trickery</i>	The villain attempts to deceive his victim.
θ	<i>Complicity</i>	The victim submits to deception, unwittingly helps the enemy.
A	<i>Villainy</i>	The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family.
α	<i>Lack</i>	One member of a family lacks something or wants something.
B	<i>Mediation</i>	Misfortune is made known, hero is dispatched.
C	<i>Counteraction</i>	Seekers agree to decide on counteraction.
\uparrow	<i>Departure</i>	The hero leaves home.
D	<i>First function of donor</i>	Hero tested, receives magical agent or helper.
E	<i>Hero's reaction</i>	Hero reacts to actions of the future donor.
F	<i>Receipt of magic agent</i>	Hero acquires the use of a magical agent.
G	<i>Spatial transference</i>	Hero led to object of search.
H	<i>Struggle</i>	Hero and villain join in direct combat.
I	<i>Victory</i>	Villain is defeated.
K	<i>Liquidation</i>	Initial misfortune or lack is liquidated.
\downarrow	<i>Return</i>	Return
Pr	<i>Pursuit</i>	A chase: the hero is pursued.

(Continued)

(Continued)

Rs	<i>Rescue</i>	Rescue of hero from pursuit.
O	<i>Unrecognized arrival</i>	The hero, unrecognized, arrives home or in another country.
L	<i>Unfounded claims</i>	A false hero presents unfounded claim.
M	<i>Difficult task</i>	A difficult task is proposed to the hero.
N	<i>Solution</i>	The task is resolved.
Q	<i>Recognition</i>	The hero is recognized.
Ex	<i>Exposure</i>	The false hero or villain is exposed.
T	<i>Transfiguration</i>	The hero is given a new appearance.
U	<i>Punishment</i>	The villain is punished.
W	<i>Wedding</i>	The hero is married and ascends the throne.
There are seven dramatis personae in Propp's scheme		
1	<i>Villain</i>	Fights with hero.
2	<i>Donor</i>	Provides hero with magical agent.
3	<i>Helper</i>	Aids hero in solving difficult tasks.
4	<i>Princess and her father</i>	Sought-for person. Assigns difficult tasks.
5	<i>Dispatcher</i>	Sends hero on his mission.
6	<i>Hero</i>	Searches for something or fights with villain.
7	<i>False hero</i>	Claims to be hero but is unmasked.

It's quite remarkable how many television programs, films, and other narratives can be seen as fairy tales and analyzed using updated and modernized versions of Propp's functions, as long as you don't worry about his rule that the sequence of functions is always identical. For example, you can apply Propp's functions to the James Bond stories quite easily. Bond is always sent on a mission by M, who has Q give Bond "secret weapons" (what Propp called "magic agents"). Bond is often pursued and captured by a villain, whom he eventually outwits and destroys. And usually he gets to have sex—or so we are led to

believe—with some beautiful woman he has rescued from the villain (the equivalent of “the hero is married and ascends the throne”).

❖ PARADIGMATIC ANALYSIS OF TEXTS

Another important method of analyzing narrative texts needs to be explained: paradigmatic analysis, a search for the oppositions found in texts that help give them meaning. While syntagmatic analysis focuses on the sequence of events in a text and how the order of events generates meaning, **paradigmatic analysis** concerns itself with how oppositions hidden in the text generate meaning. It stems from the work of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and his analysis of myths. As folklorist Alan Dundes (1928/1968) wrote in his introduction to Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*:

Paradigmatic analysis seeks to describe the pattern (usually based on an a priori binary principle of opposition) which allegedly underlies the folkloristic text. This pattern is not the same as the sequential structure at all. Rather, the elements are taken out of the “given” order and are regrouped in one or more analytic schema. (p. xi)

We are back now to Saussure’s notion that concepts have meaning differentially. Roman Jakobson, a famous linguist, made the same point—that binary oppositions are the fundamental way the human mind produces meaning (Culler, 1986). In every text, the human mind searches not only for concepts but also for oppositions that enable it to make sense of things. We do this because that is how language works; concepts are always defined differentially.

Skyfall: A Paradigmatic Analysis

Let me offer a paradigmatic analysis of a James Bond film, *Skyfall*. The oppositions we find in this text are either stated or implied and provide those who view the film with an understanding of what it means. *Skyfall*, the 23rd James Bond film, was released in 2012. It made more than \$1 billion and was at one time the seventh-highest-grossing film ever made. (It’s now 21st, according to Wikipedia.) It stars Daniel Craig as Bond and Javier Bardem as Raoul Silva, a former MI6 agent who felt he was betrayed by M (Judi Dench) and plots revenge against

her and the agency she runs. The film contains many battles between Bond and various villains and culminates in a battle scene in which Silva and a large group of his men, in a helicopter, attack Bond and M, who have lured Silva to Skyfall, Bond's childhood home and family estate in Scotland. M is wounded during the attack. Bond blows up Skyfall, destroying the helicopter and killing many of Silva's men. Silva survives, tracks down M, holds a gun to her head and puts his head next to hers, and asks her to pull the trigger. Bond has followed Silva and throws a knife into Silva's back, killing him. M, who was wounded, dies.

Hero	Villain
James Bond (Daniel Craig)	Raoul Silva (Javier Bardem)
Works for MI6	Worked for MI6
Defends MI6 and M	Attacks MI6
Blows up Skyfall	Blows up MI6 headquarters
Motive: Patriotism	Motive: Revenge (for being left to die by M)
Captures Silva on island near Macau	Wants to be captured, brought to London, escapes
Chases Silva through London Underground	Evades Bond
Lures Silva to Skyfall	Attacks Skyfall with helicopter and many killers
With allies, kills many attackers	With attackers, wounds M (who eventually dies from wound)
Kills Silva: Throws knife into his back	Is killed by Bond while holding gun to M's head

When people see this film, these polar oppositions give it meaning. This is true even if people aren't consciously making these distinctions, because it is through binary oppositions that we make sense of concepts and texts. Some critics argue that paradigmatic analysis does not discover structures in texts but "reads them in" or invents them ("hocus-pocus"); others claim that it finds structures (sets of oppositions) that are really there, hidden in the text ("God's truth") and that our minds recognize them, even if we don't always bring these oppositions to consciousness.

Remember that there is a difference between negations and oppositions. Oppositions use two different terms (for example, *happy* and *sad*), while negations use the same term.

Oppositions	Happy versus sad
Negation	Happy versus unhappy

With each pair of opposites, there is always a concept or notion that links the two. In the case of *happy* and *sad*, it would be something like “mental state.” Every text generates meaning two ways, then—first, by the order in which events happen (the syntagmatic structure) and second, by the hidden oppositions found in the text (the paradigmatic structure).

❖ APPLICATIONS OF SEMIOTIC THEORY

Let’s consider how semiotic theory can be applied. I will discuss some “signs” that are part of our everyday lives: eyeglasses and teeth. They also have significance in television shows and movies, where they can be used to suggest things about characters. And that is because we all try to “read” faces for clues to personality, character, status, and other things. This is, of course, a semiotic enterprise—even for those who have never heard of semiotics. Many articles in newspapers and magazines are semiotic in that they attempt to make sense of objects and phenomena semioticians would call “signs.” (A person may never have heard the term *schizophrenic*, but that doesn’t prevent him or her from being one!)

I will start with eyeglasses. In 1991, Henry Allen, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, wrote an article titled “Everything You Wanted to Know About Specs” that was really an exercise in applied semiotics. The article began as follows: “Eyeglasses are not only optical instruments, but they are also costume, manifesto, clothing for the face, and societal fetish.” Allen pointed out that eyeglasses were a \$12 billion-a-year industry in America and that about 60% of Americans at the time owned glasses. He continued, discussing men’s glasses from a semiotic perspective:

Men’s glasses got sexy in their own right in the ‘50s, when intellect, alienation, and flaws became sexy in men. The tortured James Dean was seen in glasses. Buddy Holly wore black plastic rims that said, I wear glasses, I don’t care if you think I’m handsome or not.

Allen (1991) then offered interpretations of the meaning of various styles of glasses, which I present as a chart:

Signifier	Signified
KIND OF GLASSES	MEANING
Small glasses	Earnest intensity
Small glasses in wire	Industry and fierce modesty
Big glasses	Not embarrassed to wear glasses
Round glasses	Tradition, authenticity, intellect
Squared off glasses	Technology, can-do, engineering
Aviator (teardrop)	Masculine adventure
Eye high in frame	Introspection
Eye low in frame	Optimism, action
Silver wire	Mechanical practicality
Black wire	Solid state electronics, minimalist art
Heavy plastic frames	Big ego, big bucks
Colored rims	Playful, creative, eccentric
Rimless	Cool, modest, denying one has glasses
Tinted	Mysterious

These interpretations are semiotic, and Allen was aware of the science, for he concluded his article with a discussion of World War II general Douglas MacArthur, seen as a great strategist by some and a great self-promoter by others:

At the heart of the aesthetics of glasses, from deliberate contradiction to preempting of stereotype, is coyness.

Contradiction: General Douglas MacArthur decorated his face with aviator sunglasses, symbol of technological daring, and a corn-cob pipe, symbol of primitive wisdom—one of the semiotic masterstrokes of the century. (Allen, 1991)

Thus, we can see that eyeglasses are used for many purposes—not only to allow us to see more clearly.

Teeth would seem an unlikely candidate for semiotic analysis, but according to a dentist, they are important signs and may have a great deal to do with our love lives and success in the business world. We all

know, of course, what a couple of sharp and pointy teeth sticking out of the mouth of a pale and tired-looking man mean—he’s a vampire. We’ve learned this convention from films. But teeth have other meanings as well. A San Francisco cosmetic dentist named Jeff Morley caught the attention of the *Wall Street Journal* (Chase, 1982) a number of years ago by arguing that people unconsciously “read” teeth. Because of this, Morley argued, people have to make sure their teeth convey the right messages and make sure their teeth are perfect.

An advertisement by Morley and an associate tells the story:

Your smile says a lot about you. The alignment, shape, color, and condition of your teeth are powerful communicators to friends, family, and business associates. They may also have a lot to do with your self-esteem.

As Morley explained, in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*:

“What it comes down to is this: buck teeth imply people are dumb. Large canines imply aggressiveness. Weak chins imply passivity, while strong chins imply a macho, studly personality—I don’t know who made these up, but the fact is, they’re cultural standards.” (Chase, 1982, p. 1)

Thus, our eyeglasses and teeth function as signs that people interpret to gain information about us. We are always sending messages, even if we don’t say a word—and it is the task of semiotics to help us determine how to “read” the messages others are sending us and make sure that the messages we are sending are the ones we want to send.

❖ PAUL EKMAN ON FACIAL EXPRESSION

Paul Ekman, probably the foremost authority on **facial expression**, did extensive research and found that there are seven universal facial expressions and one “neutral” state that doesn’t show any emotion (Ekman & Sejnowski, 1992). They are as follows, in alphabetical order:

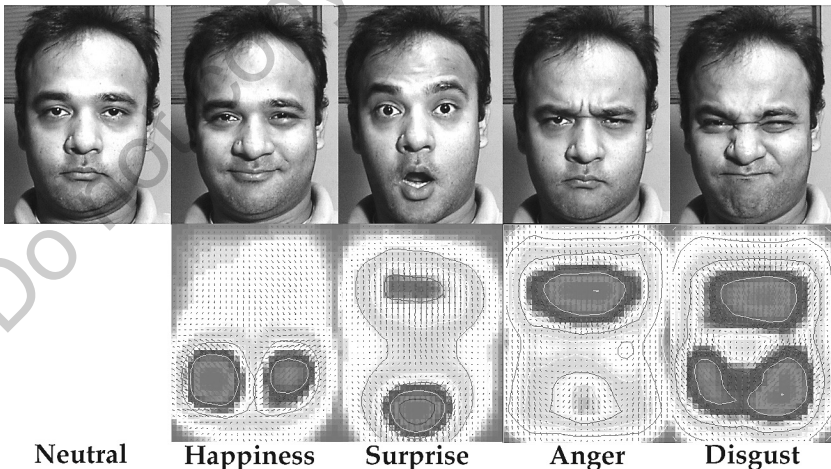
Anger	Neutral (no particular emotion)
Determination	Pouting
Disgust	Sadness
Fear	Surprise

In a classroom exercise, I showed photographs of Ekman demonstrating these emotions to my students and found they could not correctly identify most of the emotions.

Ekman developed a facial action coding system, which states that there are 43 muscles in the human face that in different combinations show our emotions. Sometimes an emotion lasts for just a fragment of a second on our faces (what Ekman calls “micro expressions”) and we aren’t aware of having shown it. In a report to the National Science Foundation, *Facial Expression Understanding* (1992), co-written with Terrence J. Sejnowski, we find the following information about facial expressions:

- They provide information about our emotions and our moods.
- They reflect cognitive activity like perplexity, concentration, and boredom.
- They reveal truthfulness and lying.
- They offer diagnostic information about depression, mania, and schizophrenia and about our responses to treatment for these afflictions.

Figure 3.1 Five Facial Expression Images



These images reflect five emotions reflected in facial expressions. The images below them show the energy expended for each facial expression going from neutral to the expression.

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The report adds that “the technological means are now in hand to develop automated systems for monitoring facial expressions and animating artificial models. . . . Face technology . . . could revolutionize fields as diverse as medicine, law, communications, and education” (§ I-A). So faces can reveal a great deal to the trained observer.

❖ SEMIOTICS: APPLICATIONS AND EXERCISES

1. Find an advertisement that has both metaphor and metonymy and explain how they function to sell the product. Study the facial expressions of the people in the advertisement. What do you think they reveal? On what basis do you come to your conclusions?
2. Find articles that use semiotics to analyze hairstyles and hair color for women, men, or both. What insights did they offer? How convincing are the articles?
3. Write a 1,000-word semiotic analysis of *Avatar* or some other film or television program chosen by your instructor. Start your paper with an applications chart (see Table 3.2, p. 96) on a separate page. To make the chart, list semiotic concepts on the left-hand side of the page and applications of the concepts to events and dialogue in the film on the right-hand side of the page. In your paper, amplify and explain your applications.

Note: Use applications charts for all your analyses of texts.

4. Using semiotic methods, write a 1,000-word analysis of “The Schizoid Man” episode of *The Prisoner* (available free on the Internet). Use the applications chart format described in Exercise 3.

Note: Free videos of *The Prisoner* can be found at <http://www.amctv.com/>.

5. Record and review a television commercial and discuss the signs and other aspects of the commercial that you found interesting. Use an applications chart to list the semiotic terms you used in your analysis and to show how you have applied them. Make a syntagmatic (Propp) and paradigmatic (Lévi-Strauss) analysis of the text.

Table 3.2 Sample Applications Chart

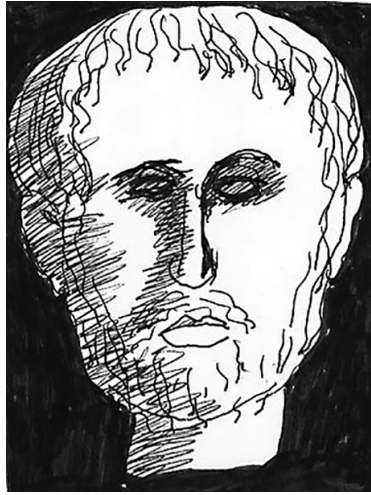
Sample Concepts/Applications Chart for <i>The Prisoner</i> , "Arrival"		
Semiotic Concepts	Applications to "Arrival"	
1. Signifier/ Signified	Filing cabinets The village Numbers Blonde housekeeper	Bureaucracy Small town Prisoners Innocence
2. Syntagmatic analysis	See chart in essay applying some of Propp's functions to the episode.	
3. Paradigmatic analysis	See chart in essay showing some basic oppositions in the text.	
4. Metaphor	One important metaphor in this text is that the village is a prison.	
5. Synecdoche	Rover stands for the authority of Number Two and the administration.	
6. Icons	Some of the more important icons are the photographs of Number Six and the statues found in the village.	
7. Indexes	The smoke that pours into the agent's room while he is packing is a gas that knocks him out and enables people to bring him to the village.	
8. Symbols	The helicopter is a symbol for escape and the pawns on the chessboard symbolize the villagers.	
9. Intertextuality	<i>The Prisoner</i> is related to a program that McGoohan was on earlier, <i>Danger Man</i> , and to spy and science fiction genres in general.	
10. Codes	One important code is the smaller the number, the greater the power. Another is duplicity: Nobody can be trusted. Another is lack of privacy: Number Six and others are always being monitored.	

❖ CONCLUSIONS

Semiotics, then, is a valuable tool for understanding how people find meaning in life—in objects, in rituals, in texts of all kinds. When you see the world as "perfused with signs, if not made up entirely of them," and know something about how signs communicate, you have an extremely useful research tool to analyze texts found in the mass media as well as communication in everyday life.

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Aristotle

Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. This is not a function of any other art. Every other art can instruct or persuade about its own particular subject-matter; for instance, medicine about what is healthy and unhealthy, geometry about the properties of magnitudes, arithmetic about numbers, and the same is true of the other arts and sciences. But rhetoric we look upon as the power of observing the means of persuasion on almost any subject presented to us; and that is why we say that, in its technical character, it is not concerned with any special or definite class of subjects,

—Aristotle (quoted in McKeon, 1941, p. 1329)

Rhetoric has to do with the ways in which signs influence people. That is, rhetoric is persuasive communication. This definition represents an historical evolution of our understanding of the nature of communication in general and rhetoric in particular. In other words, what counts as rhetoric (i.e., persuasive communication) is much broader than was once the case.

—Deanna D. Sellnow, *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture: Considering Mediated Texts* (2017, p. 28)