

Second Edition

# the basics

semiotics  
daniel chandler

# SEMIOTICS

## THE BASICS

Following the success of the first edition, *Semiotics: the Basics* has been revised to include new material on the development of semiotics from Saussure to contemporary socio-semiotics. This second edition is fully updated with an extended index, glossary, and further reading section. Using jargon-free language and lively up-to-date examples, this book demystifies this highly interdisciplinary subject and addresses questions such as:

- What is a sign?
- Which codes do we take for granted?
- What is a text?
- How can semiotics be used in textual analysis?
- Who are Saussure, Peirce, Barthes and Jakobson – and why are they important?

The new edition of *Semiotics: the Basics* provides an interesting and accessible introduction to this field of study, and is a must-have for anyone coming to semiotics for the first time.

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# SEMIOTICS **THE BASICS**

SECOND EDITION

Daniel Chandler

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While Roland Barthes (1967b, xi) declared that ‘perhaps we must invert Saussure’s formulation and assert that semiology is a branch of linguistics’, most of those who call themselves semioticians at least implicitly accept Saussure’s location of linguistics within semiotics. The linguist and semiotician Roman Jakobson was in no doubt that ‘language is a *system of signs*, and linguistics is part and parcel of the science of signs or semiotics’ (Jakobson 1949a, 50; cf. 1970, 454). However, even if we theoretically locate linguistics within semiotics it is difficult to avoid adopting the linguistic model in exploring other sign-systems. The American linguist Leonard Bloomfield asserted that ‘linguistics is the chief contributor to semiotics’ (Bloomfield 1939, 55). Jakobson defined semiotics as ‘the general science of signs which has as its basic discipline linguistics, the science of verbal signs’ (Jakobson 1963e, 289). Semioticians commonly refer to films, television and radio programmes, advertising posters and so on as ‘texts’, and to ‘reading television’ (Fiske and Hartley 1978). Media such as television and film are regarded by some semioticians as being in some respects like languages. The issue tends to revolve around whether such media are closer to what we treat as reality in the everyday world of our own experience or whether they have more in common with a symbolic system like writing. However, there is a danger of trying to force all media into a linguistic framework. Contemporary ‘social semiotics’ has moved beyond the structuralist focus on signifying systems as languages, seeking to explore the use of signs in specific social situations.

## LANGUE AND PAROLE

We will shortly examine Saussure’s highly influential model of the sign, but before doing so it is important to understand something about the general framework within which he situated it. Saussure made what is now a famous distinction between *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech). *Langue* refers to the system of rules and conventions which is independent of, and pre-exists, individual users; *parole* refers to its use in particular instances. Applying the notion to semiotic systems in general rather than simply to language, the distinction is one between *system* and *usage*, *structure* and *event* or *code* and

*message*. According to the Saussurean distinction, in a semiotic system such as cinema, for instance, individual films can be seen as the *parole* of an underlying system of cinema ‘language’. Saussure focused on *langue* rather than *parole*. To the Saussurean semiotician, what matters most are the underlying structures and rules of a semiotic system as a whole rather than specific performances or practices which are merely instances of its use. Saussure’s approach was to study the system ‘synchronically’ as if it were frozen in time (like a photograph) – rather than ‘diachronically’ – in terms of its evolution over time (like a film). Some structuralist cultural theorists subsequently adopted this Saussurean priority, focusing on the functions of social and cultural phenomena within semiotic systems. Theorists differ over whether the system precedes and determines usage (structural determinism) or whether usage precedes and determines the system (social determinism) (although note that most structuralists argue that the system *constrains* rather than completely *determines* usage).

The structuralist dichotomy between usage and system has been criticized for its rigidity, splitting process from product, subject from structure (Coward and Ellis 1977, 4, 14; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, 44, 173–4). A fundamental objection is that the prioritization of structure over usage fails to account for changes in structure. Marxist theorists have been particularly critical. In the late 1920s, Valentin Voloshinov rejected Saussure’s synchronic approach and his emphasis on internal relations within the system of language (Voloshinov 1973; Morris 1994). Voloshinov reversed the Saussurean priority of *langue* over *parole*: ‘The sign is part of organized social intercourse and cannot exist, as such, outside it, reverting to a mere physical artifact’ (Voloshinov 1973, 21). The meaning of a sign is not in its relationship to other signs within the language system but rather in the social context of its use. Saussure was criticized for ignoring historicity (*ibid.*, 61). The Russian linguists Roman Jakobson and Yuri Tynyanov declared in 1927 that ‘pure synchronism now proves to be an illusion’, adding that ‘every synchronic system has its past and its future as inseparable structural elements of the system’ (cited in Voloshinov 1973, 166). Writing in 1929, Voloshinov observed that ‘there is no real moment

in time when a synchronic system of language could be constructed . . . A synchronic system may be said to exist only from the point of view of the subjective consciousness of an individual speaker belonging to some particular language group at some particular moment of historical time' (Voloshinov 1973, 66). While the French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss applied a synchronic approach in the domain of anthropology, most contemporary semioticians have sought to reprioritize historicity and social context. Language is seldom treated as a static, closed and stable system which is inherited from preceding generations but as constantly changing. The sign, as Voloshinov put it, is 'an arena of the class struggle' (*ibid.*, 23). Seeking to establish a wholeheartedly 'social semiotics', Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress declare that 'the social dimensions of semiotic systems are so intrinsic to their nature and function that the systems cannot be studied in isolation' (Hodge and Kress 1988, 1).

#### WHY STUDY SEMIOTICS?

While Saussure may be hailed as a founder of semiotics, semiotics has become increasingly less Saussurean since the 1970s. While the current account of semiotics focuses primarily on its structuralist forms, we will also explore relevant critiques and subsequent developments. But before launching on an exploration of this intriguing subject, let us consider why we should bother: why should we study semiotics? This is a pressing question in part because the writings of semioticians have a reputation for being dense with jargon: one critic wittily remarked that 'semiotics tells us things we already know in a language we will never understand' (Paddy Whannel, cited in Seiter 1992, 31).

The semiotic establishment may seem to be a very exclusive club but its concerns are not confined to members. No one with an interest in how things are represented can afford to ignore an approach which focuses on, and problematizes, the process of representation. While we need not accept the postmodernist stance that there is no external reality beyond sign-systems, studying semiotics can assist us to become more aware of the mediating role of signs and of the roles played by ourselves and others in constructing social



realities. It can make us less likely to take reality for granted as something which is wholly independent of human interpretation. Exploring semiotic perspectives, we may come to realize that information or meaning is not ‘contained’ in the world or in books, computers or audio-visual media. Meaning is not ‘transmitted’ to us – we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we are normally unaware. Becoming aware of such codes is both inherently fascinating and intellectually empowering. We learn from semiotics that we live in a world of signs and we have no way of understanding anything except through signs and the codes into which they are organized. Through the study of semiotics, we become aware that these signs and codes are normally transparent and disguise our task in reading them. Living in a world of increasingly visual signs, we need to learn that even the most realistic signs are not what they appear to be. By making more explicit the codes by which signs are interpreted, we may perform the valuable semiotic function of denaturalizing signs. This is not to suggest that all representations of reality are of equal status – quite the contrary. In defining realities signs serve ideological functions. Deconstructing and contesting the realities of signs can reveal whose realities are privileged and whose are suppressed. Such a study involves investigating the construction and maintenance of reality by particular social groups. To decline the study of signs is to leave to others the control of the world of meanings which we inhabit.



# MODELS OF THE SIGN

We seem as a species to be driven by a desire to make meanings: above all, we are surely *homo significans* – meaning-makers. Distinctively, we make meanings through our creation and interpretation of ‘signs’. Indeed, according to Peirce, ‘we think only in signs’ (Peirce 1931–58, 2.302). Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects, but such things have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning. ‘Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign’, declares Peirce (ibid., 2.172). Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as ‘signifying’ something – referring to or *standing for* something other than itself. We interpret things as signs largely unconsciously by relating them to familiar systems of conventions. It is this meaningful use of signs which is at the heart of the concerns of semiotics.

The two dominant contemporary models of what constitutes a sign are those of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. These will be discussed in turn.

## THE SAUSSUREAN MODEL

Saussure's model of the sign is in the dyadic tradition. Prior advocates of dyadic models, in which the two parts of a sign consist of a 'sign vehicle' and its meaning, included Augustine (397), Albertus Magnus and the Scholastics (13th century), Hobbes (1640) and Locke (1690) (see Nöth 1990, 88). Focusing on *linguistic* signs (such as words), Saussure defined a sign as being composed of a 'signifier' (*signifiant*) and a 'signified' (*signifié*) (see Figure 1.1). Contemporary commentators tend to describe the signifier as the form that the sign takes and the signified as the concept to which it refers. Saussure makes the distinction in these terms:

A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept [*signified*] and a sound pattern [*signifier*]. The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses. This sound pattern may be called a 'material' element only in that it is the representation of our sensory impressions. The sound pattern may thus be distinguished from the other element associated with it in a linguistic sign. This other element is generally of a more abstract kind: the concept.

(Saussure 1983, 66)

For Saussure, both the signifier (the 'sound pattern') and the signified (the concept) were purely 'psychological' (*ibid.*, 12, 14–15, 66).

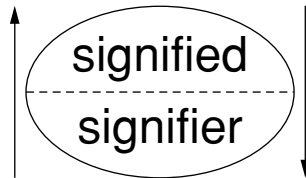


FIGURE 1.1 Saussure's model of the sign

Source: Based on Saussure 1967, 158

Both were non-material *form* rather than *substance*. Figure 1.2 may help to clarify this aspect of Saussure's own model. Nowadays, while the basic 'Saussurean' model is commonly adopted, it tends to be a more materialistic model than that of Saussure himself. The *signifier* is now commonly interpreted as the *material (or physical) form* of the sign – it is something which can be seen, heard, touched, smelled or tasted – as with Roman Jakobson's *signans*, which he described as the external and perceptible part of the sign (Jakobson 1963b, 111; 1984b, 98).

Within the Saussurean model, the *sign* is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified (ibid., 67). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is referred to as 'signification', and this is represented in the Saussurean diagram by the arrows. The horizontal broken line marking the two elements of the sign is referred to as 'the bar'.

If we take a linguistic example, the word 'open' (when it is invested with meaning by someone who encounters it on a shop doorway) is a *sign* consisting of:

- a *signifier*: the word 'open';
- a *signified concept*: that the shop is open for business.

A sign must have both a signifier and a signified. You cannot have a totally meaningless signifier or a completely formless signified

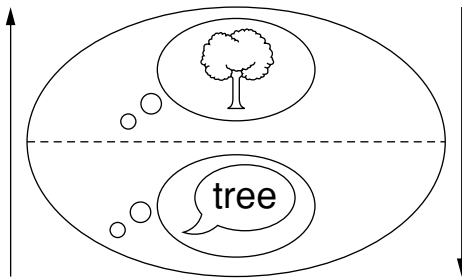


FIGURE 1.2 Concept and sound pattern

(*ibid.*, 101). A sign is a recognizable combination of a signifier with a particular signified. The same signifier (the word ‘open’) could stand for a different signified (and thus be a different sign) if it were on a push-button inside a lift (‘push to open door’). Similarly, many signifiers could stand for the concept ‘open’ (for instance, on top of a packing carton, a small outline of a box with an open flap for ‘open this end’) – again, with each unique pairing constituting a different sign.

Saussure focused on the linguistic sign and he ‘phonocentrically’ privileged the spoken word. As we have noted, he referred specifically to the signifier as a ‘sound pattern’ (*image acoustique*). He saw writing as a separate, secondary, dependent but comparable sign-system (*ibid.*, 15, 24–5, 117). Within the (‘separate’) system of written signs, a signifier such as the written letter ‘t’ signified a sound in the primary sign-system of language (and thus a written word would also signify a sound rather than a concept). Thus for Saussure, writing relates to speech as signifier to signified or, as Derrida puts it, for Saussure writing is ‘a sign of a sign’ (Derrida 1967a, 43). Most subsequent theorists who have adopted Saussure’s model tend to refer to the form of linguistic signs as either spoken or written (e.g. Jakobson 1970, 455–6 and 1984b, 98). We will return later to the issue of the post-Saussurean ‘rematerialization’ of the sign.

As for the *signified*, Umberto Eco notes that it is somewhere between ‘a mental image, a concept and a psychological reality’ (Eco 1976, 14–15). Most commentators who adopt Saussure’s model still treat the signified as a mental construct, although they often note that it may nevertheless refer indirectly to things in the world. Saussure’s original model of the sign ‘brackets the referent’, excluding reference to objects existing in the world – somewhat ironically for one who defined semiotics as ‘a science *which studies the role of signs as part of social life*’ (Saussure 1983, 15). His *signified* is not to be identified directly with such a referent but is a *concept* in the mind – not a thing but the notion of a thing. Some people may wonder why Saussure’s model of the sign refers only to a concept and not to a thing. An observation from Susanne Langer (who was not referring to Saussure’s theories) may be useful here. Note that like most contemporary commentators, Langer uses the

term 'symbol' to refer to the linguistic sign (a term which Saussure himself avoided): 'Symbols are not proxy for their objects but are *vehicles for the conception of objects* . . . In talking *about* things we have conceptions of them, not the things themselves; and *it is the conceptions, not the things, that symbols directly mean*. Behaviour towards conceptions is what words normally evoke; this is the typical process of thinking'. She adds that 'If I say "Napoleon", you do not bow to the conqueror of Europe as though I had introduced him, but merely think of him' (Langer 1951, 61).

Thus, for Saussure the linguistic sign is wholly immaterial – although he disliked referring to it as 'abstract' (Saussure 1983, 15). The immateriality of the Saussurean sign is a feature which tends to be neglected in many popular commentaries. If the notion seems strange, we need to remind ourselves that words have no value in themselves – that is their value. Saussure noted that it is not the metal in a coin that fixes its value (*ibid.*, 117). Several reasons could be offered for this. For instance, if linguistic signs drew attention to their materiality this would hinder their communicative transparency. Furthermore, being immaterial, language is an extraordinarily economical medium and words are always ready to hand. Nevertheless, a principled argument can be made for the revaluation of the materiality of the sign, as we shall see in due course.

## TWO SIDES OF A PAGE

Saussure stressed that sound and thought (or the signifier and the signified) were as inseparable as the two sides of a piece of paper (Saussure 1983, 111). They were 'intimately linked' in the mind 'by an associative link' – 'each triggers the other' (*ibid.*, 66). Saussure presented these elements as wholly interdependent, neither pre-existing the other. Within the context of spoken language, a sign could not consist of sound without sense or of sense without sound. He used the two arrows in the diagram to suggest their interaction. The bar and the opposition nevertheless suggest that the signifier and the signified can be distinguished for analytical purposes. Poststructuralist theorists criticize the clear distinction which the Saussurean bar seems to suggest between the signifier and the signified; they seek to blur or

erase it in order to reconfigure the sign. Common sense tends to insist that the *signified* takes precedence over, and pre-exists, the signifier: ‘look after the sense’, quipped Lewis Carroll, ‘and the sounds will take care of themselves’ (*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Chapter 9). However, in dramatic contrast, post-Saussurean theorists have seen the model as implicitly granting primacy to the *signifier*, thus reversing the commonsensical position.

## THE RELATIONAL SYSTEM

Saussure argued that signs only make sense as part of a formal, generalized and abstract system. His conception of meaning was purely *structural* and *relational* rather than *referential*: primacy is given to relationships rather than to things (the meaning of signs was seen as lying in their systematic relation to each other rather than deriving from any inherent features of signifiers or any reference to material things). Saussure did not define signs in terms of some essential or intrinsic nature. For Saussure, signs refer primarily to each other. Within the language system, ‘everything depends on relations’ (Saussure 1983, 121). No sign makes sense on its own but

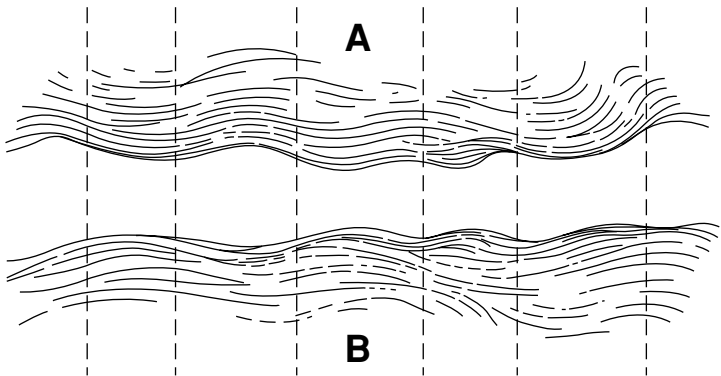


FIGURE 1.3 Planes of thought and sound

Source: Based on Saussure 1967, 156



only in relation to other signs. Both signifier and signified are purely relational entities (ibid., 118). This notion can be hard to understand since we may feel that an individual word such as ‘tree’ does have some meaning for us, but Saussure’s argument is that its meaning depends on its relation to other words within the system (such as ‘bush’).

Together with the ‘vertical’ alignment of signifier and signified *within* each individual sign (suggesting two structural ‘levels’), the emphasis on the relationship *between* signs defines what are in effect two planes – that of the signifier and the signified. Later, Louis Hjelmslev referred to the ‘expression plane’ and the ‘content plane’ (Hjelmslev 1961, 59). Saussure himself referred to *sound* and *thought* as two distinct but correlated planes (see Figure 1.3). ‘We can envisage . . . the language . . . as a series of adjoining subdivisions simultaneously imprinted both on the plane of vague, amorphous thought (A), and on the equally featureless plane of sound (B)’ (Saussure 1983, 110–11). The arbitrary division of the two continua into signs is suggested by the dotted lines while the wavy (rather than parallel) edges of the two ‘amorphous’ masses suggest the lack of any natural fit between them. The gulf and lack of fit between the two planes highlights their relative autonomy. While Saussure is careful not to refer directly to reality, the American literary theorist Fredric Jameson reads into this feature of Saussure’s system that:

it is not so much the individual word or sentence that ‘stands for’ or ‘reflects’ the individual object or event in the real world, but rather that the entire system of signs, the entire field of the *langue*, lies parallel to reality itself; that it is the totality of systematic language, in other words, which is analogous to whatever organized structures exist in the world of reality, and that our understanding proceeds from one whole or Gestalt to the other, rather than on a one-to-one basis.

(Jameson 1972, 32–3)

What Saussure refers to as the ‘value’ of a sign depends on its relations with other signs within the system (see Figure 1.4). A sign has no ‘absolute’ value independent of this context (Saussure 1983, 80).

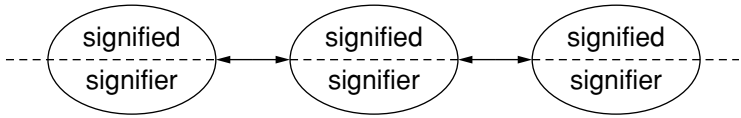


FIGURE 1.4 The relations between signs

Source: Based on Saussure 1967, 159

Saussure uses an analogy with the game of chess, noting that the value of each piece depends on its position on the chessboard (*ibid.*, 88). The sign is more than the sum of its parts. While *signification* – what is signified – clearly depends on the relationship between the two parts of the sign, the *value* of a sign is determined by the relationships between the sign and other signs within the system as a whole (*ibid.*, 112–13).

The notion of value . . . shows us that it is a great mistake to consider a sign as nothing more than the combination of a certain sound and a certain concept. To think of a sign as nothing more would be to isolate it from the system to which it belongs. It would be to suppose that a start could be made with individual signs, and a system constructed by putting them together. On the contrary, the system as a united whole is the starting point, from which it becomes possible, by a process of analysis, to identify its constituent elements.

(Saussure 1983, 112)

As an example of the distinction between signification and value, Saussure notes that:

The French word *mouton* may have the same meaning as the English word *sheep*; but it does not have the same value. There are various reasons for this, but in particular the fact that the English word for the meat of this animal, as prepared and served for a meal, is not *sheep* but *mutton*. The difference in value between *sheep* and *mouton* hinges on the fact that in English

there is also another word *mutton* for the meat, whereas *mouton* in French covers both.

(Saussure 1983, 114)

Saussure's relational conception of meaning was specifically *differential*: he emphasized the differences between signs. Language for him was a system of functional differences and oppositions. 'In a language, as in every other semiological system, what distinguishes a sign is what constitutes it' (ibid., 119). It has been noted that 'a one-term language is an impossibility because its single term could be applied to everything and differentiate nothing; it requires at least one other term to give it definition' (Sturrock 1979, 10). Advertising furnishes a good example of this notion, since what matters in 'positioning' a product is *not* the relationship of advertising signifiers to real-world referents, but the differentiation of each sign from the others to which it is related. Saussure's concept of the relational identity of signs is at the heart of structuralist theory.

Saussure emphasized in particular negative, oppositional differences between signs. He argued that 'concepts . . . are defined not positively, in terms of their content, but negatively by contrast with other items in the same system. What characterizes each most exactly is *being whatever the others are not*' (Saussure 1983, 115; *my emphasis*). This notion may initially seem mystifying if not perverse, but the concept of negative differentiation becomes clearer if we consider how we might teach someone who did not share our language what we mean by the term 'red'. We would be unlikely to make our point by simply showing that person a range of different objects which all happened to be red – we would probably do better to single out a red object from a set of objects which were identical in all respects except colour. Although Saussure focuses on speech, he also noted that in writing, 'the values of the letter are purely negative and differential' – all we need to be able to do is to distinguish one letter from another (ibid., 118). As for his emphasis on negative differences, Saussure remarks that although both the signified and the signifier are purely differential and negative when considered separately, the sign in which they are combined is a *positive* term. He adds that 'the moment we compare one sign with another

as positive combinations, the term *difference* should be dropped . . . Two signs . . . are not different from each other, but only distinct. They are simply in *opposition* to each other. The entire mechanism of language . . . is based on oppositions of this kind and upon the phonic and conceptual differences they involve' (ibid., 119).

## ARBITRARINESS

Although the signifier is treated by its users as 'standing for' the signified, Saussurean semioticians emphasize that there is no necessary, intrinsic, direct or inevitable relationship between the signifier and the signified. Saussure stressed the *arbitrariness* of the sign (ibid., 67, 78) – more specifically the arbitrariness of the link between the signifier and the signified (ibid., 67). He was focusing on linguistic signs, seeing language as the most important sign-system; for Saussure, the arbitrary nature of the sign was the first principle of language (ibid., 67) – arbitrariness was identified later by Charles Hockett as a key 'design feature' of language (Hockett 1958). The feature of arbitrariness may indeed help to account for the extraordinary versatility of language (Lyons 1977, 71). In the context of natural language, Saussure stressed that there is no inherent, essential, transparent, self-evident or natural connection between the signifier and the signified – between the sound of a word and the concept to which it refers (Saussure 1983, 67, 68–9, 76, 111, 117). Note that although Saussure prioritized speech, he also stressed that 'the signs used in writing are arbitrary, The letter *t*, for instance, has no connection with the sound it denotes' (Saussure 1983, 117). Saussure himself avoids directly relating the principle of arbitrariness to the relationship between language and an external world, but subsequent commentators often do. Indeed, lurking behind the purely conceptual 'signified' one can often detect Saussure's allusion to real-world referents, as when he notes that 'the street and the train are real enough. Their physical existence is essential to our understanding of what they are' (ibid., 107). In language, at least, the form of the signifier is not determined by what it signifies: there is nothing 'treeish' about the word 'tree'. Languages differ, of course, in how they refer to the same referent. No specific signifier is naturally more

suitable to a signified than any other signifier; in principle any signifier could represent any signified. Saussure observed that ‘there is nothing at all to prevent the association of any idea whatsoever with any sequence of sounds whatsoever’ (ibid., 76); ‘the process which selects one particular sound-sequence to correspond to one particular idea is completely arbitrary’ (ibid., 111).

This principle of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign was not an original conception. In Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus* this issue is debated. Although Cratylus defends the notion of a natural relationship between words and what they represent, Hermogenes declares that ‘no one is able to persuade me that the correctness of names is determined by anything besides convention and agreement . . . No name belongs to a particular thing by nature’ (Plato 1998, 2). While Socrates rejects the absolute arbitrariness of language proposed by Hermogenes, he does acknowledge that convention plays a part in determining meaning. In his work *On Interpretation*, Aristotle went further, asserting that there can be no natural connection between the sound of any language and the things signified. ‘By a noun [or name] we mean a sound significant by convention . . . the limitation “by convention” was introduced because nothing is by nature a noun or name – it is only so when it becomes a symbol’ (Aristotle 2004, 2). The issue even enters into everyday discourse via Shakespeare: ‘That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet’. The notion of the arbitrariness of language was thus not new; indeed, Roman Jakobson notes that Saussure ‘borrowed and expanded’ it from the Yale linguist Dwight Whitney (1827–94) – to whose influence Saussure did allude (Jakobson 1966, 410; Saussure 1983, 18, 26, 110). Nevertheless, the emphasis which Saussure gave to arbitrariness can be seen as highly controversial in the context of a theory which bracketed the referent.

Saussure illustrated the principle of arbitrariness at the lexical level – in relation to individual words as signs. He did not, for instance, argue that syntax is arbitrary. However, the arbitrariness principle can be applied not only to the individual sign, but to the whole sign-system. The fundamental arbitrariness of language is apparent from the observation that each language involves different distinctions between one signifier and another (e.g. ‘tree’ and ‘free’)

and between one signified and another (e.g. ‘tree’ and ‘bush’). The signified is clearly arbitrary if *reality* is perceived as a seamless continuum (which is how Saussure sees the initially undifferentiated realms of both thought and sound): where, for example, does a ‘corner’ end? Common sense suggests that the existence of things in the world preceded our apparently simple application of ‘labels’ to them (a ‘nomenclaturist’ notion which Saussure rejected and to which we will return in due course). Saussure noted that ‘if words had the job of representing concepts fixed in advance, one would be able to find exact equivalents for them as between one language and another. But this is not the case’ (ibid., 114–15). Reality is divided up into arbitrary categories by every language and the conceptual world with which each of us is familiar could have been divided up very differently. Indeed, no two languages categorize reality in the same way. As John Passmore puts it, ‘Languages differ by differentiating differently’ (Passmore 1985, 24). Linguistic categories are not simply a consequence of some predefined structure in the world. There are no natural concepts or categories which are simply reflected in language. Language plays a crucial role in constructing reality.

If one accepts the arbitrariness of the relationship between signifier and signified then one may argue counter-intuitively that the signified is determined by the signifier rather than vice versa. Indeed, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, in adapting Saussurean theories, sought to highlight the primacy of the signifier in the psyche by rewriting Saussure’s model of the sign in the form of a quasi-algebraic sign in which a capital ‘S’ (representing the *signifier*) is placed over a lower-case and italicized ‘s’ (representing the *signified*), these two signifiers being separated by a horizontal ‘bar’ (Lacan 1977, 149). This suited Lacan’s purpose of emphasizing how the signified inevitably ‘slips beneath’ the signifier, resisting our attempts to delimit it. Lacan poetically refers to Saussure’s illustration of the planes of sound and thought as ‘an image resembling the wavy lines of the upper and lower waters in miniatures from manuscripts of *Genesis*; a double flux marked by streaks of rain’, suggesting that this can be seen as illustrating the ‘incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier’ – although he argues that one

should regard the dotted vertical lines not as ‘segments of correspondence’ but as ‘anchoring points’ (*points de capiton* – literally, the ‘buttons’ which anchor upholstery to furniture). However, he notes that this model is too linear, since ‘there is in effect no signifying chain that does not have, as if attached to the punctuation of each of its units, a whole articulation of relevant contexts suspended “vertically”, as it were, from that point’ (ibid., 154). In the spirit of the Lacanian critique of Saussure’s model, subsequent theorists have emphasized the temporary nature of the bond between signifier and signified, stressing that the ‘fixing’ of ‘the chain of signifiers’ is socially situated (Coward and Ellis 1977, 6, 13, 17, 67). Note that while the intent of Lacan in placing the signifier *over* the signified is clear enough, his representational strategy seems a little curious, since in the modelling of society orthodox Marxists routinely represent the fundamental driving force of ‘the [techno-economic] base’ as (logically) below ‘the [ideological] superstructure’.

The arbitrariness of the sign is a radical concept because it establishes the autonomy of language in relation to reality. The Saussurean model, with its emphasis on internal structures within a sign-system, can be seen as supporting the notion that language does not reflect reality but rather *constructs* it. We can use language ‘to say what isn’t in the world, as well as what is. And since we come to know the world through whatever language we have been born into the midst of, it is legitimate to argue that our language determines reality, rather than reality our language’ (Sturrock 1986, 79). In their book *The Meaning of Meaning*, Charles Ogden and Ivor Richards criticized Saussure for ‘neglecting entirely the things for which signs stand’ (Ogden and Richards 1923, 8). Later critics have lamented his model’s detachment from social context (Gardiner 1992, 11). By ‘bracketing the referent’, the Saussurean model ‘severs text from history’ (Stam 2000, 122). We will return to this theme of the relationship between language and reality in Chapter 2.

The arbitrary aspect of signs does help to account for the scope for their interpretation (and the importance of context). There is no one-to-one link between signifier and signified; signs have multiple rather than single meanings. Within a single language, one signifier may refer to many signifieds (e.g. puns) and one signified may be

referred to by many signifiers (e.g. synonyms). Some commentators are critical of the stance that the relationship of the signifier to the signified, even in language, is always completely arbitrary (e.g. Jakobson 1963a, 59, and 1966). Onomatopoeic words are often mentioned in this context, though some semioticians retort that this hardly accounts for the variability between different languages in their words for the same sounds (notably the sounds made by familiar animals) (Saussure 1983, 69).

Saussure declares that ‘the entire linguistic system is founded upon the irrational principle that the sign is arbitrary’. This provocative declaration is followed immediately by the acknowledgement that ‘applied without restriction, this principle would lead to utter chaos’ (ibid., 131). If linguistic signs were to be *totally* arbitrary in every way language would not be a system and its communicative function would be destroyed. He concedes that ‘there exists no language in which nothing at all is motivated’ (ibid.). Saussure admits that ‘a language is not completely arbitrary, for the system has a certain rationality’ (ibid., 73). The principle of arbitrariness does not mean that the form of a word is accidental or random, of course. While the sign is not determined *extralinguistically* it is subject to *intralinguistic* determination. For instance, signifiers must constitute well-formed combinations of sounds which conform with existing patterns within the language in question. Furthermore, we can recognize that a compound noun such as ‘screwdriver’ is not wholly arbitrary since it is a meaningful combination of two existing signs. Saussure introduces a distinction between *degrees* of arbitrariness:

The fundamental principle of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign does not prevent us from distinguishing in any language between what is intrinsically arbitrary – that is, unmotivated – and what is only relatively arbitrary. Not all signs are absolutely arbitrary. In some cases, there are factors which allow us to recognize different degrees of arbitrariness, although never to discard the notion entirely. *The sign may be motivated to a certain extent.*

(Saussure 1983, 130)



Here, then, Saussure modifies his stance somewhat and refers to signs as being ‘relatively arbitrary’. Some subsequent theorists (echoing Althusserian Marxist terminology) refer to the relationship between the signifier and the signified in terms of ‘relative autonomy’ (e.g. Tagg 1988, 167). The *relative* conventionality of relationships between signified and signifier is a point to which we will return shortly.

It should be noted that, while the relationships between signifiers and their signifieds are *ontologically* arbitrary (philosophically, it would not make any difference to the status of these entities in ‘the order of things’ if what we call ‘black’ had always been called ‘white’ and vice versa), this is not to suggest that signifying systems are *socially* or *historically* arbitrary. Natural languages are not, of course, arbitrarily established, unlike historical inventions such as Morse Code. Nor does the arbitrary nature of the sign make it socially ‘neutral’ – in Western culture ‘white’ has come to be a privileged (but typically ‘invisible’) signifier (Dyer 1997). Even in the case of the ‘arbitrary’ colours of traffic lights, the original choice of red for ‘stop’ was not entirely arbitrary, since it already carried relevant associations with danger. As Lévi-Strauss noted, the sign is arbitrary *a priori* but ceases to be arbitrary *a posteriori* – after the sign has come into historical existence it cannot be arbitrarily changed (Lévi-Strauss 1972, 91). As part of its social use within a sign-system, every sign acquires a history and connotations of its own which are familiar to members of the sign-users’ culture. Saussure remarked that although the signifier ‘may seem to be freely chosen’, from the point of view of the linguistic community it is ‘imposed rather than freely chosen’ because ‘a language is always an inheritance from the past’ which its users have ‘no choice but to accept’ (Saussure 1983, 71–2). Indeed, ‘it is because the linguistic sign is arbitrary that it knows no other law than that of tradition, and [it is] because it is founded upon tradition that it can be arbitrary’ (ibid., 74). The arbitrariness principle does *not*, of course mean that an individual can arbitrarily choose any signifier for a given signified. The relation between a signifier and its signified is *not* a matter of individual choice; if it were, then communication would become impossible. ‘The individual has no power to alter a sign in any respect once it has become established in the linguistic community’ (ibid., 68). From

the point of view of individual language-users, language is a 'given' – we don't create the system for ourselves. Saussure refers to the language system as a non-negotiable 'contract' into which one is born (*ibid.*, 14) – although he later problematizes the term (*ibid.*, 71). The ontological arbitrariness which it involves becomes invisible to us as we learn to accept it as natural. As the anthropologist Franz Boas noted, to the native speaker of a language, none of its classifications appear arbitrary (Jakobson 1943, 483).

The Saussurean legacy of the arbitrariness of signs leads semioticians to stress that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is *conventional* – dependent on social and cultural conventions which have to be learned. This is particularly clear in the case of the linguistic signs with which Saussure was concerned: a word means what it does to us only because we collectively agree to let it do so. Saussure felt that the main concern of semiotics should be 'the whole group of systems grounded in the arbitrariness of the sign'. He argued that: 'signs which are entirely arbitrary convey better than others the ideal semiological process. That is why the most complex and the most widespread of all systems of expression, which is the one we find in human languages, is also the most characteristic of all. In this sense, linguistics serves as a model for the whole of semiology, even though languages represent only one type of semiological system' (*ibid.*, 68). He did not in fact offer many examples of sign-systems other than spoken language and writing, mentioning only: the deaf-and-dumb alphabet; social customs; etiquette; religious and other symbolic rites; legal procedures; military signals and nautical flags (*ibid.*, 15, 17, 68, 74). Saussure added that 'any means of expression accepted in a society rests in principle upon a collective habit, or on convention – which comes to the same thing' (*ibid.*, 68). However, while purely conventional signs such as words are quite independent of their referents, other less conventional forms of signs are often somewhat less independent of them. Nevertheless, since the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs is clear, those who have adopted the Saussurean model have tended to avoid 'the familiar mistake of assuming that signs which appear natural to those who use them have an intrinsic meaning and require no explanation' (Culler 1975, 5).