

# SEMIOTICS **THE BASICS**

SECOND EDITION

Daniel Chandler

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2002 by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon,  
Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Reprinted 2002, 2004 (twice), 2005

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

Second edition 2007

© 2002, 2007 Daniel Chandler

The author has asserted his moral rights in relation to this work in  
accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2007.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s  
collection of thousands of eBooks please go to [www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk](http://www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk).”

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced  
or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means,  
now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording,  
or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission  
in writing from the publishers.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Chandler, Daniel.

Semiotics: the basics/Daniel Chandler. – 2nd ed.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Semiotics. I. Title.

P99.C463 2007 302.2–dc22

2006024738

ISBN 0–203–01493–6 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0–415–36376–4 (hbk)

ISBN10: 0–415–36375–6 (pbk)

ISBN10: 0–203–01493–6 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978–0–415–36376–1 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978–0–415–36375–4 (pbk)

ISBN13: 978–0–203–01493–6 (ebk)

# INTRODUCTION

If you go into a bookshop and ask an assistant where to find a book on semiotics, you are likely to meet with a blank look. Even worse, you might be asked to define what semiotics is – which would be a bit tricky if you were looking for a beginner's guide. It's worse still if you do know a bit about semiotics, because it can be hard to offer a simple definition which is of much use in the bookshop. If you've ever been in such a situation, you'll probably agree that it's wise not to ask. Semiotics could be anywhere. The shortest definition is that it is *the study of signs*. But that doesn't leave enquirers much wiser. 'What do you mean by a sign?' people usually ask next. The kinds of signs that are likely to spring immediately to mind are those which we routinely refer to as 'signs' in everyday life, such as road signs, pub signs and star signs. If you were to agree with them that semiotics can include the study of all these and more, people will probably assume that semiotics is about 'visual signs'. You would confirm their hunch if you said that signs can also be drawings, paintings and photographs, and by now they'd be keen to direct you to the art

and photography sections. But if you are thick-skinned and tell them that it also includes words, sounds and ‘body language’, they may reasonably wonder what all these things have in common and how anyone could possibly study such disparate phenomena. If you get this far, they’ve probably already ‘read the signs’ which suggest that you are either eccentric or insane and communication may have ceased.

## DEFINITIONS

Beyond the most basic definition as ‘the study of signs’, there is considerable variation among leading semioticians as to what semiotics involves. One of the broadest definitions is that of Umberto Eco, who states that ‘semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign’ (Eco 1976, 7). Semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as ‘signs’ in everyday speech, but of anything which ‘stands for’ something else. In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. Contemporary semioticians study signs not in isolation but as part of semiotic ‘sign-systems’ (such as a medium or genre). They study how meanings are made and how reality is represented.

Theories of signs (or ‘symbols’) appear throughout the history of philosophy from ancient times onwards (see Todorov 1982), the first explicit reference to semiotics as a branch of philosophy appearing in John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). However, the two primary traditions in contemporary semiotics stem respectively from the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (pronounced ‘purse’) (1839–1914). Saussure’s term *sémiologie* dates from a manuscript of 1894. The first edition of his *Course in General Linguistics*, published posthumously in 1916, contains the declaration that:

It is . . . possible to conceive of a science *which studies the role of signs as part of social life*. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it

*semiology* (from the Greek *sēmeîon*, ‘sign’). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready for it in advance. Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge.

(Saussure 1983, 15–16)

While for the linguist Saussure ‘semiology’ was ‘a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life’, to the philosopher Charles Peirce the field of study which he called ‘semeiotic’ (or ‘semiotic’) was the ‘formal doctrine of signs’, which was closely related to logic (Peirce 1931–58, 2.227). Working quite independently from Saussure across the Atlantic, Peirce borrowed his term from Locke, declaring that:

Logic, in its general sense, is . . . only another name for semiotic (sémeiōtiké), the quasi-necessary, or formal, doctrine of signs. By describing the doctrine as ‘quasi-necessary’, or formal, I mean that we observe the characters of such signs as we know, and . . . by a process which I will not object to naming abstraction, we are led to statements, eminently fallible, and therefore in one sense by no means necessary, as to what must be the characters of all signs used by a ‘scientific’ intelligence, that is to say, by an intelligence capable of learning by experience.

(Peirce 1931–58, 2.227)

Peirce and Saussure are widely regarded as the co-founders of what is now more generally known as *semiotics*. They established two major theoretical traditions. Saussure’s term ‘semiology’ is sometimes used to refer to the Saussurean tradition while the term ‘semiotics’ sometimes refers to the Peircean tradition. However, nowadays the term ‘semiotics’ is widely used as an umbrella term

to embrace the whole field (Nöth 1990, 14). We will outline and discuss both the Saussurean and Peircean models of the sign in the next chapter.

Some commentators adopt Charles W. Morris's definition of semiotics (a reductive variant of Saussure's definition) as 'the science of signs' (Morris 1938, 1–2). The term 'science' is misleading. As yet, semiotics involves no widely agreed theoretical assumptions, models or empirical methodologies. Semiotics has tended to be largely theoretical, many of its theorists seeking to establish its scope and general principles. Peirce and Saussure, for instance, were both concerned with the fundamental definition of the sign. Peirce developed logical taxonomies of types of signs. Many subsequent semioticians have sought to identify and categorize the codes or conventions according to which signs are organized. Clearly there is a need to establish a firm theoretical foundation for a subject which is currently characterized by a host of competing theoretical assumptions. As for methodologies, Saussure's theories constituted a starting point for the development of various structuralist methodologies for analysing texts and social practices. For Roman Jakobson, semiotics 'deals with those general principles which underlie the structure of all signs whatever and with the character of their utilization within messages, as well as with the specifics of the various sign systems and of the diverse messages using those different kinds of signs' (Jakobson 1968, 698). Structuralist methods have been very widely employed in the analysis of many cultural phenomena. However, they are not universally accepted: socially oriented theorists have criticized their exclusive focus on structure, and no alternative methodologies have as yet been widely adopted.

Semiotics is not widely institutionalized as an academic discipline (although it does have its own associations, conferences and journals, and it exists as a department in a handful of universities). It is a field of study involving many different theoretical stances and methodological tools. Although there are some self-styled 'semioticians', those involved in semiotics include linguists, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, literary, aesthetic and media theorists, psychoanalysts and educationalists.

## RELATION TO LINGUISTICS

This book concentrates on structuralist semiotics (and its poststructuralist critiques). It is difficult to disentangle European semiotics from structuralism in its origins. Linguistic structuralism derived primarily from Saussure, Hjelmslev and Jakobson. It was Jakobson who first coined the term 'structuralism' in 1929 (Jakobson 1990, 6). Structuralism is an analytical method which involves the application of the linguistic model to a much wider range of social phenomena. Jakobson wrote that 'Language is . . . a purely semiotic system . . . The study of signs, however, . . . must take into consideration also applied semiotic structures, as for instance, architecture, dress, or cuisine . . . any edifice is simultaneously some sort of refuge and a certain kind of message. Similarly, any garment responds to definitely utilitarian requirements and at the same time exhibits various semiotic properties' (1968, 703). He identified 'the cardinal functions of language' (see Chapter 6) and argued that this should lead to 'an analogous study of the other semiotic systems' (ibid.). Structuralists search for 'deep structures' underlying the 'surface features' of sign-systems: Lévi-Strauss in myth, kinship rules and totemism; Lacan in the unconscious; Barthes and Greimas in the 'grammar' of narrative. Julia Kristeva declared that 'what semiotics has discovered . . . is that the *law* governing or, if one prefers, the *major constraint* affecting any social practice lies in the fact that it signifies; i.e. that it is articulated *like* a language' (Kristeva 1973, 1249).

Saussure argued that 'nothing is more appropriate than the study of languages to bring out the nature of the semiological problem' (Saussure 1983, 16). Semiotics draws heavily on linguistic concepts, partly because of his influence, and also because linguistics is a more established discipline than the study of other sign-systems. Saussure referred to language (his model being speech) as 'the most important' of all of the systems of signs (Saussure 1983, 15). Many other theorists have regarded language as fundamental. Roman Jakobson insisted that 'language is the central and most important among all human semiotic systems' (Jakobson 1970, 455). Émile Benveniste observed that 'language is the interpreting system of all other systems, linguistic and non-linguistic' (Benveniste 1969, 239),

while Claude Lévi-Strauss noted that ‘language is the semiotic system *par excellence*; it cannot but signify, and exists only through signification’ (Lévi-Strauss 1972, 48). Language is almost invariably regarded as the most powerful communication system by far.

One of the most powerful ‘design features’ of language is called *double articulation* (or ‘duality of patterning’). Double articulation enables a semiotic code to form an infinite number of meaningful combinations using a small number of low-level units which in themselves are meaningless (e.g. phonemes in speech or graphemes in writing). The infinite use of finite elements is a feature which in relation to media in general has been referred to as ‘semiotic economy’. Traditional definitions ascribe double articulation only to human language, for which this is regarded as a key ‘design feature’ (Hockett 1958). Louis Hjelmslev regarded it as an essential and defining feature of language (Hjelmslev 1961). Jakobson asserted that ‘language is the only system which is composed of elements which are signifiers and yet at the same time signify nothing’ (Jakobson 1976, 230). Double articulation is seen as being largely responsible for the creative economy of language. The English language, for instance, has only about forty or fifty elements of second articulation (phonemes) but these can generate hundreds of thousands of words. Similarly, from a limited vocabulary we can generate an infinite number of sentences (subject to the constraint of syntax which governs structurally valid combinations). It is by *combining* words in multiple ways that we can seek to render the particularity of experience. If we had individual words to represent every particularity, we would have to have an infinite number of them, which would exceed our capability of learning, recalling and manipulating them.

Double articulation does not seem to occur in the natural communication systems of animals other than humans. A key semiotic debate is over whether or not semiotic systems such as photography, film or painting have double articulation. The philosopher Susanne Langer argued that while visual media such as photography, painting and drawing have lines, colours, shadings, shapes, proportions and so on which are ‘abstractable and combinatory’, and which ‘are just as capable of *articulation*, i.e. of complex

combination, as words', they have no vocabulary of units with independent meanings (Langer 1951, 86–7).

A symbolism with so many elements, such myriad relationships, cannot be broken up into basic units. It is impossible to find the smallest independent symbol, and recognize its identity when the same unit is met in other contexts . . . There is, of course, a technique of picturing objects, but the laws governing this technique cannot properly be called a 'syntax', since there are no items that might be called, metaphorically, the 'words' of portraiture.

(Langer 1951, 88)

Rather than dismissing 'non-discursive' media for their limitations, however, Langer argues that they are more complex and subtle than verbal language and are 'peculiarly well-suited to the expression of ideas that defy linguistic "projection"'. She argues that we should not seek to impose linguistic models upon other media since the laws that govern their articulation 'are altogether different from the laws of syntax that govern language'. Treating them in linguistic terms leads us to 'misconceive' them: they resist 'translation' (*ibid.*, 86–9).

Saussure saw linguistics as a branch of 'semiology':

Linguistics is only one branch of this general science [of semiology]. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics . . . As far as we are concerned . . . the linguistic problem is first and foremost semiological . . . If one wishes to discover the true nature of language systems, one must first consider what they have in common with all other systems of the same kind . . . In this way, light will be thrown not only upon the linguistic problem. By considering rites, customs etc. as signs, it will be possible, we believe, to see them in a new perspective. The need will be felt to consider them as semiological phenomena and to explain them in terms of the laws of semiology.

(Saussure 1983, 16–17)

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.