

## SIGN AND SOCIETY (ON THE BASIS OF ADVERTISEMENTS)

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**Аннотациясы:** Өзүмдүн макаламда, мен тексттин же жарнамалардын маанисин табууда кантип жардам берээрин көрсөтүү үчүн семиотиканын негизги түшүнүгүн карап чыгуудамын. Семиотиканын негизги түшүнүгү – белги; семиотика алкагындагы теоретиктер адамдарды белгилерди пайда кылуучулар жана түшүндүрүүчүлөр катары таанышат. Семиотика жана семиотикалык анализ тууралуу өзүмдүн талкуумду мен “белги” түшүндүрмөсүнөн баштайм.

**Негизги сөздөр:** семиотика, мааниси, жарнама, белгилер.

**Аннотация:** В своей статье я рассматриваю основные концепции в семиотике для того, чтобы показать, как она помогает нам найти значение в текстах и в рекламах. Наиболее фундаментальная концепция в семиотике – знак; теоретики в области семиотики позиционируют человечество как производителей знаков и их толкователей. Свое рассуждение в отношении семиотики и семиотического анализа реклам я начинаю с понятия «знаки».

**Ключевые слова:** семиотика, значение, реклама, знаки.

**Abstract:** In my article I research some of the basic concepts in semiotics, to show how it enables us to find meaning in texts and advertisements in different cultures.. The most fundamental concept in semiotics is the sign; semiotic theorists posit human beings as sign-making and sign-interpreting creature. It is with signs that this discussion of semiotics and semiotic analysis of advertisements begins.

**Keywords:** semiotics, meaning, advertisements, signs.

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### Signs in Semiotics and Semiology.

Semiotics is, literally speaking, the science of signs. The word semiotics comes from the Greek root semeion, or sign, and is used to describe a systematic attempt to understand what signs are

and how they function. Semiotics is probably the more commonly used term, but some students of signs use the term semiology, literally “words” (togas) “about signs”. Semiotics is associated with the work of the American philosopher, C S Peirce

(although its roots are in medieval philosophy) and semiology with the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Both are concerned with how meaning is generated and and communicated. In his posthumously published book *A Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure (1966) states.<sup>1</sup>

Language is a system of signs that express ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, military signals, etc. But it is the most important of all these systems. A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable it would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology, what shall be called as semiology.<sup>2</sup>

This may be looked upon as one of the charter statements about semiotics / semiology. Saussure suggests that signs are made of two parts: a signifier (sound, object, image, or the like) and a signified (concept). The relation that exists between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, based on convention, or, to use the technical term, unmotivated. Because of this fact, we develop and use codes to help us learn what some signs mean.

#### **How Signs Function.**

A sign can also be defined as anything that can be used to stand for something else, but understanding how signs function is some-what complicated, because, for Peirce and semioticians, there are always “others” involved. According to Peirce, a sign “is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity”.<sup>3</sup> (1977, p. 27).

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 to 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 the truth; it cannot be used “to tell” at all.<sup>4</sup>

Saussure uses the term semiology to describe the science that would study “the life of signs within

society,” originally placing semiology within social psychology. He suggests that a sign is like a piece of paper: One side is the signifier and the other is the signified, and together they make the sign/ sheet of paper. Symbols, however, are a different matter.

#### **Symbols.**

A symbol is a subcategory of a sign. It is a sign whose meaning is not completely arbitrary or conventional.

What is important about symbols is that they stand for something, they convey meanings. These meanings are often connected to historical events, traditions, and so on. The symbol, generally an object or an image, because it can represent historical events, because it “contains” all kinds of extraneous matters connected to it, because it can be a repository of meanings, because it can have so many connotations, can become very important to people.

We are profoundly affected by symbolic phenomena, all the time-when we are awake and when we dream.<sup>5</sup> It is because texts of all kinds-films, television programs, novels, plays, works of visual art-are full of symbolic phenomena (objects, actions of characters, geographic locations, and so on) that they resist easy interpretation. Their symbolic (and mythic) aspects make them extremely complex, and so they are seldom easily understood.

#### **Icon, Index, Symbol: Peirce’s System.**

In Peirce’s theory of semiotics there are three kinds of signs: icons, which communicate by resemblance; indexes, which communicate by logical connection; and symbols, which are purely conventional and whose meanings have to be learned.

In Peirce’s theory, both icons and indexes have natural relationships with what they stand for: for example, a portrait of someone and the person being portrayed (an icon) and smoke indicating fire (an index). The meanings of symbols, on the other hand, have to be learned. Table.1 presents Peirce’s trichotomy in graphic form.

An image is conventionally understood to be a visible representation of something, though it can also be a mental picture of something (such as the image of the businessman as found in early-20th-century American literature). We live in a world of photoelectronic images, and with the development of television, all kinds of images that we never

<sup>1</sup> Peirce, C. S., Quoted in Zeman, J. J. 1977. Peirce’s Theory of Signs. In T. A. Sebeok, *A perfusion of signs*. Bloomington: Indiana Press

<sup>2</sup> Peirce ‘s Theory of Signs. First published Fri Oct 13, 2006; substantive revision Mon Nov 15, 2010

<sup>3</sup> Peirce; epigraph in Sebeok., 1977, p. vi

<sup>4</sup> Peirce; epigraph in Sebeok., 1977, p.7

<sup>5</sup> Language and Culture. A Social Semiotic Perspectives. Claire Kramsch. University of California, Berkeley, 2000.

**Table 1. Peirce's Trichotomy.**

Kind of Sign	Icon	Index	Symbol
<b>Example</b>	paintings	smoke/fire	words, flags
<b>Signify</b>	resemblance	causal connection	convention
<b>Process</b>	can see	can figure out	must learn

would have seen in real life are now brought to us, in mediated form, on the video tube. As the result of developments in printing, photography, and video, images play an increasingly important role in our lives.

Images, then, play a significant role in our lives, whether we recognize this to be the case or not. They have to be interpreted, and this takes a good deal of work, for it is not always easy to understand how images function. Cultural critics have, in recent years, expanded upon their interest in images and now talk about the phenomenon of representation. This concept deals with images of all kinds in the context of the social and political order in which these images are found, and considers such matters as who creates images, who controls the image making in a society (especially images generated and spread by the mass media), and the functions these images have for the sociopolitical order and for individuals.

**Codes.**

At the simplest level, codes are systems for interpreting the meanings of various kinds of communication in which the meanings are not obvious or evident.

In the world of espionage, messages are often coded (so that if they are somehow intercepted they will not be understood). The same applies to the world of culture. Much of what we see and hear around us in our culture carries messages, but because we do not know the codes that enable us to find the meanings in these messages, we do not pay any attention to them, or, if we do, we tend to interpret them incorrectly. We also tend to be blind to the codes that we have learned because they seem natural to us; we do not realize that when we find meaning in things, we are actually decoding signs. <sup>6</sup>

There are in every society, semioticians suggest,

<sup>6</sup> 2004. "The Development of Peirce's Theory of Signs" in, *The Cambridge Companion To Peirce*. Cheryl Misak (ed). 214–240. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

culture codes- hidden structures (in the sense that we are not aware of them or pay no attention to them) that shape our behaviour. These codes deal with aesthetic judgments, moral beliefs, cuisine, and many other things. They are directive and generally are highly articulated and specific, even though those who use them tend to be unaware of them. We need codes because we need consistency in our lives. Codes vary in scope from the universal to the local.

**Semiotics: society as semioticians and advertisements.**

Today's society relies on advertisement for consumer affairs. Magazines, a form of mass media is at the top of everyone's list for finding the perfect household good. Advertisements are the major part of our everyday life. The most common signs are words in a language, but traffic signals, punctuation, and visual markers are also signs. At a broader level, clothing, gestures and even sentences and whole texts may be signs in a larger sign system.

*Semiotics is an investigation into how meaning is created and how meaning is communicated. Its origins lie in the academic study of how signs and symbols (visual and linguistic) create meaning. It is a way of seeing the world, and of understanding how the landscape and culture in which we live has a massive impact on all of us unconsciously.*

Our actions and thoughts – what we do automatically – are often governed by a complex set of cultural messages and conventions, and dependent upon our ability to interpret them instinctively and instantly.

For instance, when we see the different colors of a traffic light, we automatically know how to react to them. We know this without even thinking about it. But this is a sign which has been established by cultural convention over a long period of time and which we learn as children, and requires a deal of unconscious cultural knowledge to understand its meaning. <sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Langrehr, D. (2003). From a semiotic perspective: Inference formation and critical comprehension of television advertising. Retrieved January 13, 2005

Viewing and interpreting (or decoding) this sign enables us to navigate the landscape of our streets and society. *Everyone is a semiotician, because everyone is constantly unconsciously interpreting the meaning of signs around them – from traffic lights to colors of flags, the shapes of cars, the architecture of buildings, and the design of cereal packaging.* And signs don't only need to be visual – they can be aural or sonic signs too, such as the sound of a police siren, usually heard before the vehicle is seen.<sup>8</sup>

We know for instance that the “thumb up” sign in the West means everything is OK. This can be dated back to its alleged use by Roman emperors to signal whether a gladiator would live (hence be OK). Its reverse – thumbs down – signified death. But in scuba diving this sign means go up to the surface, and by the side of the road it means you want to hitch a ride. *In other words, we need to understand the context in which a sign is communicated in order to comprehend its real meaning, and hence act appropriately. What is going on around the sign is usually as important for us to know as the sign itself in order to interpret its meaning.*

#### **Decoding and interpreting the signs in advertisements through the lens of semiotics.**

Once advertisements were mostly reliant on the written text, with the words explaining or complementing the visual; a person speaking a message that is emphasized by the pictures. This has changed radically. Contemporary advertising can be a mini drama, a continuing story or a montage of images. The growing use of visuals in advertisements has enhanced the ambiguity of meaning embedded in the message structure. The function of the text has moved away from explaining the visual and toward a more cryptic or coded form where the text is a key to the visual<sup>9</sup>.

The aim is to make the advertising more ambiguous and thereby enhancing its effectiveness by linking the product to a broad and subtle range of associations. Decoding what is happening in these complicated message structures requires the use of a method such as semiotics. Semiotics is a method

<sup>8</sup> Moriarty, S. E. (1995a). Visual semiotics and the production of meaning in advertising. Retrieved January 16, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Barthes, Roland (1963) ‘The Advertising Message’, in Barthes (1994) *The Semiotic Challenge* (trans. Richard Howard). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 173-8

for examining textual material. A text in this context is anything we can read or understand as having meaning: images, sounds, words. In semiotics, the science of signs, we derive meaning from reading and interpreting signs in combinations. The French theorist Roland Barthes was one of the first to study advertising from this perspective. A precursor was the literary and media critic Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan anticipated what has become a major area of interest in advertising from the perspective of its relationship with media systems and popular culture.

Many contemporary advertisements do not directly ask us to buy a product. Often they seem to be more concerned with amusing us, presenting us with a puzzle or demonstrating their own sophistication. The aim of this development in advertising is to engage us in their structure of meaning, to encourage us to participate by decoding their linguistic and visual signs, codes and social myths, and to enjoy this decoding activity. At the same time as we are decoding the signs we are participating in the structures of meaning that the advertisement represent.

In order to study advertisements closely in semiotic terms it is necessary to identify the visual and linguistic signs, to see how the signs are organised paradigmatically and note how the signs relate to each other through various coding systems. There is a need to recognise that all codes are potentially ambiguous and that different readers have the potential to decode the signs differently. We can assume that anything that carries meaning to us in an advertisement is a sign.

So linguistic signs (words) and iconic signs (visual representations) all act as signs adding to the cumulative code and meaning. Some of these signs we recognise consciously, others unconsciously. A model in an advertisement can denote the particular individual or a young woman in a given situation but can also carry the connotation of the mythic ideal of feminine beauty. Marketing messages have three basic components: object, sign, interpretant. An example of semiotics in advertising is the advertisement for the new woman's fragrance “Gucci Guilty”, it shows a naked woman wearing a pinky-red lipstick with a slight gloss to it, a sexy smokey eye, looking very seductive, desirable and guilty while being caressed by a man and staring at the viewer. The message behind the advertisement tells the audience that if you buy and wear this fragrance

you too will become irresistible and will make you feel more attractive to man.

The advertisement works because the signs are easily readable. Myths and narratives play an important role in generating and maintaining social beliefs and identity. The example of Apple logo deeply represents that signs can carry connotations, meanings that have social, cultural and historical relevance. The Apple logo is one of the popular symbols across the world. It has own way of evolution and modification. The original logo depicts sir Isaak Newton under an apple tree. Semiotic ally the image of Newton used in the logo were signifiers of discovery and innovation<sup>10</sup>.

The use of apple fruit depicts “Desire” and “Eagerness”. Then this logo was modified by Rob Jainoff. He designed a simple but unique logo. It presents rainbow coloured silhouette of an apple with a bite taken off. The apple with a “bite” taken out of it can be understood semiotically. The apple – the visual component of the sign – serves as signifiers. The associations that viewers create from perception the apple, ranging from seeing the apple as a basic, everyday object to deeper cultural connections to the symbol of health, and an icon of nature, make up what is signified by the Apple logo. The bite in the apple from the semiotic perspective has religious associations. Adam and Eve eating the forbidden apple resonate with Apple’s early brand positioning strategy as a young company in opposition to the computer giants as IBM and Hewlett Packard. Further semiotic connections include the fact that Adam and Eve gained knowledge from this transgression, that the bitten apple can be associated with the challenge and promise of knowledge that apple products make available their users.

With the thousands of advertisements each consumer views a day, it is each corporations goal to make their.own commercial stand out among the masses. Nike Inc has created just that method to attract the audience. Nike makes the consumer believe that by wearing their product they will not only run faster, jump higher, and perform better, but they will in fact run the fastest, jump the highest and perform the best. The visual elements include logo, slogan and print advertisements. The logo of Nike Inc is a sign of a swoosh. This swoosh is simply a check mark, what makes it popular? It is totally recognizable as the company, everywhere,

it is global. The popularity of the swoosh can be explained semiotically. According to semiotics, a sign is a combination of a signifier (physical shape) and a signified (the meaning behind the shape). In this case the swoosh would be signifier and the slogan “just do it” would be signified. Combined these two items make up Nike as a “whole”, of which we associate sports. But this sign also can have motivational theory; checks are used to mark off things you have completed off a list. And with the Nike’s slogan, check indicates you have completed it. It motivates us to be winners, overcome challenges and achieve our goals.

Semiotics is a key tool to ensure that intended meanings (of for instance a piece of communication or a new product) are unambiguously understood by the person on the receiving end. Usually there are good reasons if someone doesn’t understand the real intention of a message and semiotics can help unravel that confusion, ensuring clarity of meaning.

#### **Conclusion.**

Semiotics and semiology focus our attention on how people generate meanings--in their use of language, in their behaviour (body language, dress, facial expression, and so on), and in creative texts of all kinds. Everyone tries to make sense of human behaviour, in our everyday lives, in the novels we read, in the films and television shows we see, in the concerts we attend, in sports events we watch or participate in--humans are meaning-generating and meaning-interpreting animals, whatever else we are. We are always sending messages and always receiving and interpreting the messages others send us. What semiotics and semiology do is provide us with more refined and sophisticated ways of interpreting these messages-and of sending them. In particular, they provide us with methods of analyzing texts in cultures and cultures as texts.

Semiotics is important because it can help us not to take ‘reality’ for granted as something having a purely objective existence which is independent of human interpretation. It teaches us that reality is a system of signs. Studying semiotics can assist us to become more aware of reality as a construction and of the roles played by ourselves and others in constructing it. It can help us 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.

<sup>10</sup> Rohit Rohan. Semiotic analysis of The Apple Inc. Logo. Semiotic Assignment Submission, 2011.

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.

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