

Visual Semiotics

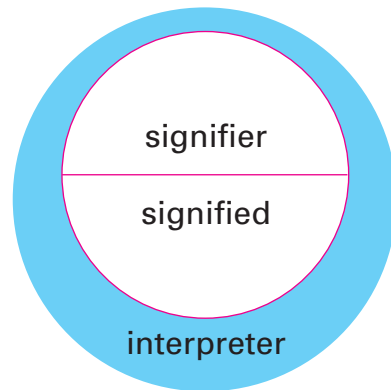
Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) is considered the founder of semiotics, which is the study of systems of signs as part of social life. Here, the term “signs” has a wide definition and includes anything that represents something else. Signs can take the form of words, images, objects, sounds, and gestures.

Semiotics is the closest that the discipline of communication design comes to a body of scientific thought about how humans communicate with one another, and the devices we use to accomplish this. Semiotics has a vocabulary that can be used to describe how a sign looks and how it communicates in a specific social context.

SIGN COMPOSITION

Saussure proposed that a sign is composed of two parts: the signifier and the signified. The complete sign is a result of the relationship between these two parts.

A number of linguists and philosophers have since adopted or modified Saussure’s original two-part model and established different terms to describe essentially the same parts of a sign. The third part listed below—interpreter—considers the synthesis of all models.



SIGNIFIER

The form that the sign takes, or, what the sign looks like. Another term for this is syntax, which refers to the structural relationships between signs. This is similar to the syntax of written language: the rules that govern the structure and appearance of words, sentences, paragraphs, etc.

SIGNIFIED

The meaning or concept attached to a sign. Another term for this is semantics, or the relationship of a sign to what it stands for.

INTERPRETER

The relation of a sign to an audience reading, or interpreting, a sign. Another term for this is the pragmatics, or function, of a sign. This takes into consideration the frame of reference of the reader, as well as the context of the reader in relation to the sign.

SIGN TYPES



ICON

A sign in which the signifier represents the signified by its likeness. For example, a photograph of a leaf.



INDEX

This type measures meaning by an inherent or causal relationship to an object. An index sign is also known as a pointing sign, as the sign points to something else for its meaning: a tree branch points to a leaf.

leaf

SYMBOL

A sign by which meaning is established from an arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. Meaning is learned through convention, or previous knowledge. For example, the spoken or written form of the word “leaf” represents the object leaf, rather than a bird, or a dog.



METASYMBOL

A symbol that has gained meaning beyond a one-to-one relationship over a period of time and/or a pervasive area of use. Other factors that contribute to the evolution of metasympols include history, tradition, and culture. Metasympols can be iconic in their recognizability.

SIGN MEANING

The meanings interpreted in words, images, objects, sounds, and gestures are denotative and connotative:

DENOTATIVE

Interpretation is explicit, self-referential or iconic; the viewer does not necessarily have to work to recognize it.

CONNOTATIVE

Interpretation is implicit and suggests, or implies, a meaning beyond its denotation.

SIGN READING

One reads an image differently from the way in which one reads a word. For example, the word “cat” connotes an image which may or may not be the same as someone else’s. With a photo of a cat, however, everyone sees the same cat. The image does not suggest—in this context it denotes, or states.

When we read a book, composed of just text, two types of connotations exist. In the first, we compare the letters within groups to form words. We then compare words in each sentence to form a complete thought. Our grammatical conventions allow us to determine what is the beginning (an uppercase letter) and ending (a punctuation mark) of a complete sentence. The process continues as we compare sentences, paragraphs, and chapters to complete a whole.

At the same time, we are comparing these words and sentences to elements that exist outside of the book itself, in the paradigm. The meaning is not necessarily derived from the words we see, but from a comparison of these words to what we do not see. Our social and cultural persona enters, and we make associations from what we know and understand already—our influences.