Signs, signification, and semiotics (semiology)

Nonvocal communication.

Signals, signs, and symbols, three related components of communication processes found in all known cultures, have attracted considerable scholarly attention because they do not relate primarily to the usual conception of words or language. Each is apparently an increasingly more complex modification of the former, and each was probably developed in the depths of prehistory before, or at the start of, man's early experiments with vocal language.

Signals.

A signal may be considered as an interruption in a field of constant energy transfer. An example is the dots and dashes that open and close the electromagnetic field of a telegraph circuit. Such interruptions do not require the construction of a man-made field; interruptions in nature (e.g., the tapping of a pencil in a silent room, or puffs of smoke rising from a mountain top) may produce the same result. The basic function of such signals is to provide the change of a single environmental factor in order to attract attention and to transfer meaning. A code system that refers interruptions to some form of meaningful language may easily be developed with a crude vocabulary of dots, dashes, or other elemental audio and visual articulations. Taken by themselves, the interruptions have a potential breadth of meaning that seems extremely small; they may indicate the presence of an individual in a room, his impatience, agreement, or disagreement with some aspect of his environment or, in the case of a scream for help, a critical situation demanding attention. Coded to refer to spoken or written language, their potential to communicate language is extremely great.

Signs.

While signs are usually less germane to the development of words than signals, most of them contain greater amounts of meaning of and by themselves. Ashley Montagu, an anthropologist, has defined a sign as a "concrete denoter" possessing an inherent specific meaning, roughly analogous to the sentence "This is it; do something about it!" The most common signs encountered in daily life are pictures or drawings, although a human posture like a clenched fist, an outstretched arm, or a hand posed in a "Stop" gesture may also serve as signs. The main difference between a sign and a signal is that a sign (like a policeman's badge) contains meanings of an intrinsic nature; a signal (like a scream for help) is merely a device by which one is able to formulate extrinsic meanings. Their difference is illustrated by the observation that many types of animals respond to signals, while only a few intelligent and trained animals (usually dogs and apes) are competent to respond even to simple signs.

All known cultures utilize signs to convey relatively simple messages swiftly and conveniently. Signs may depend for their meaning upon their form, setting, colour, or location. In the United States, traffic signs, uniforms, badges, and barber poles are frequently encountered signs. Taken en masse, any society's lexicon of signs makes up a rich vocabulary of colourful communications.

Symbols.

Symbols are more difficult than signs to understand and to define because, unlike signs and signals, they are intricately woven into an individual's ongoing perceptions of the world. They appear to contain a dimly understood capacity that (as one of their functions), in fact, defines the very reality of that world. The symbol has been defined as any device with which an abstraction can be made. Although far from being a precise construction, it leads in a profitable direction. The abstractions of the values that people imbue in other people and in things they own and use lie at the heart of symbolism.

In Whitehead's opinion, symbols are analogues or metaphors (that may include written and spoken language as well as visual objects) standing for some quality of reality that is enhanced in importance or value by the process of symbolization itself.

Almost every society has evolved a symbol system whereby, at first glance, strange objects and odd types of behaviour appear to the outside observer to have irrational meanings and seem to evoke odd, unwarranted cognitions and emotions. Upon examination each symbol system reflects a specific cultural logic, and every symbol functions to communicate information between members of the culture in much the same way as, but in a more subtle manner than, conventional language. Although a symbol may take the form of as discrete an object as a wedding ring or a totem pole, symbols tend to appear in clusters and depend upon one another for their accretion of meaning and value. They are not a language of and by themselves; rather they are devices by which ideas too difficult, dangerous, or inconvenient to articulate in common language are transmitted between people who have acculturated in common ways. It does not appear possible to compile discrete vocabularies of symbols, because they lack the precision and regularities present in natural language that are necessary for explicit definitions.

Icons.

Rich clusters of related and unrelated symbols are usually regarded as icons. They are actually groups of interactive symbols, like the White House in Washington, D.C., a funeral ceremony, or an Impressionist painting. Although in examples such as these, there is a tendency to isolate icons and individual symbols for examination, symbolic communication is so closely allied to all forms of human activity that it is generally and nonconsciously used and treated by most people as the most important aspect of communication in society. With the recognition that spoken and written words and numbers themselves constitute symbolic metaphors, their critical roles in the worlds of science, mathematics, literature, and art can be understood. In addition, with these symbols, an individual is able to define his own identity.

(Source: *Encyclopedia Britannica*)

Structuralism and semiology (semiotics)

Structuralism is the theory that conceives of all cultural phenomena as sign systems, operating according to the rules of a deep structure. The simplest example of a sign system is traffic lights or road signs. A sign is arbitrary, but cannot be viewed outside of a system of signs.

Ferdinand de Saussure, in the *Course in General Linguistics*, describes language as a system of signs (a word is a sign) to which we respond in a predictable way. According to him, the sign is made up of a signifier (e.g., the acoustic form of the word, the sound) and a signified (e.g., a mental concept). These two are combined in the mind resulting in understanding or meaning (e.g., perceiving the sound "cat" signals the object "cat"). The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary; any word can be used to signify anything.

Saussure also envisaged *semiology* (*semiotics*) as a science of signs in general, not only linguistic signs (words). Language is only one of the systems that is studied by semiotics. Semiotics was viewed by Saussure as a key to unlocking a variety of cultural phenomena all of which are various sign systems.

Semiotics of Roland Barthes and his theory of myth

Roland Barthes helped found the modern science of semiology, applying structuralist (or semiotic) methods to the "myths" that he saw all around him: media, fashion, art, photography, architecture, literature. According to Barthes, anything in culture can be a sign and send a specific message. In his *Mythologies* Barthes describes some methods of "deciphering" these messages.

"Myth Today," in *Mythologies*

p. 109
Barthes' principal assertion that "myth is a type of speech," going back to the original meaning of the Greek "mythos" (word, speech, story).

Myth is a "system of communication" or a "message," a "mode of signification."

This means that everything can be myth, provided that it conveys some meaning or message (cf. cultural signs and icons). Since language is the universal method of communication in humans, we can potentially convert everything into language.

p. 110
The historicity of myth: these cultural signs come and go. "Human history converts reality into speech."

"Speech of this kind [i.e., myth] is a message" so it is not confined to oral or written speech. Myth uses material that "has already been worked on" to make it suitable for

communication: such as representations, photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity (cf. footnote on p. 112).

p. 111
So a photograph is “a kind of speech,” in the same way as a newspaper article. If an object means something it becomes speech.

“Myth as a semiological [or semiotic] system”; mythology is part of the science of semiology discovered by Saussure

p. 112 (bottom)
Level 1. The sign. The signifier and the signified, and the “associative total of the two” which is the sign.

p. 113
Examples of signs: bouquet of roses signifying passion; black pebble signifying death.

Sign in language (Saussure): the signifier is the acoustic form of the word, the signified is the mental concept, the word itself is the sign as a sum of both.

p. 114
Level 2. Myth: the “second-level” sign, or “second-level” semiological system. (See the graph on p. 115.) The signifier in such a system is already a complete sign that already contains a signifier and a signified. The signified is “added on top” of that existing structure, so we get a sign of double complexity which is a myth.

Myth uses all suitable existing signs as its signifiers: not only written speech, but also pictures, artistic representations, cultural phenomena, etc., that already have some meaning, but acquire some additional meaning when they are used as myths.

p. 115
Terms: the signifier in myth is called “form,” the signified “concept.” This “form” already uses a fully meaningful sign “inherited” from culture (so two levels of meaning / signification).

Myth is called “metalanguage” that says something, using existing language (cf. other types of metalanguages: grammatical explanation).

p. 116
the main example of mythical speech from the cover of *Paris-Match*: a black soldier giving the French salute. The “first-level” meaning is exactly this: “a black soldier giving the French salute” that is expressed through the image of the soldier making a certain gesture. The “second-level” meaning is “France is a great Empire, and all serve it without racial discrimination” (“French imperiality”). There are many ways in which this

message can be expressed, using many other culturally created icons, but this is one of them.

Comment: the idea is, just as in Malinowski, Levi-Strauss, and Turner, that myth is something, the meaning of which is not what it immediately appears. It affects us somehow, but if we want to understand it clearly it has to be "deciphered." The multiple ways in which myths can be expressed (the message is sent in many ways) makes the "deciphering" process very interesting.

p. 118
the interesting thing about myth as a "second-level" sign: that first level of meaning is still there; myth is not exhausted by its proper meaning as it is with regular signs — cf. metaphors, allegories, etc.

p. 122
Myth distorts the meaning of the original sign: it is no longer what it was, or what it appears, but something else. pp. 123-4 — example of the window and landscape: you are looking at the same spot, but either just see the window or also the landscape (just as in myths we can read the "hidden meaning").

p. 124-5
Myth clearly sends a message, and this is intentional. The way this is done is, e.g., by placing some cultural object out of context: the example of a "Basque chalet" in the middle of Paris (cf. North American parallels). So myth always contains some "motivation" (p. 126) and intent.

p. 130
The "natural-ness" of myths: when a picture "naturally conjures up" a concept.

The way myths work: even if, in the next moment after seeing an image, you understand the "technology" of myth, as it happens in advertising, there is still a subliminal message being sent, and an impact is being made. The immediate impression has its effect even though you later understand how this advertising trick works.