**Definition:** semiotics from Philip's Encyclopedia

( semiology) Study of signs and symbols, both visual and linguistic, and their function in communication. Pioneers of semiotics include Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure. Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss developed the principles of semiotics into structuralism.

**Summary Article:** Semiotics

From The Social Science Jargon-Buster

**Core definition**

The study of signs and sign systems and how they both represent and create meaning.

**Longer explanation**

What do the letters p-i-g stand for? A pig, of course. But for those into semiotics, there’s no ‘of course’ about it. A semiotic would go beyond the surface and point out a number of things we generally take for granted, like why the letters p-i-g are the designated ‘signifier’ of that fat, four-legged, pink animal (the signified), rather than any other string of arbitrary letters. They’d also point to the variability of the signified. For example, the word ‘pig’ could conjure up an image of a dangerous wild boar, but it might also trigger an image of fat dirty farmyard beast or a famous cartoon pig like Porky, Wilbur or Babe. Semioticians would also suggest that the letters p-i-g can stand for more than just an animal; it can also stand for deeper and more abstract concepts like gluttony or boorishness. Semiotics therefore looks at the whole concept of signs and sign systems (which includes symbols and icons as well as words) and how they allow human communication and meaning-making.

**Debates and controversies**

While semiotics has definitely established itself as a major strand of inquiry in both linguistic and humanities, there are theorists who question its value in the social sciences. The most common critiques are that semiotics (1) only describes human communication and does not offer social explanations or predictions of the future; (2) is of little practical utility; (3) relies on analysis that is subjective with no clear criteria for assessing validity of interpretations; (4) ignores the complexities of human language acquisition which make decoding linguistic signs extraordinarily difficult.

**Practical application**

Signs are powerful things (just think of the power that a glimpse of the Golden Arches can have on a hungry child). Now there are some things we recognize as overt signs and symbols, for example a flag or logo. But semiotics reminds us that almost everything around us is part of a sign system. How our signs are created and used by various institutions, such as governments, the media, and marketing sectors, to manipulate our social consciousness is highly applicable in the social sciences.

**Key figures**

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/semiotics
In the early twentieth century, semiotics was developed by US pragmatist Charles Peirce, who identified three types of sign: icons, which resemble what they signify; indexes, which are indicative of something (e.g. spots signifying measles); and symbols, which are arbitrary. In Europe, Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure argued that signs are composed of signifiers (representations like words or symbols) and signified (mental concepts). Another key figure here is Roland Barthes, who developed social semiotics (the study of social and cultural signs) in the mid-twentieth century.

In the rough, a symbol is a sign that stands for something. ... Before a noise, etc., may become a symbol, something must exist for the symbol to symbolize.

Alfred Korzybski (1879-1950) Father of general semantics - in Science and Sanity (1933)

Recommended readings
For a clear introduction to general semiotics, I'd turn to either Semiotics: The Basics (Chandler 2004) or Introducing Semiotics (Cobley 2005). For an introduction to social semiotics, try Introducing Social Semiotics (van Leeuwen 2004). If you'd like to delve into seminal writings, turn to Classic Readings in Semiotics (Perron and Danesi 2003).

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA


© Zina O'Leary 2007