

2. how meaning is formed

'In a language state everything is based on relations.'¹

This chapter looks at the various ways in which meaning is formed in a sign. Both Saussure and Peirce agreed that in order to understand how we extract meaning from a sign we need to understand the structure of signs. To help us do this they categorised signs in terms of the relationships within the structures.

1. de Saussure F. *Course in General Linguistics* (1974) (1st edition 1915)

categories

Peirce defined three categories of signs:

Icon – this resembles the sign. A photograph of someone could be described as an iconic sign in that it resembles physically the thing that it represents. It is also possible to have iconic words where the sound resembles the thing it represents. Onomatopoeic words like 'bang' or 'woof' could be described as iconic language.

Index – there is a direct link between the sign and the object. In this category smoke is an index of fire and a tail is an index of a dog. Traffic signs in the street are index signs as they have a direct link to the physical reality of where they are placed such as at a junction or at the brow of a hill.

Symbol – these signs have no logical connection between the sign and what it means. They rely exclusively on the reader having learnt the connection between the sign and its meaning. The red cross is a symbol which we recognise to mean 'aid'. Flags are symbols which represent territories or organisations. The letters of the alphabet are symbolic signs whose meaning we have learnt.

As a linguist Saussure was not interested in index signs, he was primarily concerned with words. Words are symbolic signs. In the case of onomatopoeic words they can also be iconic signs. Saussure categorised signs in two ways which are very similar to the categories used by Peirce;

Iconic – these are the same as Peirce's icons, they resemble the thing they represent.

Arbitrary – these are the same as Peirce's symbols. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. It functions through agreed rules.



1 and 2 – This shopping centre in Manchester is signposted using an iconic sign. In this example the sign depends on local knowledge.

3 – An index/symbol. The danger of fire is linked to the forest through its physical position [the sign is on the edge of the forest] and by the use of an ideogram of a tree.

4 and 5 – The Red Cross and the letters of an alphabet are all symbols. The meaning of these signs relies on the reader having learnt the correct codings in advance.

categories



It is important to recognise that whichever terms you use, the categories are not separate and can function together in sets. For example let's look at the traffic sign which warns us that we are approaching traffic lights. The mark on the sign which resembles the lights is both an icon and a symbol. As it looks physically like the thing it represents it could be said to be iconic. However, it is also a symbol. That is to say it is part of a set of signs for which we have international agreement about their meaning. We have learnt what the signs mean. We may even have been tested on their meaning as part of a driving test before we can take our car on the road. The red triangular frame around the sign is a symbol which we understand as a warning sign. Furthermore, when this traffic sign is placed in the street next to the road junction it also becomes an index sign. In reality its meaning is in part formed by where the sign is placed. It is an icon/symbol/index sign.



Firstness – A sense of something.
Secondness – The level of fact.
Thirdness – The level of convention.
Think of this level as the mental level.

Peirce also identified three levels or properties for signs which can be mapped on to his triangular model. He labelled these properties firstness, secondness and thirdness.

Firstness – This is a sense of something. It can be described as a feeling or a mood. To say we are feeling 'blue' could be said to function at this first level.

Secondness – This is the level of fact. The physical relation of one thing to another. The traffic sign we discussed earlier functions at this physical level of secondness.

Thirdness – You could think of this level as the mental level. It is the level of general rules which bring the other two together in a relationship. It relates the sign to the object as a convention. The association we have in our minds between the 'Stars and Stripes' and the United States is a mental relationship which relies on a convention.