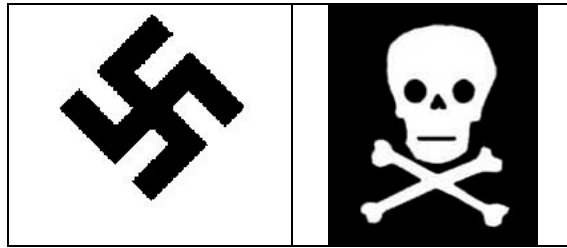


Semiotics

(the study of the meaning of signs)



What do these signs mean?

Although they may seem obvious to you, each sign has come to mean very different things to different people. The skull and crossbones has its root in piracy, since then it has come to represent a warning against poison. It has also been used in a children's cartoon, and features on car stickers and badges.

The swastika, in ancient times, was used religiously to symbolise the power of God or nature. The German Nazi party adopted it in the 1930s, so that it became linked to fascist politics. It has since been used by Hell's Angels and punks on the backs of jackets and on *Destroy* shirts. Other groups have revived it to signify racial hatred of ethnic minorities in Britain.

Such signs do not in themselves mean anything at all. People give them meaning, and it is the study of such meanings that is the purpose of semiotics.

A sign can be any physical form to which we give meaning, including words, pictures, colours, clothes, etc.

A sign, such as a word or image, is composed of two parts:

- a) The physical form – that which we can see or hear. This is what we call the **signifier**.
- b) The meaning of the form, which is called the **signified**.

For example, the word 'cat', composed of the letters **C**, **A** and **T** is a *signifier*, which those people who speak English all agree *signifies* a four legged, furry mammal with a tail and pointy teeth which makes a 'miaow' sound.

Discussion point

When you hear or read the word 'cat' what image do you see in your mind? Describe the image you see here (be as particular as you can – size, colour, etc):

Do we all see the same 'cat' in our mind's eye?

Why do you think this is?

It would be surprising if everyone in the whole group imagined identical cats. The reason we don't is because we bring our own experiences and knowledge to our understanding of signs. I have had a fat black and white cat with a broken leg, so it is my pet's image that will probably first spring to my mind when I hear the word 'cat'. This means that we all read slightly different meanings into signs all the time because we use our own personal experience to understand them.

Subject Position

On a bigger scale this means that we will all read media texts slightly differently because we approach them from our own personal **subject position**. Our subject position is everything that goes to make up what we are and where we fit in the world. For example, my subject position is female,, white, unmarried with one child, not very rich teacher who lives in Cheshire. Because of this, I might read some images very differently to somebody who is male, black, gay, 26, wealthy and lives in Scotland. This is because we will have had very different life experiences.

What do you think your subject position is? Note it down here:

Denotation and Connotation

Think back to the example we used to illustrate the meaning of 'signifier' and 'signified' – the word (or sign) 'cat'. We discovered that CAT is the **signifier**, and the image in our mind is the **signified**. The signified is the obvious meaning of the signifier or sign – the **denotation**. But many signs have other meanings as well as their obvious ones – these are meanings that they have picked up from the culture that they are used by. We call these extra meanings **connotations**.






For example, think about the word (or signifier) 'heart'. The obvious meaning (denotation or signified) of this sign is, according to the dictionary: 'the hollow muscular organ which makes the blood circulate'. Now think about the underlying meanings of the word that we use in our culture – for example, love, courage, warmth and affection, passion, comfort and good health. These are its **connotations**.

Exercise

Note down the denotations and connotations of the following signs:

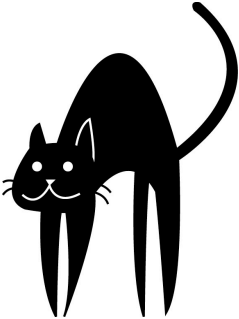

Sign	Denotation	Connotation(s)
'Rose'		
'Gold'		
'Mouse'		
'Wicked'		
'Black'		
'White'		
'Feminine'		
'Masculine'		

Now do the same thing with the following:

Sign	Denotation	Connotation(s)
		
		
		
		
		

Finally, once more think back to the signifier 'cat'. When we are considering the connotations of an image we need to think not only about *what* is represented, but also about *how* it is represented. This also affects the meanings of a sign.

Consider the following representations of cats:

		<p>What are the different connotations of these two signs?</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
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