

# SEMIOTICS: The language of the media

The language of media begins with semiotics, the language of signs. Roland Barthes (French linguist who pioneered semiotics, his most famous work was "Mythologies") argued that verbal language is just one way in which we communicate. Others include clothing, hairstyle and body language. These communication codes are verbal and visual. Media takes advantage of all these codes.

## ***Models for understanding language.***

Language is CONSTRUCTED by people to produce meanings within their given culture. Things and events themselves do not have any meaning. It is only when we name them that they get their meaning and definition. The social contract of language means that we agree to use the same language as everyone else so they understand us. We can however play with the language of our society through signs, codes and patterns as well as words.

## ***Signs have several characteristics***

1. ***The Signifier:*** The physical form of the sign. The written word patterns on the paper, a traffic light, a smile.
2. ***The Signified:*** This is the concept or idea that the signifier produces. The red light signifies stop. The written word ROSE connects to the idea of a rose. A smile could signify love.
3. ***The Referent:*** The real thing, not the signal or the idea but the real, individual thing. A real individual rose, the real feeling of love.

Semiotics emphasised that our perception of reality is shaped by the words and signs that we use, and how we interpret the words and signs of others.

Now, fill in this table. Think of a final signifier for yourself.

<b>Signifier</b>	<b>Signified</b>	<b>Referent</b>
Sigh		
Colour red		
Shaved head		
Laughter		

### ***The signs or signifiers in films***

Films use the human capability for interpreting signs. The black and red background to most Horror movie titles has connotations of fear and blood. The creaky doorway in a thriller creates tension. Romantic music puts the audience in a romantic mood and allows them to realise something romantic is about to happen.

Signifiers can be found in all areas of film. To approach signifiers you have to realise there are objective ones (put there intentionally to give clues about how to feel or react to the film) and subjective ones (not intentionally put there but something that reminds an individual of something in their life or memories from the past). When watching a film an audience usually picks up on the same objective signifiers but can have a whole host of differing subjective signifiers.

The ability to pick up on the signifiers in a film depends on an audience's experience, emotional capacity and intellect. The less emotionally experienced you are, the less likely you are to pick up on subtle emotional signifiers. The less intelligent you are, the less likely you are to analyse the film in depth, and so on. The understanding of a film is therefore relative to the individual watching the film.

This is why sometimes you can watch a film and get a certain amount of satisfaction from it, then watch it again a few years later and get a host of new experiences and ideas from the same film.

Signifiers can be created through Mis-en-scene, Lighting, Music, and Dialogue.

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### ***What do you think these elements would signify in a film?***

1. A dark room
2. High pitched screeching music
3. Shadows
4. Rain
5. Sunshine
6. Classical pastoral music
7. A frown
8. A smile as an aside to the audience
9. Red Light in a room
10. A man carrying a rose

#### **Task**

When you next watch a film list ten objective signifiers (ones put there by the director to focus the audience) and five subjective signifiers (elements in the film which had connotations personal to you).