

## Semiotics, Symbols, and Cultural Perspectives

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### Introduction


What do we think of when we think of 'New Years', or 'summer,' 'home', or 'tea cup'? Whenever we happen to think of such seemingly commonplace events, places or things, we are inundated, internally, with a wide landscape of images and feelings at a very personal level. These reactions are, to a great extent, comprised of symbols of the particular time/event or thing to which our thoughts are pointing.

This system of interpreting signs and symbols within our culture is called *semiotics*, and it is a way for us to understand how we communicate within our own linguistic domain, and how interpretation of signs and symbols is practiced in other cultures. As such, semiotics may be regarded through a variety of disciplines: linguistics, anthropology, art history, philosophy, and language education.

We may see the word 'north,' for example, and one may call to mind an image of 'snow,' as in Hokkaido in winter or the North Pole. We can say that these images are being pointed to, as symbols of 'north.' In this case, the word 'north' is the sign or signifier, and the symbols we have for it—a field of white snow, polar bears, etc.—are the signified.

Indeed, we are only able to know things and speak about them with the aid of signs, replacing them with signs that we hope are understood by others. In fact, according to Charles Peirce, considered the father of semiotics, "we think only in signs" (Peirce, 1931). The Swiss pioneer linguist Ferdinand de Saussure considered that the *sign* is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified (Saussure, 1974). Both Peirce and Saussure endeavored to understand how we think and, then, communicate our thoughts to others, and along with the work of Roland Barthes, the field of semiotics was established as a linguistic as well as philosophical discipline.

Barthes sought to explain the concepts of semiotics in textuality, or how words are arranged in sentences, in paragraphs, and ultimately as a presentation of a story through the medium of text. He believed that all signs and symbols in our culture already exist with their own inherent meaning before an author chooses to use them in a text. Barthes wrote, therefore, that since meaning cannot come from the author of a text—a story, poem, etc.—then it must be actively created by the reader through a process of textual analysis. “We should not be bound by what the author said, or thought he was saying, but cede authority to the reader (Merquoir pp. 134-40).” This was the recognition that the reader is the ultimate ‘authority’ for his own interpretation of a text, as the meaning of imagery constructed from reading is done exclusively by the reader and for the reader, as an individual. It follows, then, that each of us has our own way to interpret signs and symbols, based on the way we acquired our understanding of them through education within our own culture.

Yet of course, the most important aspect of Barthes’ idea is that each of us possesses a deeper power of interpretation through our own individual, personal life experiences. Herein lies, too, the potential for personal adaptation according to the “needs” of the culture. An example is the ‘swastika’: . The author Salman Rushdie tells us, in his book “Midnight’s Children,” that the word ‘swasti’ is the Sanskrit word for ‘good’, and is the Hindu symbol for power (Rushdie, p. 75). It can also be found in Tibetan culture, used to symbolize the never-ending, cyclical movement of the universe. Yet the very same symbol was adapted by the Nazi Party and its military of Germany as its own symbol, and became for many Jews in Europe a symbol of terror and genocide. What does this sign signify to a religious Hindu? And to a Jewish refugee from Poland? Certainly we would see radically different interpretations of the same sign, due mainly to the ‘reader’s’ own life experience within their culture.

### Components of Semiotics

There are three types of signs that are included in semiotics:

1. **The icon.** A child's drawing of a dog

This is a type of symbol, or mode, in which the signifier (such as a drawing of a dog), is perceived as *resembling* or imitating the signified (the *actual* dog). This is a metaphor for the actual thing, person, sound, taste, or feeling. It might be a scale-model of the Space Shuttle, onomatopoeia, sound effects in TV and movies, a dubbed film soundtrack, or imitative gestures that point to or signify the real thing. To be effective, we would not need any specialized education in order to understand the signifier-signified relationship.

2. **The symbol.** The word "DOG"

This is where the signifier does *not* resemble the signified, but is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional. In this case the relationship must be learned. Examples include language in general, plus specific languages, alphabetical letters or writing systems like kanji, punctuation marks, words, phrases and sentences. Also included are numbers, traffic lights, and national flags.

3. **The index.** A dog's footprint in the sand

This is where the signifier *is not arbitrary* but is directly connected in some way to the signified. This connection can either be observed or inferred, and examples include 'natural signs' (smoke, thunder, footprints, echoes, smells and flavors), medical symptoms (pain, a rash, pulse-rate), measuring instruments (thermometer, clock), 'signals' (a knock on a door, a phone ringing), pointers (a pointing finger, a directional signpost), recordings (a photograph, a film, video or television image, an audio-recorded voice), personal 'trademarks' (handwriting, catchphrase), and indexical words ('that', 'this', 'here', 'there'). (Chandler)

We can take another look at our word 'north' to illustrate the above semiotic components. If we see the letter 'N', which is a symbol, each of us might connect this signifier to a variety of signified images or meanings: 'No' as in 'Y/N', or an initial in someone's name ('Nakagawara'), and so forth. But if we connect the 'N' to a direction compass, we see it as an icon meaning 'North', and from there our list of signified images multiplies to include a road heading

north, the idea of travel, Hokkaido, winter, and the index of a set of tracks of a rabbit running through the snow.

The above examples of “signifier → signified” is called *denotation*, where the symbol denotes or points to what it represents.

### Connotation: Application to Cultural Interpretation

We can extrapolate denotation to *connotation*: what the denotation system means in a cultural context. For example, there is a culture-specific meaning that we might bring to the signifier ‘North’. In the southern states of the US before 1865, slavery was common, and thousands of Africans were brought to the South and sold to work there as slaves. For those who were able to escape and were intent on travelling to the free states of the North, they were told through word-of-mouth to ‘follow the drinking gourd,’ which was a reference to the constellation of stars that forms the shape of a ladle or drinking gourd (often called The Big Dipper in English), and which itself pointed to the North Star. Therefore, the idea of ‘North’ held the idea of freedom from bondage and servitude for many slaves. In this way, the idea of ‘North’ connotes the slave’s road to freedom. (There is also inherent in this example the icon of the drinking gourd, which gives this semiotic an enhanced meaning: the water gourd signifies life-giving relief during hard labor.)

John Wallen believes that psychotherapist Carl Jung can offer the best possibility of applying Saussurean and Peircean semiotics toward human beings living in the contexts of signs and symbology. A problem exists, he states, because according to their original ideas of signifiers and the signified, the connection was arbitrary, i.e. the signs and symbols we use to describe the world, including our language, have no logical connection with reality. The word ‘north’ could have meant anything; for some reason, we decided to make it the signifier of a particular direction in space relative to us. Jung, however, sought to understand how we humans live in our world and communicate our thoughts—our ideas, fears, identities—through a language as a set of written and spoken word-symbols. This is taken to mean that we can study a culture’s semiotics through a study of that culture’s symbol-based religion and mythology. To say that *any* story or poem contains symbols, a semiotics, of

that culture, would be a gross generalization. However, if we were to follow Barthes' ideal of the reader as final authority, we can indeed make various assumptions of the meanings of a culture's sign system.

Consider the following poem by William Butler Yeats. It was written around 1919, a few years following the end of the Russian Revolution and World War I, the most devastating war in mankind's history up until that time. Many saw it as a slaughter not only of Europe and the millions of soldiers and civilians, but of any hope for a future of peace on earth. Yeats' previous work had become designed according to the idea of the literary gyre, or spiral, where themes and imagery flow together or spiral apart, reflecting a double-cone geometry of opposites (see Fig. 1).

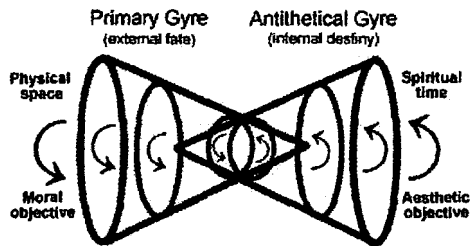


Fig. 1 (Foll, 2008)

For this poem, Yeats draws on the symbolism of the Judeo-Christian bible. The title ostensibly refers to the so-called second coming of Jesus Christ, who is expected to return to earth to save mankind, as depicted or foretold in the bible, culminating in the apocalypse of the Book of Revelation. But rather than portray Christ as a loving benefactor to the devout and non-sinning, Yeats chooses instead to use the symbol of a horrific, lumbering dark beast with ghastly, destructive powers, appearing at the end of mankind's life on earth, in order to wreak total annihilation on all the living. Herein lies Yeats' irony; the benevolent Christ whose return or second coming is hoped for, is substituted by a devil-like monster.

### The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity.  
 Surely some revelation is at hand;  
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
 The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
 When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
 Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert  
 A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
 Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
 Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
 The darkness drops again; but now I know  
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

We can take a closer reading of the poem, and discern Yeats' semiotic structure. The word gyre in the first line is based, as mentioned, on Yeats' theory of history and metaphysics (which he claimed to have received from spirits.) It is a symbolic system composed of two conic helixes (gyres), one situated inside the other, so that the widest part of one cone occupies the same plane as the tip of the other cone, and vice versa (see Fig. 1). Yeats claimed that this image captured opposing motions inherent within the process of history, and he divided each gyre into different regions that represented

particular kinds of historical periods and psychological phases of an individual's development. (Bloom, p. 318). Thus,

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold

presents the idea of a total collapse from loss of control. The image of 'anarchy,' and the subsequent four lines, point to the Russian Revolution where the 'blood-dimmed tide' drowns the remaining innocence, or in biblical terms, the virgin-pure, those without sin and destined for heaven. His double use of the word 'Surely' becomes an insistence on trying to believe, a kind of blind faith that smacks of hopelessness.

The "spiritus mundi" (Latin "spirit of the world") is a reference to Yeats' belief that each human mind is linked to a single vast intelligence, and that this intelligence causes certain universal symbols to appear in individual minds. Carl Jung's book *The Psychology of the Unconscious*, (which was published in 1912), might have had an influence, with its concept of the 'collective unconscious'.

Yeats presents us with "A shape with lion body and the head of a man," which points us to the image of the Sphinx of ancient Egypt and a symbol of a pagan religion. Yeats had often considered the sphinx or sphinx-like beast as such: "I began to imagine a brazen winged beast which I associated with laughing, ecstatic destruction" (Yeats, p. 205). In a way, then, Yeats is defiling a holiness of the Judeo-Christian bible by introducing the most powerful being not as Jesus or God, but as the image/symbol of an extinct heathen religion. Symbols and imagery in the poem such as pitiless sun, slow thighs, desert birds, and stony sleep, all conjure feelings of bleakness and despair. Finally the beast 'slouches toward Bethlehem,' an imagery that threatens the joyous aura of Christ's birth (in Bethlehem), and renders the whole concept of Christ's return or rebirth from a profound hope to a fatalistic despairing.

In this final example of semiotics in a cultural perspective, we will look at how symbols can be generated by word-association, and then re-aligned, so to speak, when transferred into another culture where a fresh connotation may be made. The American composer and writer John Cage, who was also an avid mushroom hunter, wanted to see what would happen when a Japanese haiku by Basho, written on the topic of mushrooms, is translated and transported into another linguistic domain; in this case, English. By tradition, the Japanese haiku poetic form conveys a sense of some particular season, through a word or term associated with some aspect of that time of year. Thus, we can see the signifier—>signified semiotic system at work in haiku. Below is Basho's original haiku, with a literal translation below each word:

まつ茸や

*Pine mushroom (matsutake)*

知らぬ木の葉の

*ignorance leaf of tree*

へばりつく

*adhesiveness*

In the above example, autumn is signified, by the signifier of まつ茸 (pine-mushroom), which appears in the autumnal forests, and conveys for many Japanese the richness of nature. In addition, we have the autumn signifier of a fallen leaf sticking to it, which again signifies the dampness of fall. Through Cage's efforts at moving a Japanese haiku into its English-language connotation, could the meaning or symbols be retained, or even be made afresh? What would happen to Basho's original semiotic structure of signifier/signified in terms of the relationship of one image-word (or image-term) to another?



In an audio interview (see Bibliography for source), Cage described the steps that took place. A translation of the above word-for-word conversion was subsequently adapted into 'a more poetic form' by the American poet Robert Bly:

*The leaf of some unknown tree*

*Sticking on a mushroom*

And another adaptation, this time made by a Japanese composer (Cage could not recall the name: "Takahashi?", "Ichiyanagi?" ...):

*Mushroom does not know*

*That leaf is sticking on it*

This, of course, makes a radical departure from Basho's original matrix of relationships: of the viewer, the mushroom and the fallen leaf. In the "embellishment" above, the interpreter has personified the *matsutake*, and given it a sentient awareness or consciousness.

Cage then made a further interpretation, as:

*That that's unknown*

*Brings mushroom and leaf together*

Yet Cage was not satisfied, in that he did not feel that the real semiotic quality beneath the original had been connoted. Thus, he made a final refinement where he might convey the same impact as Basho's original, but within a domain of an English-language (and American cultural) semiotic structure:

*What leaf?*

*What mushroom?*

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## Further Sources

These additional sources are provided here as further examples, and for learning more about cultural aspects of semiotics:

- Robert Frost's poem *Nothing gold can stay*  
<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/nothing-gold-can-stay/>
- Jill Terry's excellent video on the introduction of semiotics:  
Part 1: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzIfNPgxPnc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzIfNPgxPnc)  
Part 2: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYqZEOMPZIA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYqZEOMPZIA)

Architect and aesthetician Barbara Sandrisser's insightful essays on specific symbols of Japanese culture, viewed from a non-Japanese point of view:

- *The Torii as Public Art*.  
[www.sanart.org.tr/artengaged/ArtEngagement\\_BarbaraSandrisser\\_Abstract.pdf](http://www.sanart.org.tr/artengaged/ArtEngagement_BarbaraSandrisser_Abstract.pdf) Retrieved Sept., 2008
- *Valuing the ordinary: The poetics of wood in traditional Japan*. The Journal of Value Inquiry 28: 281-295. Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994

Seamus Heaney's poem *Blackberry Picking*.

- Text: <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/blackberry-picking/>

- Seamus Heaney reading (on video) *Blackberry Picking* at:  
<http://www.teachersdomain.org/resource/pe08.rla.genre.poetry.heanblack/>

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