

# The Difference Between Semiotics and Semiology

*Russell Daylight*

---

What is the relationship between semiotics and semiology? Received wisdom tells us that the “semiotics” of Charles Sanders Peirce largely overlaps in function and meaning with the “semiology” of Ferdinand de Saussure. Among semioticians more attentive to the nuances of each system, such as Sebeok, Deely, and Eco, semiology occupies that part of semiotics which relates either to conventional communication, or intentional communication, or some other subset of semiotic acts. In this essay I aim to demonstrate quite a different relation between the two fields of study. Drawing upon close readers of Saussure such as Harris and Weber, I will contrast semiotics as an act of “representation” with semiology as an act of “articulation”. What I will propose is that semiotics and semiology form wholly separate but contiguous domains of explanation.

---

## Introduction

What is the relationship between semiotics and semiology? Received wisdom tells us that the “semeiotics” of Charles Sanders Peirce overlaps in function and meaning with the “*sémiologie*” of Ferdinand de Saussure. Each system is concerned with signs, and the way in which signs are decoded, or interpreted for meaning. Since the surge in interest in semiotics/semiology in the 1980s, the two systems of thought have been uncomfortably conflated in undergraduate textbooks and even in communication research. The unique features of each system were pushed aside in the rush to teach students that a “red traffic light” acts as a *signifier* for the *signified* “stop”. Among semioticians more attentive to the nuances of each system, such as Thomas Sebeok and Umberto Eco, semiology made up just a part of the whole of semiotics. While Saussurean semiology concerned itself only with intentional communication acts, such as speaking and writing, or other related forms such as gesture and Morse code, Peircean semiotics included all sensory stimuli that could create another idea in the receiver’s mind. Such is the case when smoke is a sign of fire, or flowers are a sign of love. Having established semiology as a limited subset of semiotics, contemporary theorists such as John Deely, Jesper Hoffmeyer and Winfried Nöth have largely abandoned Saussure, following up the infinite possibilities of Peircean semiotics into new

domains such as animal communication and the relationship between humans and their environment.

In this essay I aim to demonstrate quite a different relation between the two fields of study. After reinstating some of the theoretical specificities of semiotics and semiology, I will clarify the differences between their methods and objects of interrogation. What emerges is a series of critical distinctions, including those between tripartism and bipartism and between natural and conventional sign systems, which begin to suggest a general incommensurability between the two theories. Most of all, I will focus on the radically unequal attention that semiotics and semiology pay to the question of a “referent”. As we shall see, semiotics is a system of thought which explicitly seeks to mediate between the natural environment and its perception in consciousness. Semiology, on the other hand, limits itself to the intralinguistic and mental sphere, cut off from the experiential world by an idealised world of concepts. In rejecting a theorisation of the referent, however, Saussure brings attention to the “purely negative and differential” (*Course* 118/165)<sup>1</sup> character of the sign. In doing so, Saussure makes possible a wholly original theorisation of communication. As a result, semiotics and semiology do not overlap in function and meaning, but instead, offer completely independent but complementary domains of explanation. What I will propose here is that the two models of the sign operate at different levels in the communicative process: semiotics as “representation” and semiology as “articulation”.

### Semiotics

Let us begin from the most basic unit of both semiotics and semiology: the sign. At first glance, every definition of the sign appears to be some variation on the theme of *aliquid stat pro aliquo*, or, something that stands for something else. Thomas Sebeok, for example, writes that:

To clarify what a sign is, it is useful to begin with the medieval formula *aliquid stat pro aliquo*, broadened by Peirce, about 1897, to something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. To the classic notion of *substitution* featured in this famous phrase – Roman Jakobson called it *renvoi*, translatable as “referral” – Peirce here added the criterion of *interpretation*. (33)

To the medieval definition of the sign,<sup>2</sup> Peirce adds the human subject to whom the sign stands for something, and in doing so, introduces the notion of interpretation to the sign. In Peirce’s own words, the formula is as follows:

A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed

---

1. References to the *Course in General Linguistics* will include two page numbers: the first being Roy Harris’s English translation, and the second being the standard (2nd) Payot edition.

2. For a more complex reading of classical and medieval semiotics, see Eco and Marmo (1989), Meier-Oeser (2003), and Daylight (2011), chapter 1.

sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. (2.228)

Similarly, Umberto Eco writes that “when – on the basis of an underlying rule – something actually presented to the perception of the addressee *stands for* something else, there is signification” (8). At the heart of semiosis, then, is the *stand-for relation* and the notion of referral, or substitution. In Steven Maras’s elegant formulation, it is a “semiotics of the proxy” (115).

However simple the origin of semiotic reasoning might be, this foundational principle of *renvoi* (referral or substitution) nevertheless carries with it certain assumptions and implications. These are worth drawing out. The first point is the clearest: what emerges most unmistakably from all of Peirce’s writings is his insistence on the essentially *tripartite* nature of the semiotic event. With any less than three elements, you do not have semiosis. Deely also points to the “irreducible triadicity” of the sign, and writes that:

The sign not only stands for something other than itself, it does so for some third; and though these two relations – sign to signified, sign to interpretant – may be taken separately, when they are so taken, there is no longer a question of sign but of cause to effect on one hand and object to knowing subject on the other. (*Basics of Semiotics* 33-34)

Just as Saussure insists on the meaninglessness of a signifier taken without its signified, and vice versa, a Peircean semiotic would insist on these three minimal units. Although we also need to note that unlike Peirce’s *representamen*, *interpretant*, and *object*, Deely’s semiotic here takes in the three elements *sign*, *interpretant*, and *signified* – a system which probably comes closer to Saussure’s model, but only by naming the referential object for which the sign stands as the “signified”. Already we can see that any translation of Peircean semiotics into Saussurean terminology may not sit easily with the relationship between these terms indicated by the *Course in General Linguistics*.

A second point emerges from Peirce’s theorisation of the sign, which is the possibility of *non-semiosis*, which occurs when the sign and the object are self-same. Deely elaborates upon this possibility:

So a sign is a representative, but not every representative is a sign. Things can represent themselves within experience. To the extent that they do so, they are objects and nothing more, even though in their becoming objects signs and semiosis are already invisibly at work. To be a sign, it is necessary to represent something other than the self. (*Basics of Semiotics* 35)

In other words, when the sign and the referent are the same object, as perhaps when a tree is not asked to stand for anything, but only for itself, then semiosis has not occurred. Instead, another form of perception or experience, a “presentation” without signs, has taken place. Such a presentation to the self is no doubt aligned with the pre-semiological experience that Husserl explores in the *Logical Investigations* (1970). Eco confirms this approach:

An event can be a sign-vehicle of its cause or its effect provided that both the cause and the effect are not actually detectable. Smoke is a sign of fire

to the extent that fire is not actually perceived along with the smoke: but smoke can be a sign-vehicle standing for non-visible fire, provided that a social rule has necessarily and usually associated smoke with fire. (17)

As with Deely's definition, the sign and the referent cannot be the same; something must be *revealed* in signification. In Eco's example of smoke and fire, the fire must be absent for smoke to function as a sign of it; if the fire is present, then we learn nothing from the smoke and hence it is not a sign.

The final point about these definitions to note is the rich variety in the way signs can "stand for" things and yet still be part of the unified science of semiotics. David Sless, for example, illustrates the multiple ways in which the "stand-for relation" can be put to use:

This *stand-for* relation is ubiquitous. The circuit diagram *stands* for the electronic device, money *stands* for products and labour, flags *stand* for nations, flowers *stand for* love, and even though there seem to be wide differences in the way each of these things *stand for*; I shall argue that they do indeed share a common underlying process; for in these and a myriad of other circumstances is to be found our social and biological existence – societies, organisms and indeed the fabric of the universe itself are structured by a complex web of *stand-for* relations – and from a semiotic point of view the *stand-for* relation is the basis of existence. (3)

Peirce's semiotic would seem to support this, with a myriad of different relationships proposed between a myriad of different types of representamen, interpretants, and objects. At one point Peirce counts over fifty-nine thousand different kinds of sign before economising that to sixty-six essential categories (Ogden and Richards 290). Whilst such abundance might follow from the principles of Peircean semiotics, it might not necessarily adhere to Saussure's proposed discipline of general semiology.

### Semiology

So what is the place of Saussure within this scheme? For most semioticians, semiology would contribute only a part of the whole of semiotics. Eco, for example, restricts Saussurean semiology to that part of semiotics in which communication is *intentional*, whereas semiotics as a whole also admits *unintentional* and *natural* sources of signs. He defines the Saussurean sign as "a twofold entity (signifier and signified or *sign-vehicle and meaning*)" and states that, for Saussure:

the sign is implicitly regarded as a communication device taking place between two human beings intentionally aiming to communicate or to express something. It is not by chance that all the examples of semiological systems given by Saussure are without any shade of doubt strictly conventionalized systems of artificial signs, such as military signals, rules of etiquette and visual alphabets. Those who share Saussure's notion of *sémiologie* distinguish sharply between intentional, artificial devices (which they call "signs") and other natural or unintentional manifestations which do not, strictly speaking, deserve such a name. (*A Theory of Semiotics* 14-15)

Eco's first claim – that the Saussurean sign is a twofold entity – is uncontroversial. Saussure defines the sign as the “association between signifier and signified” (*Course* 101/144), in which the signifier is the “sound-pattern” and the signified the “concept”, and both entities are purely psychological:

The linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern. The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer's psychological impression of the sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses. This sound pattern may be called a “material” element only in that it is the representation of our sensory impressions. The sound pattern may thus be distinguished from the other element associated with it in a linguistic sign. This other element is generally of a more abstract kind: the concept. (*Course* 66/98)

However, Eco's second claim – that Saussurean semiology is dependent on the intention to communicate – requires some interrogation. If it is true, then Pierre Guiraud's general definition of the sign would more accurately delimit Saussure's role within semiotics: “A sign is a stimulus – that is, a perceptible substance – the mental image of which is associated in our minds with that of another stimulus. The function of the former stimulus is to evoke the latter with a view to communication” (22). And those who share Saussure's notion of semiology would limit the scope of their research to those signs which not only stand for something else, but also are messages with senders and receivers: *aliquid stat pro aliquo plus the intention of communication.*

The Saussurean linguist Roy Harris reflects that Eco's claim would mean that: “whereas rings round the moon “meaning” rain, or spots “meaning” measles, would fall within the province of Peirce's general science of signs, they would be excluded from Saussure's” (27). But as Harris continues, “Unfortunately, Eco's reading of Saussurean semiology is not supported by what the text of the *Cours* says” (27). Harris argues that the *Course* defines semiology simply as the science which studies the role of signs as part of social life and therefore *does* include meteorological signs and even horoscopes and so on. What the *Course* says on the topic is this:

It is therefore possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. [. . .] We shall call it semiology (from the Greek, *sēmeion*, “sign”). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready for it in advance. Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge. (15-16/33)

It is certainly true, as Harris suggests, that the *Course* never specifies “intentional communication” or any other essential characteristics of the sign, other than being part of social life. However, Eco is correct in claiming that all the examples of general semiology offered by Saussure at this point are of conventional, intentional

communication: “writing, the deaf-and-dumb alphabet, symbolic rites, forms of politeness, military signals, and so on” (*Course* 15/33). So which is correct? The semiology of Roland Barthes helps us to move forward on this question.

Of all the practitioners of semiology and semiotics, none have made a more resolute effort to turn Saussure’s proposal for general semiology into a workable field of research than Roland Barthes. What we learn from his example is that Barthes’s field of study *does include* unintentional communication as well as intentional communication, but *excludes* natural signs of the order of smoke and fire. Barthes includes wholly intentional signs, such as the language of advertising, in which a string bag subtly denotes the freshness of a fishing-net (*Image Music Text* 46); but also includes the self-revealing and wholly unintentional signs of petit-bourgeois life, such as the ornamental cookery of *Elle* magazine (*Mythologies* 78-80). I believe that this indicates that the boundary between intentional and unintentional communication may not be critical in a Saussurean semiology. The *Course* seems to confirm this in indicating that signs that are not wholly arbitrary, such as genuflection or the scales of justice, are also fully part of Saussure’s design for the study of signs in social life (*Course* 68/101). Knowing that Peirce’s highest categorisation of signs takes in *symbols* (arbitrary signs, such as language), *icons* (those signs with a resemblance to what they represent, such as portraits), and *indices* (those signs with a causal relationship, such as smoke and fire), then the Saussurean definition of the sign would seem to admit both symbols and icons, with the most arbitrary signs demonstrating the semiological process best.

What is essential here is that Saussure never mentions causality, symptoms, or signs that have a physical or objective relationship between signifier and signified. Sebeok’s comments on indexical signs are useful here:

The essential point here is that the indexical character of the sign would not be voided if there were no interpretant, but only if its object were removed. An index is that kind of a sign that becomes by virtue of being really (i.e., factually) connected with its object. “Such is a symptom of disease” (Peirce 8.119). All “symptoms of disease”, furthermore, “have no utterer”, as is also the case with “signs of the weather” (8.185). We have an index, Peirce prescribed in 1885, when there is “a direct dual relation of the sign to its object independent of the mind using the sign [. . .] of this nature are all natural signs and physical symptoms” (3.361). (Sebeok 70-71)

To form an indexical sign, such as between smoke and fire, or between symptoms and their disease, a causal or “factual” connection between signifiers and signifieds must be established. Jonathan Culler comments on the unlikelihood of such a connection falling within Saussurean explanation:

Indices are, from the semiologist’s point of view, more worrying. If he places them within his domain he risks taking all human knowledge for his province, for all the sciences which attempt to establish causal relations among phenomena could be seen as studies of indices. (17)

To be fair to all parties here, it is not at all clear from the *Course* whether unintentional communication or natural relationships of cause and effect would have

been considered by Saussure as part of “the role of signs in social life”. All we know is that the laws of such a general semiology would have to apply equally well to linguistics. And as we shall see, if applying such a test means that Saussurean semiology excludes causal, objective, or logical relationships, then the basic operational example of semiotics, that “smoke is a sign of fire”, may thereby also be the least applicable to Saussurean semiology.

### Logic and arbitrariness

Saussure’s place within the field of semiotics is, then, perhaps less easily summarised than is usually thought. This field is dominated by the stand-for relation, or something that stands for something else to some cognitive power. The development of semiotics is the development of how this standing-for functions. In this sense, Peircean semiotics necessarily negotiates, through the process of *interpretation*, a stimulus object and a referential object; whilst Saussurean semiology seems to forgo a relationship with objects entirely. As such, Peircean semiotics takes into its schema natural signs, or those in which there is a relationship of cause and effect independent of the user of signs. Just as important, though, is that the stimulus object must not simply represent itself within experience. As Sless puts it:

If the sign and the referent are indistinguishable, then it is meaningless even to talk about one standing for the other, for they are the same. The stand-for relation can only be invoked between things which are taken to be different from each other by the user. (Sless 5-6)

When the representamen and object are the same, then semiosis does not occur, but only a semiotically silent presentation to the self.

We have also seen how the field of semiotics is characterised by its abundance of forms and means of signification. Such abundance puts into question the unity of the science of which Saussure is supposed to be part. Peirce himself describes semiotics as the amalgamation of three subordinate fields:

In consequence of every representamen being thus connected with three things, the ground, the object, and the interpretant, the science of semiotic has three branches. The first is called by Duns Scotus *grammatica speculativa*. We may term it pure grammar. It has for its task to ascertain what must be true of the representamen used by every scientific intelligence in order that they must embody any meaning. The second is logic proper. It is the science of what is quasi-necessarily true of the representamina of any scientific intelligence in order that they may hold good of any object, that is, may be true. Or say, logic proper is the formal science of the conditions of the truth of representations. The third [ . . . ] I call pure rhetoric. Its task is to ascertain laws by which in every scientific intelligence one sign gives birth to another, and especially one thought brings forth another. (Peirce 2.229)

Reflecting, as it does, the Latin Trivium, such a collection of subordinate studies may indeed form a unified science, or may not. Harman, for one, is less confident that such a diverse set of relationships can be gathered together under a single general theory:

Smoke means fire and the word combustion means fire, but not in the same sense of means. The word means is ambiguous. To say that smoke means fire is to say that smoke is a symptom, sign, indication, or evidence for fire. To say that combustion means fire is to say that people use the word to mean fire. Furthermore, there is no ordinary sense of the word mean in which a picture of a man means a man or means that man. This suggests that Peirce's theory of signs would comprise at least three rather different subjects: a theory of the intended meaning, a theory of evidence, and a theory of pictorial depiction. There is no reason to think that these theories must contain common principles. (93)

But what's important here is to note Peirce's interest in logic, that is, in a scientific or verifiable relationship with objects. This interest can be contrast with Ogden and Richard's 1927 review of the *Course*, which found that exactly what was missing was a theorisation of the referent: "this theory of signs, by neglecting entirely the things for which signs stand, was from the beginning cut off from any contact with scientific methods of verification" (6).

For Deely, it is Saussure's failure to theorise the referent which precludes Saussurean linguistics acting as the model for a general semiotics. This failure is particularly marked in his excessive interest in the arbitrary quality of signs:

[Saussure] compromised his proposal for the enterprise by making of linguistics "le patron générale [sic] de toute sémiologie," raising the "arbitrariness of signs" into a principle of analysis for all expressive systems. (*Basics of Semiotics* 115)

In making the sign a bipartite relation between sound pattern and concept, and in making that relation purely arbitrary and psychological, Saussurean semiology lacks what Peirce calls thirdness, that is, the interpretative function, by which objects become signs for ideas. Such a system is absolutely necessary when "smoke" is said to stand for "fire". Smoke is an object – external, extralinguistic – which becomes a sign when it stimulates the idea "fire" in the mind of the observer; in this case, responding to the interpretation that fire is necessary to produce smoke.

At this point, semiology begins to appear less a *part* of semiotics, and more an *incomplete* theorisation of it. However, if Saussure previously defined the sign as the bipartite relationship between signifier and signified, it is important to remember that he defined that relationship as "purely negative and differential" (*Course* 118/165):

Everything we have said so far comes down to this. *In the language itself, there are only differences.* Even more important than that is the fact that, although in general a difference presupposes positive terms between which the difference holds, in a language there are only differences, *and no positive terms.* Whether we take the signified or the signifier, the language includes neither ideas nor sounds existing prior to the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonetic differences arising out of that system. In a sign, what matters more than any idea or sound associated with it is what other signs surround it. (*Course* 118/166)



In language, which acts as his model for semiology, ideas do not exist prior to the linguistic system, but only as consequences of the language. The clearest understanding of any sign is not gained from its referent in the natural world, but in contrast with the other signs around it. In order to appreciate the operation of signification, it is necessary to also consider Saussure's deliberate and subtle distinction between "value" and "meaning":

Are value and *meaning* synonymous terms? Not in our view, although it is easy to confuse them. For the subtlety of the distinction, rather than any analogy between the two terms, invites confusion. Value, in its conceptual aspect, is doubtless part of meaning. It is by no means easy, indeed, to draw the distinction in view of this interconnexion. Yet it must be drawn, if a language is not to be reduced to a mere nomenclature. (*Course* 112/158)

A "value" is different from a "meaning," in that a "value" is a product of the interplay of all the elements in a semiological system, that is, of semiological difference. Saussure says that "A language is a system in which all the elements fit together, and in which the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of all the others" (*Course* 113/159). In such a scheme, "The content of a word is determined in the final analysis not by what it contains but by what exists outside it. As an element in a system, the word has not only a meaning but also – above all – a value. And that is something quite different" (*Course* 114/160). For Saussure, "meaning" is like the exchange of a token; it is the bipartite correspondence between the signifier and the signified. "Value", however, recognises that these are not positive terms, but differential and mutually determining units of language.

Samuel Weber is attentive to this gesture of Saussure, and observes that "the fundamental category of the semiotic tradition has always been that of *representation*" ("Saussure" 920). He writes that for "Aristotle – and by much of the metaphysical tradition that will follow", language only functions "as symbol – that is, as a substitute for things [. . .] as representation, and more precisely, representation in the sense of a substitute, proxy, deputy, or stand-in" (*Return to Freud* 24). However, "It is precisely this question which defines the point of departure of Saussure's reflections upon language" (*Return to Freud* 25). In order "to get at the specific originality of his conception it is first necessary to clear away some dead wood, which, despite its being dead – or perhaps because of it – has proved to be a persistent obstacle in obscuring the nature of that originality" ("Saussure" 918). And as we shall see, this "dead wood" is the unadventurous reading of Saussure's theory of the arbitrariness of the sign.

### **Representation and articulation**

Weber opens his analysis with a refutation of the assumption that the "arbitrariness of the sign" is original to Saussure. He argues, instead, that it is a conception as old as Western philosophy:

One of the best known and most quoted features of Saussure's semiotic the-

ory is doubtless the one in which he is also the least innovative: that of the “*arbitraire du signe*”. For inasmuch as this notion is simply held to state that the signifying material of the sign bears no intrinsic or natural resemblance to what it signifies, it subscribes to the most venerable traditions of Western thought concerning the nature of the sign. Already implicit in the writings of Plato, the notion of the arbitrary relation between sign [sic] and signified becomes quite explicit in Aristotle. (“Saussure” 918)

But as Weber suggests at this point: “If there is something distinctly innovative in Saussurian semiotics, it will have to be sought somewhere else than in the notion of the arbitrariness of the sign, at least interpreted in the conventional manner” (919). Weber’s argument is that to understand the true originality, even radicality, of Saussure’s theory of the arbitrariness of the sign, it must be read in light of his theory of linguistic value. He writes that:

In the chapters which follow Saussure’s initial rejection of the conception of language as nomenclature, the traditional model of language as representation remains unshaken . . . Indeed, it is only when Saussure proceeds from his description of what the sign is – a concrete linguistic *entity* – to how it *works*, that this representational-denominational conception of language is put into question. And this step coincides with his introduction of the notion of “linguistic value”. (920)

This is because the notion of linguistic value puts into doubt all previous assurances of meaning, as found in its relationship with reality. Saussure calls language “a system of pure values”, in which meanings only have solidity, or reality, in relation with other meanings, and in a relationship with sound. Weber cites Saussure –

Psychologically our thought – apart from its expression in words – is only an amorphous and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to distinguish two ideas in a clear and consistent fashion. Taken in itself, thought is like a nebula in which nothing is necessarily delimited. There are no preestablished ideas and nothing is distinct before the apparition of the language-system. (*Course* Trans. Baskin 111–12)

– and responds that even if “philosophers and linguists” always agreed that language is necessary to distinguish ideas, they have still excluded language from the process by which ideas are *constituted*, which has always been understood to exclude or transcend language:

What Saussure is asserting here, by contrast, is not simply that language is indispensable for the distinction of ideas, but for their very constitution. For if “thought is like a nebula”, apart from its articulation in language, and if there are no “preestablished ideas” antedating such articulation, then the traditional conception of language as the representation or expression of thought is undermined, at least implicitly. (922)

Saussure’s originality, then, is to make the constitution of signifieds a product, an effect, of articulation and the differential system of language. No meanings

are assured or solid prior to the introduction of linguistic structure. Weber concludes that, after Saussure: “Arbitrariness is no longer a notion governed by that of representation: it no longer designates the fact that the sign is composed of two dissimilar, heterogeneous elements – the signifier and the signified – but instead, points to something far more radical” (927). Or as Simon Critchley puts it: “In breaking the bond that ties meaning to representation, Saussure breaks with the classical theory of the sign” (36).

So how are we then to understand semiology? If the Saussurean sign is not an order of representation, then what is it? Do signs *consist* of something, *express* something, *convey*, *communicate* something? If these are supposedly synonyms, they are uneasy ones, glossing over perhaps the central question of semiology. If the sign does not represent a concept or a thing, then what does it do? Weber argues that, after Saussure, signification is no longer an act of representation – with its implication of substitution or standing for – but an act of articulation:

the primary distinction is neither that of representation and referent, nor that of signifier and signified. Rather, it is that of difference as the principle upon which the function of the signifier as well as that of the signified is “founded” [. . .] Thought in this way, signification is no longer conceived of as a process of representation, but as one of articulation. (*Return to Freud* 27)

If so, then there is already support for such a view. Malmberg, for example, distinguishes between the “symbol” and the “sign”, where the former is used for representation, and the stand-for relation, while the latter is kept for “those units which, like the signs of language, have a double articulation and owe their existence to an act of signification” (Malmberg, qtd in Eco 1976: 21). And Barthes states that:

We know that linguists refuse the status of language to all communication by analogy – from the “language” of bees to the “language” of gesture – the moment such communications are not doubly articulated, are not founded upon a combinatory system of digital units as phonemes are. (*Image Music Text* 149)

It is worth noting, then, that the section of the *Course* in which Saussure defines semiology as the “science which studies the role of signs as part of social life” immediately follows Saussure’s definition of the language faculty as *articulation*:

This idea [that the language faculty is not by nature phonic] gains support from the notion of *language articulation*. In Latin, the word *articulus* means “member, part, subdivision in a sequence of things”. As regards language, articulation may refer to the division of the chain of speech into syllables, or to the division of the chain of meanings into meaningful units. (10/26)

The next time that articulation appears in the *Course* is in the chapter “Linguistic Value”, where Saussure states that:

Linguistic structure might be described as the domain of articulations, taking this term in the sense defined earlier (10/26). Every linguistic sign is a

part or member, an *articulus*, where an idea is fixed in a sound, and a sound becomes the sign of an idea. (111/156)

In other words, as Weber suggests, Saussure's theory of linguistic value determines that the relationship between the signifier (which is no longer equivalent to a "sign") and the signified (which is no longer equivalent to a "referent") is not one of representation, nor of standing-for, but of articulation.

Many of our preconceptions about the difference between semiotics and semiology can now be overcome. Peircean semiotics describes the process by which one symbol is substituted for another, as a stimulus-object for a referential-object, and so on to infinity, on the same level. The representamen "spot" stands for the object "measles", when perceived through the interpretant of "diagnostics". Saussurean semiology, on the other hand, is supposedly constrained by a bipartite relationship between signifier and signified. However, it would be very simple to restore triadicity to the Saussurean sign, if one wished. The Saussurean sign would merely take for granted the interpretant of "social agreement". The verbal representamen "tree" would stand for the object "tree" through the interpretant of "social agreement".<sup>3</sup> In this sense, Saussurean semiology *does* include physical or natural signs in the sense that "spots" or "smoke" can be apprehended in consciousness. The Saussurean theory of value describes the process by which our experiences of the natural world become articulated as concepts through the medium of language. When we see a large body of water running to the sea, we think of "river" in contrast with "lake" or "rivulet", but that conceptuality is wholly arbitrary in relation to the natural world, and governed purely by social agreement.

The difference between semiotics and semiology is not, then, to be found in bipartism nor in convention. What is truly distinct about the two fields of study is characterised by an interest in *representation*, on the one hand, and in *articulation*, on the other. Peirce is interested in the ways – the tens of thousands of ways – in which an object can give rise to some other, different, idea. As a science it has the advantage of taking in its purview the infinite variety of communicative acts, but must exclude those cases where the signifier and signified are the same, that is, when the object simply stands for itself. As a result, semiotics remains within the representational view of language, which is dominated by the "stand-for" relation between already-constituted entities on the same level. Saussure, in contrast, is interested in the linguistic constitution of those entities in the first place. Semiology cannot serve as representation but instead describes that experiential, pre-semiotic moment prior to representation, when identity within a system of differences is first articulated. Hence, it would be appropriate to phrase semiology as the science not of representation, but of articulation.

---

3. Which corresponds to Ogden and Richards' analysis that "A sign for de Saussure is twofold, made up of a concept (*signifié*) and an acoustic image (*signifiant*), both psychological entities. Without the concept, he says, the acoustic image would not be a sign. The disadvantage of this account is [. . .] that the process of interpretation is included in the sign!" (5).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is impossible for Peircean semiotics to do without the “stand-for” relation, and impossible for Saussurean linguistics to accept it. Put another way, the semiotic acts of *representation* and *interpretation* are incompatible with Saussure’s view of the arbitrariness of the sign and its manifestation in language as *articulation*. It is not simply a matter of showing how either Peirce or Saussure is wrong, or that one project is impossible or unscientific. Rather, it is to sharpen the contrast between the explanatory power of both.

In the last two decades, semiotics has not simply moved away from Saussure, but become openly antagonistic towards the entire Saussurean tradition. For semioticians at the vanguard of its expansion into new domains of explanation, semiology represents not only an inadequate theorisation of the sign, but also that set of linguistic constraints from which semiotics struggles to break away:

For it was indeed Sebeok who, from his 1963 entry on center-stage to his death in 2001, tirelessly promoted the doctrine of signs under the label “semiotics” as inclusive of all signs, natural and cultural alike, in relentless opposition to all who would propose what he called an exclusively glottocentric perspective of the narrowing anthropocentric sort that Saussure had called for under the label or name “semiology”. (Deely “On ‘Semiotics’” 7)

For Deely, it is precisely due to its theorisation of “*renvoi* or ‘referral,’ the relation whereby one thing comes to stand for another than itself to or for some third”, that “semiotics prevails as the twenty-first century gets underway” (“The word ‘Semiotics’” 39). And as much as this is true, semiotics may have moved too quickly beyond Saussure’s unique problematisation of reference. It should be clear now that Saussure’s rejection of the referent is no lacuna in the *Course*; it is deliberate, theoretical, and anything but “naïve”, as Ogden and Richards suggest (5). Sturrock’s example is that if an animal is called *horse* and *cheval* on different sides of the English Channel, “we cannot and must not conclude from that that they are two signifiers with a common signified” (15), because a signified is something which can be found only within linguistic structure, and *not* “to be found standing in a field” (16). If Saussurean semiology is not an act of representation then neither is it an act of interpretation, because it does not involve a relationship from sign to sign, on the same level. It is a particular kind of transaction, called articulation, which forms units simultaneously and reciprocally as an intermediary between abstract sound and abstract thought. The relationship between the already-articulated objects “smoke” and “fire”, or between “flowers” and “love”, or between “flag” and “nation” no doubt requires an explanation, but that explanation has nothing at all to do with Saussurean semiology.

*Charles Sturt University, Australia*

### Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. *Image Music Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 1977. Print.
- . *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. London: Jonathan Cape, 1972. Print.
- Critchely, Simon. *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. Print.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1975. Print.
- Daylight, Russell. *What if Derrida was wrong about Saussure?* Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011. Print.
- Deely, John. *Basics of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. Print.
- . “On ‘Semiotics’ as Naming the Doctrine of Signs”. *Semiotica*. 158.1 (2006): 1-33. Print.
- . “The Word ‘Semiotics’: Formation and Origins”. *Semiotica*. 146.1 (2003): 1-49. Print.
- Eco, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976. Print.
- Eco, Umberto and Constantino Marmo, eds. *On the Medieval Theory of Signs*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1989. Print.
- Guiraud, Pierre. *Semiology*. Trans. George Gross. London: Routledge, 1975. Print.
- Harman, Gilbert. “Semiotics and the Cinema: Metz and Wollen”. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998, 5th edition. 90-98. Print.
- Harris, Roy. *Reading Saussure*. La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1987. Print.
- Husserl, Edmund. *Logical Investigations*. Vol 1. Trans. J. N. Findlay. London, Routledge, 1970. Print.
- Maras, Steven. “A Semiotics of the Proxy”. *Social Semiotics*. 12.1 (2002): 115-29. Print.
- Meier-Oeser, Stephan. “Medieval Semiotics”. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2003 edition)*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. Web. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2003/entries/semiotics-medieval/>.
- Normand, Claudine. “System, Arbitrariness, Value”. *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*. Ed. Carol Sanders. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 88-104. Print.
- Ogden, C. K. and I. A. Richards. *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner; New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927. Print.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Papers*. Ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1965. Print.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Cours de linguistique generale*. Ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye with the collaboration of Albert Riedlinger. 2nd edition. Paris and Lausanne: Payot, 1922. Print.
- . *Course in General Linguistics*. Ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye with the collaboration of Albert Riedlinger. Trans. Wade Baskin. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959. Print.
- . *Course in General Linguistics*. Ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Trans. Roy Harris. London: Duckworth, 1983. Print.
- Sebeok, Thomas A. *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*. 2nd edition. Toronto: U Toronto P, 2001. Print.
- Sless, David. *In Search of Semiotics*. Beckenham, Kent: Croom Helm, 1986. Print.
- Sturrock, John. *Structuralism*. 2nd edition. London: Fontana, 1993. Print.
- Weber, Samuel. *Return to Freud*. Trans. Michael Levine. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991. Print.
- . “Saussure and the Apparition of Language: The Critical Perspective”. *Modern Language Notes* 91 (1976): 913-38. Print.