



DOI: 10.22363/2313-2299-2023-14-2-305-313

EDN: LVEYJG

UDC 81'22:003

Research article / Научная статья

## Re-thinking Semiotics: a New Categorization of a Sign?

Marina G. Shilina<sup>1,2</sup>  , Mohsen Zarifian<sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Plekhanov Russian University of Economics,  
36, Stremyanny Ln., Moscow, Russian Federation, 115093

<sup>2</sup> Lomonosov Moscow State University,  
9, Mokhovaya str., Moscow, Russian Federation, 125009

<sup>3</sup> RUDN University,  
6, Miklukho-Maklaya str., Moscow, Russian Federation, 117198

 [marina.shilina@gmail.com](mailto:marina.shilina@gmail.com)

**Abstract.** The study discusses the fundamental issues of semiotics. Semiotics still involves no broadly agreed upon theoretical assumptions, models, or empirical methodologies. Faced with much disagreement among notable semioticians about what semiotics actually entails, the study opens up the way to its theoretical re-thinking. Starting from the analysis of the discussions of scientists it indicated that the signs are not identical to what they represent this studies the issue through a theoretical concepts analysis, literature review, combined with comparative analysis of the main classical theoretical parameters of signs. The basic approach of this study is that signs, whether it is symbolic, iconic, or indexical, are not what they mean. The nature of the sign, whether it is symbolic, iconic, or indexical, determines the way it is used, and the same signifier can be used in different ways in different contexts. The role of an interpreter should be taken into account. A sign meaning is not inherent in it; rather, it is determined by how it is interpreted. The relevance of the research is due to a new complex approach to statements about users, signs or referents that could never be made in isolation from each other. A statement about one of those always contains implications about the other two. Rather than specific «types of sign», we're talking about symbolic, iconic, and indexical forms of relationships. The hypothesis is as follows: the nature of the sign determines the way it is used. Moreover, the same signifier can be used both iconically and symbolically in different contexts. The novelty of the research is related to the idea of the sign that can be interpreted in different ways depending on who observes it: as symbolic, iconic or indexical. In other words, signs cannot be classified according to the classical semiology canons, but only with regard to the goals of their users and a certain context. Regarding this, we will propose a comparative analysis of the classic models of the sign to prove the hypothesis. The hypothesis is proved due to the provided comparative analysis of the classic models of a sign and modes of its relationship. The findings of this study have to be seen in light of some major limitations. First, the main primary research problem we have to solve was the semiotics of contemporary cartoons. Facing the lack of previous

© Shilina M.G., Mohsen Zarifian, 2023



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode>

research studies and the theoretical foundations for the research on the topic, we decided that prior theoretical research studies that are relevant to our specific topic are needed, which is why the article is aimed at theoretical issues. Theoretical and methodological limitations are addressed to our future studies. The research instruments and techniques used to collect the empirical data will have to be identified. Intercultural specifics connected with the personalities of the authors — Russian and Iranian researchers — influence the study but also limits it.

**Keywords:** semiology, object, interpretant, symbol, icon, index, model, mode

**Article history:**

Received: 05.10.2022

Accepted: 15.02.2023

**For citation:**

Shilina, M.G. & Mohsen, Zarifian. (2023). Re-thinking Semiotics: a New Categorization of a Sign? *RUDN Journal of Language Studies, Semiotics and Semantics*, 14(2), 305–313. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2299-2023-14-2-305-313>

## Переосмысливая семиотику: новая категоризация знака?

М.Г. Шилина<sup>1,2</sup>  , М. Зарифиан<sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Российский экономический университет им. Г.В. Плеханова,  
115093, Российская Федерация, г. Москва, Стремянный переулок, д. 36

<sup>2</sup> Московский государственный университет им. М.В. Ломоносова,  
125009, Российская Федерация, г. Москва, ул. Моховая, д. 9

<sup>3</sup> Российский университет дружбы народов,  
117198, Российская Федерация, г. Москва, ул. Миклухо-Маклая, д. 6

 marina.shilina@gmail.com

**Аннотация.** Семиотика до сих пор не обладает согласованными теоретическими основаниями, моделями, методологией эмпирических исследований. Столкнувшись с многочисленными разногласиями среди видных теоретиков о сути семиотики, данное исследование нацелено на ее теоретическое переосмысление. Анализ научной дискуссии определяет исследовательскую проблему: знаки не тождественны тому, что они представляют. Данная проблема изучается на основании анализа базовых теоретических концепций, обзора литературы в сочетании со сравнительным анализом основных классических теоретических параметров знаков. Основной посыл данного исследования заключается в том, что знаки не совпадают с тем, что они означают. Характер знака, будь то символический, иконический или индексальный, определяет способ его использования. Более того, одно и то же означающее может использоваться по-разному в разных контекстах. Значение знака ему не присуще; скорее, оно определяется тем, как интерпретируется, поэтому роль интерпретатора представляется существенной. Актуальность исследования определяет комплексный подход в изучении особенностей интерпретаторов/пользователей, знаков или референтов, которые не могут быть выявлены изолированно друг от друга. Констатация свойств одного всегда содержит констатацию сведений относительно двух других. По существу, речь идет не о конкретных типах знаков, а о символических, иконических и индексальных формах отношений. Новизна исследования заключается в том, что авторы на основе компаративного анализа классических моделей и параметров взаимодействия доказывают, что знак можно интерпретировать по-разному в зависимости от того, кто его наблюдает: как символиче-

ский, иконический или индексальный, — то есть знаки нельзя классифицировать по канонам классической семиологии, а только с учетом целей их пользователей и определенного контекста. Результаты исследования следует рассматривать в контексте ряда ограничений. Отсутствие исследований и теоретических основ для изучения базовой темы (семиотики карикатуры), обусловило теоретический характер исследования на данном этапе и в будущем — необходимость определить исследовательские инструменты и методы для сбора эмпирических данных. Межкультурная специфика, связанная с личностями авторов — российского и иранского исследователей, — делает исследование более многогранным, но и ограничивает его. Данные основные ограничения рассматриваются в наших последующих исследованиях.

**Ключевые слова:** семиология, объект, интерпретант, символ, икона, индекс, модель, модус

**История статьи:**

Дата поступления: 5.10.2022

Дата приема: в печать: 15.02.2023

**Для цитирования:**

*Shilina M.G., Zarifian M.* Re-thinking Semiotics: Towards a New Categorization of a Sign // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Теория языка. Семиотика. Семантика. 2023. Т. 14. № 2. С. 305–313. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2299-2023-14-2-305-313>

## Introduction

Contemporary Semiotics could be considered as “the study of signs,” claiming that “semiotics is concerned with everything that might be perceived as a sign” [1. P. 7]. Beyond the most basic description of semiotics as “the study of signs,” there is much disagreement among notable semioticians about what semiotics actually entails [2]. Nevertheless, at the edge of 20<sup>st</sup> century, contemporary semiotics has been co-founded by two significant theoretical traditions, which have been independently established by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. De Saussure and Peirce are credited with developing the two most dominant models of what defines a sign. Saussure defined ‘semiology’ as “a science which investigates the role of signs as part of social life,” [3] in contrast to Peirce, who approached ‘semiotics’ from a logical standpoint while aiming to construct a “formal doctrine of signs” [4]. While Saussure's catchphrase was “structure,” Peirce's model changed the spotlight to “process,” suggesting that even our cognitive processes are social. According to Peirce, “Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign” [4. V. 2. P. 172].

Signs are examined by modern semioticians as a component of semiotic “sign-systems,” such as a medium or genre. And it should be acknowledged that semiotics involves no broadly agreed upon theoretical assumptions, models, or empirical methodologies. The discussions of scientists indicate that the signs are not identical to what they represent [5].

The nature of a sign, whether it is symbolic, iconic, or indexical, determines the way it is used. Moreover, the same signifier can be used in different ways in different contexts. The basic approach of this study is that signs are not what they mean. The hypothesis is as follows: the nature of the sign, whether

it is symbolic, iconic, or indexical, determines the way it is used. Moreover, the same signifier can be used both iconically and symbolically in different contexts. A sign could be interpreted in different ways depending on who observes it: as symbolic, iconic or indexical. In other words, signs cannot be classified according to the classical semiology canons, but only with regard to the goals of their users and a certain context.

Regarding this, we will propose a comparative analysis of the classic models of a sign to prove the hypothesis.

### **Saussure's and Pierce's models of a sign**

Saussure's dyadic model of the sign is a division of the sign into two necessary constituent elements, which are: 'Signifier' (signifiant) — the form which the sign takes; 'Signified' (signifié) — the concept it represents. Saussure defined a sign as being composed of the two above-mentioned parts, and a sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified [6. P. 67]. It must be emphasized that both a signifier and a signified are necessary for a sign. The sign is a recognizable combination of the signifier with a specific signified. Saussure presented these elements as wholly interdependent, neither pre-existing the other. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is called the “signification”. There is an intention among contemporary commentators to explain the signifier as the form that the sign takes and the signified as the concept to which it refers. In the following terms, Saussure outlines this distinction: A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept [signified] and a sound pattern [signifier].

Saussure stressed that both the signifier and the signified to be solely psychological phenomena [3. P. 12, 14–15]. Thus, the sign is completely immaterial, despite his didn't embrace of the term “Abstract” and accordingly any connections with the external world are most probably created through the interpreter's sensorimotor system [6. P. 12, 15, 65–66]. In Saussure's association of signifier (the 'sound pattern') and the signified (the concept), both components were considered in form rather than substance. Saussure's approach is helpful in highlighting the idea that signification eventually relies on perceptions, not just on physical form.

Saussure emphasized that signifier and the signified (or the sound and thought) like the two sides of a piece of paper are inseparable [3. P. 111] and they are 'intimately linked' in the mind 'by an associative link' — 'each triggers the other' [3. P. 66]. Saussure's survey pivots around linguistic signs such as words and the 'phonocentrically' adequate focus afforded towards the spoken word, precisely referring to the image acoustique ('sound-image' or 'sound pattern'), perceiving writing as a different, subordinate, dependent but comparable sign system.

Even though the fundamental “Saussurean” model is still widely adopted and employed today, it is often more materialistic than Saussure's original

model. The signifier is nowadays frequently viewed as the physical or material representation of the sign; it is something that can be perceived through sight, sound, touch, smell, or taste.

Later theorists have also used the term “signifier” to denote a sign's physical manifestation, such as Peirce's representamen.

At roughly the same time, Peirce independently proposed a triadic version of the model of the sign [4], 'semeiotic [sic]' and sign classifications, in the form of a 'self-contained dyad', consisting of three parts as below.

1. The representamen: the actual form that the sign takes, which need not necessarily be in physical shape, but is usually perceived as such. Some theorists refer to this form as a “sign vehicle.”
2. An interpretant: not an interpreter but rather the sense made of the sign; the meaning that is interpreted (which is what an interpreter makes of the sign).
3. An object: something beyond the sign to which it refers; which is what the sign represents (a referent).

The interpretant is not the audience, but what sense the audience makes of a sign. It should be made explicit that an interpretant and an interpreter are two different things. Peirce proposed a phenomenological distinction between the sign itself [or the representamen] as an instance of “Firstness,” its object as an instance of “Secondness,” and the interpretant as an instance of “Thirdness,” since he was evidently attracted to tripartite structures. In this vein, all these three components must be present for something to be recognized as a sign. The object (what is represented), the representamen (how it is represented), and the interpretation (how it is interpreted) all contribute to the creation of the sign as a whole.

Variations of Peirce's triad are regularly presented as 'the semiotic triangle', which is a frequently encountered version that modifies the unfamiliar Peircean terminology.

## Discussion and Results

Peirce's representamen and Saussure's signifier are equivalents in meaning, while the interpretant is almost identical to a signified. But unlike the signified, the interpretant has the quality of being a sign in the interpreter's consciousness. Peirce observed that “a sign (...) addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign.” [4].

It should be noted that the term “sign” is frequently employed in an ambiguous manner. Peirce himself regularly mentions ‘the sign’ when, strictly speaking, he is referring to the representamen, and in the same way, in the Saussurean model, some references to ‘the sign’ should be to the signifier.

Peirce's version of the sign contains an object or referent, which in Saussure's model this part does not exist. The meaning and function of representamen

could be compared with Saussure's signifier and the interpretant is similar to the Saussure's signified. The interpretant, however, differs from the signified in that it is considered by the interpreter to be a sign. "A sign addresses someone when it creates in that person's mind an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign," according to Peirce." The sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign" [4. V. 2. P. 228]. To put it bluntly, Peirce used the term "semiosis" (alternatively semiosis) to describe the interaction between the representamen, the object and the interpretant [4. V. 5. P. 484].

According to Roman Jakobson, for Peirce "the meaning of the sign is the sign it can be translated into." [7]. As Peirce was well aware of, this might result in a sequence of succeeding interpretants, which is possibly ad infinitum, according to Eco, who brings into play the term "unlimited semiosis" to describe this possibility [1. P. 68–90]. Any preliminary interpretation may be revised and re-interpreted. Peirce remarked, that "the meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation" [4. V. 1. P. 339]. Peirce did not feature the term 'interpreter' in his triad system, and the importance of sense-making, which calls for an interpreter.

Whether a dyadic or triadic model is adopted, the role of the interpreter must be accounted for. A sign's meaning is not inherent in it; rather, it is determined by how it is interpreted. In view of this, David Sless outlines that "statements about users, signs or referents can never be made in isolation from each other. A statement about one always contains implications about the other two." [8. P. 6]. Paul Thibault believes that Saussure's seemingly dyadic model includes the interpreter implicitly [9. P. 184].

The relatively arbitrary "symbolism" of the medium of verbal language, offered by Saussure, actually represents just one type of relationship between signifier and signified. Although Peirce noted the relation between the 'sign' (*sic!*) and the *object*, the Peircean distinctions are most commonly applied within a broad Saussurean framework. While Saussure stressed the arbitrary aspect of the (linguistic) sign, the majority of semioticians underlined that signs varied in their degree of arbitrary/conventionality (or, in contrast, 'transparency'). Whereas Saussure did not propose a sign typology, Peirce was a compulsive taxonomist who presented multiple logical typologies [4. V. 1. P. 291; V. 2. P. 243].

Peirce's basic classifications, which he considered to be "the most fundamental" division of signs," are actually relationships between a representamen and its object or interpretant, and they are more useful as a classification of differing "modes of relationship" between sign vehicles and their referents [10. P. 129]. Within the Saussurean model, such inclusion tends to stress (though indirectly) the signified's referential potential.

Peirce classified signs into three following types, and three modes of relationships:

*Symbol/symbolic*: a mode in which the signifier and signified are essentially different from one another. There is no similarity between the signifier and the

signified in a symbol. The relationship between them is basically arbitrary or entirely conventional.

*Icon/iconic*: the signifier shares or simulates (imitates) some characteristic of the signified and is recognizably similar to it by looking, hearing, feeling, tasting, or smelling. An icon resembles the signified.

*Index/indexical*: a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is physically or causally tied to the signified. This connection can be observed, deduced, or concluded. Evidence of what is being represented is displayed in an index.

Thus, rather than specific “types of sign”, we're talking about symbolic, iconic, and indexical forms of relationships. It's easy to confuse Peirce's three forms for “sign types,” but they're not necessarily distinct; a sign can be thought of or interpreted as a symbol, a symbol, an index, or any combination of the three. Peirce himself was completely aware of this subject, as evidenced by the fact that he claimed that “it would be difficult if not impossible to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality” [4. V. 2. P. 306].

In fact, these three modes emerged inside and as a result of the triadic model of Peirce, and from a Peircean standpoint, transforming a triadic connection into a dyadic one is reductive [11]. For example, Peirce speaks of a “genuine relation” between the “sign” and the “object” that is independent of only “the interpreting mind” [4. V. 2. P. 92, 298]. The object is “necessarily existent” [4. V. 2. P. 310]. The index is really associated with its item [4. V. 4. P. 447]. There is 'a real connection' [10: 5.75]. There might be a “direct physical connection” [4. V. 1. P. 372. V. 2. P. 281, 299]. “a fragment torn away from the object” is how an indexical sign is similar to that. [4. V. 2. P. 231] An index, as opposed to an icon (whose subject may be fictitious), stands “unequivocally for this or that existing thing” [4. V. 4. P. 531]. The signifier is “actually modification” by the signified, even though “it inevitably has some characteristic in common” with it; there is an “actual affected” involved [4. V. 2. P. 248]. There is more to the relationship than “mere resemblance” “indices (...) have no significant resemblance to their objects” [4. V. 2. P. 306]. Also Eco has a lengthy discussion and critics of iconic mode of relationships between signifier and signified [1. P. 191]. According to Lyons, iconicity is “always dependent upon properties of the medium in which the form is manifest” [12. P. 105].

Theorists — and an individual — might regard a sign as symbolic, iconic, and indexical. The nature of the sign, whether it is symbolic, iconic, or indexical, determines the way it is used. Moreover, the same signifier can be used both iconically and symbolically in different contexts. And “when we speak of an icon, an index or a symbol, we are not referring to objective qualities of the sign itself. But to a viewer's experience of the sign”, argues Kent Grayson [13. P. 35].

Both Peirce and Saussure were fully aware of the mutable nature of the signifier-signified relationship in language [8. P. 74]. Nowadays, a historical change from one

sign mode to another frequently takes place. This implies that modes of the signs can also change as time passes. According to structuralist theorists, the relationship between signifier and signified is dynamically changing: Any “fixing” of “the chain of signifiers” is temporary and socially driven [14. P. 6, 8, 13].

## Conclusion

To bring the subject of “three modes of relationships” to a close, it should be emphasized that the manner in which a sign is employed essentially determines whether it is symbolic, iconic, or indexical. The same signifier could well be utilized both iconically and symbolically in different contexts.

Without taking into account the goals of their users within certain contexts, signs cannot be categorized in terms of the three modes. As a result, a sign may be interpreted in different ways depending on who observes it: as symbolic, iconic, or indexical.

Thus, the sign can be interpreted in different ways depending on who observes it: as symbolic, iconic or indexical. In other words, signs cannot be classified according to the classical semiology canons, but only with regard to the goals of their users and a certain context.

## References

1. Eco, U. (1976). *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: IN: Indiana University Press/London: Macmillan.
2. Culler, J. (1975). *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
3. Saussure, F. de. (1983). *Course in General Linguistics*. London: Duckworth.
4. Peirce, Ch.S. (1931–1958). *Collected Writings in 8 Vols*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
5. Langer, S.K. (1951). *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*. New York: Mentor.
6. Saussure, F. de. (1974). *Course in General Linguistics*. London: Fontana/Collins.
7. Jakobson, R. (1963). Visual and Auditory Signs. In: *Selected Writings*. The Hague: Mouton. pp. 334–337.
8. Sless, D. (1986). *In Search of Semiotics*. London: Croom Helm.
9. Thibault, P.J. (1997). *Re-reading Saussure: The Dynamics of Signs in Social Life*. London: Routledge.
10. Hawkes, T. (1977). *Structuralism and Semiotics*. London: Methuen.
11. Bruss, E.W. (1978). Peirce and Jakobson on the Nature of the Sign. In: *Bailey, R.W., Matejka, L. and Steiner, P. (eds.) The Sign: Semiotics Around the World*. MI: University of Michigan Press. pp. 81–98.
12. Lyons, J. (1977). *Semantics*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
13. Grayson, K. (1998). The Icons of Consumer Research. Using Signs to Represent Consumers' Reality. In: *Representing Consumers*. Abingdon: Taylor and Francis. pp. 27–43. 10.4324/9780203380260-8
14. Coward, R. & Ellis, J. (1977). *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.



### **Information about the authors:**

*Marina G. Shilina*, Dr.Sc. (Philology), Professor of the Department of Advertising, PR and Design, Plekhanov Russian State University of Economics; Assistant Professor of the Department of Advertising and PR, Faculty of Journalism, Lomonosov Moscow State University. *Research interests*: communication theory, theory of discourse and intercultural communication, mediatization studies, digital media studies; *e-mail*: marina.shilina@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-9608-352X; WoS Research ID: U-4481-2018; Scopus Author ID:57196371205

*Mohsen Zarifian*, PhD student in international journalism, RUDN University; Assistant of the Department of Mass Communication, Philological Faculty, RUDN University; journalist, cartoonist. *Research interests*: political discourse, contemporary media discourse, digital media studies, cartoon as a means of political communication; *e-mail*: mohsen.zarifian@gmail.com  
ORCID: 0000-0001-7363-0263

### **Сведения об авторах:**

*Шилина Марина Григорьевна*, доктор филологических наук, профессор кафедры рекламы, связей с общественностью и дизайна, Российский государственный экономический университет им. Г.В. Плеханова; доцент кафедры рекламы и связей с общественностью факультета журналистики, МГУ им. М.В. Ломоносова; *Научные интересы*: теория коммуникации, теория дискурса и межкультурной коммуникации, медиатизация, цифровые медиа; *e-mail*: marina.shilina@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-9608-352X; ResearcherID: U-4481-2018; ScopusID: 57196371205

*Зарифиан Мохсен*, аспирант кафедры международной журналистики, ассистент кафедры массовых коммуникаций филологического факультета, Российский университет дружбы народов; журналист, карикатурист. *Научные интересы*: политический дискурс, современный медиадискурс, исследования цифровых медиа, карикатура как средство политической коммуникации; *e-mail*: mohsen.zarifian@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0001-7363-0263