semiotics / semiology

→ the study of how *signs* make meaning

→ something that represents something else

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semiotics / semiology

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semiotics / semiology

ancient Greece

Hippocrates (460-377 BC) establishes semiotics (σημειωτικός) as a branch of medicine

Aristotle (384-322 BC) establishes a 3-part model of semiotics

early modern

Henry Stubbes (1670) as defining the branch of medical science relating to the interpretation of signs / symptoms

John Locke (1690) in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* proposes importing semiotics into philosophy as a tool for allowing philosophers to understand the relationship between representation and knowledge

structural linguistics

Charles Sanders Peirce (1890s), American pragmatist philosopher, begins developing a formal theory of semiotics

Ferdinand de Saussure (1906), Swiss linguist, begins lecturing on his theories of semiology

structuralism

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1950s), Belgian-French anthropologist, applies semiotics to cultural myths and social practices

Roland Barthes (1950s), French literary critic, applies semiotics to all forms of social behavior

Jacques Lacan (1960s), French doctor/psychiatrist, applies semiotics to Freudian psychoanalysis

Louis Althusser (1960s), French Marxist philosopher, applies semiotics to Marxist philosophy

poststructuralism

Michel Foucault (1960s), French philosopher, explores the historical importance of semiotic systems

Jacques Derrida (1960s), French-Algerian philosopher, deconstructs Saussurean linguistics

Julia Kristeva (1960s), Bulgarian-French philosopher, wages feminist critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis

Gilles Deleuze + Félix Guattari (1960s), French philosopher and psychoanalyst, critiques Marxist and Freudian structuralism

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C.S. Peirce (1839-1914)

Peirce

American pragmatist philosopher and scientist
Very concerned with the accurate description of empirical phenomena
Developed a scientific system for logically describing all types of signs: semiotics

the thing to which the representamen refers

object

semiotic

triad

representamen

the form the sign takes (not necessarily material)

interpretant

the sense made of the sign

not an interpreter but rather a "determined" relationship

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Many categories of signs

Qualisign

Sinsign

Legisign

Rhematic

Dicent

Argument

icon   representamen signifies the object through similarity (cartoon, sound effect, realistic painting)

index   representamen signifies the object through physical connection (smoke, footprint, sonic boom)

symbol   representamen signifies the object through arbitrary rule (alphabet, stop sign, punctuation)

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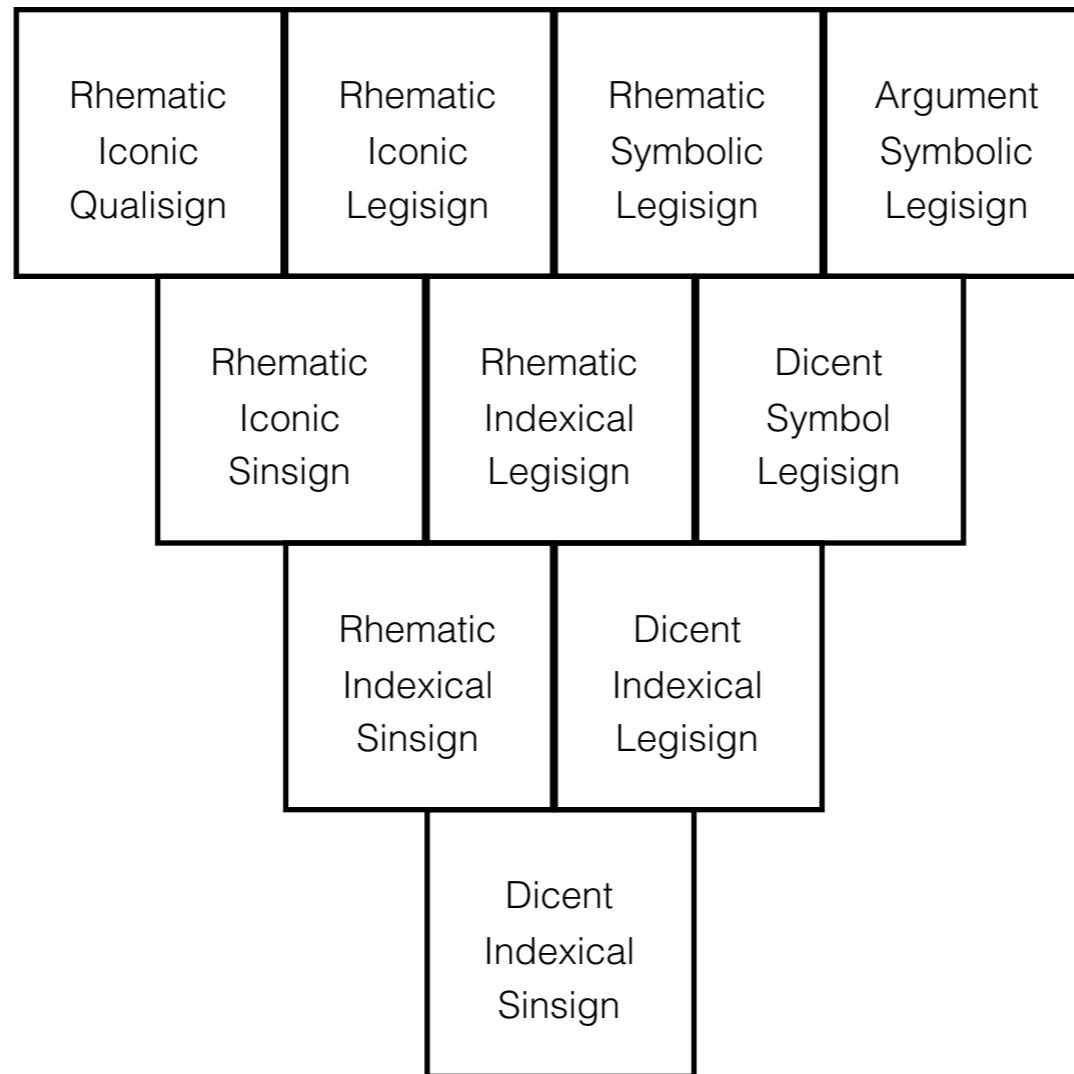Developed a scientific system for logically describing all types of signs: semiotics

10 classes of signs

Rhematic Iconic Qualisign	Rhematic Iconic Legisign	Rhematic Symbolic Legisign	Argument Symbolic Legisign
	Rhematic Iconic Sinsign	Rhematic Indexical Legisign	Dicent Symbol Legisign
		Rhematic Indexical Sinsign	Dicent Indexical Legisign
			Dicent Indexical Sinsign

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Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)

Swiss linguist

Only began lecturing in 1906

Never formalized his theories into writing, rather his *Course in General LInguistics* (1916) was synthesized from the notes of his students

Theorized definite structures to languages that create meaning which he formalized into *semiology*

language (*langue*)	**speech (*parole*)**
formal, abstract system of rules and terms	the individual act of expression
a bounded set of all possible expressions	a linear selection of possible expressions
shared and absolute system of consensual understanding	subject to individual differences in pronunciation, mistakes, expressiveness
clean and logically consistent	messy and prone to errors

Saussure believed that focusing on the messy aspects of *parole* would only muddy the understanding of how signs function and chose to focus only on *langue*.

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synchronic linguistics

studying the language (*langue*) in one point in time: the present

static linguistics

diachronic linguistics

studying how languages change over time

evolutionary linguistics

predominant mode of linguistics prior to Saussure

Saussure believed that diachronic linguistics was useless in understanding how language functions for current users, so he only focused on a synchronic understanding of language.

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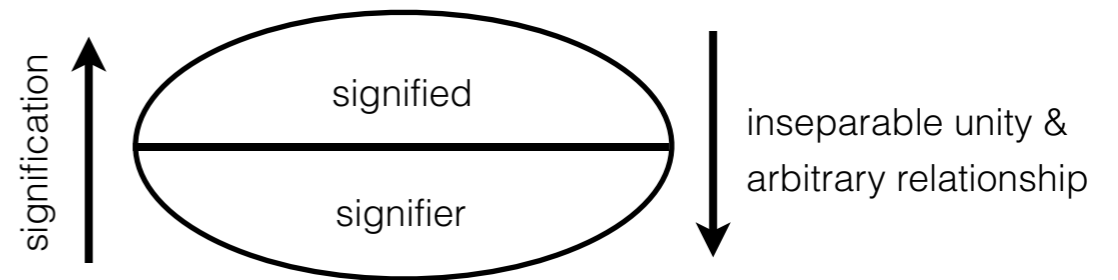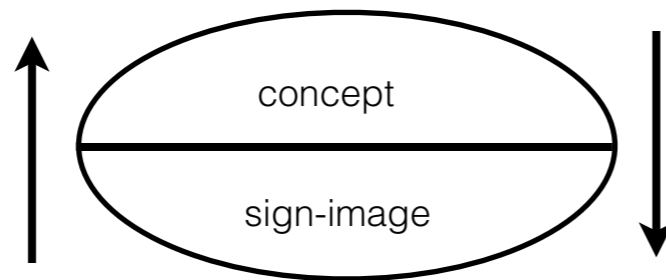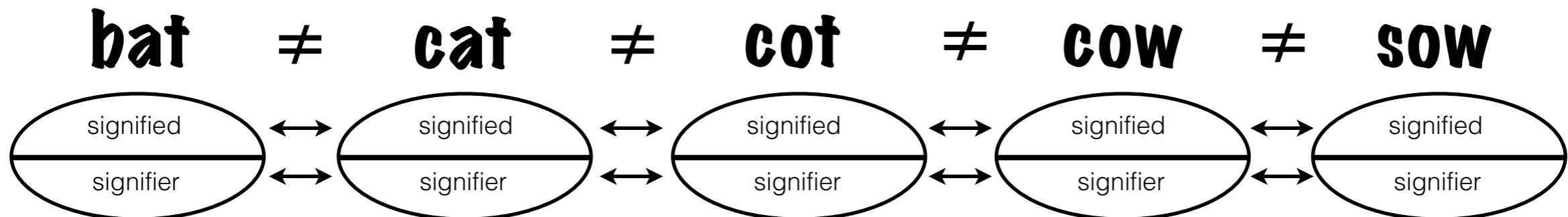
BASIC PRINCIPLES

Structure of the sign

concept of "catness"

cat

material sound/mark

concept / sign-image

signification   signified / signifier   inseparable unity &
arbitrary relationship

Meaning created through difference

bat ≠ cat ≠ cot ≠ cow ≠ sow

| signified | signified | signified | signified | signified |
| signifier | signifier | signifier | signifier | signifier |

specific organization of differences provides characteristic structure to a language

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Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-)

definition
examples
history
Peirce
Saussure

Lévi-Strauss

Belgian-French anthropologist

Interested in analyzing the essential structures of cultures

Applied Saussurean semiotic theory to cultural rituals, myths, and practices: Structural Anthropology

Is often credited with starting the Structuralism, in which all cultural practices can be understand via semiotics as *texts*

Analysis of Myths

On the one hand it would seem that in the course of a myth anything is likely to happen. […] But on the other hand, this apparent arbitrariness is belied by the astounding similarity between myths collected in widely different regions. Therefore the problem: If the content of myth is contingent [i.e., arbitrary], how are we to explain the fact that myths throughout the world are so similar?

noticed similarity between myths and meaning and signifiers and signifieds

reversible vs. non-reversible time similar to concepts of *parole* and *langue*

posited that all cultural practices obeyed a common, universal, eternal structure

created a methodology for reducing all cultural practices to essential pairs of binary opposite concepts (life-death, young-old, cooked-raw, male-female) as a means for fully grasping the logic of each culture

Life

Agriculture

Herbivores

Raven; coyote

Beasts of prey

Hunting

Death

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Roland Barthes (1915-1980)

French literary critic and social theorist

Extended Sausurre's semiology to all fields of contemporary mass media, especially popular culture

Created the foundation for what we often think of as contemporary semiotics

Eventually transitioned into poststructuralism

wrote *Elements of Semiology*, which updated many of Saussure's basic principles

Mythologies (1957)

extended Saussure's concept of the semiotic text to popular culture via a series of short essays previously published in magazines, which included semiotic analyses of professional wrestling, laundry detergent ads, and shoe fashions

originated a new understanding of *myth* as a semiotic system built on top of other pre-existing signs — a meta-system

opened a political and historical dimension to semiotics but arguing that myths are "depoliticized speech" in which the original political construction of a sign has been concealed so as to make the sign system seem "natural"

concept picked up as a Marxist critique of capitalist ideology / propaganda

examples

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Jacques Lacan (1901-1981)

French doctor and psychiatrist

Extended Saussurean semiotic analysis to Freudian psychoanalysis

Louis Althusser (1918-1990)

French Marxist philosopher

Applied Saussurean semiotics to Marxist theory, particularly to the concept of state ideological apparatus

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Michel Foucault (1926-1984)

French philosopher
Openly gay
Mentored by Louis Althusser and educated as a Marxist

was interested in understanding how entire semiotic systems changed over time (diachronically)

developed a methodology called *archaeology of knowledge* in which he tracked the semiotic differences across various periods of a particular historical archive

argued that there were often distinct breaks in meaning between different historical periods, as though they were completely different systems of ordering differences in language without any logical connection

Birth of the Clinic – difference in anatomical descriptions between Pomme in 1769 and Bayle in 1825
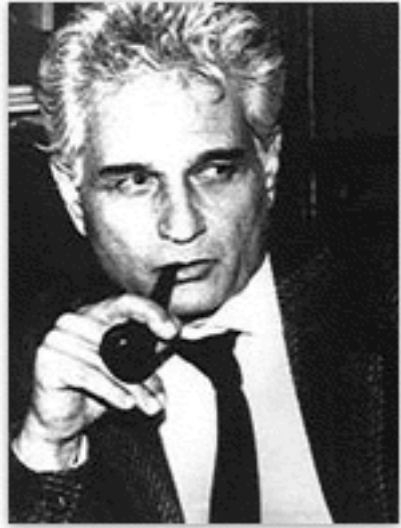
was interested the ways in which changes in political power structures changed the way language, thought and perception are ordered — posited a connection between power and knowledge

explored the fringe elements in historical societies (insane, sick, criminals,sexual deviants) to understand how *discourse* was capable of exerting material power/force on physical bodies

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Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)

Algerian-born French Jew
Philosopher

critiqued Saussure's theory of meaning established through difference

argued that one never arrives at a fixed meaning in the chain of differences, meaning is always deferred — it is never present in the sign but is always constituted of other signs — *différance* (deferral + difference)

meaning is always unanchored and open to interpretation

focused on *parole* rather than *langue* because there is no real material presence to *langue* — argued that since individual expressions of *langue* always differ, there individual signs have no stability

the same method of *deconstruction* can be applied to all modernist, logocentric, structuralist systems of meaning because they are all organized around a some central first concept (God, the Idea, the Self, substance, etc.) that must lie *outside* the system of language in order to provide structure through binary oppositions of terms in which one binarism is privileged above the other

thus, this system is not maintained by logical necessity, essential truth or an accurate depiction of reality but is rather enforced through political processes that privilege certain concepts over others

as a result, all such systems are tainted and polluted, even though we still must use them to express ourselves — meaning is always up for open interpretation

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Julia Kristeva (1941-)

Bulgarian born theorist who later moved to Paris
Provided a feminist critique of male-dominated Lacanian psychoanalysis

Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995)
Félix Guattari (1930-1992)

French philosopher and psychoanalyst
Critiqued Freudian and Marxist semiotics
Provided positive definition of difference
Adopted Peirce's system of semiotics

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