

# SEMIOTICS

**Ekaterine Maruashvili**  
**Doctor of Philology**  
**Georgian State teaching university**  
**Of physical education and sport**  
**Affiliated professor**

<https://doi.org/10.52340/gbsab.2026.57.04>

**Keywords: Semiotics, pragmatics, non-linguistic, context-dependent, anthroposemiosis, pogonomyrmex**

Semiotics is the study of signs. It is an interdisciplinary field that examines what signs are, how they form sign systems, and how individuals use them to communicate meaning. Its main branches are syntactics, which addresses formal relations between signs, semantics, which addresses the relation between signs and their meanings, and pragmatics, which addresses the relation between signs and their users. Semiotics is related to linguistics but has a broader scope that includes non-linguistic signs, such as maps and clothing.

Signs are entities that stand for something else, like the word cat, which stands for a carnivorous mammal. They can take many forms, such as sounds, images, written marks, and gestures. Iconic signs operate through similarity. For them, the sign vehicle resembles the referent, such as a portrait of a person. Indexical signs are based on a direct physical link, such as smoke as a sign of fire. For symbolic signs, the relation between sign vehicle and referent is conventional or arbitrary, which applies to most linguistic signs. Models of signs analyse the basic components of signs. Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic model identifies a perceptible image and a concept as the core elements, whereas Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model distinguishes a sign vehicle, a referent, and an effect in the interpreter's mind.

Sign systems are structured networks of interrelated signs, such as the English language. Semioticians study how signs combine to form larger expressions, called texts. They explore how the message of a text depends on the meanings of the signs composing it and how contextual factors and tropes influence this process. They also investigate the codes employed to communicate meaning, including conventional codes, such as the colour code of traffic signals, and natural codes, such as DNA encoding hereditary information. Semiotics is the study of signs or of how meaning is created and communicated through them. Also called semiology, it examines the nature of signs, their organization into signs systems, like language, and the ways individuals interpret and use them. Semiotics has wide-reaching applications because of the pervasive nature of signs, affecting how individuals experience phenomena, communicate ideas, and interact with the world. These applications make it an interdisciplinary field, originating in philosophy and linguistics and closely related to disciplines like psychology, anthropology, aesthetics, sociology, and education sciences. Because most sciences rely on sign processes in some form, semiotics is sometimes characterized as a meta-discipline that provides a general approach for the analysis of signs across domains. It is controversial whether semiotics is itself a science since there are no universally accepted theoretical assumptions or methods on which semioticians agree. Semiotics has also been characterized as a theory, a doctrine, a movement, or a discipline. Apart from its interdisciplinary applications, pure semiotics is typically divided into three branches: semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics, studying how signs relate to objects, to each other, and to sign users, respectively.

Semiotic inquiry overlaps in various ways with linguistics and communication theory. It shares with linguistics the interest in the analysis of sign systems, examining the meanings of words,

how they are combined to form sentences, and how they convey messages in concrete contexts. A key difference is that linguistics focuses on language, while semiotics also studies non-linguistic signs, such as images, gestures, traffic signs, and animal calls. Communication theory studies how individuals encode, convey, and interpret both linguistic and non-linguistic messages. It typically focuses on technical aspects of how messages are transmitted, usually between distinct organisms. Semiotics, by contrast, concentrates on the meaning of messages and the creation of meaning, including the role of non-communicative signs. For example, semioticians also study naturally occurring biological signs, like disease symptoms, and signs based on inanimate relations, such as smoke as a sign of fire.

The term semiotics derives from the Greek word *σημειωτική* (*semeiotike*), originally associated with the study of disease symptoms. Proposing a new field of inquiry of signs, John Locke suggested the Greek term as its name. The first use of the English term semiotics dates to the 1670s. Semiotics became a distinct field of inquiry following the works of the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the founders of the discipline.

Semiotics has diverse applications because of the pervasive nature of signs. Many semioticians study cultural products, such as literature, art, and media, investigating both the elements used to express meaning and the subtle ideological messages they convey. The psychological activities associated with sign use are another research topic. Biosemiotics extends the scope of inquiry beyond human communication, examining sign processes within and between animals, plants, and other organisms. Semioticians typically adjust their research approach to their specific domain without a single methodology adopted by all subfields. Although the roots of semiotic research lie in antiquity, it was not until the late 19th and early 20th centuries that semiotics emerged as an independent field of inquiry. A sign is an entity that stands for something else. For example, the word cat is a sign that stands for a small domesticated carnivorous mammal. Signs direct the attention of interpreters away from themselves and toward the entities they represent. They can take many forms, such as words, images, sounds, and odours. Similarly, they can refer to many types of entities, including physical objects, events, or places, psychological feelings, and abstract ideas. They help people recognize patterns, predict outcomes, make plans, communicate ideas, and understand the world.

Semioticians distinguish different elements of signs. The sign vehicle is the physical form of the sign, such as sound waves or printed letters on a page, whereas the referent is the object it stands for. The precise number and nature of these elements is disputed and different models of signs propose distinct analyses. The referent of a sign can itself be a sign, leading to a chain of signification. For instance, the expression «red rose» is a sign for a particular type of flower, which can itself act as a sign of love. Semiosis is the capacity or activity of comprehending and producing signs. Also characterized as the action of signs, it involves the interplay between sign vehicle and referent as organisms interpret meaning within a given context. Different types of semiosis are distinguished by the type of organisms engaging in the sign activity, such as the contrast between anthroposemiosis involving humans, zoösemiosis involving other animals, and Phyto semiosis involving plants. The meaning of a sign is what is generated in the process of semiosis.

Meaning is typically analysed into two aspects: sense and reference. This distinction is also known by the terms connotation and denotation as well as intension and extension. The reference of a sign is the object for which it stands. For example, the reference of the term morning star is the planet, Venus. The sense of a sign is the way it stands for the object or the mode in which the object is presented. For instance, the terms morning star and evening star have the same reference since they point to the same object. However, their meanings are not identical since they differ on the level of sense by presenting this object from distinct perspectives. Various theories of meaning have been proposed to explain its nature and identify the conditions that determine the meanings

of signs. Referential or extensional theories define meaning in terms of reference, for example, as the signified object or as a context-dependent function that points to objects. Ideational or mentalist theories interpret the meaning of a sign in relation to the mental states of language users, for example, as the ideas it evokes. Pragmatic theories describe meaning based on behavioural responses and use conditions. A historically influential classification of sign types relies on the contrast between conventional and natural signs. Conventional signs depend on culturally established norms and intentionality to establish the link between sign vehicle and referent. For example, the meaning of the term tree is fixed by social conventions associated with the English language rather than a natural connection between the term and actual trees. Natural signs, by contrast, are based on a substantial link other than conventions. For instance, the footprint of a bear signifies the presence of a bear as a result of the bear's movement rather than a matter of convention. In modern semiotics, the distinction between natural and conventional signs has been replaced by the threefold classification into icons, indices, and symbols, initially proposed by Peirce. Icons are signs that operate through similarity: sign vehicles resemble or imitate the referents to which they are linked. They include direct physical similarity, such as a life-like portrait depicting a person, but also encompass more abstract resemblance, such as metaphors and diagrams. Icons are also used in animal communication. For instance, ants of the species *Pogonomyrmex badius* use a smell-based warning signal that resembles the type of danger with a correspondence between intensity and duration of signal and danger.

Indices are signs that operate through a direct physical link. Typically, the referent is the cause of the sign vehicle. For example, smoke indicates the presence of fire because it is a physical effect produced by the fire itself. Similarly, disease symptoms are signs of the disease causing them and a thermometer's gauge reading indicates the temperature responsible. Other material links besides a direct cause-effect relation are also possible such as a directional signpost physically pointing the path to a nearby campsite.

#### გამოყენებული ლიტერატურა:

1. Petrilli, Susan; Ponzio, Augusto (2010). «Semioethics». In Cobley, Paul (ed.). *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics*. Routledge.
2. Raposa, Michael (2003). «Semiotics». In Van Huyssteen, J. Wentzel Vrede (ed.).
3. Olteanu, Alin; Campbell, Cary (2018). «A Short Introduction to Edusemiotics».
4. Manetti, Giovanni (2010). «Ancient Semiotics». In Cobley, Paul (ed.). *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics*.

#### Resume

Semiotics is the study of signs. It is an interdisciplinary field that examines what signs are, how they form sign systems, and how individuals use them to communicate meaning. Its main branches are syntactics, which addresses formal relations between signs. The signs in a sign system are connected through several structural relations, like the contrast between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. Syntagmatic relations govern how individual signs or sign elements can be combined to form larger expressions. For example, sentences are linear arrangements of words, and syntagmatic relations govern which words can be combined to produce grammatically correct sentences. Similarly, a dinner menu is a sequence of courses with syntagmatic relations governing their arrangement, like beginning with a starter, followed by a main course and a dessert. Some sign systems use non-linear arrangements, such as traffic signs combining the shape of a sign with the symbol it shows