



The Semiotics of Meaning: A Semantic Perspective on Language and Signs

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the dynamic interplay between semantics and semiotics as interrelated disciplines that contribute to the study of meaning-making in language and communication. Semantics, as a core area of linguistics, focuses on the relationship between linguistic forms, concepts, and referents, analysing how words, phrases, and sentences encode meaning. Semiotics, on the other hand, provides a broader framework for understanding signs and signification, extending beyond verbal language to encompass cultural symbols, images, and multimodal forms of expression. By integrating these two perspectives, this study demonstrates how language functions simultaneously as a structural system and as a vehicle for cultural and ideological meaning. The research draws on classical and contemporary theoretical contributions, including Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic model of the sign, Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic framework of semiosis, Roland Barthes's notion of denotation, connotation, and myth, and Umberto Eco's conceptualisation of semiotic codes. Through these perspectives, the paper highlights how semantic meaning (denotative reference) often interacts with semiotic meaning (cultural and symbolic interpretation) to produce complex layers of significance. Examples from discourse, media texts, and digital communication illustrate how semantic precision and semiotic richness converge in shaping interpretation. The discussion argues that a combined semantic-semiotic approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of linguistic meaning by addressing both structural and cultural dimensions. This integrated perspective not only enriches linguistic analysis but also provides valuable insights into literature, media studies, and cross-cultural communication.

KEYWORDS: semantics, semiotics, meaning-making, language and signs, Saussure, Peirce, Barthes, eco, denotation, connotation, discourse analysis, linguistic communication.

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Introduction

Language is not merely a collection of words strung together to convey information; it is a complex, dynamic system of signs through which humans interpret, negotiate, and reshape reality (Rabiah, 2018). Every utterance, written text, gesture, or symbol communicates meanings that extend beyond their surface structure, embedding social, cultural, and ideological dimensions. To understand this multifaceted nature of meaning, linguists and scholars have long turned to two interrelated disciplines: semantics and semiotics. While semantics investigates the internal linguistic mechanisms of meaning—focusing on words, phrases, sentences, and their referents—semiotics extends the analysis to the broader study of signs and signification, encompassing both linguistic and non-linguistic systems (Kravchenko, 2003). The dialogue between semantics and semiotics provides a comprehensive framework for examining how meaning is created, transmitted, and interpreted across diverse communicative contexts. Semantics, traditionally situated within the domain of linguistics, deals with sense and reference, lexical relations, and the principles governing how meaning is structured in language (Paradis, 2012). For example, it explains how words like *'dog'* and *'animal'* are related hierarchically, how polysemy allows a single word to have multiple related meanings, and how truth-conditional approaches determine the accuracy of a proposition in relation to the real world. Semantics seeks precision and clarity, aiming to capture the logical and structural dimensions of meaning. Yet, by itself, semantics often remains limited to linguistic form, sometimes overlooking the social and cultural frameworks in which meanings are embedded. Semiotics, in contrast, broadens the scope of meaning-making. (Edgington, 1986). Emerging from the foundational works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, semiotics treats meaning as a relational process in which signs acquire significance not only through their structural properties but also through cultural codes, symbolic associations, and interpretive practice. Saussure conceptualised the sign as a dyadic entity, consisting of the *signifier* (the form of the sign, such as a word or image) and the *signified* (the concept it represents). Peirce, in contrast, advanced a triadic model of semiosis, introducing the *representamen* (the form), the *object* (the referent), and the *interpretant* (the meaning generated in the interpreter's mind). Building on these foundations (Gile, 2009), later theorists, such as Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, expanded semiotics into cultural and ideological domains, demonstrating how signs are not neutral carriers of information but rather sites of contestation, persuasion, and power (Leach, 1976).

The intersection of semantics and semiotics lies in their shared concern with meaning but diverging approaches to its scope (Hodge, 2016). Semantics provides the tools to analyse how words and sentences function logically within language, while semiotics situates these linguistic elements within broader sign systems and cultural contexts. For instance, the semantic meaning of the word *'home'* refers to a physical dwelling; yet, semiotically, it can evoke powerful connotations of comfort, belonging, nostalgia, or national identity, depending on the context. Similarly, a semantic reading of the colour *red* may reduce it to a mere descriptor of hue. Still, a semiotic analysis reveals its rich symbolic

dimensions—encompassing love, danger, revolution, and prosperity – in different cultural traditions. Such examples demonstrate that semantics and semiotics, though distinct, are most effective when considered together, as each discipline compensates for the other's limitations (Brandt 2004). The significance of studying meaning through a combined semantic-semiotic lens has grown in contemporary contexts, where communication is increasingly multimodal and mediated by technology. In advertising, for instance, the semantic analysis of slogans alone cannot account for the persuasive impact of visual symbols, colours, and cultural narratives (Skorupa & Dubovičienė 2015). In political discourse, the semantic content of terms like '*freedom*' or '*justice*' gains further depth when analysed semiotically to uncover the ideological myths embedded within them. In digital communication, emojis, hashtags, and memes function as semiotic resources whose meanings depend on both semantic interpretation and cultural conventions. Thus, integrating semantics with semiotics equips researchers with the methodological tools to address the complexity of meaning-making in modern communication (Leone 2024).

This paper situates its investigation within this interdisciplinary dialogue, exploring how semantics and semiotics interact to construct meaning across linguistic and cultural contexts (Hodge, 2016). It draws upon foundational theoretical contributions—from Saussure's structural linguistics to Peirce's philosophy of signs, from Barthes's notion of mythologies to Eco's semiotic codes – and applies them to contemporary communicative practices. The central argument advanced here is that semantics provides the logical and structural precision of meaning. At the same time, semiotics reveals the symbolic, cultural, and ideological dimensions that often operate beneath the surface. Together, they present a holistic view of meaning-making that is vital for understanding both language and society (Scarino, 2014).

By examining this intersection, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions in linguistics, discourse analysis, and cultural studies. It emphasises that meaning is not static or fixed but dynamic, shaped by the interplay of linguistic systems and semiotic processes. Ultimately, the study argues for the necessity of an integrated semantic-semiotic framework to capture the richness of human communication, offering insights not only for theoretical linguistics but also for applied fields such as media analysis, literary criticism, and intercultural communication (Kramsch, 2015).

Literature Review

Semantics and Its Scope

Semantics focuses on the study of meaning in language. It deals with concepts such as sense, reference, denotation, connotation, and truth conditions (Martin 2015). Scholars such as Gottlob Frege and John Lyons have emphasised how semantics investigates the relationship between linguistic expressions and the world they represent. Semantic theories—such as truth-conditional semantics,

cognitive semantics, and formal semantics—each offer distinct perspectives on how meaning is encoded in linguistic structures.

Semiotics: The Study of Signs

Semiotics, as introduced by Saussure and Peirce, broadens the study of meaning to all sign systems. Saussure (1916) described the sign as consisting of the *signifier* (the form of expression) and the *signified* (the concept it represents). Peirce (1931) proposed a triadic model, comprising the *representamen* (the sign form), the *object* (what it refers to), and the *interpretant* (the understanding generated). Later, Barthes (1967) and Eco (1976) expanded semiotics into cultural analysis, demonstrating how signs function ideologically within society (Threadgold and culture 1986).

Intersection of Semantics and Semiotics

While semantics traditionally confines itself to linguistic meaning, semiotics broadens the scope to include all forms of symbolic communication (Hodge 2016). The overlap occurs when signs are verbal, as semiotic frameworks can enrich linguistic semantics. For instance, the semantic concept of *denotation* aligns with the semiotic notion of the *signified*, whereas *connotation* relates to cultural and ideological meanings studied in semiotics.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a hybrid theoretical framework that integrates key insights from both semantics and semiotics to provide a comprehensive account of meaning-making (Whittle et al., 2023). Each tradition contributes unique perspectives: semantics offers analytical precision regarding the structure of meaning in language, while semiotics situates those meanings within wider cultural, ideological, and interpretive processes (Whittle et al., 2023).

Saussurean Semiotics

Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist view of semiotics forms one of the foundational pillars of this framework. Saussure conceptualised language as a system of arbitrary signs, where the *signifier* (the sound or written form) is linked to the *signified* (the mental concept). Crucially, he emphasised that the relationship between signifier and signified is not natural but conventional, determined by social agreement. This perspective highlights the structural and relational nature of language: words derive meaning not in isolation, but through their differences from other words within the linguistic system.

Peircean Semiotics

Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics expands this model by introducing a triadic process of meaning-making: the *representamen* (the form of the sign), the *object* (the thing referred to), and the *interpretant* (the understanding generated by the interpreter). This dynamic process, known as *semiosis*, highlights the interpretive and evolving nature of meaning. Unlike Saussure's relatively static

model, Peirce's theory foregrounds the role of context and interpretation, showing how meaning is continuously produced and renegotiated.

Barthesian Semiotics

Roland Barthes extended semiotics into the cultural and ideological domain. He distinguished between denotation (the literal meaning of a sign) and connotation (the secondary, cultural, or emotional associations). In *Mythologies* (1957/1967), Barthes further demonstrated how signs can be transformed into "myths" that naturalise social values and ideologies, making them appear universal or commonsensical. For example, an image of a national flag not only denotes a piece of cloth with specific colours but also connotes ideas of patriotism, unity, or power. This perspective is vital in examining how language and signs function as vehicles of ideology.

Semantic Theories

While semiotics addresses the cultural dimension of meaning, semantics provides the tools for analysing meaning at the linguistic level. Three approaches are particularly relevant:

- Formal semantics emphasises truth-conditions, focusing on how the meaning of a sentence corresponds to states of affairs in the world.
- Cognitive semantics emphasises how meaning is grounded in human cognition, influenced by conceptual metaphors, frames, and embodied experience. For instance, metaphors like "time is money" reveal how abstract domains are understood through concrete experiences.
- Lexical semantics investigates word meaning relations, including synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, and polysemy, thereby providing insight into the network of meanings within a language.

Integrative Perspective

By combining these theoretical traditions, the framework developed here strikes a balance between structural precision and cultural interpretation. Semantics ensures clarity in analysing literal, referential, and cognitive aspects of meaning, while semiotics situates these meanings within the broader contexts of ideology, culture, and communication. Taken together, these perspectives highlight that meaning is not fixed but emerges at the intersection of linguistic structures, interpretive processes, and cultural codes.

Discussion: The Semiotics of Meaning

Language as a Sign System

Language functions as a structured code where each word represents a signifier linked to a signified. For example, the word "*tree*" denotes a *plant* but can also convey ideas such as *life, growth,*

or *environmentalism*, depending on the cultural context. Semantics captures the basic meaning, while semiotics reveals the complex, layered cultural meanings.

Semantic Interpretation Through Semiotic Lenses

A purely semantic analysis might explain how the word *freedom* refers to the state of being free. However, semiotics investigates how this term is ideologically loaded in political speeches, advertisements, or literature, often functioning as a myth or cultural construct. Thus, semiotics complements semantics by contextualising meaning in broader cultural narratives.

Semiotic Resources Beyond Language

Visual and multimodal signs—images, gestures, sounds—extend the study of meaning beyond verbal semantics. For instance, in advertising, the semantic meaning of a slogan combines with visual semiotic cues (colours, symbols, images) to construct persuasive messages. Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal semiotics show how text and image interact to create complex layers of meaning.

Applications

- Combining semantics and semiotics helps uncover hidden ideologies in political and media discourse.
- Semiotic-semantic analysis reveals how metaphors, symbols, and intertextual references generate multiple meanings, thereby enriching the understanding of literary texts.
- Emojis, memes, and hashtags operate as semiotic resources whose semantic meanings are context-dependent.
- Different cultures attach varying connotations to the same semantic units, highlighting the role of semiotics in meaning negotiation.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study highlights the close relationship between semantics and semiotics in the process of meaning-making. Semantics deals with the literal and referential aspects of language—how words and structures denote objects, actions, and concepts in the world. It focuses on the formal relationship between linguistic signs and what they stand for, offering precision and clarity in communication. Semiotics, however, goes beyond this surface level by examining how signs are embedded in cultural and ideological systems. It explores the additional layers of meaning—such as connotations, myths, values, and symbols—that shape how language is interpreted within a specific social context. By integrating these two perspectives, we see that language operates not merely as a neutral system of signs but also as a powerful medium that reflects and reproduces cultural norms, social ideologies, and collective identities. Thus, an interdisciplinary approach combining semantics and semiotics provides a more comprehensive understanding of language as both a communicative

tool and an ideological force.

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