

Signs: Fashion

Abstract Basic concepts of semiotics are offered, including works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles S. Peirce, and Umberto Eco. Definition of sign is offered, and arbitrary nature of relation between elements of signs, signifiers, and signifieds is considered. Difference between connotation and denotation, and relation between semiotics and discourse analysis are explained.

Application Works by sociologist Georg Simmel, cultural analyst Ruth P. Rubinstein, and sociologist Orrin Klapp on fashion are dealt with. Semiotic aspects of fashion and relation between fashion and ideology are investigated.

Keywords Semiotics · Signs · Signifiers · Signifieds · Fashion · Ideology

I call the combination of a concept and a sound-image a *sign*, but in current usage the term generally designates only a sound-image, a word, for example...I propose to retain the word *sign* [*signe*] to designate the whole and to replace *concept* and *sound-image* respectively by *signified* [*signifie*] and *signifier* [*signifiant*]; the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts. As regards *sign*, if I am satisfied with it,

this is simply because I do not know of any word to replace it, the ordinary language suggesting no other.

Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (1915/1966:67)

Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands for it. Thus semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used “to tell” at all.

Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976:7)

Every sign is determined by its objects, either first by partaking in the characters of the object, when I call a sign an *Icon*; secondly, by being really and in its individual existence connected with the individual object, when I call the sign an *Index*; thirdly, by more or less approximate certainty that it will be interpreted as denoting the object, in consequence of a habit (which term I use as including a natural disposition), when I call the sign a *Symbol*.

Charles S. Peirce (quoted by J.J. Zeman in Thomas Sebeok, Ed.
A Perfusion of Signs 1977:36)

Semiotics is the “science of signs,” a sign being, as Umberto Eco, a well-known semiotician and novelist explains, anything that can be used to stand for something else, whether that something else actually exists or not. Words are signs and for discourse analysts, one of the most important kind of signs. Eco also argues that signs can lie and if they can’t be used to lie, they can’t be used to communicate at all.

The term “semiotics” comes from the Greek word *sēmeîon*, which means “signs.” Earlier, I discussed the work of de Saussure, whose book *A Course in General Linguistics* was published in 1915. It was translated into English in 1966. The other founding father of semiotics, Peirce, argued that a sign is “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (quoted in Zeman, 1977:27), which means that people play a major role in understanding signs.

Saussure’s division of signs into sound-images or signifiers and concepts or signified is at the heart of his approach to semiotics. Peirce’s trichotomy of *iconic* (signify by resemblance, as for example, a photograph of a person and that person), *indexical* (signify by association, as for example, smoke,

and fire), and *symbolic* (signify by being taught what is signified, for example a flag or a crucifix) is at the heart of his approach.

Saussure offered a charter statement about semiology/semiotics in his book. He wrote (1915/1966:16):

Language is a system of signs that express ideas, and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc. But it is the most important of all these systems.

A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it *semiology* (from Greek *semeion* “sign”). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance.

This is the charter statement of semiotics, a statement that opens the study of discourse of all kinds to us. Not only can we study symbolic rites and military signals, we can also study conversations, speeches, articles in newspapers and magazines, radio and television commercials, soap operas, situation comedies, and almost anything else as “sign systems.”

It is important that we realize that the relationship between the two components of signs, signifiers and signifieds, is arbitrary and based on convention. This means that meaning of signs can change. For example, fifty years ago or so long hair in men was associated with being artistic. Now, so many men have long hair that it has lost its meaning. Hair length along with hair color and hair styling are signs and we have to learn how to interpret them and all kinds of other signs. Thus, for example, many blond women (and now men) dye their hair blond. And that beautiful blond woman you see, on the other side of a room you are in, may actually be a cross-dressing man, who is “lying” about his gender by appropriating the signs of femininity for his purposes and needs.

Linguists make a distinction between connotation and denotation. Connotation refers to the cultural meanings that become attached to words in discourse and historic and symbolic meanings connected to them. Denotation refers to the explicit or literal meaning of words in discourse and other matters connected to them. Thus, the denotations of Barbie Dolls are that it was a toy designed for girls that was 11.5 inches high, had measurements of 5.25 inches at the bust, 3.0 inches at the waist, and 4.25 inches at

the hips (for the original 1959 version). The connotations of Barbie Doll are open to discussion. For some theorists, Barbie Doll marks a change in the way girls were socialized. Instead of rehearsing for motherhood with baby dolls, little girls learned to be courtesans and consumers, since Barbie Doll buys lots of clothes and has relationships with Ken dolls. In 2016, Mattel introduced a number of different Barbie Dolls with different body shapes and ethnicities, a sign that American culture is changing.

Discourse analysis, in conjunction with semiotics, psychoanalytic theory and Marxist ideological theory is now an important part of cultural studies. Because of the focus semiotics has on signs, it is used in multimodal discourse analysis—since images, videos, and language are all now very important and play a major role in social media such as Facebook. Discourse analysis in



Drawing of Levi's Patch

conjunction with semiotics is interested in everything—in imaginary signs (in our dreams), in the manifest and latent meaning of signs, in signs and lifestyles, in the role signs play in our constructing our identities, with signs that confound (optical illusions), with no sign as a sign (the dog that didn't bark in a Sherlock Holmes mystery), and with just anything else in which meaning plays an important role. Roland Barthes used semiotics to explain the important of professional wrestling to the French and other aspects of French culture such as “steak and frites,” margarine and detergents. This explains why semiotics plays such an important role in discourse analysis. Semioticians are imperialistic academics and tend to see everything as a subdiscipline of semiotics, including discourse theory. Discourse theorists are also imperialistic and see everything else (including semiotics) as part of discourse theory. That explains why we find a chapter on semiotics in van Dijk's edited book *Discourse as Structure and Process*.

APPLICATION: FASHION

Whatever else fashion may be, it uses articles of clothing, jewelry, watches, accessories, and other things as signs—indicating who we are or who we think we are. (A woman in a typical Neiman Marcus advertisement is very beautiful, has lots of jewelry and is very upscale fashionable.) Or who we want others to think we are. Or who we want to be. Fashion is of interest to social scientists and qualitative researchers like discourse analysts because it is a form of collective behavior and has certain imperatives connected to it. The term “fashion” is derived from the Latin term “faction,” which can mean either “to make or do” or “faction.” Faction suggests differentiation which is one of the major components of fashion. The language in fashion ads—what little there is, most of the time—is also of interest to discourse analysts. Fashion ads, which often combine words and images, require a multimodal discourse analysis approach.

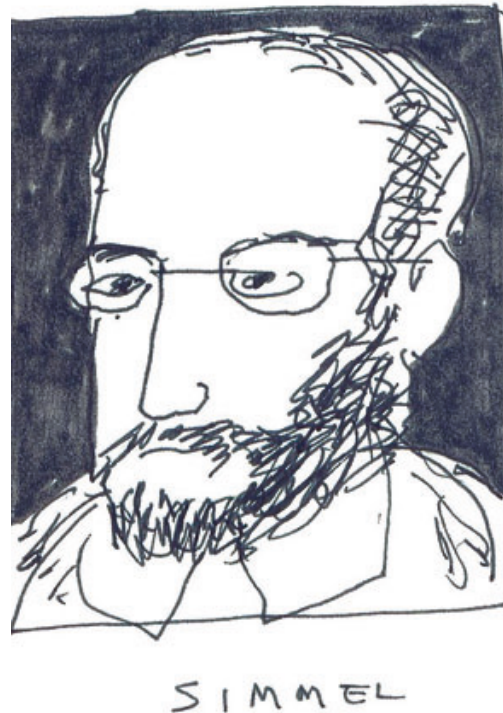
Susan Kaiser, Howard G. Schutz, and Joan L. Chandler offer an insight into the relation between fashion and ideology in their article “Cultural Codes and Sex-Role Ideology: A Study of Shoes.” They write (in *The American Journal of Semiotics*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1987:14):

In recent years, scholars in a variety of areas of study (cultural studies, semiotics, sociology, textiles and clothing, to mention a few) have pursued the study of mundane objects that emerge as representative codes of everyday culture. These objects take on a symbolic dimension, connoting not only

style-specificity to a particular social group but also . . . social-political ideology. Hebdige (1979:13) has noted that ideology often thrives beneath the social consciousness, and the “perceived-accepted-suffered” nature of cultural objects provides a means for detangling the underlying power structure of society.

The term fashion can be used for various products but it is generally used to deal with different styles of clothes and accessories which become popular for a time and then become superseded by the next style.

Georg Simmel drawing



Georg Simmel, a German sociologist (1858–1918), had some perceptive things to say about fashion in his article “The Philosophy of Fashion.” He writes in David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (Eds.), *Simmel on Culture* (1997:192):

The essence of fashion consists of the fact that it should always be exercised by only part of a given group, the great majority of whom are merely on the road to adopting it. As soon as fashion has been universally adopted, that is, as soon as anything that was originally done only by a

few has really come to be practiced by all—as is the case in certain elements of clothing and various forms of social conduct—we no longer characterize it as fashion. Every growth of fashion drives it to its doom, because it thereby cancels out its distinctiveness . . . Fashion’s question is not that of being, but rather it is simultaneously being and non-being; it always stands on the watershed of the past and the future and, as a result, conveys to us, at least while it is at its height, a stronger sense of the present than do most other phenomena.

His point is that fashion is always in a state of being born, but once it is accepted by large numbers of people, it loses its power to differentiate fashionable people from others, and must be replaced, so it is continually being born and dying. People who are not fashionable adopt the latest fashions because they approve of them and are envious of those who are fashionable.

From a semiotic perspective, clothes and other objects subject to fashion are signs that convey information about the people who are fashionable. In *Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture*, Ruth P. Rubinstein writes (1995:3):

Most social scientists take it for granted that an individual’s clothing expresses meaning. They accept the old saw that “a picture is worth a thousand words” and generally concede that dress and ornament are elements in a communication system. They recognize that a person’s attire can indicate either conformity or resistance to socially defined expectations for behavior. Yet few scholars have attempted to explain the meaning and relevance of clothing systematically. They often mistake it for *fashion* (in a person’s desired appearance) whereas *clothing* refers to established patterns of dress. As a result, neither clothing images nor the rules that govern their use have been adequately identified or explained.

We see fashion as messages in the dress styles of adolescents and young adults, to whom fashion is a way of communicating messages to those who know how to decode them. We can say the same thing to gay and lesbian clothing styles, cross-dressers, surfers, bikers, orthodox Jews, members of youth gangs, and so on. Fashion in clothing, in jewelry, in handbags and briefcases, and other objects subject to fashion becomes a means of asserting one’s identity.

Simmel offers us an insight into why so many people follow or adopt fashions so slavishly. It is, he suggests, because of their weak social position. As he explains (1997:196):

If fashion both gives expression towards the impulse towards equalization and individualization, as well as to the allure of imitation and conspicuousness, this perhaps explains why it is that women, broadly speaking, adhere especially strongly to fashion. Out of the weakness of their social position to which were condemned throughout the greater part of history there arises there close relationship to all that is “custom,” to that which is “right and proper,” to the generally valid and approved form of existence. Those who are weak steer clear of individualization; they avoid dependence upon the self, with its responsibilities and the necessity of defending oneself unaided.

Following fashions enables people to disappear into the crowd and avoid people’s attention. We can see those who are slaves to fashion as a signifier of a sense of weakness and an unwillingness to stand out. There are others, of course, who want to stand out—what Orrin Klapp calls “ego screamers,” who use fashion to draw attention to themselves. He discusses a number of matters relative to fashion in his *The Collective Search for Identity* (1969:75):

1. the sheer variety of “looks” (types) available to the common man;
2. the explicitness of identity search (for the real you);
3. ego-screaming: the plea “look at me!”;
4. style rebellion (style uses as a means of protest or defiance);
5. theatricalism and masquerading on the street;
6. pose as a way of getting to the social position one wants;
7. dandyism: (living for style, turning away from the Horatio Alger model of success);
8. dandyism of the common man as well as the aristocrat;
9. pronounced escapism in many styles (such as those of beatniks, hippies, surfers . . .);
10. a new concept of the right to be whatever one pleases, regardless of what others think (the new romanticism);
11. the breakdown of status symbols, the tendency of fashions to mix and obscure classes rather than differentiate them.

The existence of many “knock-offs” helps obscure class relations as shown by branding and fashion, in general. And some people who opt out of the imperatives of fashion prevent us from always making a connection between fashion, high-status brands, and social identity.

We can think of brands, from a discourse analysis perspective, as iconic signifiers. Brands often identify themselves by icons, which show that people wearing a particular brand of object—eyeglasses, purses, etc.—can afford the item and can differentiate themselves from people who wear less expensive brands or no brand (commodity) fashion items. And by the language they use, which helps distinguish the fashion item from others and the brand from others. What brands try to do is differentiate themselves from other brands and from generic products. Brands use advertising to tell stories—to establish an image about the kind of people who use their products. From a Saussurean perspective we can say “in brands, there are only differences.” Brands primarily compete with one another but also with generic no-brand products or commodities.

Laura R. Oswald, in her article “Semiotics and Strategic Brand Management,” discusses the role of semiotics in creating brands (http://www.media.illinois.edu/advertising/semiotics_oswald.pdf). She writes:

Over the past ten years or so, brand strategy researchers have come to recognize the importance of brand communication in building and sustaining brand equity, the value attached to a brand name or log that supersedes product attributes and differentiates brands in the competitive arena . . . The contribution of brand meanings and perceptions to profitability—the Coca Cola brand is valued at over \$70 billion—testifies to the power of symbolic representation to capture the hearts and minds of consumers by means of visual, audio, and verbal signs. The semiotic—or symbolic—dimension of brands is therefore instrumental for building awareness, positive associations, and long-term customer loyalty, and contributes to trademark ownership and operational advantages such as channel and media clout. Consequently, managing brand equity means managing brand **semiotics**.

It is discourse analysis and semiotics that enable us to understand what brands are, how brands work, and the role brand language plays in consumer decision making.

We might ask the following questions when studying the language in fashion advertisements:

- What words were used? If no words are used, why?
- Are there any metaphors and similes in the text? (analogies)
- Are there any metonymies and synecdoches? (associations)
- What affirmations are made and negations stated?
- What is the tone of the language used? Why was this tone adopted?
- What logical arguments and emotional appeals are made?
- What slogans are used? How are headlines used?
- What questions are asked and answered in the textual material?
- What is the style of the language used? What was this style used?
- Where can one buy the products being sold? Do they cities where they are sold tell us anything?

We have to recognize that the language used in ads for upscale fashion products is different from that used in advertisements for inexpensive ones.

What's important about brand-name products is that when we see a person wearing a certain brand or collection of brands, we get, we believe, a sense of what the person using the brands is like—if, that is, we have seen advertisements for the brand and know something about it. Branded luxury objects are status symbols and help confer high status upon those who use them. If a self is a kind of conversation we have with ourselves, what happens when we get tired of certain brands and switch to others? Is there a kind of dissociation that occurs as we take on a new self based on new brands that we now find attractive? That is a problem we all have to wrestle with—if that is, we use brand products and feel strongly about the brands we use.