Saussurian Sign

Agniva Pal

PhD in Linguistics, Jawaharlal Nehru University
Assistant Professor, School of Education
Azim Premji University
Bengaluru
agniva.pal@apu.edu.in

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Abstract

At the time when Saussure or Pierce were propounding and formulating their ideas about the relationship between a concept and the multiple ways they can be referred to, the world was still going through the extended effects of the industrial revolution. The world was still connecting and finding out that there could be multiple ways of referring to most concepts around us. But fast forward a hundred years and the world has changed a lot. Concepts have changed and we now live in an earth which is more connected than ever and new 'languages' keep cropping up once in a while. The concept of sign propounded has had a big role to play in the structure of language, at least from a theoretical point of view. The idea of sign has evolved over time and this paper presents a discussion of the relationships between signifiers and signifieds.

Keywords: Saussure, Pierce, Linguistics, signified, signifier

Language is a system of references which enables communication in species with design features (Hockett, 1960) like vocal Auditory Channel, Broadcast transmission; directional reception, total feedback, rapid fading, displacement, productivity, traditional transmission, learnability and reflexiveness. In short, higher primates with higher cognitive abilities or species with the ability to use the above-mentioned design features have the ability to use language akin to human beings. Homo sapiens are the only species though, with the ability to use features like displacement, productivity, traditional transmission, learnability and reflexiveness (Pierce, 2006).

Ferdinand de Saussure in his lectures propounded the theory of structuralism. Structuralism (Saussure, 1916) is the primary theory which led the impetus into modern language theory. Saussure defines the concept of *sign* as the relationship between a *signified* concept and a *signifier*. A signifier can be defined as a means to refer to a concept; a concept which exists at the Langue level. This concept which exists at the concept level is what we call a signified concept. Saussure reiterates that every word we utter, every word we write, every gesture we make, every sound we make in order to convey information, every picture we draw

in order to convey some message, every expression, every hand gesture and every other way we use in order to convey some information or refer to some signified concept is a sign relationship. Methods we use to refer to concepts are called signifiers. Concepts we refer to are called signifieds.
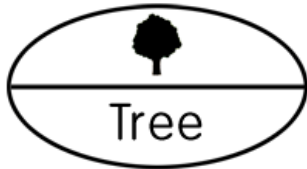

Fig 1: A signified concept above and the signifier in language we use to refer to the concept above. (Authors, 2022)

According to the image above, there are two parts to a sign relationship. The part above is the conceptual part we call the signified. The part below where 'tree' is written is just one of the many signifiers used in order to refer to the signified concept. We call it a signifier. For example, the signified concept in the image above can be referred to using the following signifiers:

Tree – in English
Ped – in Hindi
Kul – in Kashmiri
Gach – in Bangla

Concepts do not change. Words used to refer to such concepts are called signifiers.
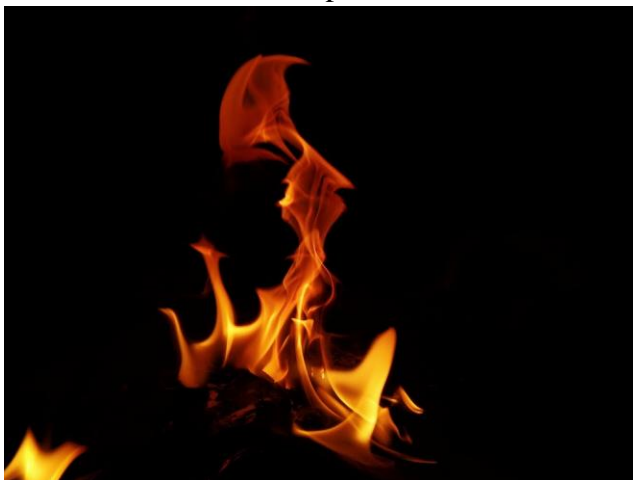
Let us take another example.

Fig 2: An image of fire. (Adapix, 2022)

Above is an image which can be referred to as 'fire' in English, 'aagun' in Bangla, 'aag' in Hindi, 'zjarr' in Alabanian and 'vuur' in Afrikaans. Every language would have a word in order to refer to the concept mentioned above. These words are signifiers.

Gestures can also convey a message and can be used as signifiers. A smile conveys warmth, happiness and good luck. The smile in this case is the signifier and the concepts it refers to are the signifieds. We can understand emotions like anger, happiness, jealousy and so on so forth because we are used to the fact that certain facial expressions, gestures and body language refer to certain concepts. Concepts referred to as signified concepts can exist in the physical world eg: a tree, the sky, human beings, dogs etc; or exist as abstract concepts like love, happiness, organisations like Maruti Suzuki, bucket lists and so on.

Saussure started by defining a sign as an arbitrary relationship between a signifier (a sound pattern or utterance in a given language) and a signified (concept being referred to). It was reiterated to be arbitrary because every word in every language is a sign relationship which arbitrarily connects a concept with a method to refer to it in language, an utterance which speakers of the same language can use in order to refer to it, as a speech community (Pinnegar, 2022). One is capable of reading the text written here because they have inculcated the sign relationships which are used in English and know the meanings of every word being used in this paper. One would be incapable of reading this text if a language was used beyond their recognition.

Charles Saunders Pierce, a contemporary of Saussure, takes a different approach to sign relationships. This approach makes the understanding of signs on the basis of kinds of signifiers and the method of linkages to signified concepts. (Pierce, 2006)

According to Pierce, there are three different types of sign relationships, namely icons, indexes, and symbols. An icon is a sign relationship in which the signifier bears physical resemblance to the signified concept being referred to. For example, if one draws the picture of a flower on a piece of paper, someone else other than the person who drew the flower would be able to recognize that it is a flower as the sketch drawn has a physical resemblance to flower, the signified concept. When one sees a sketch of a dog, one is able to refer the sketch to the signified concept of a dog.

Fig 3: A sketch of a dog (Bruce, 2022)

Above is a sketch of a dog by artist Mike Bruce. This sketch acts as a signifier to the actual concept of a dog.

Indexes are sign relationships based on causality. By that it means that signifiers in index sign relationships are the cause for something taking place (signified). Signifiers in index relationships lead to the signified effect. For example, if a scholar does not study for exams, they will not score well in exams. The scholar not studying diligently when they had time is a signifier, leading to the signified result or effect which is that they do not score well. In order to understand the concept better, we may also take the example of how if one finds out after stepping from home that there is water everywhere, they presume that it has rained, rather than assuming that someone took the time and effort to drench the land with water.

Symbol is the category of sign relationships first propounded as the original definition of sign relationships by Ferdinand de Saussure. Symbols are signifier and signified relationships with no causality or physical resemblance-based linkages like icons and indexes. Signifiers in symbols are linked to signified concepts only because a speech community accepts such linkages in general. For example, all speakers of English would accept 'water' as a means to refer to the clear transparent liquid we all drink in order to survive, while all speakers of Bangla would refer to it as 'Jol'; speakers of Hindi would on the other hand refer to it as 'pani'. 'Pani' – 'Jol' – 'Water'. These two have no commonality in between them and are connected in no way except for the fact that the speech community backing three languages have unanimously accepted the words in their own languages as a way of referring to the clear transparent liquid we drink.

Saussure refers to Langue as the totality of rule-based formations which can occur as a part of a language system (Saussure, 1916). In simpler terms, *langue*, the concept can be referred to as a pandora's box filled with all utterances all speakers of a language have made over time and will make over time. Language here does not only refer to spoken language but all other forms of language and usages of language like knowledge hoarding, displacement and in books. Everything is a part of langue, the concept. In other words, we may also refer to langue as the container that contains all sign relationships that a certain language can use (users of a certain speech community) in the past, present and future time. *Parole*, on the other hand, is defined as useful utterances one makes in order to communicate. While Langue is a massive concept which would be like an unending box, Parole is like the part of langue, every individual makes in order to make their life work and in order to make their daily communications work or life happen.

While Saussure started with sign to be an arbitrary concept between signifiers and signifieds based in totality on recognition by speech community users, modern interpretation adds to it by redefining the roles of signifiers. A signifier may be graphical including images, photographs, sketches, sculptures, statues, landscape and so on. A signifier may be uttered like in spoken language. A signifier may be written like this paper. A signifier may be signed

by a person who cannot speak or hear. A signifier may be gestures through body language or a signifier may be anything else which helps another human being, or any other species realise that a message is being conveyed to them. A signified concept on the other hand may be referred to as the concept which one has in their mind when a signifier is used. For example, when one uses a signifier to refer to a concept like 'house', one generically refers to a concept which is saved in their mind and associated with the signifier 'house'. When one sees a house on the road, the house seen on the road is also a signifier which helps them refer to the concept that is saved in their mind. On the contrary to popular belief, the house on the road helps one refer to the concept of houses, which can be realised in various shapes and sizes and henceforth the house seen on the road is also a signifier to another signified concept and not a signified itself. In case someone photographs a certain house and then shows it to someone, the image in that case would work as a signifier to the certain house that was photographed.

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