

Multimodality in Literary Text
Lecture 1
Introduction of Semiotics: The Study of Signs
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Learning objective

At the end of this meeting, you are expected to understand:

1. All the topics will be covered in this course
2. The basic concept of Semiotics
3. The three “fathers” of semiotics and their semiotic concepts
4. The connection between English Literature and Semiotics
5. The literary works for semiotic analysis
6. The examples of semiotic analysis in literary works

A. Topics of the course

Multimodality in literary text is one of major courses offered in English Literature major of Jakarta International University in Indonesia. This course covers three main topics of Semiotics, which are:

1. Semiotics
2. Social Semiotics
3. Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA)
4. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)
5. Writing a research paper

As this course is offered to the junior level or the third year students, therefore, at the end of the 12th meeting of this course, students are expected to be able to write a mini research paper related to the three main topics above.

The discussion of **Semiotics** will cover the basic concept of semiotics and the social semiotics. The main reference will be taken from Daniel Chandler’s book entitled “Semiotics the basics” the fourth edition published in 2021. We are discussing it today in more details.

The discussion of **Social Semiotics** will elaborate how signs and symbols are used in society to create meanings. This chapter will look at the ways in which language, images, and other semiotic resources are used to convey messages and ideas in the society as well give impact to the social construction. The main references would be taken from Michael Halliday, Theo van Leeuwen, Roberth Hodge and Gunter Kress.

The discussion of **Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA)** will focus on the three metafunction concept from Kress and Van Leeuwen as they elaborated in their book entitled “Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design” the third edition published in 2021. According to them, three metafunctions consist of representational metafunction, interactional metafunction, and compositional metafunction. We will discuss more deeply in the lecture 3 and 4. To have better understanding about this framework, I will give examples on how to analyze the three metafunctions or how they work in the various kinds of literary works.

The next discussion about **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**. This topic has been discussed and written by many researchers such as: Teun A. van Dijk, Ruth Wodak, Norman Fairclough and also Machin and Mayr. Just like MDA, CDA is also considered as an interdisciplinary study which is applicable in various majors including English Literature. CDA in this course will shell the Machin & Mayr book entitled “How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis” (2012). Texts and articles from various media will be taken as examples on how CDA is being implemented.

The last discussion is about **writing a research paper**, especially the typical of Indonesian research paper format. This part will be deeply discussed in week 12. I will show my own research paper as the example in writing a research paper related to this course.

B. Basic Concept of Semiotics

Simply saying, **semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation** (Chandler, 2021). Semiotics focuses on the meaning making and how it represents and constructs the reality through signs, sign systems, and process of signification (Chandler, 2021). This theory was introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure (1957-1913) which then developed into a behaviorist semiotics by an American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1916) and Roland Barthes (1915-1980) as one of the leading modern semiotic theorists.

As of now, Semiotics is an old-school theory for researchers, however this is still the basic concept for other new related theories. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) have the updated concepts rooted from Semiotics. However, there are still many current researches about various topics that utilizing semiotics. As the study of signs, Semiotics could work in various media, not only in drawings, paintings, and photographs as the visual signs, but this study also includes words, sounds, and even body language such facial expressions, body vectors, and gestures (Chandler, 2021).

So what is SIGN?

Sign is something which stands for or represents something else. For human beings like us, something becomes a sign when we interpret it as signifying something (Chandler, 2021). For example, if you see the pictures below, we can call them as signs and we as human beings interpret them into something. For example:



Figure 1

Source: Nazila, 2019: online



Figure 2

Source: Rosyid, 2019: online

Pare (Figure 1) is one vegetable with a very bitter taste that some people do not even like it. While lime (Figure 2) tastes very sour. By just looking at these two pictures without even tasting them, we know exactly how they taste because we have got the background knowledge of that foods. We have ever tasted them previously therefore it becomes our background knowledge to those foods. By that, we, as human beings, signify *pare* as bad taste food because it is bitter. Meanwhile, we signify lime as a fresh taste food because of its sourness taste.

Another example of how SIGN represents something can be seen in the following two pictures:



Figure 3

Source: Sparham, 2021: VOGUE India



Figure 4

Source: "Gwen Stacy", 2023: Wikipedia

She is Emma Stone, a talented Hollywood actress. These pictures are taken from her movies entitled "Cruella" and "The Amazing Spiderman". She plays two different characters in between these two movies. Coming back to Semiotics, these two pictures are the form on sign in which they represent something. As you can see that Figure 3 represent the antagonist character while the Figure 4 represent the protagonist character. Viewers can clearly see such representation from her appearance, the make-up, the hair-do, the costume, her expression, and her attitude. Therefore, these signs make the viewers come up to a conclusion that the left woman is bad and the right woman is good.

Therefore, we can define SIGN as a word, an image, a sound a smell, a flavor, words, images, sounds, or even gestures that stand for something else or means something as we define them. Meanwhile, **symbols** are signs that represent abstract concepts such as love, freedom, or justice.

For example:



Figure 5

Source: "Peace Symbols", 2023: Wikipedia

This symbol represents a concept of peace or also known as CND symbol (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament). The peace representation is as an abstract concept created by the society to convey their world-wide campaign mission.



Figure 6

Source: "International Symbol of Access", 2023: Wikipedia

This wheelchair symbol or also known as the International Symbol of Access (ISA) symbolizes that certain facility or places are disability-friendly or dedicated for disabilities. This symbol is mostly found in public area as symbol to support the disability people. Governments also support by mandating public area to provide special facilities for the disabilities. In conclusion, this wheelchair picture is a simple example of how a symbol represent something.

C. The Fathers of Semiotics

Among all the semioticians known in this field of study, there are three of them who are well known as the semiotics fathers:

1. Ferdinand de Saussure with the concept of "Sign, Signifier, Signified"
2. Charles Sanders Peirce with the concept of "Representamen, Interpretant, Object"
3. Roland Barthes with the concept of "Denotative, Connotative, and Myth"

Ferdinand de Saussure concept of semiotics is known as semiology and therefore he is known not only as a linguist but also a semiologist. His semiology concept relies on "**Sign, Signifier, and Signified.**" The following figure is the visualization of Saussure semiology concept:

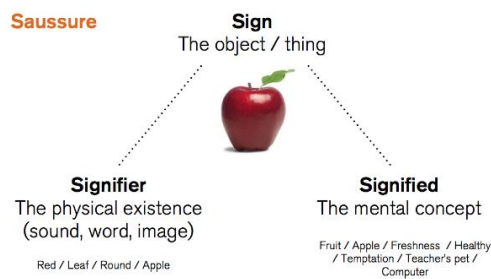


Figure 7

Source: *European Structuralism Ferdinand de Saussure*
 Université Setif2 EL Hidhab.

As Saussure is a linguist, his semiology concept focuses on language. He considers language as a system of arbitrary signs. As has been explained earlier that sign is something which stands for or represents something else, then signifier refers to the form of how the sign takes and signified refers to the represented concept of it. Furthermore, sign is the object or the thing that we can see/smell/touch/hear with our five senses. This sign brings a relationship between the signifier and the signified. Signifier is the physical existence of sign in which we can “enjoy” with our five senses such as the sound, the word, and the image of it. Based on the example in Figure 7, the sign is a picture of an apple. The signifier is that the apple is round, it has leaf on it, it is rounded shape, and it is called apple. The signified could be interpreted in many ways depends on the background knowledge of the interpreter. The apple can be considered as an healthy and fresh fruit by looking at its appearance. For certain people, apple can also be considered as gadget brand, especially if they own it.

An American philosopher, **Charles Sanders Peirce**, also learned the semiology structure by Saussure. Peircean semiotics proposed that signs could be classified into symbolic, iconic, and indexical according to their associations (Chandler, 2021).

1. Symbolic is the conventional signs that are culturally specific between the signifier and signified. For example: male and female sign in front of the public toilet which has the same representation as the real male and female.
2. Iconic is the signs where the signifier resembles the signified. For example: the symbol in figure 5 which indicates the peace meaning.
3. Indexical is the signs where the signified is the result of the signifier. For example: there is no smoke without fire, therefore smoke signifies the fire.

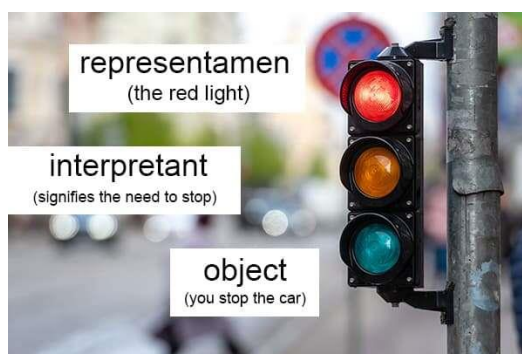


Figure 8
Source: media studies: online

If Saussure semiology relies on “sign, signifier and signified”, Peircian semiotic model emphasizes on “**representamen, interpretant, and object.**” Representamen is like a sign in semiology, it refers to the object or the thing that we can see/smell/touch/hear with our five senses. Interpretant is about is being signified by the object. Lastly, the object how the interpretant causes the effect of the representamen. Peircian semiotic model can be easier understood by looking at the figure 8. The

representamen is when we are looking at the red light on the street, it signifies that we have to stop (this is what is called as interpretant). Then we really stop, that is the actual action after we see the red light is on, this is what is called as object in Peircian semiotic model.

The last semiotic father, **Roland Barthes**, developed the “**denotation, connotation and myth.**” concept where the denotation refers to the specific or direct meaning of signs and connotation refers to an associated idea or feeling of the signs. Different from Saussure’s semiology, Barthes Semiotic model reflects that **signs** could be multi-interpretation in their connotations and denotations (Chandler, 2021). **Denotation** tends to be described as the literal, obvious or commonsense meaning of a sign. In the area of linguistic, denotative meaning of signs is what the dictionary writes. For the field of art, denotation of visual image is represented by what all the viewers (from any culture and at any time) would recognize as the way it is. Meanwhile, the **connotation** refers to the socio-cultural and personal associations (ideological, emotional, etc.) of the sign. The connotation analysis would be based on the interpreter’s background of knowledge, including their class, age, gender, ethnicity and so on. In addition, Vera in Daniela (2021) states that the **myth** relates more to the value and norms in the society.



Figure 9
Source: Chandler, 2021: Semiotics the Basics

This figure 9 is one of the famous Barthes’ semiotic analyses that he wrote in 1987. He analyzed a young negro soldier saluting the French flag that appeared in a cover of a Paris magazine. For Barthes, this picture portrays a meaningful ideology. This picture describes that France is a great empire, that all sons there, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under its flag. However, the picture is not just a portrayal of a citizen’s loyalty to his country, but clearly a portrayal of an alleged colonialism by a negro or black man in serving the oppressors. The analysis process of this magazine cover until Barthes comes up to such ideological perspective about French is called myth. Therefore, myth is defined by a certain intention.

D. Semiotics and English Literature

Saussure, who is a linguist, stated that linguistics as a branch of the semiology study. The strongest discipline ties to philosophy and linguistics (Chandler, 2021). Morris also stated that Semiotics composed three branches, which are: Syntactic, Semantics, and Pragmatics (Morris in Long, 2019). The three branches were elaborated by Chandler (2021) as follows:

1. Semantics : studies the meaning of signs
2. Pragmatics : studies the use of signs
3. Syntactics : studies the relations between signs

The relations of semiotics to philosophy and linguistics can be seen in the following figure:

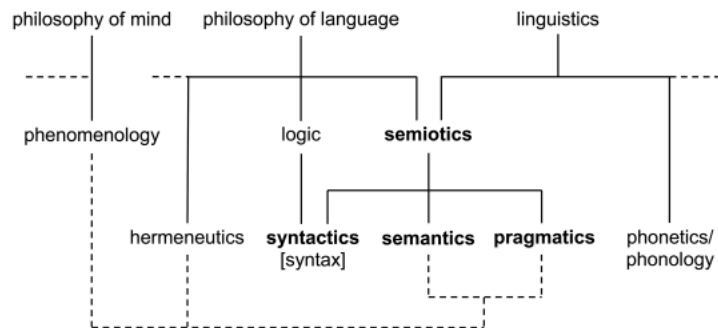


Figure 10

Source: Chandler, 2021: Semiotics The Basics

From the above figure taken from Chandler (2021), it can be seen that theory of signs is mostly mentioned in the subdisciplines of logic and theoretical linguistics. However, it also shows broader link between semiotics and philosophy of language which mainly concerns with relations between language, thought, and the world. Semiotics is also closely related to hermeneutics or known as theory of interpretation (particularly the contextual interpretation of text). We can also see the relation between semiotics and the other three branches. Those courses are studied in English Literature major of JIU. Semiotics is the part of linguistics which then also learned in phonetics phonology.

In English Literature, Semiotics plays a role as the theory or method to analyze various types of literary works, such as:

- a. Written works: novels, biographies, short stories, poems, poetries, song lyrics, speech text/ scripts, articles in magazines, or news articles in newspapers or digital websites.
- b. Still image or still visual works: article headlines, posters, flyers, brochures, magazine covers, social media feed posts, movie posters, book covers.
- c. Moving image or visual and verbal works: digital contents, podcasts, speeches, interview records, music videos, campaigns, movies, series, documentaries, advertisement.

E. Examples of Semiotics Analysis

Before going further to the examples of semiotic analysis, we need to define what semiotics can analysis. Semiotics provides people with a new mode of thinking in analyzing phenomena or problems in the scope of linguistics, literature, social, culture, politics, art, and news communication (Long, 2019).

1. One of semiotic analysis example is taken from my own research paper with my former student in early 2022 about the portrayal of love language in the Netflix series, entitled Bridgerton. This paper utilized Saussure semiology “sign, signifier, and signified” and Roland Barthes semiotic concept about “denotation and connotation” to examine the love language portrayal by the main character, Daphne Bridgerton. The love language theory is taken from Gary Chapman (1992). The



Figure 11
Source: Dailly, 2020: online

analysis of love language is by examining the verbal and non-verbal gestures and expression of Daphne Bridgerton. The result of the research concluded that women in the British Regency era should behave and act nicely in the society. People create certain standards, manners, and values in the society based on someone else’s opinion and perspective. People obey the society standard to avoid bad opinions to them. Research also found that woman in the Regency Era were presented as the key of value in her family. Society in that era tend to believe if the woman is married to a wealthy man can increase the level of economy and reputation in society. Therefore, Daphne Bridgerton is urged to find a perfect suitor to be her husband to avoid rumors toward her family.

2. Another example is taken from Heinz ketchup advertisement which is analyzed by Lesley Vos (2021) in cxi.com. Signifiers of the picture are shown in the red backdrop, the horizontal slice of Heinz bottle which looks like tomato slices in the shape of bottle and lastly is the sentence “No



Figure 12
Source: Vos, 2021: online

one grows Ketchup like Heinz.” written on the below. For viewers, it might seem like a simple interesting ketchup advertisement. However, for semiotic learners, we can dig deeper to its meaning making or the signified. The red backdrop is read. Red is considered as the most appetizing and hunger-inspiring color. The slicing bottle looks like a ripe tomato which connotes the freshness of the product. Heinz tries to promote and offer a healthier way of life to the customers. Furthermore, the bottle also looks like a crafted sculpture, associating that Heinz is an artsy and innovative. However, it could create confusion of Heinz as an art product rather than food product. Lastly is the word “grow” in the below sentence that emphasizes the natural ingredient in it as it is taken directly from the farm instead of a factory-made condiment.

3. The last example of semiotic analysis is sourced from Vouge Philippines cover issued in April 2023. This cover shows a 106-year-old tattoo artist from Philippines named Apo Whang – Od or so-called Maria Oggay (Nepomuceno, 2023). The signifiers of this cover are depicted with an old woman sitting with her left hand supporting her chin. She is giving a slight smile with a red wine lipstick color on her lips. By wearing a tank top, readers can clearly see tattoos all over her wrinkled body.



Figure 13
Source: Nepomuceno, 2023: online

She is also wearing an ethnic fabric as a skirt and some accessories. The brown color background matches her skin tone. There is a caption “Apo Whang – Od Next of Skin The Beauty Issue” written on the bottom of the cover page. In the scope of semiotics, we can try to analyze what this picture is trying to signify. Tattoo nowadays is commonly attached with bad attitude and rebellion of youngsters, even though some other consider it as an art. Therefore, it is not common to see an old woman with tattoos. An old woman or a grand mother usually does not look like Whang – Od. Her appearance is beyond merely style and beauty standards but the representation of several indigenous members. She is trying to upkeep the thousand-year-old tradition of Kalinga region and its people by imprinting the sacred symbols of their ancestors on the body. Her hand-tapping-tattoos are the representation of scarification which is in line with the below caption “beauty issue”. Unmarked women were considered imperfect and undesirable. Therefore, tattooed bodies were celebrated as badges of honor, wealth, beauty, and bravery.

Summary and Conclusion:

In summary, we have discussed in detail about the basic concept of semiotics as the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation. Semiotics focuses on the meaning making and how it represents and constructs the reality through signs, sign systems, and process of signification (Chandler, 2021). There were three famous fathers of semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce and Roland Barthes, who develop semiotic with their own approach:

1. Ferdinand de Saussure with the concept of “Sign, Signifier, Signified”
2. Charles Sanders Peirce with the concept of “Representamen, Interpretant, Object”
3. Roland Barthes with the concept of “Denotative, Connotative, and Myth”

In English Literature, linguistics is the branch of semiotic study. This study is also related to Syntactic, Semantics, and Pragmatics which also learned in English studies. In English Literature, Semiotics plays a role as the theory or method to analyze various types of literary works, such as in written works, still image or still visual works, moving image or visual and verbal works. At the last discussion we also try to see the semiotic analysis in three different contents. As semiotic learners, we have to be critical in looking at a literary work. We cannot just ‘enjoy’ it but semiotic tries to reveal the deeper meaning of the literary work.

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Figure 4

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Figure 5

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Figure 7

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Figure 8

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Figure 9

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Figure 10

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Figure 11

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Figure 12

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Figure 13

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