# The semiology of language\*

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Semiology will have much to accomplish if it does nothing else but discover its own boundaries. Ferdinand de Saussure<sup>1</sup>

Since the time when those two antithetical geniuses, Peirce and Saussure, almost simultaneously,<sup>2</sup> in total ignorance of one another, conceived of the possibility of a science of signs and worked at establishing it, an important problem has arisen which has not as yet found a precise formulation. In the midst of the confusion that reigns in this field, this problem has not even been clearly stated. What is the place of language among the systems of signs?

Peirce devoted his entire life to the further elaboration of concepts based on the term *semiotic*, returning to the designation  $\Sigma \eta \mu \epsilon i \omega \tau i \kappa \eta$ , which John Locke had applied to a science of signs and significations derived from logic, which was itself conceived of as a science of language. The enormous quantity of his notes bears witness to an obstinate effort to analyze logical, mathematical, physical, and even psychological and religious notions within the framework of semiotics. This study, pursued throughout his life, involved an increasingly complex apparatus of definitions aimed at distributing all of reality, the conceptual, and the experiential into various categories of signs. In order to construct this 'universal algebra of relations',<sup>3</sup> Peirce proposed a tripartite division of signs into *icons*, *indices*, and *symbols*: today this is nearly all we retain of the immense logical superstructure underlying this division.

As for language, Peirce made no precise or specific formulations. For him, language was both everywhere and nowhere at all. He was never concerned with the way language functioned, if he even paid attention to it. Language for him was reduced to its components, words, which are certainly signs. Yet, they are not derived from a distinct category, or even from a constant type. Words belong, for the most part, to the category of

Semiotica, supp. (1981), 5-23.

'symbols': certain ones, for example, demonstrative pronouns, are 'indices', and therefore are classified with their corresponding gestures, the gesture of pointing, for example. Consequently, Peirce did not recognize the fact that such a gesture is universally understood, whereas the demonstrative is part of a special system of oral signs, language, and of a particular linguistic system, the idiom. Moreover, in Peirce's terms the same word can appear as several varieties of 'signs', such as the qualisign, the sinsign, or the legisign.<sup>4</sup> We do not see, therefore, the operative utility of similar distinctions, nor to what extent they would help the linguist construct a semiology of language as a system. The difficulty that prevents any specific application of Peirce's concepts (except for the well-known but much too general tripartite framework) is that the sign is definitively posited as the base of the entire universe, and functions simultaneously as the principle of definition for each element and as the principle of explanation for the entire ensemble, be it abstract or concrete. Man himself is a sign; his thought is a sign;<sup>5</sup> his every emotion is a sign.<sup>6</sup> But finally, since these signs are all signs for each other, for what could they be a sign that is not a sign itself? Where could we find a fixed point to anchor the first signifying relationship? The semiotic edifice that Peirce constructs is not self-inclusive in its own definition. In order to keep the notion of sign from disappearing completely amidst this proliferation ad infinitum, we must recognize a difference, somewhere in this universe, between sign and signified. Therefore, each sign must be included and articulated within a system of signs. Therein lies the condition for significance. It then follows, to counter Peirce, that all signs cannot function identically, nor belong to one system alone. We have to establish several systems of signs, and among these systems, make explicit the relationships of difference and analogy.

It is here that Saussure presents himself directly as the exact opposite of Peirce, in methodology as well as in practice. In Saussure's work, reflection proceeds from language and adopts language as its exclusive object. Language is considered in itself. Linguistics has a threefold task: (1) to describe all known languages synchronically and diachronically; (2) to extract the general laws at work in languages; and (3) to delimit and define itself (1966: 6).

Under its external rational appearance, the peculiarity that this program conceals passes unnoticed; yet, this peculiarity is precisely its force and audacity. Hence, the third aim of linguistics: to define itself by itself. This task, if we are willing to understand it fully, absorbs the two others, and in a sense eliminates them. How will linguistics be able to set its own boundaries and define itself by itself, if not by delimiting and defining its very own object, language? But in such a case, can it accomplish the first two tasks that it must undertake, i.e., the description and history of language? How would linguistics be able 'to determine the forces that are permanently and universally at work in all languages, and to deduce the general laws to which all specific historical phenomena can be deduced' (1966: 6), if we have not begun by defining the powers and resources of linguistics (that is to say, the hold it has on language, and consequently, the nature and characteristics peculiar to this entity called language)? Everything is dependent upon this requirement, and the linguist cannot deem any one of these tasks distinct from the others, nor fulfill any one of them, if he is not first aware of the singular nature of language with respect to all other objects of science. This insight contains the basic condition preliminary to all other active and cognitive linguistic proceedings. Far from being located on the same plane as the other two tasks, and thus implying their completion, this third task, 'to delimit and define itself' (1966: 6), forces linguistics to postpone the fulfillment of the other two until it has discovered its own limits and definition as a science. Herein lies the great innovation of Saussure's program. Reference to his Course readily confirms that for Saussure a linguistic science is possible only on the condition that it ultimately find itself through the discovery of its own object.

Everything then proceeds from the question: 'What is both the integral and concrete object of linguistics?' (1966: 7). Saussure's first step aims at destroying all previous responses to this question. 'From whatever direction we approach the question, nowhere do we find the integral object of linguistics' (1966: 9). The field thus cleared, Saussure posits his first methodological requirement: language (*la langue*) must be separated from human speech (*le langage*). The essential concepts furtively slip into the following few lines:

Taken as a whole, speech is many-sided and heterogeneous; straddling several areas simultaneously — physical, physiological, and psychological — it belongs both to the individual and to society; we cannot put it into any category of human facts, for we cannot discover its unity.

Language, on the contrary, is a self-contained whole and a principle of classification. As soon as we give language first place among the facts of speech, we introduce a natural order into a mass that lends itself to no other classification. (1966: 9)

Saussure's chief concern is the discovery of the principle of unity dominating the multiplicity of forms under which languages appear. This principle alone allows us to classify linguistic facts among human activities. The reduction of human speech to language satisfies this double condition: it allows us to propose language as a unifying principle, and in the same stroke, establishes a place for language among human activities. In formulating the principle of unity and the principle of classification Saussure presents the two concepts which, in turn, introduce semiology.

Both principles are necessary to establish linguistics as a science. We could not conceive of a science uncertain of its object, undefined in terms of its relevance. This goes well beyond a concern for rigor; it proceeds from the very rules specific to the totality of human acts.

Here again, no one has sufficiently emphasized the originality of Saussure's procedure. It is not a question of deciding whether or not linguistics is closer to psychology or sociology, nor of finding a place for it in the midst of existing disciplines. The problem is presented on another level, and in terms that create their own concepts. Linguistics is part of a science that does not yet exist, a science that has as its subject other systems of the same order in the totality of human activities: *semiology*. Saussure states and situates this relationship thusly:

Language is a system of signs that expresses 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 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 sēmeîon '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. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological acts.

To determine the exact place of semiology is the task of the psychologist.<sup>7</sup> The task of the linguist is to find out what makes language a special system within the mass of semiological data. This issue will be taken up later; here I wish merely to call attention to one thing: if I have succeeded in assigning linguistics a place among the sciences, it is because I have related it to semiology. (1966: 16)

The basics of the long commentary that this page demands are included in the discussion that we broach further on. In order to emphasize them, we shall consider only the primordial characteristics of semiology as Saussure perceives it, and furthermore, as he recognized it long before alluding to it in his teachings.<sup>8</sup>

Language, in all its aspects, appears as a duality: a social institution, set to work by the individual; continuous discourse, composed of fixed units. Language is independent of the phonoacoustic mechanism of speech: it consists of a 'system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound images, and in which both parts of the sign are psychological' (1966: 15). Where is language to find its unity and its functional principle? In its semiotic character. In that way it defines its own nature, and also integrates itself into a set of systems, all having the same characteristics.

For Saussure, in contrast to Peirce, the sign is a linguistic concept which extends more widely to certain orders of anthropological and social data. Thereby its domain is circumscribed. But besides language, this domain includes systems homologous to it. Saussure refers to several. The latter all have the characteristic of being systems of *signs*. Language 'is the most important of these systems' (1966: 16). The most important in relation to what? Is it simply because language has more importance in social life than any other system? There is nothing which allows us to determine this.

Saussure's thought, most affirmative about the relationship of language to systems of signs, is less clear on the relationship of linguistics to semiology, the science of the systems of signs. The future of linguistics will be in its incorporation into semiology, which in turn will form 'a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology' (1966: 16). But we must wait for the establishment of semiology, 'a science that studies the life of signs within society', in order to learn 'what constitutes signs, what laws govern them' (1966: 16). Saussure, therefore, defers the task of defining the sign itself to this future science. Nevertheless, he elaborates, for linguistics, the instrument of its own semiology, the linguistic sign: 'to me, the language problem is mainly semiological, and all developments derive their significance from that important fact' (1966: 17).

This principle, that the linguistic sign is 'arbitrary' placed at the center of linguistics, connects linguistics to semiology. In a general manner, the principal object of semiology will be 'the whole group of systems grounded on the arbitrariness of the sign' (1966: 68). Consequently, in the totality of systems of expression, preeminence belongs to language.

Signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process; this is why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is also the most characteristic; in this sense linguistics could become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology although language is only one particular semiological system (1966: 68).

In this way, while clearly formulating the idea that linguistics has a necessary relationship to semiology, Saussure refrains from defining the nature of that relationship, except by means of the principle of the 'arbitrary nature of the sign', which would govern the totality of systems of expression, and above all, language. Semiology, as a science of signs, remains latent in Saussure's work as a prospect which in its most precise features models itself on linguistics.

Saussure limits himself to rapidly citing several systems which, along with language, are included under semiology; he far from exhausts the list, since he puts forth no delimiting criteria: 'a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc.' (1966: 16). Elsewhere he speaks of considering rites, customs, etc., as signs (1966: 17).

Taking up this important problem at the point where Saussure left off, we would like to insist first upon the necessity of establishing a preliminary classification if we are to advance the analysis and consolidate the bases of semiology at all.

We will say nothing about writing here, saving this difficult problem for special examination. Are symbolic rites and rules of etiquette autonomous systems? Can we really put them on the same level as language? They only occur in a semiological relationship through the intermediary of a discourse: the 'myth', which accompanies the 'rite'; the 'protocol' which governs the rules of etiquette. These signs, if they are to be established as a system, presuppose the existence of language, which produces and interprets them. They are therefore of a distinct order in a hierarchy yet to be defined. We already suspect that, no less than the systems of signs, the *relationships* between these systems will constitute the subject of semiology.

It is finally time to forsake generalities and tackle the central problem of semiology, the status of language among the systems of signs. We cannot guarantee anything in this theory as long as we lack a clear idea of the sign's concept and worth within those groups where it is already accessible to study. We believe this examination should begin with nonlinguistic systems.

The role of the sign is to represent, to take the place of something else while alluding to it by virtue of a substitute. A more precise definition, one which would distinguish several varieties of signs specifically, presupposes a reflection upon the principle of a science of signs, of a semiology, and an effort to elaborate it. The smallest attention to our behavior, to the conditions of intellectual and social life, of our dealings with others, of the relationship between production and exchange, shows us that we are utilizing several systems of signs concurrently at every moment: first, the signs of language, which are those that we acquire the earliest, with the beginning of conscious life; graphic signs; the signs of politeness, of gratitude, and of persuasion in all their varieties and hierarchies; the signs regulating vehicular movement; the 'external signs' indicating social conditions; 'monetary signs', values and indices of economic life; cult signs, rites, and beliefs, and the signs of art in all its varieties (music, images, figurative reproductions). In short and without going beyond empiric verification, it is clear that our whole life is caught up in networks of signs that condition us to the point where we do not know how to omit a single one without endangering the equilibrium between society and individual. These signs seem to engender themselves and multiply by virtue of some internal necessity, apparently responding as well to a necessity within our mental organization. What principle can be introduced into the numerous and diverse ways in which signs arrange themselves in configurations that will order these relationships and delimit their sets?

The common characteristic of all these systems and the criterion for their inclusion in semiology is their signifying property, or *meaning*, and their composition into units of meaning, or *signs*. We have come to the point where we must describe their distinctive characteristics.

A semiological system is characterized by: (1) its mode of operation; (2) the domain of its validity; (3) the nature and number of its signs; and (4) its type of operation.

Each one of these features entails a certain number of variations.

The *mode of operation* is the manner in which the system acts, more particularly the sense (sight, hearing, etc.) to which it is directed.

The *domain of validity* is that area in which the system imposes itself and must be recognized or obeyed.

The *nature* and *number of signs* are a function of the aforesaid conditions.

The *type of operation* is the relationship that unites the signs and confers their distinguishing function upon them.

Let us put this definition to the test against an elementary system, the system of traffic signal lights: its mode of operation is visual, generally diurnal, on a clear day; its domain of validity is vehicular traffic on highways; its signs are constituted by the chromatic opposition green/red (sometimes with an intermediary phase of simple transition, yellow), i.e., it is a binary system; its type of operation is a relationship of alteration (never of simultaneity), green/red signifying road open/road closed, or under its prescriptive form, stop/go.

This system is capable of expansion or transference, but only under one of its four conditions, the domain of validity. We can apply it to fluvial navigation, to channel buoy markers, or to aviation runways, provided that we keep the same chromatic opposition, with the same signification. The nature of the signs can only be modified temporarily, and for reasons of expediency.<sup>9</sup>

The traits subsumed under this definition form two groups: the first two, relative to the mode of operation and to the domain of validity,

provide the external empirical conditions of the system; the last two, relative to signs and to their type of operation, indicate their internal semiotic conditions. The first two allow certain variations or accommodations; the other two do not. This structure delineates a canonical model for the binary system, which we recognize, for example, in voting customs — using a black or white ball, standing or being seated, etc. — and in all the circumstances where the alternative could be (but is not) stated in linguistic terms such as: yes/no.

From now on, we are able to extract two principles which pertain to the relationships between semiotic systems.

The first principle can be stated as the *principle of nonredundancy* between systems. Semiotic systems are not 'synonymous'; we are not able to say 'the same thing' with spoken words that we can with music, as they are systems with different bases.

In other words, two semiotic systems of different types cannot be mutually interchangeable. In the example cited, speech and music have as a common trait the production of sounds and the fact that they appeal to hearing; but this relationship does not prevail, in view of the difference in nature between their respective units and their types of operation, as we shall show further on.

Nonredundancy in the universe of sign systems occurs as a result of the nonconvertibility of systems with different bases. Man does not have several distinct systems at his disposal for the *same* signifying relationship.

On the other hand, the written alphabet and the Braille alphabet, or Morse code, or the deaf-mute alphabet are mutually interchangeable, all being systems based on the alphabetic principle: one letter, one sound.

A second principle follows from and completes the preceding one.

Two systems can have the same sign in common without being, as a result, synonymous or redundant; that is to say, the functional difference of a sign alone matters, not its substantial identity. The red in the binary system of highway traffic signals has nothing in common with the red of the French tricolor flag, nor does the white of that flag have anything to do with the white worn for mourning in China. The value of a sign is defined only in the system which incorporates it. There is no sign that bridges several systems, that is transsystemic.

Are these systems, then, just so many closed worlds, having nothing between them except a relationship of coexistence, itself perhaps fortuitous? We have to draw up new methodological requirements. The relationship laid down between semiotic systems must itself be semiotic in nature. It is determined first of all by the same cultural background which in some way produces and nurtures all systems in its particular group. Therein, again, lies an external link which does not necessarily imply a coherent relationship between individual systems. There is a second condition: can it be determined whether a given semiotic system can interpret itself by itself, or must it receive its interpretation from another system? The semiotic relationship between systems is expressed, then, as the relationship between *interpreting system* and *interpreted system*. It is this relationship that we shall propose on a grand scale between the signs of language and those of society. The signs of society can be interpreted integrally by those of language, but the reverse is not so. Language is therefore the interpreting system of society.<sup>10</sup> On a small scale, we shall consider the written alphabet as the interpreting system of Morse code or of Braille because of the larger extension of its domain of validity, and in spite of the fact that they are all mutually interchangeable.

We can already infer from this that the semiotic subsystems internal to society are logically interpreted by language, since society contains them, and society is interpreted by language. We already perceive a fundamental asymmetry in this relationship, and therefore, should return to the primary cause of this nonreversibility: language occupies a special position in the universe of sign systems. If we decide to designate the totality of these systems with the letter S, and language with the letter L, the transformation always occurs in the direction of S to L ( $S \rightarrow L$ ), never in the reverse order. Herein we have a general principle of hierarchy suitable as an introduction for the classification of semiotic systems functioning as the basis for any semiological theory.

In order to highlight the difference between the orders of semiotic relationships, we now propose, in the same perspective, a totally different system: that of music. The differences appear essentially in the nature of the 'signs' and in their mode of operation.

Music is made up of sounds which have a musical status when they are designated and classified as *notes*. There are no other units in music directly comparable to the 'signs' of language. These notes have an organizing framework, the *scale*, in which they are employed by virtue of being discrete units, discontinuous from one another, of a fixed number, each one characterized by a constant number of vibrations in a given time. The scales include the same notes at different pitches, defined by a number of vibrations in a geometric progression, while the intervals remain constant.

Musical sounds can occur in monophony or in polyphony; they function in an isolated state or simultaneously (chords), whatever the intervals separating them into their respective scales. There is no limit to the multiplicity of sounds produced simultaneously by a group of instruments, nor to the order, to the frequency, or to the scope of combinations. The composer freely organizes the sounds in a discourse that is never subjected to any 'grammatical' convention, but that obeys its own 'syntax'.

We see, therefore, in what respect the musical system can or cannot be considered semiotic. It is organized from an ensemble constituted by a scale that is itself formed of notes. The notes have no differential value except within the scale; and the scale itself is a recurrent whole at several (different) pitches, specified by the tone which indicates the key.

The basic unit will therefore be the note, a discrete and contrasting unit of sound; but it only assumes this value within the scale, which fixes the paradigm of notes. Is this a semiotic unit? We can discern that it is in its own order, since it determines the oppositions. But then it has no relationship with the semiotics of the linguistic sign, and, in fact, it is not convertible into units of language, at whatever level this may occur.

The following analogy, at the same time, discloses a profound difference. Music is a system which functions on two axes: a simultaneous and a sequential axis. We might think of a homology with the function of language along its paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes. However, the axis of simultaneity in music contradicts the very principle of the paradigm in language, which is the principle of selection, excluding all intrasegmental simultaneity; and the sequential axis in music does not coincide with the syntagmatic axis of language either, since the musical sequence is compatible with the simultaneity of sounds, and is not subjected to any restriction of liaison (syncopation) or of exclusion with regard to any sound or group of sounds.

In this way it can be seen that the musical combination derived from harmony and counterpoint has no equivalent in language, where paradigms as often as syntagms are subjected to specific arrangements: rules of consistency, of selectivity, of recurrence, etc., upon which depend frequency and statistical predictability on the one hand, and the possibility of constructing intelligible statements on the other. This difference does not depend on a special musical system or on a chosen sound scale: the twelvetone serial scale is as rigorously bound here as the diatonic scale.

We can say, on the whole, if music is considered as a language, it has syntactic features, but not semiotic features. This difference delineates in advance a positive necessary feature of linguistic semiology that we should keep in mind.

Let us now go on to another field, that of the so-called plastic arts, an enormous area, where we will limit ourselves to pursuing some similarity or opposition capable of elucidating the semiology of language. Here from the very first we run up against a difficulty in principle: is there something common at the base of all these arts, aside from the vague notion of the 'plastic'? Can we find in each or in only one of them a formal entity which we may call the *unit* of the system under consideration? But what can be the unit in painting or drawing? Is it shape, line, color? Formulated in this fashion, is the question still meaningful?

At this point we can state the minimal conditions for comparison between systems of different orders. Every semiotic system based on signs must necessarily include (1) a finite repertory of *signs*, (2) and rules of order governing its *figures*, (3) existing independently of the nature and number of the *discourses* that the system allows to be produced. None of the plastic arts considered in its totality seems to reproduce such a model. At the most, we might be able to find some approximation of it in the work of a particular artist. However, it would no longer be a matter of constant general conditions, but of individual characteristics, and this again would lead us astray from language.

The notion of unit is central to the problems which concern us,<sup>11</sup> and no serious theory can be formulated without considering the question, since every signifying system must be defined by its mode of signification. Consequently, such a system must designate the units it brings into play in order to produce meaning and to specify the nature of the meaning produced.

Two questions then emerge: (1) Can we reduce all semiotic systems to units? (2) In the systems in which they exist, are these units signs?

The unit and the sign remain as distinct features. The sign is necessarily a unit, but the unit may not be a sign. We are assured of at least one thing: language is composed of units, and these units are signs. What about other semiological systems?

First we shall consider the functioning of the so-called artistic systems, those of image and sound, while deliberately ignoring their aesthetic function. Musical language is composed of diversely articulated sound combinations and sequences; the elementary unit, the sound, is not a sign; each sound is identifiable in the scalar structure upon which it depends; none is endowed with meaning in itself. This is a typical example of units which are not signs, which do not designate, because they are merely the degrees of a scale whose range has been arbitrarily set. We have here a principle of selection: the systems based upon units are divided between systems of signifying units and systems of nonsignifying units. Language is in the first category, and music in the second.<sup>12</sup>

In the figurative arts (painting, design, and sculpture), which have fixed or mobile images, it is the existence of units which comes under discussion. What would their nature be? If it is a matter of colors, we recognize that they can be divided into a scale whose principal degrees are identifiable by name. They are designated, they do not designate; they neither refer to anything, nor suggest anything in an univocal way. The artist chooses

them, blends them, and arranges them on the canvas according to his taste; finally, it is in composition alone that, technically speaking, they assume a 'signification' through selection and arrangement. Thus the artist creates his own semiotics; he sets up his own oppositions in features which he renders significant in their order. Therefore, he does not acquire a repertory of signs, recognized as such, nor does he establish one. Color, the material, comprises an unlimited variety of gradations in shade, of which none is equivalent to the linguistic sign.

With regard to the figurative arts, they are already derived from another level, that of representation, where feature, color, and movement combine to form a whole governed by its own necessities. In this case, they are separate systems of great complexity, in which the definition of the sign can only be precisely stated after the development of this still vague study of semiology.

The signifying relationships of any artistic language are to be found within the compositions that make us aware of it. Art is nothing more than a specific work of art in which the artist freely sets up contrasts and values over which he assumes supreme authority. He answers to no one, nor must he eliminate contradictions. He must merely express a vision, to which the entire composition bears witness, and of which it becomes a manifestation, according to conscious or unconscious criteria.

We can thus distinguish the systems in which meaning is imparted by the author to the composition from those in which meaning is expressed by the initial elements in an isolated state, independently of the interrelationships which they may undergo. In the former, meaning emerges from the relationships forming a closed world; in the latter it is inherent in the signs themselves. Therefore, the meaning of art may never be reduced to a convention accepted by two partners.<sup>13</sup> New terms must always be found, since they are unlimited in number and unpredictable in nature; thus they must be redevised for each work and, in short, prove unsuitable as an institution. On the other hand, the meaning of language is meaning itself, establishing the possibility of all exchange and of all communication, and thus of all culture.

It is still permissible, taking into account certain metaphors, to compare the execution of a musical composition to the production of a linguistic statement; we can speak about a musical 'discourse', analyzed into phrases separated by 'pauses', or by 'silences', set off by recognizable 'motifs'. We might also look for morphological and syntactical principles in the figurative arts.<sup>14</sup> One thing at least is certain: no semiology of sound, color, or image can be formulated or expressed in sounds, colors, or images. Every semiology of a nonlinguistic system must use language as an intermediary, and thus can only exist in and through the semiology of language. Whether language serves here as an instrument rather than as an object of analysis does not alter this situation which governs all semiotic relationships; language is the interpreting system of all other systems, linguistic and nonlinguistic.

At this point we must specify the nature and the feasibility of relationships among semiotic systems. We propose three kinds of relationships.

(1) One system can generate another system. Ordinary language generates logical and mathematical formalization; ordinary writing generates stenographic writing; the normal alphabet generates the Braille alphabet. This generative relationship is useful between two distinct, contemporaneous systems, of the same kind, where the second one is constructed from the first one and fulfills a specific function. We should carefully distinguish this generative relationship from the derivative relationship, which supposes evolution and historical transition. Between hieroglyphic writing and demotic writing there is derivation, not generation. The history of writing systems provides many examples of derivation.

(2) The second kind of relationship is the relationship of homology, which establishes a correlation between the parts of two semiotic systems. In contrast to the preceding relationship, it is not explicitly stated, but is set up by virtue of the connections we find or establish between two distinct systems. The kind of homology may vary: intuitive or rational, substantial or structural, conceptual or poetic. 'Les parfums, les couleurs, les sons se répondent.' ['Fragrances, colors, and sounds mutually respond.'] These 'correspondances' are unique to Baudelaire; they organize his poetic universe and the imagery which reflects it. Of a more intellectual nature is the homology that Panofsky sees between Gothic architecture and scholastic thought.<sup>15</sup> The homology between writing and ritual gesture in China has also been pointed out. Two linguistic structures of different makeup can reveal partial or extended homologies. All depends upon the way in which we lay down the two systems, the parameters which we use, and the fields in which we perform. According to the situation, the homology established will serve as a unifying principle between two fields and will be limited to this functional role, or it will create new kinds of semiotic values. Nothing assures the validity of this relationship in advance, nothing limits the extent of it.

(3) We will term the third relationship between semiotic systems a *relationship of interpretance*. We designate the relationship established between an interpreting system and an interpreted system in this way. From the standpoint of language it is the fundamental relationship, the one which divides the systems into articulate systems, because they exhibit

their own semiotics, and articulated systems, whose semiotics appears only through the grid of another mode of expression. Thus we can introduce and justify the principle that language is in the interpreting system (interpretant) of all other semiotic systems. No other system has at its disposal a 'language' by which it can categorize and interpret itself according to its semiotic distinctions, while language can, in principle, categorize and interpret everything, including itself.

We see here how the semiological relationship is distinguished from every other, especially from the sociological. If, for example, we question ourselves on the respective status of language and of society — a topic of interminable debate - and also on their mode of mutual dependency, the sociologist and probably anyone else who perceives the question in dimensional terms will notice that language functions within the society that encompasses it; from thence, it is relatively easy to determine that society is the whole, and language, one of its parts. However, consideration from a semiological perspective reverses this relationship, because language alone permits society to exist. Language forms that which holds men together, the basis of all relationships, which in turn establish society. We could say, then, that it is language which contains society.<sup>16</sup> In this way the *interpretance* relationship, which is semiotic, moves in an opposite direction to that of inclusion, a nesting relationship, which is sociological. While the former relationship makes language and society mutually dependent according to their capacity of semiotization, the latter, if we objectify the external dependencies, reifies language and society in a similar manner.

Thereupon we may verify a criterion we indicated above, when, in order to determine the relationships between semiotic systems, we proposed that these relationships ought to be themselves semiotic in nature. The irreversible relationship of *interpretance*, which includes other systems in language, satisfies this condition.

Language provides us with the only model of a system that is at the same time semiotic in its formal structure and in its functioning:

(1) it manifests itself by a statement making reference to a given situation; to speak is always to speak about;

(2) it consists formally of distinct units, each of which is a sign;

(3) it is produced and accepted with the same values of reference by all members of a community;

(4) it is the only actualization of intersubjective communication.

For these reasons, language is the preeminent semiotic organization. It explains the function of a sign, and it alone offers an exemplary formula of the sign. Thus language alone can — and, in fact, does — confer on other

groups the rank of signifying system by acquainting them with the relationship of the sign. There is then a *semiotic modeling* which language practices and whose principle we cannot expect to find anywhere else than in language. The nature of language, its representative function, its dynamic power, and its relational role make of it the great semiotic matrix, the modeling structure from which other structures reproduce its features and its mode of action.

To what may we attribute this property? Can we discern why language is the interpreting system of every signifying system? Is it simply because language is the most common system, the one which has the largest field, the greatest frequency of use and — in practice — the greatest effectiveness? On the contrary, this privileged position of language in the pragmatic order of things is a consequence, not a cause, of its preeminence as a signifying system, and only a semiological principle can explain this preeminence. We will discover it by becoming aware of the fact that language signifies in a specific way which belongs to it alone, in a way that no other system copies. It is invested with *double medning*. In this aspect it is appropriately a model without parallel. Language combines two distinct modes of meaning, which we designate on the one hand as the *semiotic* mode, and on the other, the *semantic* mode.<sup>17</sup>

Semiotics designates the mode of signification proper to the linguistic sign that establishes it as a unit. We can, for purposes of analysis, consider separately the two surfaces of the sign, but with respect to its signification, it is a unit; it remains a unit. The only question to which a sign gives rise, if it is to be recognized as such, is that of its existence, and the latter is answered by yes or no: tree - song - to wash - nerve - vellow - on, and not \*tro - \*rong - \*dawsh - \*lerve - \*sellow - \*ton. Further, we compare the sign in order to define it, either to signifiers which are partially alike: saber:sober, or saber:sable, or saber:taber; or to neighboring things signified: saber:gun, or saber:epee. All semiotic research, in the strictest sense, consists of the identification of units, the description of characteristic features, and the discovery of the increasingly fine criteria of their distinctiveness. In this way each sign asserts its own meaning still more clearly in the midst of a constellation or among an ensemble of signs. Taken in itself, the sign is pure identity itself, totally foreign to all other signs, the signifying foundation of language, the material necessity for statement. It exists when it is recognized as signifier by all members of a linguistic community, and when it calls forth for each individual roughly the same associations and oppositions. Such is the province and the criterion of semiofics.

With the semantic, we enter into the specific mode of meaning which is generated by *discourse*. The problems raised here are a function of

language as producer of messages. However, the message is not reduced to a series of separately identifiable units; it is not the sum of many signs that produces meaning; on the contrary, it is meaning (*l'intenté*), globally conceived, that is actualized and divided into specific signs, the *words*. In the second place, semantics takes over the majority of referents, while semiotics is in principle cut off and independent of all reference. Semantic order becomes identified with the world of enunciation and with the universe of discourse.

Whether or not it is a question of two distinct orders of ideas and of two conceptual universes, we can still demonstrate this distinction through the difference in criteria of validity required by each. Semiotics (the sign) must be *recognized*; semantics (the discourse) must be *understood*. The difference between recognition and comprehension refers to two distinct faculties of the mind: that of discerning the identity between the previous and the present, and that of discerning, on the other hand, the meaning of a new enunciation. In the pathological forms of language, these two powers are frequently dissociated.

Language is the only system whose meaning is articulated this way in two dimensions. The other systems have a unidimensional meaning: either semiotics (gestures of politeness, *mudras*) without semantics; or semantics (artistic expressions) without semiotics. It is the prerogative of language to comprise simultaneously the meaning of signs and the meaning of enunciation. Therein originates its major strength, that of creating a second level of enunciation, where it becomes possible to retain meaningful remarks about meaning. Through this metalinguistic faculty we discover the origin of the interpreting relationship through which language embraces all other systems.

When Saussure defined language as a system of signs, he laid the foundation for linguistic semiology. But we now see that if the sign corresponds well to the signifying units of language, we cannot set it up as a unique principle of language in its discursive operation. Saussure was not unaware of the sentence, but obviously it created a serious obstacle for him and it was relegated to 'speech' (cf. Saussure [1966: 106, 124–128] and Godel [1966: 490 ff.]), solving nothing; we must know precisely if and how we can proceed from the sign to 'speech'. In reality the world of the sign is closed. From the sign to the sentence there is no transition, either by syntagmatization or otherwise. A hiatus separates them. Consequently, we must admit that language comprises two separate domains, each of which requires its own conceptual apparatus. For the one which we call semiotics, Saussure's theory of the linguistic sign will serve as a basis for research. The semantic domain, on the other hand, should be recognized as separate. It will require a new conceptual and definitional apparatus.

The semiology of language has been obstructed, paradoxically, by the same instrument which created it, the sign. We cannot brush aside the idea of the linguistic sign without omitting the most important characteristic of language; nor can we extend it to discourse as a whole without contradicting its definition as a minimal unit.

In conclusion, we must go beyond Saussure's concern for the sign as a unique principle, on which depend both the structure and the function of language.

This transcendence is achieved through two channels: in intralinguistic analysis, through the opening of a new dimension of meaning, that of discourse (which we call semantic), henceforth distinct from that which is connected to the sign (which we call semiotic); and in the translinguistic analysis of texts and other manifestations through the elaboration of a metasemantics founded on the semantics of enunciation.

The instruments and methodology of this 'second generation' semiology shall in turn contribute to the development of other branches of general semiology.

#### Notes

- \* This article first appeared in *Semiotica* 1 (1969), 1–12 and 127–135; it was subsequently included in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*.
- 1. Handwritten note (Saussure 1957: 19).
- 2. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914); Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913).
- 3. 'My universal algebra of relations, with the subjacent indices  $\varepsilon$  and  $\pi$ , is susceptible of being enlarged so as to comprise everything and so, still better, though not to ideal perfection, is the system of existential graphs' (Peirce 1958: 389).
- 4. 'As it is in itself, a sign is either of the nature of an appearance, when I call it a QUALISIGN; or secondly, it is an individual object or event, when I call it a SINSIGN (the syllable *sin* being the first syllable of *semel, simul, singular,* etc.); or thirdly, it is of the nature of a general type, when I call it a LEGISIGN. As we use the term "word" in most cases, saying that "the" is one "word" and "an" is a second "word", a "word" is a legisign. But when we say of a page in a book that it has 250 "words" upon it, of which twenty are "the's", the "word" is a sinsign. A sinsign so embodying a legisign, I term a "replica" of the legisign' (1958: 391).
- 5. '... the word or sign which man uses is man himself. For, as the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that 'man is a sign; so that every thought is an EXTERNAL sign that proves that man is an external sign' (Peirce 1958: 71).
- 'Everything in which we take the least interest creates in us its particular emotion, however slight this emotion may be. This emotion is a sign and a predicate of the thing' (Peirce 1958: 67).
- 7. Here Saussure refers to Naville (1888: 104).
- 8. This idea and the term are already found in a handwritten note in Saussure's 1846 manuscript, published in Godel (1957: 46 and cf. 37).

- 9. Material impediments (fog) can require additional methods, auditory signals instead of visual ones, for example, but these temporary expedients do not change the normal conditions.
- 10. This point will be developed elsewhere.
- 11. Personally speaking, it seems hardly useful or even possible to burden these pages with a discussion of previous theories. The informed reader will see, in particular, what separates us from Louis Hjelmslev on an essential point. He defines *semiotics* as 'a hierarchy, any of whose components admits of a further analysis into classes defined by mutual relations, so that any of these classes admits of an analysis into derivates defined by mutual mutation' (1963: 106). Such a definition will only be admissible if we totally adhere to the principles of glossematics. The considerations of the same author (1963: 109) on the place of language in semiotic structures, on the limits between the semiotic and the nonsemiotic, reflect a completely temporary and still imprecise position. We can only approve the invitation to study the diverse semiotic disciplines from a similar point of view:

it seems fruitful and necessary to establish a common point of view for a large number of disciplines, from the study of literature, art, and music, and general history, all the way to logistics and mathematics, so that from this common point of view these sciences are concentrated around a linguistically defined setting of problems (1963: 108).

However, this vast program remains a mere wish so long as we have not elaborated the theoretical bases for a comparison among the systems. That is what we are attempting to do here. More recently, Charles Morris (1964: 62) restricts himself to noting that for a number of linguists whose names he cites, linguistics is a part of semiotics, but he does not define the situation of language in this relationship.

- 12. Roland Harweg (1968: 273) verifies that 'the sign theoretic approach is inadequate for the study of music, for the only thing it can provide with regard to it are negative statements "negative" taken in a logical, not in an evaluative sense. All it can state may be comprised in the statement that music is NOT a significational-representational institution as is language'. This verification, however, lacks the support of theoretical formulation. The problem which we are discussing is precisely that of the intersemiotic validity of the notion of 'sign'.
- 13. Mieczyslaw Wallis (1964, 1966) makes useful observations on iconic signs, especially in medieval art, where he discerns a 'vocabulary', and rules of 'syntax'. Surely, we can recognize in medieval sculpture a certain iconic repertory which corresponds to certain religious themes, to certain theological or moral teachings. But these are conventional messages, produced in an equally conventional topology where figures occupy symbolic places consistent with familiar representations. In addition, the figurative scenes are the iconic transposition of narratives or of parables; they reproduce an initial verbalization. The real semiological problem, which to our knowledge has not yet been formulated, would be to investigate *how* this transposition of a verbal statement into an iconic representation is carried out, what are the possible correspondences from one system to another and in what measure this confrontation could be pursued up to the ascertainment of the correspondences between distinct *signs*.
- 14. The possibility of extending semiological categories to pictorial techniques, and particularly to films, is discussed in an instructive manner by Christian Metz (1968). J. L. Scheffer (1969) inaugurates a semiological 'reading' of painting and proposes an analysis of it similar to that of a 'text'. This research already shows an awakening of an original reflection on the fields and categories of nonlinguistic semiology.

- 15. Cf. Panofsky (1957: 104 ff.). In his translation of Erwin Panofsky's *Gothic Architecture* and Scholasticism, Pierre Bourdieu cites the homologies indicated by R. Marichal between writing and Gothic architecture (Panofsky 1967: 152).
- 16. We treat this relationship in more detail elsewhere (see Benveniste 1974: 91-102).
- 17. This distinction was proposed for the first time at the inaugural session of the 13th Congress of Societies for the Investigation of the Philosophy of the French Language, held in Geneva, 3 September 1966. The fruit of this analysis appears as 'The levels of linguistic analysis' (Benveniste 1971: 85–100). In order to better emphasize the distinction, we would have preferred to choose terms less alike than *semiotics* and *semantics*, since both assume a technical meaning here. It was necessary, however, that both evoke the notion of *sema* to which both are effectively, although differently, connected. This terminological question should not inconvenience those who are willing to consider the entire perspective of our analysis.

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