# Semiotics for Beginners

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Denotation, Connotation and Myth

Beyond its 'literal' meaning (its denotation), a particular word may have connotations: for instance, sexual connotations. 'Is there any such thing as a *single entendre*?' quipped the comic actor Kenneth Williams (we all know that 'a thing is a phallic symbol if it's longer than it's wide', as the singer Melanie put it). In semiotics, denotation and connotation are terms describing the relationship between the signifier and its signified, and an analytic distinction is made between two types of signifieds: a *denotative* signified and a *connotative* signified. Meaning includes both denotation and connotation.
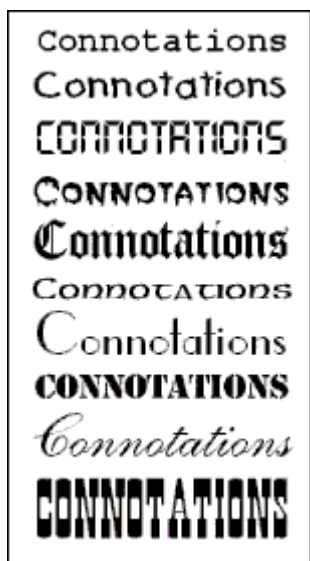
'Denotation' tends to be described as the definitional, 'literal', 'obvious' or 'commonsense' meaning of a sign. In the case of linguistic signs, the denotative meaning is what the dictionary attempts to provide. For the art historian Erwin Panofsky, the denotation of a representational visual image is what all viewers from any culture and at any time would recognize the image as depicting (Panofsky 1970a, 51-3). Even such a definition raises issues - *all* viewers? One suspects that this excludes very young children and those regarded as insane, for instance. But if it really means 'culturally well-adjusted' then it is already culture-specific, which takes us into the territory of connotation. The term 'connotation' is used to refer to the socio-cultural and 'personal' associations (ideological, emotional etc.) of the sign. These are typically related to the interpreter's class, age, gender, ethnicity and so on. Signs are more 'polysemic' - more open to interpretation - in their connotations than their denotations. Denotation is sometimes

regarded as a *digital* code and connotation as an *analogue* code (Wilden 1987, 224).

As Roland Barthes noted, Saussure's model of the sign focused on denotation at the expense of connotation and it was left to subsequent theorists (notably Barthes himself) to offer an account of this important dimension of meaning (Barthes 1967, 89ff). In 'The Photographic Message' (1961) and 'The Rhetoric of the Image' (1964), Barthes argued that in photography connotation can be (analytically) distinguished from denotation (Barthes 1977, 15-31, 32-51). As Fiske puts it 'denotation is what is photographed, connotation is how it is photographed' (Fiske 1982, 91). However, in photography, denotation is foregrounded at the expense of connotation. The photographic signifier seems to be virtually identical with its signified, and the photograph appears to be a 'natural sign' produced without the intervention of a code (Hall 1980, 132). Barthes initially argued that only at a level higher than the 'literal' level of denotation, could a code be identified - that of connotation (we will return to this issue when we discuss *codes*). By 1973 Barthes had shifted his ground on this issue. In analysing the realist literary text Barthes came to the conclusion that 'denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the last of the connotations (the one which seems both to establish and close the reading), the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature' (Barthes 1974, 9). Connotation, in short, produces the illusion of denotation, the illusion of language as transparent and of the signifier and the signified as being identical. Thus denotation is just another connotation. From such a perspective denotation can be seen as no more of a 'natural' meaning than is connotation but rather as a process of *naturalization*. Such a process leads to the powerful illusion that denotation is a purely literal and universal meaning which is not at all ideological, and indeed that those connotations which seem most obvious to individual interpreters are just as 'natural'. According to an Althusserian reading, when we first learn denotations, we are also being

positioned within ideology by learning dominant connotations at the same time (Silverman 1983, 30).

Consequently, whilst theorists may find it analytically useful to distinguish connotation from denotation, in practice such meanings cannot be neatly separated. Most semioticians argue that no sign is purely denotative - lacking connotation. Valentin Voloshinov insisted that no strict division can be made between denotation and connotation because 'referential meaning is moulded by evaluation... meaning is always permeated with value judgement' (Voloshinov 1973, 105). There can be no neutral, objective description which is free of an evaluative element. David Mick and Laura Politi note that choosing not to differentiate denotation and connotation is allied to regarding comprehension and interpretation as similarly inseparable (Mick & Politi 1989, 85).

For most semioticians both denotation and connotation involve the use of codes. Structural semioticians who emphasise the relative arbitrariness of signifiers and social semioticians who emphasize diversity of interpretation and the importance of cultural and historical contexts are hardly likely to accept the notion of a 'literal' meaning. Denotation simply involves a broader consensus. The denotational meaning of a sign would be broadly agreed upon by members of the same culture, whereas 'nobody is ever taken to task because their connotations are incorrect', so no inventory of the connotational meanings generated by any sign could ever be complete (Barnard 1996, 83). However, there is a danger here of stressing the 'individual subjectivity' of connotation: 'intersubjective' responses are shared to some degree by members of a culture; with any individual example only a limited range of connotations would make any sense. Connotations are not purely 'personal' meanings - they are determined by the codes to which the interpreter has access. Cultural codes provide a connotational framework since they are 'organized around key oppositions and equations', each term being 'aligned with a cluster of symbolic attributes' (Silverman 1983, 36). Certain connotations would be widely recognized within a culture. Most adults in Western cultures would know that a car can connote virility or freedom.

In the following extract from his essay 'Rhetoric of the Image', Roland Barthes demonstrates the subtlety and power of connotation in the context of advertising.

Here we have a Panzani advertisement: some packets of pasta, a tin, a sachet, some tomatoes, onions, peppers, a mushroom, all emerging from a half-open string bag, in yellows and greens on a red background. Let us try to 'skim off' the different messages it contains.

The image immediately yields a first message, whose substance is linguistic; its supports are the caption, which is marginal, and the labels, these being inserted into the natural disposition of the scene, '*en abyme*'. The code from which this message has been taken is none other than that of the French language; the only knowledge required to decipher it is a knowledge of writing and of French. In fact, this message can itself be further broken down, for the sign Panzani gives not simply the name of the firm but also, by its assonance, a additional signified, that of 'Italianicity'. The linguistic message is therefore twofold (at least in this particular image): denotational and connotational. Since, however, we have here only a single typical sign, namely that of articulated (written) language, it will be counted as one message.

Putting aside the linguistic message, we are left with the pure image (even if the labels are part of it, anecdotally). This image straightaway provides a series of discontinuous signs. First (the order is unimportant as these signs are not linear), the idea that what we have in the scene represented is a return from the market. A signified which itself implies two euphoric values: that of the freshness of the products and that of the essentially domestic preparation for which they are destined. Its signifier is the half-open bag which lets the provisions spill out over the table,

'unpacked'. To read this first sign requires only a knowledge which is in some sort implanted as part of the habits of a very widespread culture where 'shopping around for oneself' is opposed to the hasty stocking up (preserves, refrigerators) of a more 'mechanical' civilization. A second sign is more or less equally evident; its signifier is the bringing together of the tomato, the pepper and the tricoloured hues (yellow, green, red) of the poster; its signified is Italy, or rather *Italianicity*. This sign stands in a relation of redundancy with the connoted sign of the linguistic message (the Italian assonance of the name *Panzani*) and the knowledge it draws upon is already more particular; it is a specifically 'French' knowledge (an Italian would barely perceive the connotation of the name, no more probably than he would the Italianicity of tomato and pepper), based on a familiarity with certain tourist stereotypes. Continuing to explore the image (which is not to say that it is not entirely clear at the first glance), there is no difficulty in discovering at least two other signs: in the first, the serried collection of different objects transmits the idea of a total culinary service, on the one hand as though Panzani furnished everything necessary for a carefully balanced dish and on the other as though the concentrate in the tin were equivalent to the natural produce surrounding it; in the other sign, the composition of the image, evoking the memory of innumerable alimentary paintings, sends us to an aesthetic signified: the '*nature morte*' or, as it is better expressed in other languages, the 'still life'; the knowledge on which this sign depends is heavily cultural.

(Barthes 1977, 33)
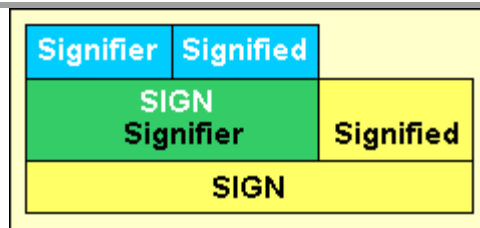
Connotation and denotation are often described in terms of *levels of representation* or *levels of meaning*. Roland Barthes adopted from Louis Hjelmslev the notion that there are different *orders of signification* (Barthes 1957; Hjelmslev 1961, 114ff). The *first order of signification* is that of denotation: at this level there is a sign consisting of a signifier and a signified. Connotation is a *second-order of signification* which uses the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional

signified. In this framework connotation is a sign which derives from the signifier of a denotative sign (so denotation leads to a chain of connotations). This tends to suggest that denotation is an underlying and primary meaning - a notion which many other commentators have challenged. Barthes himself later gave priority to connotation, and in 1971 noted that it was no longer easy to separate the signifier from the signified, the ideological from the 'literal' (Barthes 1977, 166). In passing, we may note that this formulation underlines the point that 'what is a signifier or a signified depends entirely on the level at which the analysis operates: a signified on one level can become a signifier on another level' (Willemen 1994, 105). This is the mechanism by which signs may seem to signify one thing but are loaded with multiple meanings.

Changing the form of the signifier while keeping the same signified can generate different connotations. Changes of style or tone may involve different connotations, such as when using different typefaces for exactly the same text, or changing from sharp focus to soft focus when taking a photograph. The choice of words often involves connotations, as in references to 'strikes' vs. 'disputes', 'union demands' vs. 'management offers', and so on. Tropes such as metaphor generate connotations.

Connotation is not a purely paradigmatic dimension, as Saussure's characterization of the paradigmatic dimension as 'associative' might suggest. Whilst absent signifiers with which it is associated are clearly a key factor in generating connotations, so too are syntagmatic associations. The connotations of a signifier relate in part to the other signifiers with which it occurs within a particular text. However, referring to connotation entirely in terms of paradigms and syntagms confines us to the language system, and yet connotation is very much a question of how language is *used*. A purely structuralist account also limits us to a synchronic perspective and yet both connotations and denotations are subject not only to socio-cultural variability but also to historical factors: they change over time. Signs referring to disempowered groups (such as 'woman') can be seen as having had far more negative denotations as well as negative

connotations than they do now because of their framing within dominant and authoritative codes of their time - including even supposedly 'objective' scientific codes. Fiske warns that 'it is often easy to read connotative values as denotative facts' (Fiske 1982, 92). Just as dangerously seductive, however, is the tendency to accept denotation as the 'literal', 'self-evident' 'truth'. Semiotic analysis can help us to counter such habits of mind.

Whilst the dominant methodologies in semiotic analysis are *qualitative*, semiotics is not incompatible with the use of quantitative techniques. In 1957 the psychologist Charles Osgood published a book on *The Measurement of Meaning* together with some of his colleagues (Osgood *et al.* 1957). In it these communication researchers outlined a technique called the *semantic differential* for the systematic mapping of *connotations* (or 'affective meanings'). The technique involves a pencil-and-paper test in which people are asked to give their impressionistic responses to a particular object, state or event by indicating specific positions in relation to at least nine pairs of bipolar adjectives on a scale of one to seven. The aim is to locate a concept in 'semantic space' in three dimensions: **evaluation** (e.g. *good/bad*); **potency** (e.g. *strong/weak*); and **activity** (e.g. *active/passive*). The method has proved useful in studying attitudes and emotional reactions. It has been used, for instance, to make comparisons between different cultural groups. Whilst the technique has been used fairly widely in social science, it has not often been used by semioticians (including the self-styled 'scientist of connotations', Roland Barthes), although binary oppositions have routinely provided theoretical building-blocks for structuralist semioticians.

Related to connotation is what Roland Barthes refers to as *myth*. We usually associate myths with classical fables about the exploits of gods and heroes. But for Barthes myths were the dominant ideologies of our time. In a departure from Hjelmslev's model Barthes argues that the orders of signification called denotation and connotation combine to produce ideology - which has been described (though not by Barthes) as a *third order of signification* (Fiske & Hartley 1978, 43; O'Sullivan *et al.* 1994, 287). In a very famous

example from his essay 'Myth Today' (in *Mythologies*), Barthes illustrates this concept of *myth*:

I am at the barber's, and a copy of *Paris-Match* is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro* in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the *meaning* of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro* in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (*a black soldier is giving the French salute*); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier... In myth (and this is the chief peculiarity of the latter), the signifier is already formed by the signs of the language... Myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us...

One must put the biography of the Negro* in parentheses if one wants to free the picture, and prepare it to receive its signified... The form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance... It is this constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form which defines myth. The form of myth is not a symbol: the Negro* who salutes is not the symbol of the French Empire: he has too much presence, he appears as a rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent, *indisputable*

image. But at the same time this presence is tamed, put at a distance, made almost transparent; it recedes a little, it becomes the accomplice of a concept which comes to it fully armed, French imperiality...

Myth is... defined by its intention... much more than by its literal sense... In spite of this, its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, made absent by this literal sense (*The French Empire? It's just a fact: look at this good Negro* who salutes like one of our own boys*). This constituent ambiguity... has two consequences for the signification, which henceforth appears both like a notification and like a statement of fact... French imperiality condemns the saluting Negro* to be nothing more than an instrumental signifier, the Negro* suddenly hails me in the name of French imperiality; but at the same moment the Negro's* salute thickens, becomes vitrified, freezes into an eternal reference meant to establish French imperiality...

We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature... In the case of the soldier-Negro*... what is got rid of is certainly not French imperiality (on the contrary, since what must be actualized is its presence); it is the contingent, historical, in one word: *fabricated*, quality of colonialism. Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. If I *state the fact* of French imperiality without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and *goes without saying:* I am reassured. In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions... Things appear to mean something by themselves...

*Translator's term - *not* the choice of this author

(Barthes 1987)

Signs and codes are generated by myths and in turn serve to maintain them. Popular usage of the term 'myth' suggests that it refers to beliefs which are demonstrably false, but the semiotic use of the term does not necessarily suggest this. Myths can be seen as extended metaphors. Like metaphors, myths help us to make sense of our experiences within a culture (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 185-6). They express and serve to organize shared ways of conceptualizing something within a culture. Semioticians in the Saussurean tradition treat the relationship between nature and culture as relatively arbitrary (Lévi-Strauss 1972, 90, 95). For Barthes, myths serve the ideological function of *naturalization* (Barthes 1977, 45-6). Their function is to naturalize the cultural - in other words, to make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs seem entirely 'natural', 'normal', self-evident, timeless, obvious 'common-sense' - and thus objective and 'true' reflections of 'the way things are'. Contemporary sociologists argue that social groups tend to regard as 'natural' whatever confers privilege and power upon themselves. Barthes saw myth as serving the ideological interests of the bourgeoisie. 'Bourgeois ideology... turns culture into nature,' he declares (Barthes 1974, 206). George Lakoff and Mark Johnson outline key features of the myth of *objectivism* which is dominant and pervasive in Western culture - a myth which allies itself with scientific truth, rationality, accuracy, fairness and impartiality and which is reflected in the discourse of science, law, government, journalism, morality, business, economics and scholarship (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 188-9). Myths can function to hide the ideological function of signs and codes. The power of such myths is that they 'go without saying' and so appear not to need to be deciphered, interpreted or demystified.

Differences between the three orders of signification are not clear-cut, but for descriptive and analytic purposes some theorists distinguish them along the following lines. The first (denotative) order (or level) of signification is seen as primarily representational and relatively self-contained. The second (connotative) order of signification reflects 'expressive' values which are attached to a sign. In the third

(mythological or ideological) order of signification the sign reflects major culturally-variable concepts underpinning a particular worldview - such as masculinity, femininity, freedom, individualism, objectivism, Englishness and so on. Susan Hayward offers a useful example of the three orders of signification in relation to a photograph of Marilyn Monroe:

At the denotative level this is a photograph of the movie star Marilyn Monroe. At a connotative level we associate this photograph with Marilyn Monroe's star qualities of glamour, sexuality, beauty - if this is an early photograph - but also with her depression, drug-taking and untimely death if it is one of her last photographs. At a mythic level we understand this sign as activating the myth of Hollywood: the dream factory that produces glamour in the form of the stars it constructs, but also the dream machine that can crush them - all with a view to profit and expediency. (Hayward 1996, 310)

The semiotic analysis of cultural myths involves an attempt to deconstruct the ways in which codes operate within particular popular texts or genres, with the goal of revealing how certain values, attitudes and beliefs are supported whilst others are suppressed. The task of 'denaturalizing' such cultural assumptions is problematic when the semiotician is also a product of the same culture, since membership of a culture involves 'taking for granted' many of its dominant ideas. Nevertheless, where we seek to analyse our own cultures in this way it is essential to try to be explicitly reflexive about 'our own' values.