Ferdinand de Saussure, *On Signifying*

**I. Signs and Signifying Systems**

A. Semiotics/Semiology: the science of signs by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Peirce

B. A focus on how meaning is constructed, not what the meaning is (as in content analysis). It thus treats its objects as texts (as meaningful on the basis of shared codes and conventions), not as autonomous objects with pre-existent and universally apparent meaning.

C. Language is the primary model of a signifying system that creates, rather than simply expresses, meaning. In so doing, it produces our conceptual categories; we are in a "prison house of language," and rather than fully controlling language, we are "spoken by" it.

D. Language (human speech) = langue and parole. Saussure concentrates on langue (a social rule-governed system) rather than on parole (the individual speech acts which must conform to the underlying system in order to be understood).

E. The smallest unit is the sign: something that stands for something else in order to communicate.

1. According the Saussure, the sign is formed from the union of the signifier (the sound-image) and the signified (the concept it represents). The connection between them is arbitrary and conventional, but only through their union are significant sounds and ideas articulated (marked off as meaningful units to be selected and combined).

2. Peirce broke the sign down into 3 parts: the representamen (like the signifier), the object (the signified), and the interpretant (the sign that we used to translate the first sign). This emphasis on "translation" indicates that meaning always refers back to the signifying system: we are in an endless chain of semiosis. Similarly, all texts refer to other texts with which they share conventions: they are all structured by relations of intertextuality.

F. According to Peirce, there are 3 kinds of signs depending on the relationship between signified and signifier and the degree of motivation that links the two. All of them, however, involve some degree of social convention (not just a purely natural relationship) in order to be "readable."

1. Symbolic: a purely arbitrary relationship (examples: language, pink = girl)
2. Iconic: a relationship based upon resemblance (examples: maps, pictures)
3. indexical: an existential or causal relationship based on the occurrence of co-presence within a particular context (examples: thermometer, footprints)

G. Signs have no positive or intrinsic value: a sign's meaning and value derives through its difference from and relationship to other signs—from its relative position in the system, its value: signification value

H. There are 2 kinds of significant relationships:
   1. Syntagmatic (horizontal relations): the relative position of a sign along a temporal chain (examples: a word in a sentence, shots in a film scene, programs in a TV schedule).
   2. Paradigmatic/Associative (vertical relations): the set of signs that could have been substituted for the chosen sign but are absent; other possibilities in the same category (examples: other words that are associated with the 1st word due to similarities of sounds or meanings; the set of all talk shows; the set of camera distances, etc.).

I. The conventional rules governing the combinations (syntagms) of what's been selected from the possible choices (paradigms) are the codes of the structure. Codes establish rule-governed systems that are known by both readers/viewers and producers and that link separate texts together in relations of intertextuality (shared conventions that let us make sense of texts in relation to one another other).

II. Yet semiotic theory, as initiated by Saussure, tends to be ahistorical (due to his emphasis on synchronic analysis). How to solve this problem and be able to attend to history? Some suggestions:
   A. Roland Barthes' theory of myth and connotation
      1. Myth (popular belief) is a 2'nd order system (the level of connotative meaning) operating on the 1'st order system (the level of denotative meaning).

      2. Myth robs meaning of its historical contingency, but does so out of a historical motivation; it naturalizes certain meanings by attempting to freeze history into nature (thus making those meanings appear timeless and universal).
B. Some media and cultural theories emphasize the historical construction of meanings which are then open to negotiation and socially specific readings. [Later weeks on discourse and ideology will elaborate these approaches].

1. Cultural codes may work together to promote a dominant or preferred meaning, but texts are never fully unified; they are polysemic (open to multiple meanings), and therefore, readers/viewers may not all take up the preferred meaning; other interpretations are possible depending on the historical contexts and intertexts.

2. There is thus a distinction between the empirical reading/viewing subject (the actual person who, depending on his social position, will accept, reject, or negotiate with the dominant meaning) and the textually-inscribed subject (the ideal subject addressed by a text-- a theoretical construction and embodiment of the text’s preferred reading position).

3. We are each situated by various discourses (social organizations of language with conventions that govern how objects are to be known and defined, who counts as qualified speakers, and what perspectives are preferred). We use these discourses to make sense of our world, so subjects positioned by competing discourses will "read" texts differently.

4. Not all discourses are equal. Those with the most power to define culture--the most cultural capital--will best assert their meanings. Discourses are power relations, yet negotiations, variations, and resistances are also inevitable.