



SIGNS AND SIGN SYSTEMS

This chapter introduces basic concepts of language, especially the *sign*, and presents the basic structure and general nature of language.

1. THREE BASIC CONCEPTS: SIGN, COMMUNICATION, AND LANGUAGE

1.1. Sign

In ordinary language a sign is a notice placed for the public to see. Here, however, following technical and linguistic usage, let **sign** mean ‘an intersection or relationship of **form** and **meaning**’, where form is something concrete, including writing, sound, and gestures, and meaning is something mental or cognitive.

Examples of signs in this sense include:

‘∞’, which means ‘infinity’,

‘©’, which means ‘copyrighted’,

‘♥’, which means ‘love’, as in ‘I ♥ New York’,

‘*sign*’, which means ‘an intersection or relationship of form and meaning’.

As in the last example, a sign may be a word. A sign does not have to be seen; it could be heard, as is the usual case with words, which are more often spoken than read.

A sign is neither form nor meaning, but simultaneously both: the intersection or relationship of form and meaning. A form without a meaning is not a sign, nor is a meaning without a form. It may be argued that form and meaning cannot exist apart from one another, and it is not easy to argue otherwise. But this rather difficult and profound matter cannot be considered here.

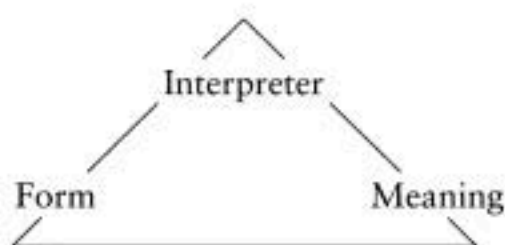


Figure 1.1 The three parts of a sign

1.2. Communication

The notion ‘sign’ is fundamental to understanding human communication, and upon the basis of the above understanding, we can define **communication** as ‘the use of signs’. In communication, one presents the form of signs to others, and so invokes their meanings.

But communication is seldom perfect, and this can be understood as resulting from the third dimension of a sign, the interpreter; see figure 1.1. The relationship between the form of a sign and its meaning must be part of the knowledge of its interpreter. The interpreter adds an aspect or dimension of variability to our understanding of *sign*, because different interpreters may recognize different aspects of meaning in association with particular forms, and different forms in association with particular meanings. This variability is probably apparent with some of the four signs ‘∞’, ‘©’, ‘♥’, and ‘*sign*’. Some interpreters of these may not recognize the meaning ‘infinity’ of the ∞ form, and some may be unfamiliar with the still somewhat novel extension of ‘♥’ to mean ‘love’. As for the fourth sign, ‘*sign*’, the meaning of this as a technical term has only just been introduced to most readers, whose interpretations undoubtedly vary considerably at this time.

1.3. Language

Language, then, can be simply defined as a sign system. Usually, however, *language* means specifically the customary sign system of humankind, and here we shall follow this usage. Sometimes language, in this sense, is termed **speech**, a term which properly refers just to the vocal medium typically employed to form the natural signs of human languages.

2. SIGNS

2.1. Three types of signs

There are three types of signs (as recognized by the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914)), which differ according to the three types of relationship that exist between form and meaning: icon, index, and symbol.

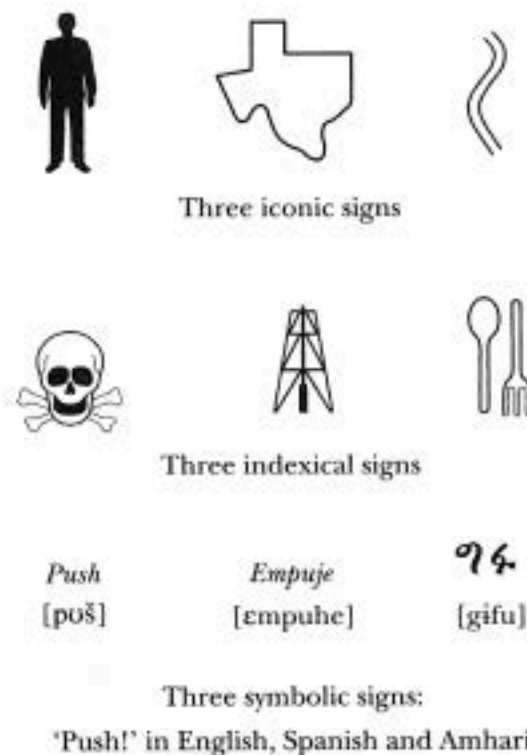


Figure 1.2 The three types of signs

2.1.1. *Icon*

An **icon** is a sign whose form has actual characteristics of its meaning. See three examples of iconic signs in figure 1.2. The first means 'man', the second 'Texas', and the third 'winding road'. These three signs can have the meanings 'man', 'Texas', and 'winding road', respectively, since, obviously enough, the forms have actual characteristics of these meanings. The third may not be so obvious, in fact, but when seen posted at the side of a highway, in a mountainous area, its iconic characteristic may be apparent enough.

2.1.2. *Index*

An **index** is a sign whose form has characteristics which are only associated in nature with its meaning. Recognizing indexical signs can be a little tricky. See three examples of indexical signs in figure 1.2. The first example is a skull and crossed bones, traditionally a sign meaning 'poison'. Notice the indexical, natural, relation between this form and its meaning: 'if you drink the contents of this bottle, in a few months you will look like this'. Similarly, an oil well could mean 'Texas', since oil wells are something naturally associated with Texas. The third sign, when seen posted at the side of a highway, will suggest 'restaurant' or 'food (service)', by the natural association of spoons and forks with these meanings.

The difference between icon and index is not always perfectly clear. A spoon and fork may be considered an actual characteristic (icon) of restaurants, if only an association (index) with food. The interpreter/interpretation is crucial to the determination of a sign as icon, index, or symbol. The difference between icon

and index is especially problematic when meanings are abstract. Take the meaning 'liberty', for example, and its occasional form of 'breaking chains'. Such a picture/form may be associated with 'liberty' because such an event is an actual characteristic of this otherwise somewhat abstract idea, or, if 'liberty' is essentially something quite abstract (personal, and emotional), because the breaking of chains is just an occasional association with 'liberty' as a precondition in history.

2.1.3. *Symbol*

A **symbol** is a sign whose form is arbitrarily or conventionally associated with its meaning. See three examples of symbolic signs in figure 1.2. These are necessarily presented here in their secondary, written, forms, as ordinarily spelled, and in phonetic writing. The first example, the written English word *push* [puʃ], only means 'push' by a completely arbitrary or conventional association of this form, whether spoken or written, with this meaning. Nothing in nature associates this word with this meaning. In fact, to those who have grown up in the English-speaking world it may seem completely normal that this form should have this meaning. On reflection, however, it must be clear that there is nothing intrinsic to the natural world about this normality, which results entirely from the customary usage or convention of English-speaking communities. The other examples, the Spanish and Amharic (a language of Ethiopia) written words for 'push' – like the English words, those which would be written on a door, as an instruction – are also such symbolic signs.

2.2. Linguistic signs

2.2.1. *Morphemes*

The simplest sort of sign in (human) languages is a **simple word**. An example of a simple word is *sea*, which contrasts with a **complex word** like *seashell*. *Sea* has one meaning and *seashell* has two. But linguistic signs don't have to be words: the *un-* and the *-ly* of *unhappily*, for example, are meaningful too, and these are not words. A linguistic sign, whether of the word type, like *sea* and *shell*, or the sub-word type, like *un-* and *-ly*, is a **morpheme** (*morph* is from Greek, 'form'). There are two morphemes in the word *seashell* (*sea*, *shell*) and three in *unhappily* (*un-*, *happy*, *-ly*).

Although here on the pages of this book it is necessary to present words and morphemes in their written or **orthographic form**, these are ordinarily more common in their spoken or **phonetic form**, a pattern of sound produced by a set of articulations of the physiological apparatus of speech including the lungs, larynx, tongue, velum, lips, etc.

2.2.2. *Symbolic nature of morphemes*

With rare exception, the typical signs of human language, morphemes, are symbolic signs, like *push*, *sea*, *un-*, or other examples of English or of any other