

## **SEMIOTICS FOR BEGINNERS**

If you go into a bookshop and ask them where to find a book on semiotics you are likely to meet with a blank look. Even worse, you might be asked to define what semiotics is - which would be a bit tricky if you were looking for a beginner's guide. It's worse still if you do know a bit about semiotics, because it can be hard to offer a simple definition which is of much use in the bookshop. If you've ever been in such a situation, you'll probably agree that it's wise not to ask. Semiotics could be anywhere. The shortest definition is that it is *the study of signs*. But that doesn't leave enquirers much wiser. 'What do you mean by a sign?' people usually ask next. The kinds of signs that are likely to spring immediately to mind are those which we routinely refer to as 'signs' in everyday life, such as road signs, pub signs and star signs. If you were to agree with them that semiotics can include the study of all these and more, people will probably assume that semiotics is about 'visual signs'. You would confirm their hunch if you said that signs can also be drawings, paintings and photographs, and by now they'd be keen to direct you to the art and photography sections. But if you are thick-skinned and tell them that it also includes words, sounds and 'body language' they may reasonably wonder what all these things have in common and how anyone could possibly study such disparate phenomena. If you get this far they've probably already 'read the signs' which suggest that you are either eccentric or insane and communication may have ceased.

Assuming that you are not one of those annoying people who keeps everyone waiting with your awkward question, if you are searching for books on semiotics you could do worse than by starting off in the *linguistics* section.

Thus wrote the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, a founder not only of linguistics but also of what is now more usually referred to as semiotics. Other than Saussure, key figures in the early development of semiotics were the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and later Charles William Morris,

who developed a *behaviourist* semiotics. Leading modern semiotic theorists include Roland, Yuri Lotman, Christian Metz, Umberto Eco and Julia Kristeva. A number of linguists other than Saussure have worked within a semiotic framework, such as Louis Hjelmslev and Roman Jakobson. It is difficult to disentangle European semiotics from structuralism in its origins; major structuralists include not only Saussure but also Claude Levi-Strauss in anthropology (who saw his subject as a branch of semiotics) and Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis. Structuralism is an analytical method which has been employed by many semioticians and which is based on Saussure's linguistic model. Structuralists seek to describe the overall organization of sign systems as 'languages' - as with Levi-Strauss and myth, kinship rules and totemism, Lacan and the unconscious and Barthes and Greimas and the 'grammar' of narrative. They engage in a search for 'deep structures' underlying the 'surface features' of phenomena. However, contemporary *social semiotics* has moved beyond the structuralist concern with the internal relations of parts within a self-contained system, seeking to explore the use of signs in specific social situations. Modern semiotic theory is also sometimes allied with a Marxist approach which stresses the role of *ideology*.

Semiotics began to become a major approach to cultural studies in the late 1960s, partly as a result of the work of Roland Barthes. The translation into English of his popular essays in a collection entitled *Mythologies*, followed in the 1970s and 1980s by many of his other writings, greatly increased scholarly awareness of this approach. Writing in 1964, Barthes declared that 'semiology' aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not *languages*, at least systems of signification'.

Semiotics is not widely institutionalized as an academic discipline. It is a field of study involving many different theoretical stances and methodological tools. One of the broadest definitions is that of Umberto Eco, who states that 'semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign'. Semiotics

involves the study not only of what we refer to as 'signs' in everyday speech, but of anything which 'stands for' something else. In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. Whilst for the linguist Saussure, 'semiology' was 'a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life', for the philosopher Charles Peirce 'semiotic' was the 'formal doctrine of signs' which was closely related to Logic. For him, 'a sign... is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity'. He declared that 'every thought is a sign'. Contemporary semioticians study signs not in isolation but as part of semiotic 'sign systems' (such as a medium or genre). They study how *meanings* are made: as such, being concerned not only with communication but also with the construction and maintenance of reality. Semiotics and that branch of linguistics known as semantics have a common concern with the meaning of signs, but John Sturrock argues that whereas semantics focuses on *what* words mean, semiotics is concerned with *how* signs mean.

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### **TEACHER TRAINING IN EUROPE**

While preparing for my candidate examination I have read a Handbook of Teacher Training in Europe by Maurice Galton and Bob Moon.

I have chosen this investigation because it will help me in my dissertation research. I was mostly interested in the problem of grouping pupils according to their abilities. The question of how best to group children for teaching and learning has concerned generations of teachers and administrators in many societies. In some countries decisions about groupings are left to individual schools or to regions. In the United States and Sweden there have been mixed ability classes. In West Germany and the United Kingdom, a selective system meant that, the more able pupils were educated in separate schools. In England and Wales during most secondary schools became comprehensive and non-selective, and children of a very wide range of ability could be in the same class) as many schools introduced mixed ability groups, especially in the 11-13-year-old rang.