

# Toward the Meaning of Linguistic Signs: A Hierarchical Theory

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## *Abstract*

The primary function of a linguistic sign is to express and convey meaning; thus meaning is a central issue in linguistic semiotics. Throughout the history of the humanities, the definition of “meaning” has remained controversial. From an ontological perspective, there have been varied approaches to the problem of meaning and these approaches have helped to generate different ways of understanding meaning. Hence the dyadic model, the triadic model, the semiotic triangle, the semantic trapezoid, and the semantic quadrangle. This essay proposes a hierarchical theory for the meaning of the linguistic sign, and argues that language is a system of signs with manifold layers, and the meaning of the linguistic sign is correspondingly characterized by homogeneity and complexity. In the process of meaning construction, the signifier and the signified are continuously combined, forming different layers: the sign of object (phonetic shell + reflected thing) in the deep layer, the sign of langue (phonetic word + generic thing) in the shallow layer, and the sign of parole (phonetic complex + actual thing) in the surface layer. These respectively resemble the associative name, the abstract name, and the concrete name of a thing, represent the signification, the denotation, and the referentiation of a concept, and reflect perceptual meaning, cognitive meaning, and contextual meaning. Within the theoretical framework this essay proposes, the sign, the thing, the concept, and the semiotic meaning are the core elements which together constitute the world of meaning where the real value of the linguistic sign lies.

*Keywords: linguistic sign, meaning, hierarchical theory*

## **1. Introduction**

No consensus has ever been reached concerning the definition of the concept of “meaning”.

British linguist Geoffrey Leech once pointed out that “the word ‘meaning’ and its corresponding verb ‘to mean’ are among the most eminently discussable terms in the English language” (Leech, 1996, p. 1). This is further highlighted by the fact that 22 definitions for “meaning” are listed in *The Meaning of Meaning*, a book co-authored by semanticists Charles Kay Ogden and Ivor Armstrong Richards (He, 2000, p. 8).

The primary function of a linguistic sign is to express and convey meaning, and ultimately to communicate. From this perspective, linguistic semiotics can be defined as an area of study that is concerned specifically with the meaning of the linguistic sign. Given its importance, it is essential to study the issue of meaning in order to understand the semiotic, systematic, hierarchical, social, and ethnic characteristics of language, and any attempt to understand the nature of language and linguistic phenomena without lifting the veil over meaning is bound to fail.

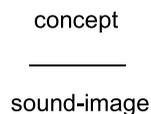
As linguistic signs are closely linked to human cognitive activity, the issue of meaning has long attracted the attention of a number of contiguous disciplines. For instance, meaning is defined in relation to “reference” and “idealism” in general philosophy; “reflection”, “meaning as use”, and “speech act” in language philosophy; “relation”, “truth value”, and “identity of sign and meaning” in logic; and “information flow” in information theory (Wang, 2004, pp. 208-220). The most popularly known theories of meaning, however, are those that address its semiotic elements in terms of ontology. These primarily include the dyadic model, the triadic model, the semiotic triangle, the semantic trapezoid and the semantic quadrangle.

## 2. The Four Models

### 2.1 The dyadic model

The general understanding of words is that they are names and signs of things. However, for Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, whose research denies such a simple view, a word doesn’t represent the thing itself, but the concept behind the thing: “The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image” (Saussure, 1985, p. 101). This can be illustrated in Diagram 1, with the horizontal line representing unity:

Diagram 1.



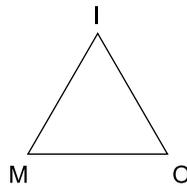
Therefore, the linguistic sign can be counted as a psychological entity whose two facets are so closely connected as to be inseparable. As Saussure puts it, “Language can also be compared to a sheet of paper: thought is the front and the sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time” (Saussure, 1985, p. 158). To further illuminate the relation between the two facets, he proposes the terms of “signifier” and “signified” to denote sound-image and concept respectively, while the term “sign” is still

used to refer to the unity of the two, namely, sign = the signifier + the signified. Saussure sees a sign as the combination of the signifier and the signified, and meaning as produced by the relations within the system of signs. That is to say, the meaning of a word is not a physical entity; rather, it is a relational structure which consists of two inseparable elements (sound-image and concept), and it is in such a relational structure that the meaning of a word is born.

### 2.2 The triadic model

According to American semiotician C. S. Peirce, a sign can be defined as “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (Peirce, 1931, 2.228). In other words, he regards a sign as something that represents or signifies something else, which can be understood or interpreted by someone or means something to someone. Unlike Saussure, Peirce sees a sign as a complex of three components. That is to say, a sign is composed of three related elements—medium (M), object (O), and interpretant (I)—representing respectively form, reference, and explanation, which together compose a “trinity”, determining the meaning of a sign and acting as its essential characteristics. Here is the formula for the “trinity”: S (sign) = R (relation) (M, O, I), which can also be shown in Diagram 2:

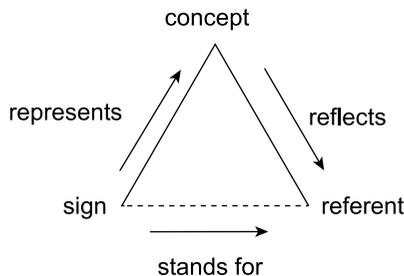
Diagram 2 .



### 2.3 The semiotic triangle

The theory of the semiotic triangle is proposed by British linguists Charles K. Ogden and Ivor A. Richards. It is so named because its major claims can be presented by a triangle:

Diagram 3.



This tri-part semantic diagram describes the relation between word, meaning, and thing in a linguistic sign system, the idea being that we first conceptualize a thing and then express it in words. That is to say, words are used to express concepts while concepts are reflections of things in the human mind. In Diagram 3, the concept and the referent are

connected by a solid line—an indication of a direct relation between the two; this is also true of the relation between the concept and the sign. The dotted line between the sign and the referent shows a non-direct relation between the two; in other words, the relation between them is “arbitrary” and “conventional”.

## 2.4 The semantic trapezoid and the semantic quadrangle

The theory of the Semiotic Triangle has had a profound influence on semantics, especially linguistic semantics, and continues to be widely quoted in many studies of linguistic meaning. However, researchers have identified major defects with the theory. For example, the apex of the triangle may refer to concept, meaning, or significance all at the same time, thereby resulting in confusion between concept and meaning (Novikov, 1982, p. 91). In response to these defects, German scholar K. Hegel established the theory of the semantic trapezoid, and Russian scholar G. P. Melnikov the theory of the semantic quadrangle (cf. Diagrams 4 & 5):

Diagram 4. Semantic trapezoid

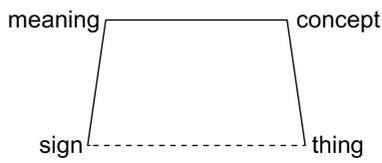
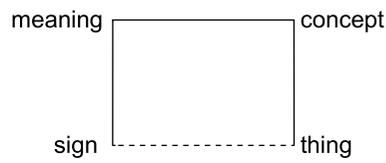


Diagram 5. Semantic quadrangle



The two theories are more or less the same in that both are based on the theory of the semiotic triangle, and both add a fourth angle—the angle of meaning. From thing to sign counterclockwise, they can be interpreted as implying: the thing is the basis of conceptualization → meaning reveals the nature of the concept → the sign is the carrier of meaning, while from sign to thing clockwise: the sign expresses meaning → an important feature of meaning is generalization, and it must be associated with the concept → the concept represents the thing.

The theories of the semantic trapezoid and the semantic quadrangle, though far less influential than the semiotic triangle, are valuable in that they incorporate “meaning” as a component element into the theory of meaning. These theories address the issue of meaning from a different perspective than the semiotic triangle, and they represent a significant effort made in order to tackle the problem of “meaning”. But it should also be pointed out that, due to different research purposes, theoretical foundations, and observations, the conclusions these theories draw do not always apply in discussions of meaning as it is understood in linguistic semiotics. At least three weaknesses can be detected.

First, they are mostly based on reductionism and they attempt to classify meaning into the categories of reference, truth-value, signification, representation, response, relation, behavior, environment, usage, action, etc. They see meaning in terms of so many other things that, from their approach, elusive meaning becomes no longer elusive. But the fact is that meaning cannot be equated with these things; such equation could only lead to

skepticism as leads to one the misconception that meaning might not exist at all.

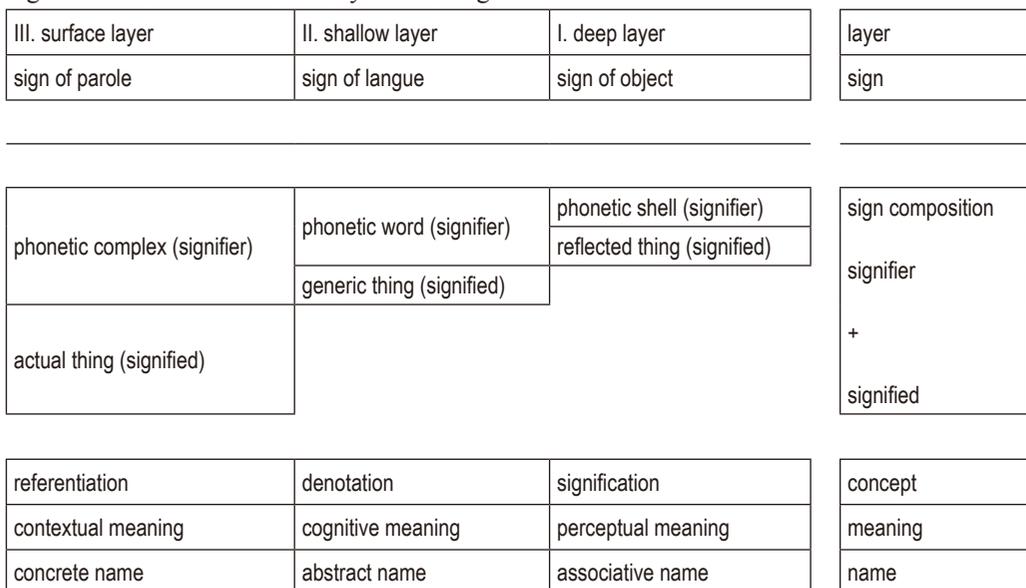
Second, the distinction between concept and meaning is not defined clearly enough. Most of the theories touch upon concept, but they all seem to confuse meaning with concept. Meaning and concept, like language and thought, can be integrated, but they are not the same thing. Concept is a logical category while meaning, word meaning in particular, is constrained not only by logic but also by linguistic conditions. Hence, concept should not be excluded from the study of meaning, and meaning is indispensable for the interpretation of a concept.

Third, as language is a complicated system of signs, any one-time description of the signifier or the signified is overly simple and superficial, and such a description is bound to generate incomprehensive and sometimes incorrect conclusions. The fact is sometimes ignored that a sign tends to present meaning through multiple layers, as well as the fact that no meaning cluster at any layer is an enclosed system. The truth is that in language, it is often the case that different layers interact, with each upper layer serving as the semiotic context for the one below, so that vagueness is dispelled from between the different layers and relative specificity and definiteness of meaning shows up.

### 3. The Hierarchical Theory

In light of all these understandings, we propose a new perspective to look at the nature of the meaning of the linguistic sign. We suggest that, for a better understanding of the issue, one probably needs a hierarchical theory, which provides a more comprehensive and objective interpretation for the meaning of the linguistic sign. The core ideas of the theory are illustrated in Diagram 6:

Diagram 6. The hierarchical theory of meaning



### **3.1 The three signs**

According to Saussure, a linguistic sign can be divided into the sign of langue and the sign of parole. However, we propose that the linguistic sign can be hierarchically divided into layers, with what can be called the “surface layer” being comprised of the sign of parole, and the “shallow layer” below it being comprised of the sign of langue. And in fact, there is yet another layer, the “deep layer”, which is comprised of the sign of object, so that the linguistic sign should be said to comprise not only the sign of langue and the sign of parole, but also the sign of object.

#### *3.1.1 The sign of object*

The sign of object is a primary linguistic sign located in the deep layer of the hierarchical system of signs, and a sound-image not yet shaped but perceptible, which is primarily related to the fragmentation of a thing of the external world.

#### *3.1.2 The sign of langue*

The sign of langue is a conventional linguistic sign located in what I call the “shallow layer” of the hierarchical system of signs, and a sound-image, shaped and generalized, which is primarily related to the abstractness of the objective world.

#### *3.1.3 The sign of parole*

The sign of parole is an applied linguistic sign located in what we call the “surface layer” of the hierarchical system of signs, and a sound-image, mature and concrete, which is primarily related to the concreteness of the real world.

### **3.2 The three layers**

Language is a hierarchical system of signs. The sign in each layer is composed of the signifier and the signified, and the composite of the two serves as the signifier of the above layer to enter the composition of new signs. As this process repeats itself, a hierarchical system of signs comes into being. In this three-layer system, the signifier of a sign in each layer is defined by the adjective “phonetic”, because a sign, when functioning in language, depends primarily on the phonetic sound while other media are substitutes of the phonetic sound.

#### *3.2.1 The layer of the sign of object*

In the deep layer, where the sign of object lies, a purely materialistic phonetic shell associates people with a thing in the objective world, which we call a “reflected thing”. The association between the phonetic shell and the reflected thing happens because of people’s knowledge of the objective world, especially that knowledge acquired through language acquisition. When one pronounces a sound or a group of sounds as phonetic shell, his brain, a pool of knowledge, will start instructing him to select certain “reflected things” to assemble. Though knowledge discrepancy between individuals may result in

different capabilities of knowledge storage, which may then lead to a different selection of “parts” in quantity and quality (precision), people’s knowledge of the “reflected things” is roughly the same due to the influence of the social collective consciousness enforced during language acquisition. For example, when hearing the word “lion”, what immediately comes to mind is a string of associations—animal, beast, strong limbs, brown hair, a long tail, predator, and so on. Not comprehensive and accurate enough, and far from scientific, these features do associate the sound of the word “lion” with the “lion” in the real world—a sign of object is thus produced.

### 3.2.2 *The layer of the sign of langue*

The sign of langue is located in the shallow layer of the system. Its signifier complex stands as the phonetic word, and is composed of the signifier and the signified of the sign of object. The phonetic word, though appearing mainly as form in the shallow layer, is already not a “pure” form because of its combination of sound and meaning of the sign of object in the deep layer; rather, it functions as a signifier with certain associative connotations. A phonetic word is used primarily for naming, and is, so to speak, a sign of the named thing. However, it should be pointed out that the thing at this point is not a particular thing in the real world, but a generic thing conceptualized and abstracted from the real world. The result is that a linguistic sign is produced, which brings about the scientific meaning or the purely conventional meaning of a sign, as is the case of the dictionary meaning of a word. That is to say, in the layer of langue, what comes after the mention of the word “lion” should not be a simple cumulation of the “fragmented” knowledge that derives from the associations in people’s mind, but a representation of human wisdom featuring the kind of scientific conventionalities that we read in a Chinese dictionary of etymology such as *Ci Hai*:

Lion (*Panthera leo*) is the name of an mammalian animal in the cat family. The male lion is strong with a three-meter-long body, a big head and a broad face, and a mane on the head and neck; the female lion is relatively small without a mane on the head and neck. Most lions have brown or dark brown fur and clusters of hair at the end of the tail. They inhabit sandy lands where forests are scarce. Lions are active primarily at night. They are predators to hooved animals like antelopes, zebras, and giraffes. Lions are found in Africa and West Asia. (*Ci Hai*, 1980, p. 821, my translation)

### 3.2.3 *The layer of the sign of parole*

In the surface layer of the system is the sign of parole. Its signifier, just like that of langue, is also a complex (a combination of the signifier and the signified of the sign of langue with certain conventional connotations). It can be called a phonetic complex, used primarily to refer to an utterance, a thing in the utterance, or a thing in the real world. At this point, the abstract and generic concept, which is found under the sign of langue and the sign of object, plays a potential role as deposited knowledge only, whereas human

knowledge, as found under the sign of parole, focuses on identifying an individual thing. For example, “lion” as a sign of parole must refer to the lion mentioned in the utterance, or the lion that shows up on TV, or in the zoo. Here it refers to a particular thing in a particular context.

In addition, the phonetic complex, affected by contextual factors, may go beyond the denotation of a thing under certain conditions, and be used as a sign of other specific things (at this point, the sign is likely to enter a new stereotyped system). For example, “lion” can refer to a “violent and valiant man”, just as “rooster” in oral Chinese might be used to refer to an “aggressive man”, and “dog” to a “henchman who serves powerful bad guys”.

### **3.3 The representation of the four elements of a sign**

The development of the theories of semiotic meaning reveals that four elements are essential to the interpretation of meaning of a linguistic sign: sign, thing, concept, and meaning. These four elements are also represented in the hierarchical theory of meaning of the linguistic sign we propose in this article.

#### *3.3.1 The representation of sign*

In the layer of the sign of object, the phonetic shell establishes an initial relation with the objective world through materializing the signified and becoming a carrier for object-meaning association. In the layer of the sign of langue, the phonetic words establish more stable links with the objective world through making the signified abstract and conventionalizing the meaning the sign carries. In the layer of the sign of parole, the phonetic complex establishes a real connection with the objective world through making the signified concrete and pragmatizing the meaning the sign carries.

#### *3.3.2 The representation of thing*

In the layer of the sign of object, the signified is a thing reflected by the phonetic shell. As the formation of a reflected thing is of some uncertainty (due to the enforced social collective consciousness and the knowledge discrepancy between individuals), the name the sign gives to a thing is still vague, at the pre-naming stage, and therefore can be defined roughly as an associative name. In the layer of the sign of langue, the signified is a generic thing, signified by the phonetic words. As the signified thing at this point is generic rather than specific, the name the sign gives in this layer is abstract. In the layer of the sign of parole, the signified is an actual thing, signified by the phonetic complex in an utterance. As the signified thing at this point is a specific one, the sign is actually connected with the objective world in this layer, and the name the sign gives is concrete.

#### *3.3.3 The representation of concept*

“Concept is a way of thinking that reflects the properties of an object (properties characteristic of a certain category of objects only)” (Zhang, 1994, p. 205). As a way of

thinking that reflects an object, the concept targets the object's properties, and seeks to explain either the nature of an object or the relation between objects. Thus, claims like "the concept is the signified", "the concept is the object", or "the concept is meaning" are all wrong. In the hierarchical theory of meaning we propose, concept is represented respectively by three abstract terms: signification, denotation, and referentiation. In the layer of the sign of object, concept corresponds to "signification" in semantics. In the layer of the sign of langue, concept corresponds to "denotation" in semantics. In the layer of the sign of parole, concept corresponds to "referentiation" in semantics.

### *3.3.4 The representation of meaning*

Meaning is the most important of the four elements of a sign, and constitutes the core of any theory of meaning. In the layer of the sign of object, meaning refers to perceptual meaning, that is, a "certain social collective's perceptions and understandings of things" imprinted on and stored in the human brain through acquisition. Its value lies in its connection with certain phonetic shells, ready to be withdrawn any time from the brain through association. Despite the fact that during the "withdrawal" process the accuracy and quantity of meaning features may vary from person to person, perceptual meaning plays an important role as the potentially invariable meaning in the process of semiotization as a result of the "social collective" force.

In the layer of the sign of langue, meaning refers to cognitive meaning, the most basic meaning conveyed in verbal communication. This kind of meaning can be described as "well-established", "a contractual meaning", and "a purely conventional meaning". It abstracts and generalizes things and phenomena in the objective world rather than directly correlating with them. For example, in the sentence "I like dogs", the meaning of "dog" is abstracted and generalized from numerous things of the same kind—"dogs" refers to "dog" as a kind of animal instead of any particular dog. Since cognitive meaning is the meaning defined in dictionaries, the perceptions and understandings of which may not vary from person to person; it usually plays its role in semiotization as an explicitly invariable meaning.

In the layer of the sign of parole, meaning refers to contextual meaning. Instead of the abstract relations between a sign and a thing, it indicates the relations between a sign and a thing revealed in an utterance in a particular context. In other words, it reflects a relation that is revealed in a situational context, where the signified must be a thing or phenomenon that exists in the objective world. For example, in the sentence "I like my dog", "dog" refers not to "a type of dogs" or "any one dog", but to "a specific dog (the dog I have in my home)". It should be pointed out that, constrained by various factors of uncertainty in communication, contextual meaning usually plays its role in semiotization as an explicitly variable meaning. The most typical manifestation is as the thoughts and feelings of the addresser delivered towards a thing as part of the information conveyed in social communication, bringing forth the commonly recognized "connotative meaning". Leech cites the word "woman" as an example to elaborate on connotative meaning. He holds that

the conventional meaning of “woman” features HUMAN+ADULT+FEMALE—but in a specific context, the word, based on its references, may have other communicative values, that is, the connotative meaning, which can be represented by various characteristics of women—we might say, for instance, gregarious and maternal (psychological and social characteristics), good at talking and cooking (typical but not essential characteristics), and delicate, tearful, timid, emotional, capricious, graceful, sympathetic, sensitive, diligent, etc. (universally recognized characteristics).

#### **4. About Denotation and Referentiation**

In many theories of meaning, denotation and referentiation are often confused. Hence the necessity of distinguishing further between the two concepts.

First, not every sign has both denotation and referentiation. For example, words like god, devil, water nymph, dragon, and centaur each represent something that does not exist in the real world. So these signs have, as it were, denotation instead of referentiation; if these fictional things are deliberately associated with a “fictional world”, then the signs that represent these things can be taken as having, at best, “fictional referentiation”.

Second, denotation emphasizes the structure and state of a thing or a fact, while referentiation emphasizes a thing or a fact itself, which leads to two possibilities (as is seen especially in a sentence). One is that the denotations of the signs are the same while their referentiations are different. Take the two sentences, “the dog is running” and “the dog is not running”, as an example: the denotations are the same, both revealing the subject and the action, whereas the referentiations are just the opposite—the former sentence implies that “the subject is acting”, while the latter that “the subject is not acting”. The other possibility is that the referentiations of the signs are the same while their denotations are different. For example, the referentiation of “morning star” and that of “evening star” are the same, both referring to the star Venus, but their denotations are different—Venus that appears at dawn is dubbed the “morning star”, while that at dusk the “evening star”.

Third, in terms of a sentence, denotation can also be understood as the structure of thoughts explicitly expressed, and referentiation, as a specific object (a specific situation, event, or abstract thought) that the sentence describes and refers to. A sentence, upon having a denotation, has a meaning, and is thus a qualified unit of communication; as for whether the message delivered by this unit of communication corresponds to the real world or not, it has nothing to do with the referentiation of the sentence. Look at these three sentences: “The orphan has a father”, “The orphan has no father”, and “The colorless green thoughts sleep desperately”. The three sentences all have denotations as they all embrace structures of thoughts explicitly expressed (they can be perceived, and be defined as semantically abnormal). In terms of referentiation, however, none of the three sentences conform to reality: the first is semantically contradictory (the connection between the denotation and the referentiation is a fallacy as the referentiation of the

sentence does not exist in reality); the second is semantically redundant (the connection between the denotation and the referentiation is superfluous since a thing in reality is not necessarily expressed in such a tautological way); the third is semantically abnormal (the denotation and the referentiation of the sentence are not organically connected, for a thing in reality keeps itself away from such a combination).

## 5. Conclusion

Semiotics, as one of the latest theoretical developments in the intellectual history of mankind, aims for the accurate description of reality in all its complexities, and the objects it deals with find themselves at the very basic layer of the real world, yet it must confront the hierarchical layers of meaning where it is expressed (Li, 2007, p. 1, my translation). While we are convinced that the meaning of linguistic signs will remain an open topic for future research, this article, on the basis of a critical review of previous theories of meaning, proposes a hierarchical theory in an attempt to examine the meaning of linguistic signs in a comprehensive and objective way. As the system of linguistic signs is complex and multi-layered, we emphasize that any simple or one-sided description may fail to explain meaning properly. And, as long as a meaning-based approach is employed to explore the nature of language, awareness of its multiple layers (object, langue, and parole) will be of crucial importance and will need to be constantly heeded in linguistic semiotics.

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