

Name and Hour: _____

Semiotics Why-Lighting Passage

Ferdinand de Saussure was a Swiss linguist. He lived from 1857-1913. Saussure's approach to linguistics was different from those who came before him. In the 19th century, the primary field of studying language was known as philology, which looked at how specific languages changed over time. Instead, Saussure wanted to try and understand how language works no matter when it was written or where it was spoken.

Saussure focused on (linguistic) signs, which are made up of two parts: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the physical aspect of the sign; these signifiers could be a drawing or words on a page, the sound waves hitting an ear, or the touch of braille on the fingers. The signified is the mental image or concept that arises in the mind upon seeing, hearing, or feeling the signifier. In short, the signifier is what is communicated and the signified is what it brings to mind.

No two people are going to say a word in exactly the same way or have the same handwriting, but communication is successful if we arrive at a similar understanding of the mental image being communicated. That is, if someone says or writes the word *dog*, and the person hearing or seeing it thinks of a German shepherd or a Dalmatian, the communication is still successful. The kind of *dog* they think of when they think of the word *dog* is naturally different for each person since there is not only one "real" or "true" way to think of the idea of *dog*. However, if the idea being communicated was a "Dalmatian," then thinking of a golden retriever would be less successful communication. If I ask someone if they have a dog, it is quite a different question than if I ask them if they have a rottweiler or chihuahua even though they are both breeds of dogs.

A signifier without a signified would be nonsense. For example, the first time one hears a new slang word nothing comes to mind. However, once one becomes familiar with the meaning, the slang word can be used to communicate with someone else who also knows that slang word. A signified without a signifier would just be something that doesn't yet have a word to name it.

Important to Saussure's theory is the idea that the connection between signifier and signified (word and mental image) is hit or miss. There is no reason why we call a dog a *dog* and not a cow. This does not mean that we can make up any word for a dog and expect other people to understand it. The relationship between signifier and signified is a social agreement upon what a word generally means. Resources like dictionaries act as a catalog of popularly accepted definitions but can change over time or

even from dictionary to dictionary. Like with 20 Questions or Pictionary, it's perhaps more useful to think about how signs name things by excluding all other signifieds; a dog is a dog insofar as it is not a cat, a road, a can of soup, or anything else.

The question still remains, how do individual signs relate to other signs to form not just single signs, but the entire meaning possible for a language? Saussure points out that there are agreed upon rules for how to construct meaningful sentences that are more or less known by those who speak the language fluently. Sentences may be thought of like a human body (made up of distinct parts) that can be clothed in a variety of ways. Just like with a body, it doesn't matter what color or style of gloves go on the hand, what kind of hat goes on the head, or what style of shoes go on the feet. However, a shoe on the head may be an odd choice indeed.

Saussure was interested in how the parts of speech relate in a given sentence. He asked, how can any word logically replace another word in a sentence and still make sense? For example, the sentence "I walk my dog down the street on a leash" shows the pattern of pronoun/verb/possessive-pronoun/noun/preposition/article/noun). You could replace *walk* with many other similar verbs, though the sentence may change its meaning because walking a dog has a specific mental image (a dog on a leash); "I run my dog down the street on a leash," however, can have a significantly different meaning because to run something down would typically mean to chase something or put someone down through insults. While one could replace dog with chihuahua or any other breed of dog, not any noun will do and still have a similar enough meaning. "I walk my husband down the street on a leash" points out that the relationship between dog and leash is connected by the idea of how we treat pets—and does not translate effectively to how many people treat their spouses.

Finally, it is important to remember that all words are related to other ideas. This is called connotation. The connotation of a word can be cultural (Bald Eagle with freedom, apple pie with America, etc.) or individual (dogs can be man's best friend if you've had good relationships with dogs, or Cujo-style frightening beasts if you ever had a bad encounter with one). When swapping one word for another in a sentence, the relationships between signs often come from connections between signs with similar connotations. Swapping one word for a similar word may break or create new connections between signs and change the overall meaning. For example, a well-designed advertisement strives to create a coherent message. Each object in the image has been carefully selected by the creator of the advertisement. Altering the images may create less cohesion in the desired message or reveal the relationship between all the signs that were not immediately obvious to the viewer.

