

# MAN202T: Sociology of Design

Session 12



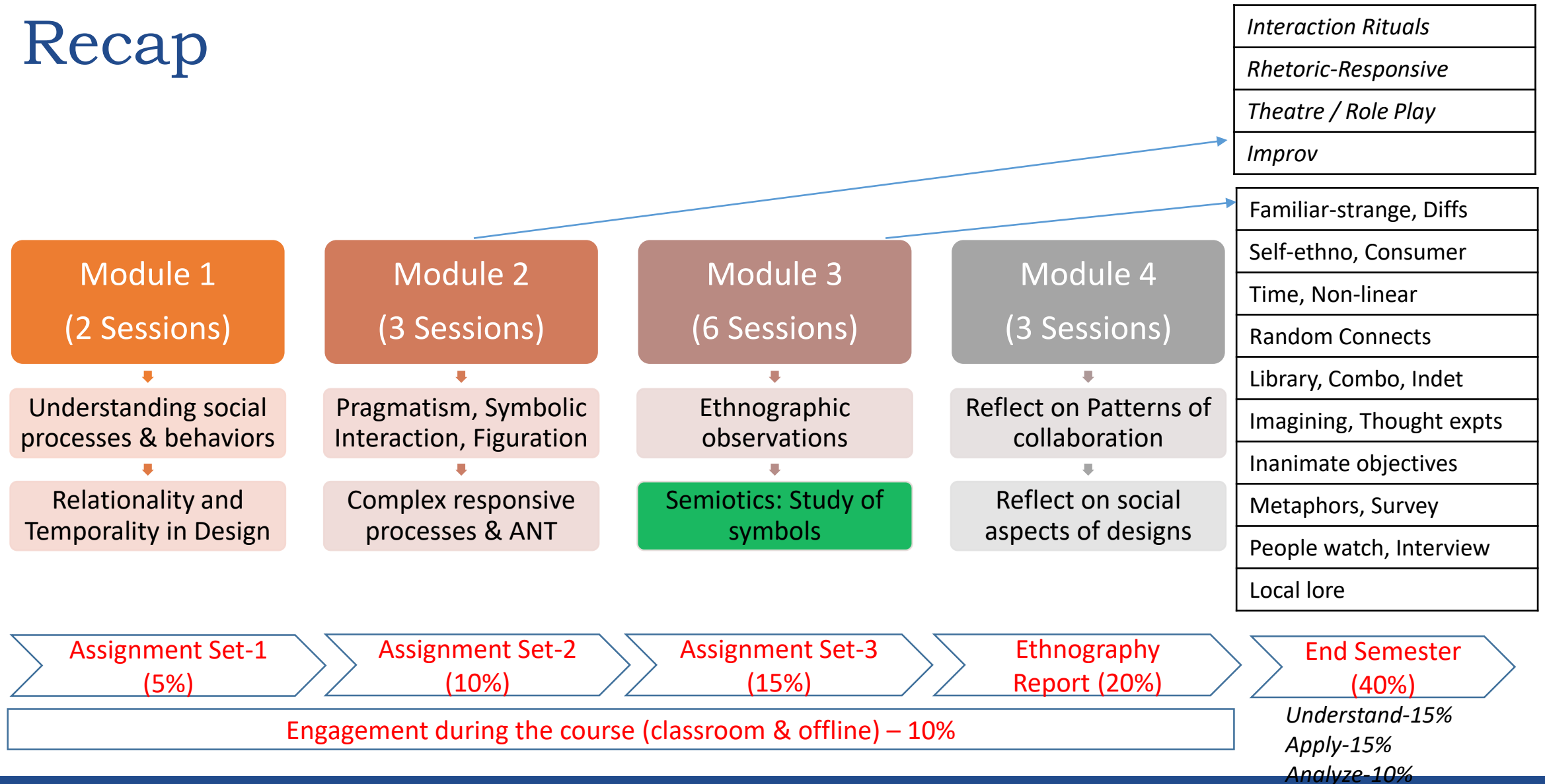
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY,  
DESIGN AND MANUFACTURING,  
KANCHEEPURAM

- Dr. Sudhir Varadarajan

# SESSION OUTLINE

- Recap & Interpreting ethnographic data
- Interpreting with Semiotics: Theory of Signs
- The Semantic Turn in Product Design & Role of Visual Communications

# Recap



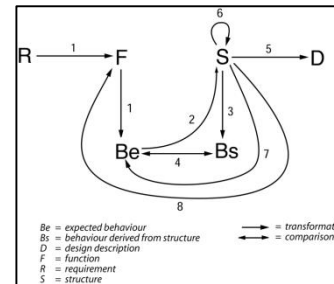
# Interaction -> Meaning -> Action

Facts / Artefacts /  
Objects / Products  
/ Technologies

Customers and Users interact  
with products & **derive**  
**meanings** depending on their  
cultural context

Engineers and their  
professions & artefacts  
shape the products &  
**meanings**

Users, Customers,  
Stakeholders



Engineers interact  
with customers to  
discover and give  
shape to their ideas

Designers,  
Manufacturers,  
Marketing &  
Sales, Suppliers

How (symbolic)  
interaction  
shapes meaning?

# What are we doing in ethnography?

- Observing interactions among actors (animate and inanimate), i.e., actors in action
- The intent is to understand how the actors in a network respond to each other in a particular context
- How they enable or constrain each other based on the signs they produce and interpret socially, and affordances they offer each other

# What is the use of ethno data for design?

- We are trying to find if there is new/hidden information in the context that cannot be surfaced through surveys or interviews
- What can we infer about the underlying need or object based on what appears to be “meaningful” to the actors in the context
- Generating more information about the context is a key step towards generating more alternatives and possibly a wider solution space

# How do we extract hidden information from ethnographic observations?

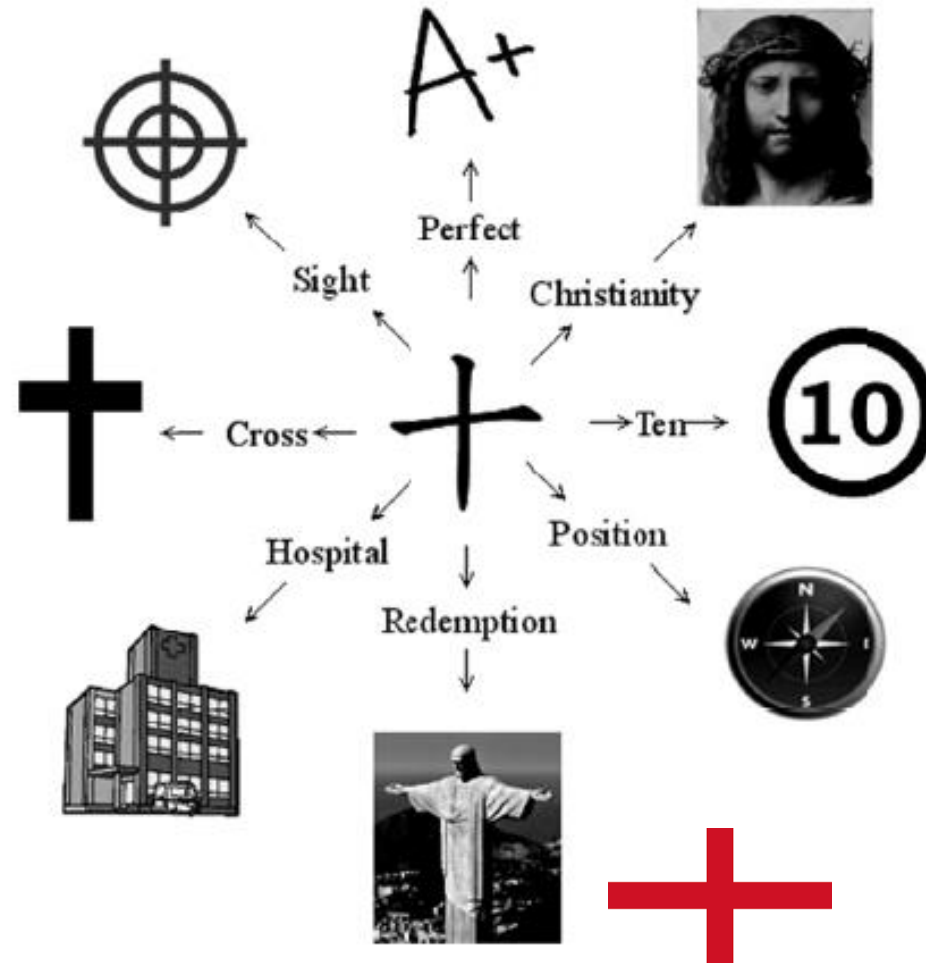
- Deep observation, long observation, non-judgmental observation, micro-level details ... the first step and Capturing specific signs and affordances that shape micro-interactions among actors in a context
- Next, we need to analyze the signs/affordances and the patterns that connect them to unearth hidden meanings and possibilities
- By unbundling the different components of signs and the instabilities in those relations you open possibilities for more alternatives

# SESSION OUTLINE

- Recap & Interpreting ethnographic data
- Interpreting with Semiotics: Theory of Signs
- The Semantic Turn in Product Design & Role of Visual Communications



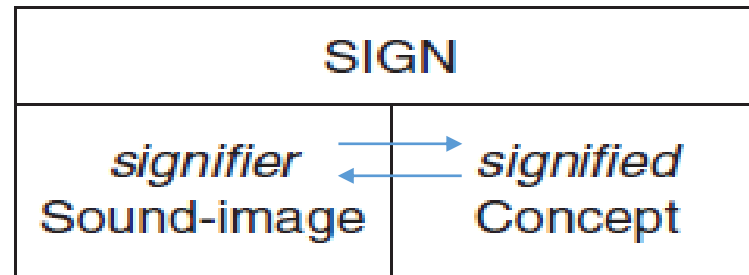
# Semiotics: The study of signs



Signs are used to communicate and can carry different meanings depending on the social context

# Understanding Signs – Saussure's View

A sign comprises **two parts**



Denotation

S – signifier, the expression, The FORM, the aesthetics, Objective – outer world  
s- signified, the content, The CONCEPT, what it stands for, Subjective – innerworld

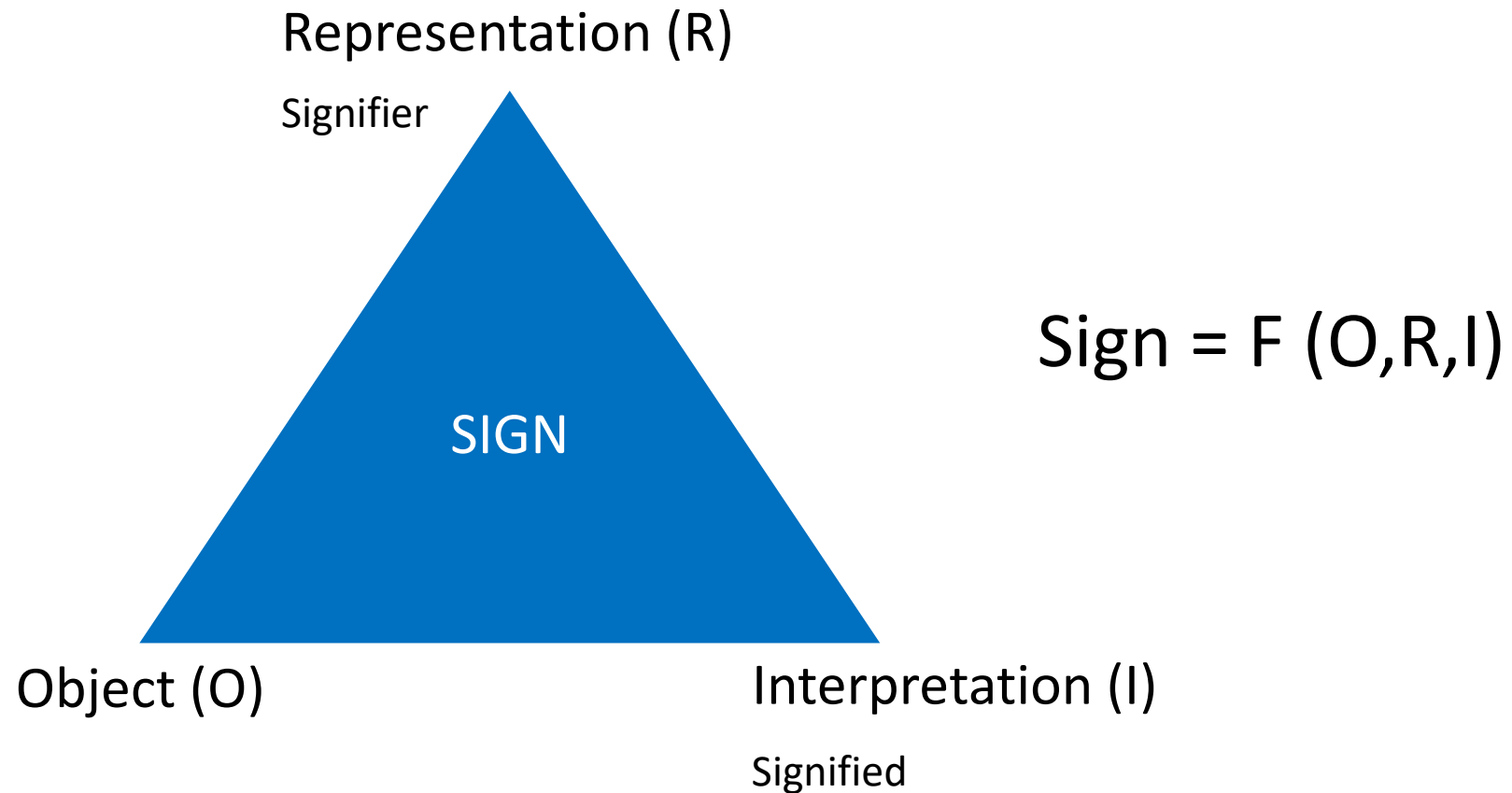
Connotation

# Example of Signifiers and Signified

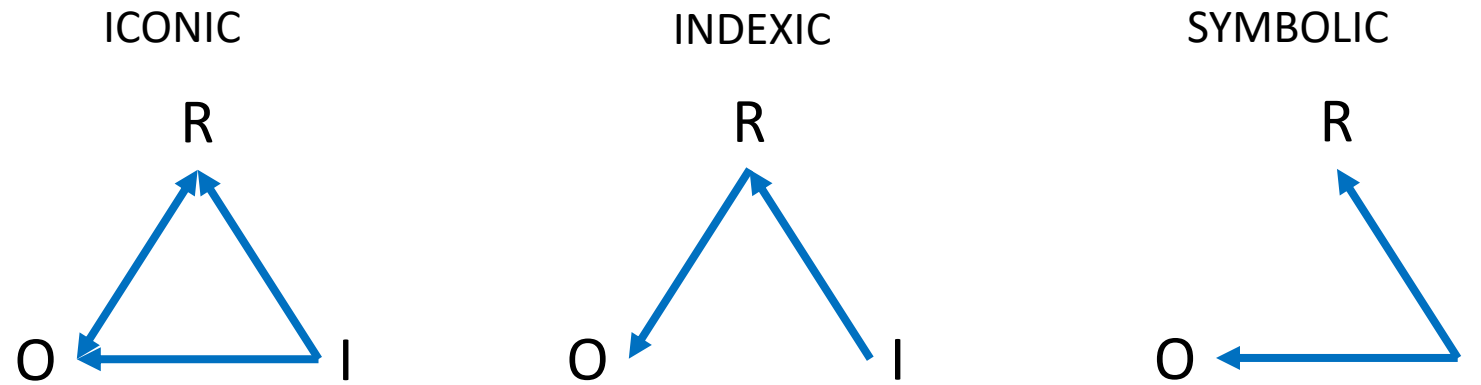
## A scene from Sherlock Holmes

<i>Signifiers</i>	<i>Signifieds</i>
Cubic capacity of hat (large brain)	Man is intellectual.
Good-quality hat, but 3 years old	Man hasn't a new hat, suggesting decline in fortune.
Hat not brushed in weeks	Man's wife no longer loves him.
Dust on hat is brown house dust	Man seldom goes out.
Wax stains from candles on hat	No gas in house.

# Understanding Signs – Peirce's View



# Three types of Signs



	<i>Icon</i>	<i>Index</i>	<i>Symbol</i>
Signify by	Resemblance	Causal connection	Convention
Examples	Pictures, statues	Fire/ smoke	Flags
Process	Can see	Can figure out	Must learn

# Example



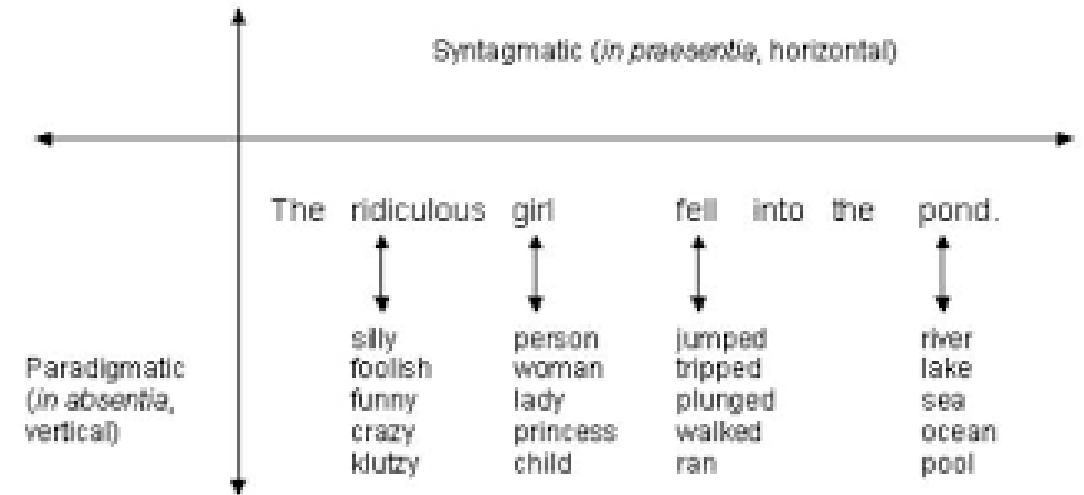
Symbol

Index

Icon

# Differences between signifiers produce meaning

- These differences are of two kinds:
  - Paradigmatic (concerning substitution)  
... replacing signifiers with alternatives
  - Syntagmatic (concerning positioning)  
... change in sequence

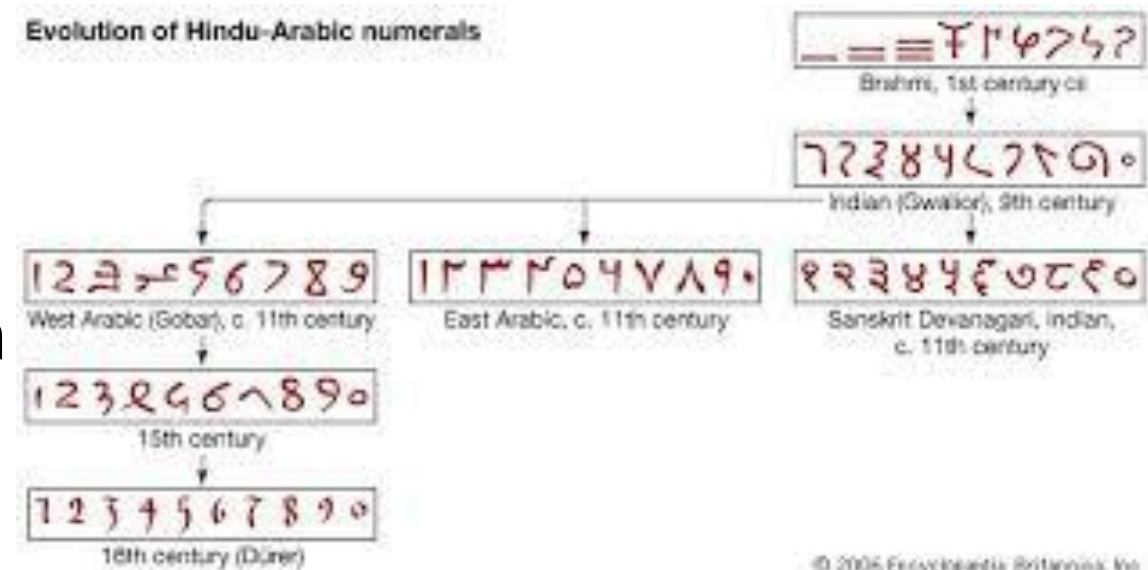


- WITH A COMPUTER, I HANDLE A PROBLEM IN MY OFFICE
- WITH MY OFFICE, I HANDLE A PROBLEM IN A COMPUTER

# Signs can be analyzed diachronically & synchronically

- The evolution of signs through time is called 'Diachronic' analysis
- The study of signs existing at a given point is called 'Synchronic' analysis

Evolution of Hindu-Arabic numerals



© 2006 Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.



# Communications will involve multiple signs



**Signifier:** An image of a dolphin (icon) and the Japanese flag (index) are integrated to create a scene in which bleeding dolphins are collectively caught in a fishing net

**Signified:** People of the Taiji fishing village in Japan used to hunt dolphins on a large scale. Thousands of dolphins, including new-borns, were killed

# SESSION OUTLINE

- Recap & Interpreting ethnographic data
- Interpreting with Semiotics: Theory of Signs
- The Semantic Turn in Product Design & Role of Visual Communications

# The Semantic Turn in Product Design

- Product semantics claims that meaning is cognitively constructed in the user's mind based on the information perceived by the senses. Thus, users' interpretation of a product is predominantly influenced by their personal experiences, socio-cultural background, and SOCIAL INTERACTION
- The semantic perspective on product design focuses on the communication and social issues in design
- Most of the semantic approaches consist of three common steps: determining an intended character for the product (purpose / core functions), selecting relevant attributes, and exploring visual expressions of these attributes

# Advertisements can give you glimpses into dominant ideologies in a society

- Advertisements are the pictorial manifestation of the dominant ideologies. Advertisements are ‘never ideologically impartial’.
- They are infused with meanings, and studying them can reveal much about the cultures in which they operate
- A washing machine is not sold on the basis of its use-values (to wash clothes). Instead it is sold on how it will make consumers *feel*, and how it will make them the envy of their neighbors

# Example 1: Hidden message of sophistication



an attractive French  
actress known for  
her portrayal of  
mysterious beauties  
in films such as  
*Belle de jour*

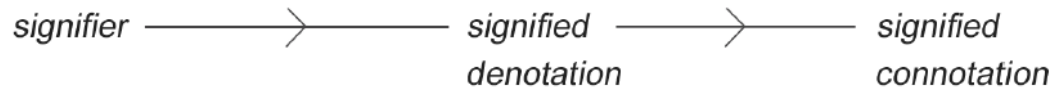
sophisticated



= sophisticated

signifier

signified



Through her portrayals of mysterious and elusive beauties in films such as *Belle je Jour*, over time Deneuve had become a sign of 'sophistication'.

Chanel has taken Deneuve's 'meaning' and applied it to their product by compressing her face (signifier) with a bottle of Chanel No. 5 perfume.



= sophisticated  
French chic

Source: <http://media.leeds.ac.uk/files/2013/07/Jessica-Burrows-BACS-2013.pdf>

## Example 2: The fearless challenger with a sophisticated family car for urban middle class



Signifier:	Signified:
Shahrukh Khan's image as Raj in DDLJ & other popular movies in the mid to late 1990s	<b>Fearless Challenger</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• No family connections (like Tata Motors)</li><li>• No legacy in business (like MUL)</li><li>• A possessor of style, class and power-packed performance - Hyundai</li></ul>

**Signifier**



**Signified**

Urbane  
= Intelligent  
Sophisticated  
Family oriented



+

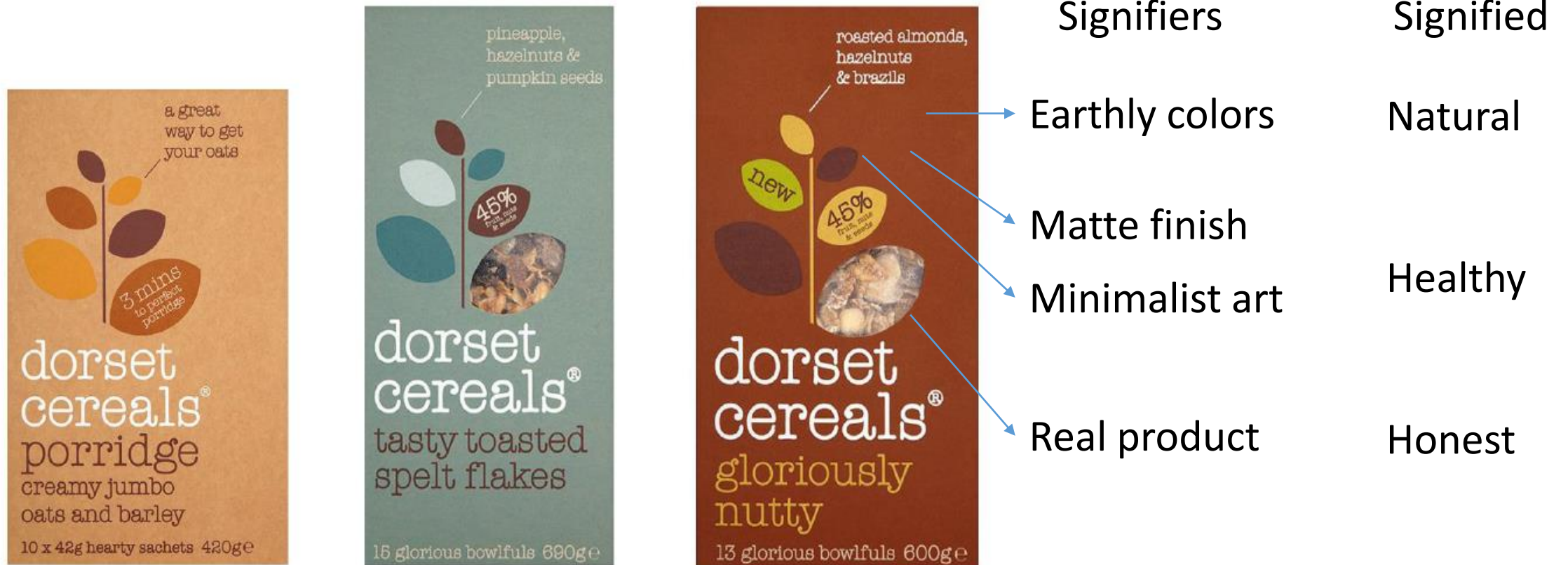


=



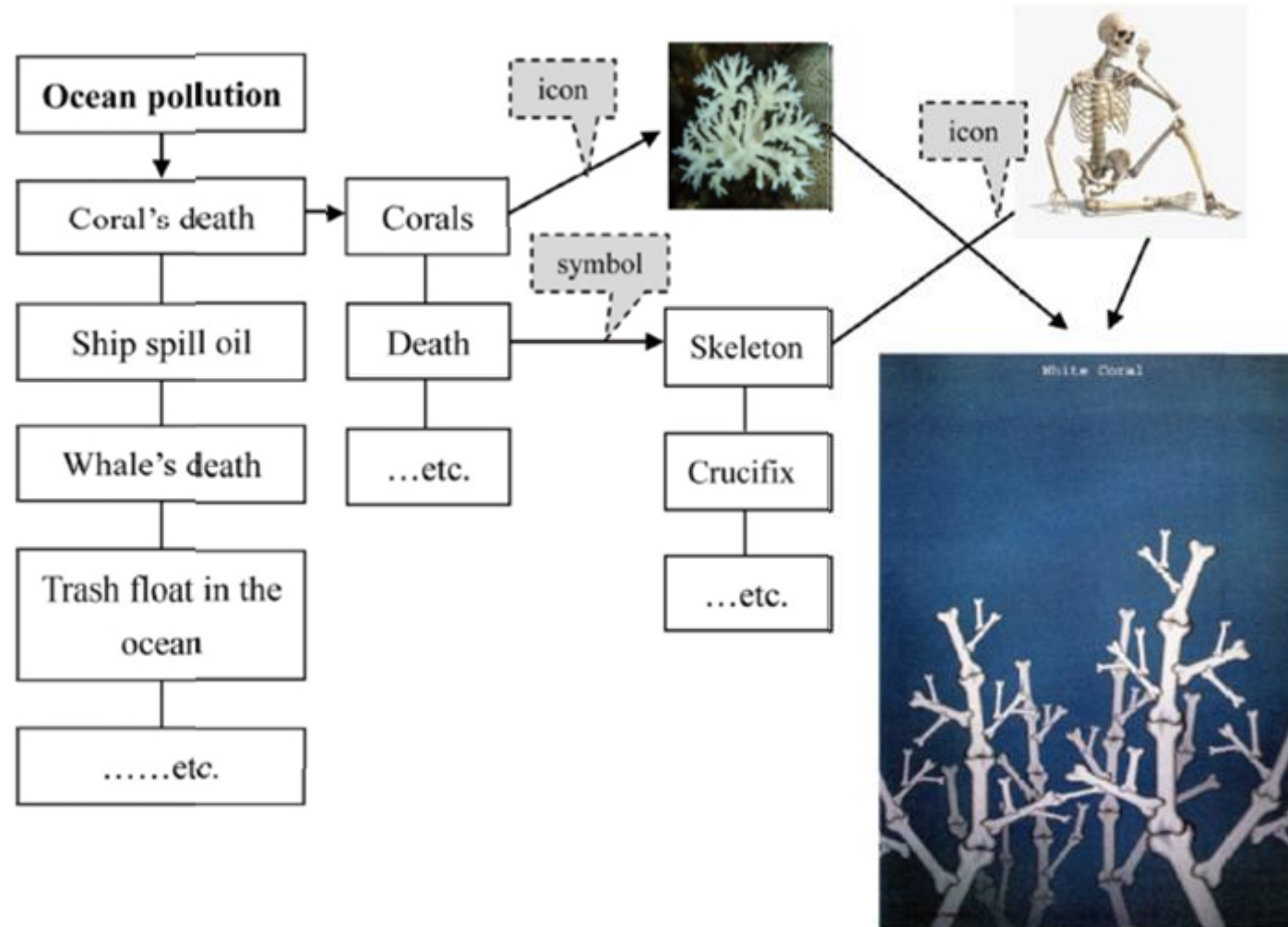


# Example 3: Hidden idea of honesty



Source: <http://media.leeds.ac.uk/files/2013/07/Jessica-Burrows-BACS-2013.pdf>

# Example 4: Concern for sustainability





# Analyze the Signs in MaDeIT Logo

*... a new generation of design-driven startups*



Power of 3 (... disciplines)

Triangles (Wisdom, Trinity)

Three colors:

- Green – Inexperience / Youth (Belief is key)
- Orange – Energy / Creativity (in Design)
- Blue – Trust / Order (while Leaping/Scaling)
- *Orange-White-Yellow – Gol sponsored*

MaDeIT – Name & Institutional Alignment

Sequence of three drivers - Syntagmatic

# Steps in Semiotic Analysis

- Study the artifact (advertisement, poster, ritual, etc.): Look carefully at its signs, its goals, its meanings. Ask in a general sense: what is this artifact *really* trying to sell?
- Unpack the artifact: identify between four and six significant signs
- Perform initial analysis: For each sign, identify the signifier and signified
- Construct initial constellation: Identify the theme (eg., wealth, beauty, authority) that is common to three or more signs
- Remove outliers: Narrow your constellation to three signs that most directly relate to your chosen theme
- Propose ideology: Draft a brief sentence that offers an attitude or advocates an action related to the theme (eg., wealth is good, beauty requires youth, authority is necessary)... **Sociological theories can help here**
- Revealing ideology demands that you unpack the foundational theme, the unspoken truth of the artifact. What idea does it try to sell? What way of living in the world does it advertise?

# Let us analyze two advertisements

- Maruti Wagon-R advertisement – Best vs Great (2017)
  - <https://www.kulzy.com/work/147227/wagon-r/brand-film/make-everyday-great/>
- Paper Boat drinks
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7l6zYp0CU8>

# Exercise 12: Perform a semiotic analysis of your ethnographic data

- Conduct an ethnography of your product user / social context
- Interpret the data using semiotics

# Work on the ethnography report

