



Similar Theories to Saussure's Theory of Signs

Introduction

This handout outlines several linguistic and philosophical theories that parallel Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the **sign**. By examining the work of key thinkers who *expanded, adapted, or challenged* Saussure's ideas, it provides a broader understanding of how *signs, meaning, and communication* have been interpreted across different schools of thought. The aim is to clarify how these theories contribute to *modern structuralism* and to *the study of language as an organised system*.

1. Ivor Armstrong Richards and Charles Kay Ogden (1923) (British linguists and philosophers)

They have simply repeated Saussure's idea of signifier/ signified and the linguistic sign, using other terms. For them, whenever we say a word, it is above all a **symbol** which has a **meaning** or **referent**. Both the symbol and its referent, have a **reference** in our minds (a mental image).

For example: the word "**apple**" is a **symbol**, the actual fruit is the **referent**. The picture of an apple that forms in our minds when we hear the word is the **reference (mental image)**.

2. Charles Sanders Pierce (American philosopher)

Pierce argued that communication is best examined through **semiotics** (the study of sign systems). He proposed that language (and signs generally) can be analysed on **three** levels:

a. Syntactic Relationship

This refers to the *relationships between signs themselves*.

* Example 1: In the sentence *John plays tennis*, each word relates to the others to form a complete structure.

*Example 2: Traffic lights contain three signs whose relationships and sequence organise traffic.

b. Semantic Relationship

This concerns the *relationship between signs and the external world*.

* Example 1: The colour red on a traffic light indicates 'stop'; orange indicates 'be cautious' or 'prepare to move'; green indicates 'go'.

* Example 2: The question *Would you like to open the door, please?* conveys a clear meaning that the listener can understand.

c. Pragmatic Relationship

This refers to the *relationship between signs and the behaviour they produce*.

* Example: When a driver sees a red light and stops, the act of stopping is the *pragmatic act*.

* Another example: When someone responds to *Would you like to open the door, please?* by opening the door, the action of opening the door is the pragmatic act/ result of interpreting the sign.



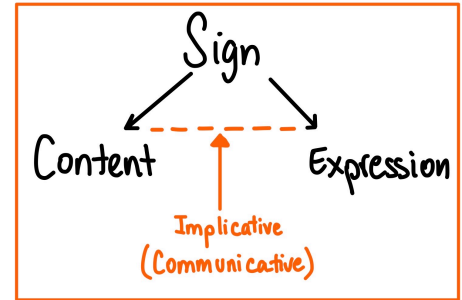
3. Louis Trolle Hjelmslev (Danish linguist)

→ Hjelmslev developed **glossematics**, the study of the smallest meaningful units (*glossemes*). He viewed language as an **abstract system** and believed linguistics should be considered an **autonomous discipline**.

→ According to Hjelmslev, language must be described in terms of the **internal relationships between its signs**.

He divided the sign into two components:

- **Expression:** the shape, symbol, or word itself;
- **Content:** the meaning associated with that word.



4. Émile Durkheim (French sociologist)

Often regarded as the father of sociology, Durkheim, like Saussure, distinguished between *langue* (the language system) and *parole* (language in actual use/ put into practice). However, he emphasised that language must be understood within a broader **social and cultural context**.

5. Claude Lévi-Strauss (French structuralist)

Lévi-Strauss, a key figure in structuralism, drew directly on Saussure's principles, particularly the distinction between *synchronic/diachronic* study and *langue/parole*. His work significantly influenced modern semiotics; the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behaviour, the analysis of communicative systems.

Summary

→ Forms and meanings do not exist independently as universal units; they only take shape within the specific languages in which they are realised.

→ Each language represents a unique organisation of elements, and the arrangement of those elements varies from one language to another.

→ Structuralism therefore sees language as a system in which each element gains meaning solely through its relationship with others. This view challenges practices such as rote memorisation of vocabulary lists or direct translation between languages, highlighting instead the essential role of **context** and the understanding of language **as a system of systems**.