Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of meaning, a cornerstone of **structuralism** and **semiology**, posits that meaning is not inherent in words themselves but is a product of a system of relationships within a language. He argued that meaning is not determined by a word's connection to a real-world object, but by its relationship to other words within the same system.

The Linguistic Sign: Signifier and Signified

Saussure's theory is built on the concept of the **linguistic sign**, which he defined as a psychological entity with two inseparable parts, like the two sides of a coin:

- **Signifier:** The physical form of the sign. This is the sound-image or the written letters (e.g., the sounds you make when you say "tree" or the letters t-r-e-e).

- **Signified:** The concept or mental idea associated with the signifier (e.g., the mental image of a tree).

Saussure emphasized that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is **arbitrary**. There is no natural or logical reason why the word "tree" signifies the concept of a tree. This is proven by the fact that different languages use different signifiers for the same concept (e.g., *arbol* in Spanish, *arbre* in French). This arbitrariness is what allows a language to function as a self-contained system.

The Importance of Difference and Structure

For Saussure, a sign's meaning is determined by its **difference** from other signs within the system. Meaning isn't a positive value, but a negative one. For example, the word "dog" has meaning not because of a direct link to a physical animal, but because it is not "cat," "pig," or "wolf." The relationships and distinctions between words are what create a system of meaning.

He also distinguished between two aspects of language:

- **Langue:** The abstract, underlying system of language—the shared rules, conventions, and structures that make communication possible. This is the system that a linguist studies.

- **Parole:** The actual, individual act of speaking or writing—the specific utterances of a language user. This is an individual's use of the shared system.

Saussure's theory shifted the focus of linguistics from the history and evolution of words (**diachronic** study) to the structure of a language at a specific moment in time (**synchronic** study). This focus on a language as a complete, self-contained system of interdependent parts became the foundation for the 20th-century intellectual movement known as **structuralism**