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# Effects of Language and Signs in Product Packaging on the Users

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## Abstract

Communication makes use of diverse signals to send information through the channels. Language is all about communication and when the signs are involved, the user needs in-depth knowledge to do the needful in encoding the meaning behind the message. In most cases we use signs to send the signal. It has been observed that most time as the study found out that the users may not be very well informed, especially in most packaged products and goods. Hence, users ignoring those signs there and forge ahead to use those products, which are highly detrimental in some cases. Without the understanding towards these signs, the users keep misinterpreting and misrepresenting them. Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of sign, proposed the term semiology as the study of signs and signification process. The theory hinged mainly on two focal components: signifier (concept) and signified (sound image), hence its application to this paper. The data for this work came as a questionnaire and they were shared among one hundred and five respondents, returned and analysed. It was discovered that contrary to the widely held belief that there is a substantial level of knowledge of these signs, there is actually a low-level understanding about them. More so, this research found out that there are numerous consequences of this deficiency in knowledge ranging from environmental pollution to wastages and health

hazards. The study, “Effects of Language and Signs in Product Packaging on the Users” concluded that these signs imprinted on packaged products play pivotal roles like: environmental protection, minimisation of wastages, product protection, individual protection and adequate concerns should be given to these signs once detected on the packaged products.
Keywords: Communication, Effects, Language, Signs, Product Packaging

## Introduction

Humans, by virtue of their advanced cognitive abilities, occupy a ranking position in the natural echelon. As a result, they are not exempted from communication by means of signs. In fact, of all living organisms, human beings use signs the most in communication. At one point or another, we all interpret signs; we negotiate the signage of human interactions, purchases, work, travel, and others. In most cases, we do this successfully because we have learned how to decode and use the signs in our everyday lives. Noteworthy is the fact that, only living things and their inanimate extensions undergo semiosis. Evidently, the ability to understand how other people interpret signs, how new signs might be interpreted and the linkage between different signs are the specialties of semiotics.

In essence, green is a clear example of a sign which can be interpreted contextually. In other words, while meanings are constantly changing and are individually, culturally and environmentally specific, common interpretations are inevitable when particular signs permeate a society. As Danesi puts it, "This is the reason why, over time, the human species has come to be regulated not by force of natural selection, but by force of history, that is by the accumulated meanings that previous generations have captured, preserved and passed on in the forms of sign" (4). A sign, as used above, is broader than the basic assumptions one may

have. It means anything that is capable of communicating a meaning beyond itself.

Essentially, a particular sign can be interpreted differently by different cultures, even within the same context. A bull, for instance, is a mark of strength and vigour. However, it is a religious symbol for the Indians and Egyptians. Even within the religious circle, a bull means a different thing for the Roman Catholics, especially coming from the Papal seat. In the United States, it is a special sign for a policeman. All the same, there are signs that have universal implications regardless of cultural affiliations, as long as the context of usage remains unchanged. A good example is the colour "green," elucidated above. Whenever and wherever it appears as a traffic sign, it means "go," to anyone facing it.

Saussure is of the view that a sign must have both a signifier and a signified. One cannot have a totally meaningless signifier or a completely formless signified (101-102). Several signs and symbols used on packaged products fall under this category; they have universal implications. As Grayson puts it "When we speak of an icon, an index or a symbol, we are not referring to objective qualities of the sign itself but to a viewer's experience of the sign" (35). These signs are expected to accurately state the quantity (weight, volume, and count), quality, handling and usage of the products. They serve many purposes which can be broadly classified into:

1. Those that are meant to protect the product.
2. Those that are meant to protect the user (environment/society).

Meanwhile, packaging is one of the fields in visual communication design that has many special demands, because it deals directly with consumers. Among these are technical demands, creative demands, communicative demands and marketing demands; all

must be manifested into visual language. A physical form of the packaging contains communicative signs that have a visual meaning but needs to be conveyed meaningfully. Again, as hinted earlier, it is expected of packaging designs to be able to translate marketing objectives as well as producers'/manufacturers' vision and mission statement as well as persuade the audience.

The physician looks out for symptoms (signs) of a particular disease; the linguist investigates the nature of distinct sounds and their patterning to produce words as well as the arrangement of words to produce meaningful sentences; the archaeologist digs for fossils, then analyses them to prove the existence of unknown or extinct organisms. Erton notes that, "studies in modern linguistic theory, to determine the scope and vision of human communication, have shifted their attention to semiotics, in which actions speak louder than words as some say" (267). In understanding the signs and languages involved: syntactics studies relationship among signs in formal structures; Semantics studies the relationship between signs and the things to which they refer- their denotata; while Pragmatics studies the relationship between signs and their effects on people who make use of them. Undoubtedly, semiotics is still fundamentally a multidisciplinary study. Chandler thus states:

> The distinction between signifier and signified has sometimes been equated to the familiar dualism of 'form and content'. Within such a framework the signifier is seen as the form of the sign and the signified as the content. However, the metaphor of form as a 'container' is problematic tending to support the equation of content with meaning, implying that meaning can be 'extracted' without an active process of interpretation and that form is not in itself meaningful. (104-6)

## Statement of the Problem

Experts in communication studies agree that words (signs) do not mean, rather, people do; an acknowledgement of the fact that words do not carry meaning(s) in themselves but acquire meaning(s) as assigned to them. Essentially, the meaning(s) contained in the signifier lie(s) in the 'successful interpretation' of it as the signified. In other words, if in the process of signification, the signifier is misinterpreted or not interpreted at all, then it is considered worthless. Riding on this premise, producers, manufacturers and product packaging designers imprint signs and symbols on packaged products as a branding mechanism or as a way of communicating particular ideas to the public. Undoubtedly, there is this general belief that such signs are perfectly understood and correctly interpreted. The users in most cases keep misinterpreting those signs on various product because of ignorance and lack of knowledge about the language and signs used on the product.

## Review of Related Literature

### The Concept of Sign

Defining a sign is not so difficult a task, however, giving an accurate and satisfactory definition is a matter of debate. All the same, many scholars have given several definitions of the concept and these definitions are more complementary than contradictory. According to the ancient Roman philosopher, Saint Aurelius Augustine, "a sign is a thing which, over and above the impression it makes on the senses, causes something else to come into the mind as a consequence of itself" (Wang, 11). Again, the American philosopher and semiotician, Charles Sanders Peirce said that, "a sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity." Similar to this definition is that given by another American philosopher, Charles Morris. He defined a sign as, "that which stands for or represents something other than itself" (ibid.). Morris is of the view that, "Something is a sign only

because it is interpreted as a sign of something by the interpreter" (Eco, 16).

From the above definitions, one can in the first place infer that, meaning does not reside in the object but in the minds. Hence, humans assign meanings to signs. This is in line with Roland Barthes' observation that, as soon as there is a society, every usage is converted into a sign of itself (Wang 11). Second, a sign or anything taken to be a sign does not represent itself but something else. In this sense, the sign is synonymous to a code- a concealed message or a symbol with little relation to what it represents, hence, it is to be decoded.

Saussure, however, refutes this claim when he asserts that, "the linguistic sign (and of course every other sign) unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image (138). Therefore, the sign for him is "the combination of the concept and the sound-image" (139). In Eco's definition, he proposes a sign to be, "everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing for something else" (16). This means that the relationship between the signifier and signified is (mostly) by convention. Generally, a sign is anything that can be used to communicate something else apart from itself, plus that which is communicated; and of course, both are related by a conventional signification process. Wang (12-13) observes four properties of signs: materiality (a sign must have substance, should be tangible); detachment (signs convey meaning beyond themselves, meaning removed from the representative); conventionality (there is no one to one correspondence between the signifier and what it represents); equality (a sign must represent its meaning(s) likewise the meaning(s) should equally recall the signifier when seen or mentioned.

**Sign and its Overview**

In his attempt to categorise signs, Ezeh (18) distinguishes between two broad groups: spontaneous signs and utilitarian or functional

signs. The spontaneous signs are those produced in response to animate biological or biochemical processes. These he noted are somewhat reflexive. The utilitarian or functional signs are deliberate projections aimed at communicating particular messages. Hence, Ezeh projects that only humans use symbols and icons (19). Meanwhile, Charles Sanders Peirce recognised three different types of signs thus:

**Icon:** Any sign that is made to resemble or reproduce its referent in some way. Iconicity constitutes an attempt to simulate the sensory properties perceived in things. Icon is a sign which resembles its object in some way; that is, it looks or sounds like the object. In other words, the signifier is seen as having a close resemblance with the signified or imitating the signified. Simply put, signs where the signifier resembles the signified are called iconic signs. Examples include: pictures (including pictograms, histograms, and others.), maps, paintings, photographs, onomatopoeic words, etc.

**Index:** A sign that has a logical connection either existentially or casually, to the object. That is the signifier has a direct association which could be physical or casually to the signified. Index refers to something or someone in terms of its existence or location in time or space. Indexicality constitutes a strategy for referring to the existence and location of objects in time-space. Example: smoke is an index of fire, flood is an index of rain, and deictic words equally manifest indexicality (Sebeok 11). Indexical signs do not resemble their referents, rather they show or indicate where they are. One popular example is the pointing of the "index" finger, which humans the world over, use to point out and locate things, people, and events (ibid.).

**Symbol:** Any sign that stands for its referent in an arbitrary, conventional way. Symbolism according to Danesi (27), is the result of historical and social convention, agreements and pacts.

This, semioticians agree is what sets human representation apart from that of all other species, allowing the human species to reflect upon the world separately from stimulus-response situations. Hence, the address of humans as *homo-symbolicums.* Symbols are signs which have neither resemblance nor logical connection to the object. Put differently, the signifier does not resemble, imitate nor have a direct association with the signified. Examples include: most words in all language, traffic signs, etc.

In addition, Sebeok introduced three more types, bringing the number to six, thus:

**Signal:** This he observes are basically expressed by animals as they are capable of responding to species-specific signals for survival. Most signals are emitted automatically in response to specific types of stimuli and affective states. Eco (48) observes that, "a signal can be a stimulus that does not mean anything but causes or elicits something, however, when used as the recognised antecedent of a foreseen consequent, it may be viewed as a sign." Examples: bird calls, bird songs, winks, nods, glances, kicks, nudges, head tilting, etc. (Sebeok 10). Some of these can equally be created by convention, examples: traffic lights, alarms, distress signals, whistles, etc. (ibid.).

**Name:** This is an identifier sign assigned to the member of a species in various ways and this sets the specific member off from others. Example: a human name is a sign that identifies the person in terms of such variables as ethnicity and gender (Sebeok 11).

**Symptom:** The bodies of all animals produce symptoms as warning signs, but what these indicate will depend on the species. Animals with widely divergent anatomies will manifest virtually no symptomatology in common. A symptom is a compulsive, automatic, non-arbitrary sign, such that the signifier is coupled with the signified in the manner of a natural link. It has a strong,

but not exclusively, medical tradition (Eco 48). Examples: cough is a symptom of cold, headaches can be symptoms of malaria or typhoid.

**Theoretical Framework**

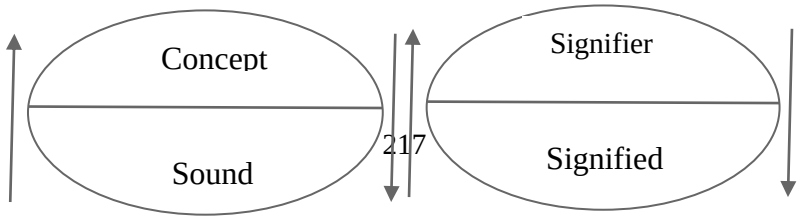
Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of sign is adopted for the present study.

**Saussurean's Theory of Sign**

Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of sign, unlike that of Charles Sanders Peirce, follows a dyadic tradition. He proposed the term semiology as the study of signs and signification process. Saussure's theory hinged mainly on two focal components: signifier (concept) and signified (sound image). The signifier denotes something that is in a material form (physical), explicitly exists and can be distinguished by human senses. The signified on the other hand, refers to something which literally and physically does (may not) exist, but is, on abstract basis. Its existence is in the minds; that is where the sound calls up image(s).

*Figure 2. Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic theory of sign*

The relationship between the signifier and the signified is referred to as the signification system. The sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified (Saussure, 67). All the same, both signifier and signified are not independent of themselves; they exist in unison. Furthermore, it is not necessarily true that the signifier must always call up the signified; the reverse can equally be the case. Finally, Saussure's theory asserts that neither the signifier nor the signified independently is the sign; rather, both come together to form it.



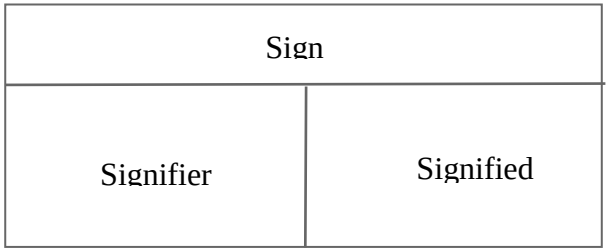



*Figure 3. Diagrammatic representation of Saussure's definition of sign.*

Saussurean theory is especially apt for the analysis of the signs selected in this research. Thus, it will be used to show the relationship between the signifier and its signified.

**Research Methodology and Data Analysis**

The primary method of data collection is survey. A survey is an official type of examination or test administered on a group in order to elicit information from them. This research question guided the data analysis: What is the level of people's knowledge regarding these signs imprinted on packaged products? It involves questions and answers; the researcher asks questions while the research subjects provide the necessary answers to the best of their knowledge. There is also the use of oral interviews and observation which are geared towards gathering comprehensive and accurate data. The method of data analysis adopted in this research is the descriptive statistics. This was expressed in the forms of frequency and percentage. The frequency is simply the number of occurrences of a particular event; while the percentage is the number or ratio expressed as a fraction of a hundred (100). The data that were collected through questionnaires are geared towards answering this research question. Sequel to this, we shall first

explicate the selected signs in line with the Saussurean model, thereafter, proceed with the presentation of respondents' replies. The questionnaire of this article was randomly shared among one hundred and five respondents and were filled by them and returned accordingly. These guided the work on the area of the questionnaire that was shared to forty-two males and sixty-three females in that order.

**What is the level of people's knowledge regarding these signs imprinted on packaged products?**



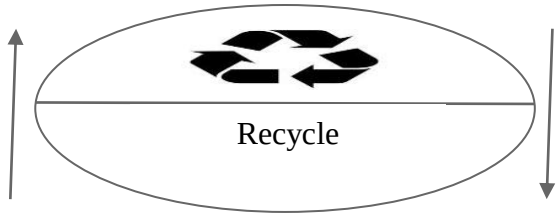

**Question 1.**

*A Saussurean interpretation of the first sign.*

| Options | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Put in a basket | 14 | 13.33 |
| Dispose Properly | 70 | 66.67 |
| Hold over a basket | 21 | 20 |

*People's level of knowledge of the first sign*

The data above show a greater understanding of the first sign. While seventy persons (70), which represent 66.67% of the sample understand the sign, the remaining thirty-five persons, which represent 33.33%, do not understand the sign.



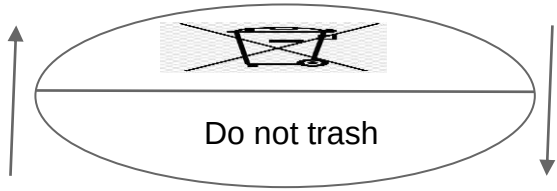
**Question 2**

*A Saussurean interpretation of the second sign*

| Options | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Rotate content | 36 | 34.29 |
| Swing or shake before use | 11 | 10.48 |
| Recycle | 58 | 55.24 |

*People's level of knowledge of the second sign*

The data above reflect a fairly good level of understanding of the second sign. While thirty-six (58) persons (55.24%) clearly understand the sign, the remaining forty-seven (47) persons (44.77%) do not understand the sign.




**Question 3**

*A Saussurean interpretation of the third sign*

| Options | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Do not trash | 45 | 42.86 |
| Do not box | 25 | 23.81 |
| Do not move | 35 | 33.33 |

*People's level of knowledge of the third sign*

In table above, we observe a relatively poor understanding of the sign as only forty-five (45) persons clearly interpreted the sign while the majority, sixty (60) persons do not understand the sign.



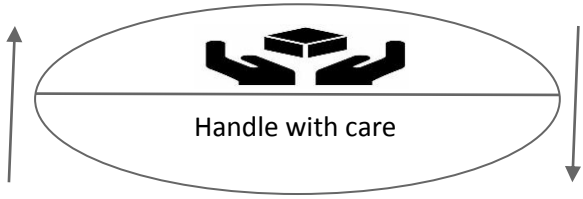
**Question 4**

*A Saussurean interpretation of the fourth sign*

| Options | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Do not swing or shake before use | 11 | 10.48 |
| Do not recycle | 58 | 55.24 |
| Do not rotate content | 36 | 34.29 |

*People's level of knowledge of the fourth sign*

The data presented above reflect another fairly good understanding of the sign. A total of fifty-eight (58) persons (55.24%) understand the sign whereas forty-seven (47) persons, (44.77%), are totally ignorant of the sign's interpretation.




**Question 5**

*A Saussurean interpretation of the fifth sign*

| Options | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Handle with care | 30 | 28.58 |
| Carry with both hands | 50 | 47.62 |
| Do not touchwith both hands | 25 | 23.81 |

*People's level of knowledge of the fifth sign*

As seen above, only but thirty (30) persons interpreted the sign correctly, while a whooping number of seventy-five (75) persons were unable to correctly interpret the sign. This reflects a very poor knowledge of the sign. Again, we observe that the majority of the respondents selected the second option which was the closest to an iconic representation of the sign; this certainly reflects the arbitrariness of this sign in relation to its signified.

## 5.2. Conclusion

The data gathered prove that although there are some signs which the respondents interpreted correctly, there are still more in which they recorded abysmal failure. As regards the effects of this lack of understanding on both the products themselves and society, it must be noted that there are naturally established consequences. There is a general agreement that these signs imprinted on packaged products play pivotal roles like: environmental protection, minimisation of wastages, product protection, individual protection and the others.

While it may be argued that there is a remarkable distinction between understanding and interpreting these signs correctly and adhering to the instructions they signify; there is still no doubt about the fact that greater global understanding of these signs remains the first step towards mitigating the drastic effects such as general notion that these signs imprinted on packaged products play pivotal roles like: environmental protection, minimisation of wastages, product protection, individual protection and adequate concerns should be given to these signs once detected on the packaged products. They are likely to have negative effects on society at large, if not adhered to. Language, of course, remains the only tool necessary and competent enough to solve the problem; a linguistic problem can only be resolved linguistically.

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