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Consumer Research and Semiotics: Exploring the Morphology of Signs, Symbols, and Significance

DAVID GLEN MICK*

The importance of signs and symbols has been widely recognized, but only a handful of consumer researchers have developed theory and research programs based on semiotics, the doctrine of signs. This article outlines the emergence and principal perspectives of semiotics and then discusses its applications and implications for consumer research. Among its strengths, semiotics positions *meaning* at the nucleus of consumer behavior, provides a rich metalanguage for semiotic consumer research, and recommends a multi-paradigm philosophy of science.

The consumer world is a web of meanings among consumers and marketers woven from signs and symbols ensconced in their cultural space and time. Authors who have theorized about communication in general, and the formation and use of symbols in particular, have argued that this ability is the central and differentiating characteristic of the human species—"the peculiarity and the glory of man" (Boulding 1956, p. 44).

Today's research on symbolism and consumer behavior has been cultivated from such seminal articles as Gardner and Levy's "The Product and the Brand" (1955), Levy's "Symbols for Sale" (1959), and Levitt's "The Morality (?) of Advertising" (1970), and derives from works by Goffman (1959, 1979), Hall and Trager (1953), Henry (1956), Newman (1957a, 1957b), Veblen (1899), Warner (1953), and Warner and Lunt (1941). Recent research has fostered multiple viewpoints on symbolism and a deepening appreciation for its province in the marketplace and in the lives of consumers. The preeminent scholar and spokesman on the importance of symbolism in consumer behavior has been Sidney Levy (1959, 1971, 1978, 1981, 1982). Lately, Russell Belk has become a major voice as well (1976; Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982; Belk, Mayer, and Driscoll 1984).

Despite the increasing attention paid to symbolism in the marketplace and consumer life, the field so far lacks a solid theoretical base and is mired in inherently descriptive research (Hirschman 1981 and Holman 1980a have made similar claims). Levy has lamented (1971, p. 113):

It is hard to keep thinking about the symbolic meaning of objects and behavior. To do so requires practice in adopting a view of actions that is sufficiently detached to permit analysis and interpretation, and sufficiently empathetic to produce insights. It is usually simpler to deal with the objects and behaviors themselves.

Holman (1981b) has concluded that notwithstanding the volume of research on products as communication vehicles, no theory per se has been specified. Belk, Bahn, and Mayer (1982) and Ward (1974), making analogous statements about the evolution of consumption symbolism in children, have called for increased theory building and research in the area. Likewise, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) have charged that the prevalent information-processing theory has failed to address significant consumption phenomena like leisure activities, fantasies, and emotional responses that are replete with symbolic meaning.

To date, few symbolism researchers in the consumer behavior field have acknowledged and integrated the semiotic doctrine that focuses on the morphology of signs, symbols, and meaning. This article contends that through its distinctive and wide-ranging literature, semiotics can advance theory development and substantiate expanded methodologies for symbolism research from acquisition and consumption to disposition behaviors. This article sketches the history of semiotics, discusses semiotic approaches to symbolism research,

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and presents the implications of semiotics for consumer behavior theory and research.

SEMIOTICS: ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The roots of semiotics trail back at least as far as the pre-Socratic era, where Hippocrates identified bodily manifested symptoms (signs) as conveyors of messages about physical and mental states. Though Plato, Aristotle, Poinset, Locke, Leibniz, and Vico all discussed signs, symbols, and communication, it was not until the turn of the 20th century that semiotics achieved its identity through the independently developed works of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce.

Broadly speaking, semiotics analyzes the structures of meaning-producing events, both verbal and nonverbal. Sebeok has written that the scope of semiotics and its subject matter includes "the exchange of any messages whatever and of the systems of signs which underlie them," with the *sign* always the fundamental concept (Sebeok 1976, p. 1). Semiotics takes two forms: (1) a general semiotics that seeks to answer, "What is the nature of meaning?" and (2) a specific semiotics that asks, "How does our reality—words, gestures, myths, products/services, theories—acquire meaning?" (Ransdell 1977). To address these questions, semioticians investigate the sign systems or *codes* essential to all types of communication for the latent rules that facilitate sign production and interpretive responses.

Semiotics stands apart from the bulk of the social sciences, and not uncontroversially, with a more intense focus on meaning. Harman (1981) has argued that since meaning is not something physical or directly measurable, it is awkward for contemporary scientifically-minded researchers to deal with. For many of them, meaning is beyond the purview of science, and what is non-science is nonsense. Semiotics, in large part, rebukes that view.

F. de Saussure

Saussure was a respected linguist of his time who challenged the very foundations of his field (1915). He maintained that since language was a system of signs, linguistics should be enveloped by a larger science of signs within society. Saussure called that science *semiology*, i.e., the study of what signs are made of and what laws command them.¹ Saussure defined a linguistic sign as a wholly arbitrary, diadic relationship be-

tween a concept that is the signified (e.g., blouse) and a sound image that is the signifier (e.g., the spoken word "blouse").

Saussure sought to overthrow the traditional view of linguistics wherein language was seen as an aggregation of separate units (words), each with a distinct meaning. From Saussure's perspective, the relationships and interactions between words take precedence over individual words when meaning is formed or derived. According to his chessboard metaphor, moving one piece alters all the relationships between pieces on the board. Thus, Saussure's chief contribution to the study of signs resided in shifting a longstanding philosophical emphasis on the nature of things in and of themselves to a relational world view whereby meaning derives from the priorities human beings construct and perceive among signs in a system.

Synchronic/Diachronic Research. For Saussure, language was the epitome of a self-contained relational structure. To study the principles of language (or any sign system) Saussure advocated *synchronic* approaches, which measure the adequacy and self-sufficiency of the current system, in addition to customary *diachronic* methods, which place the system in an historical dimension for observing and recording cause-effect laws of change.

Paradigmatic/Syntagmatic Relations. Synchronic analyses specify two genres of relations, *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic*, that determine how signs are organized. A paradigm in the Saussurean sense is a set of signs; a syntagm is the message formed by signs chosen from several paradigms. Paradigmatic relations are those that reveal the oppositions and contrasts between signs in a set. For example, scenes or background settings form an important paradigm from which a key selection is made in the development of advertising messages (e.g., beach, kitchen, office, city street). A paradigmatic choice conveys meaning through the differences between the sign selected and those not selected. Syntagmatic relations are evident in combinations of paradigmatic choices, revealing the rules or conventions that facilitate sign combinations to form messages (in language these rules constitute grammar). In a consumer context, a family picnic is a syntagm of choices from the paradigms of food, drink, entertainment, picnic sites, apparel, participants, and so on.

Langue/Parole. Saussure also drew an important distinction between *langue* and *parole*. The former stands for the abstract rules and conventions of language (or any code) that pre-exist any individual's use of it; the latter represents the manipulation of the language system via individual utterances in everyday situations. For Saussure, *parole* is the level at which meaning arises. Meaning ultimately emerges through the existence of differences among words in a language as they are chosen and combined in actual verbalizations. In economic

¹Although synonymous in general reference, Americans tend to use the Greek-derived *semiotics* in deference to Locke and Peirce while Europeans use the Greek-derived *semiology* in the tradition of Saussure (Fisch 1978; Sebeok 1976, Chapters 1 and 2). Specifically, however, the Peircean and Saussurean lineages have cardinal contrasts as well as similarities (Fiske 1982; Sherry 1985; Singer 1984).

contexts the Saussurean perspective of meaning through difference has been implicated as both the fuel of healthy market competition (brand differentiation; Gardner and Levy 1955) and an institutionalized flaw of Western cultures (social class distinctions promoted by differential product ownership; Sahllins 1976).

Language and Reality. Saussure's acute focus on synchronic analyses and on difference as the key to meaning reinforced the self-defining nature of linguistic structures and made them peer inward at their own rules instead of outward at an objective world. According to Hawkes, Saussure further reasoned that (1977, p. 28):

since this self-regarding, self-regulating form constitutes our characteristic means of encountering and of coping with the world beyond ourselves, then perhaps we can say that it constitutes the characteristic human structure. From there, it is only a small step to the argument that perhaps it also constitutes the characteristic structure of human reality.

Thus, along with Vico and Piaget, Saussure believed that reality is sensible because it is pre-coded for us at birth. "What we learn is not the world," according to Thayer, "but particular codes into which it has been structured so that we may 'share' our experiences of it" (1982, p. 30). And since, in the Saussurean perspective, signs are arbitrary and conventional, to learn the codes is to adopt the values and biases that guarantee the indigenous world view.

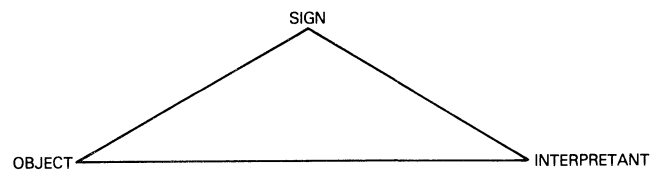
Sapir and Whorf

Unaware of Saussure's ideas, the American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf recorded and analyzed North American Indian languages from synchronic and structuralist perspectives. Together they played prominent roles in developing the notion of relativity of culture and in promoting the idea that a culture's life patterns are determined, or at least structured, according to its language. In a provocative classic statement, Sapir wrote (1949, p. 162):

Human beings do not live in the objective world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. . . . The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group. . . . We see and hear and experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

Hence, the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis maintains that communication is not just a mere conduit of information and meaning, but a process that actually establishes reality, including who we are and who we will be. In a unique extension of consumer research, Holman (1981c) has pointed out that cultures incorporate different perceptions of time in the verb structures of their languages and, therein, culture-specific images of

FIGURE A
PEIRCE'S TRIADIC SEMIOSIS



the future may affect investment and buying patterns, perceived risks in buyer behavior, and buyer-seller interactions across cultural borders.

C.S. Peirce

Peirce's lifelong inquiry into the nature of signs stemmed from his reading of John Locke, who apparently was the first to suggest that semiotics might provide novel insights on human understanding (Peirce 1931-1958). Trained in philosophy and chemistry, Peirce adopted Locke's vision of semiotics and set out from a logic-centered orientation grounded in empirical observation—invariably more pervasive than Saussure's language-centric focus—to examine "the essential nature and fundamental varieties of possible semiosis" (5.488).²

Semiosis, Interpretant, Meaning. For Peirce, semiosis is the process of communication by any type of sign, a sign being anything that stands for something (its object), to somebody (its interpreter), in some respect (its context). Like Saussure, Peirce explained sign processes in terms of relations. But Peirce spoke of "triadic" instead of "diadic" relations (Peirce 5.484):

By 'semiosis' I mean, on the contrary [to diadic relations], an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of *three* subjects such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs.

Peirce's model of semiosis is shown in Figure A.

Peirce's semiotics is a philosophy anchored in the real world Saussure de-emphasized, as indicated by the essential role of objects therein. Moreover, it stresses the import of people, social institutions, and culture through the often misunderstood notion of "interpretant." The interpretant is not the interpreter (as Hawkes and others have claimed); nor is it just an interpretation (see Eco 1976, pp. 68-69). According to Sebeok, "By 'interpretant' Peirce appeared to mean the interpreter's reaction to the sign, that is, the sign's transmutation into an inferred neural code" (1976, p. 7). Ultimately, the interpretant is transformed into a language or other

²Reference notation for Peirce is volume and paragraph: Volume 5, Paragraph 488.

symbolic code by which it is shared with and transmitted through the social environment.

Peirce wrote extensively on the interpretant, proposing several subtle gradations of the construct. Nonetheless, Peirce scholars like Buczynska-Garewicz (1981, 1983) and Eco (1976, 1979) have argued that essentially the interpretant is the meaning of the sign; put differently, the interpretant is actually another sign referring to the same “object.” Since any initial meaning can be re-interpreted (and often is), each interpretant is thus a sign leading to another interpretant, and so on ad infinitum. This double nature of the interpretant—as both the interpreted sign and the interpreting sign—confers unlimited regress or extrapolation in semiosis and led Peirce to conclude that man “is the thought,” in fact, “a sign himself” (5.314, 6.344). This restive tautology apparent in Peirce’s interpretant is “at the same time its force and the conditions of its theoretical purity. . . . Semiosis explains itself by itself” (Eco 1976, p. 71). As a more concrete example, consider that a dictionary is a perfect case of similar circularity.

Icons, Indexes, Symbols. As his reflections on semiotics evolved, Peirce’s taxonomy of signs reached 10 trichotomies, eventually yielding 66 types. The three sign categories he most often utilized (8.368) were based on the relationship between sign and object posed in Figure A. An iconic sign relates to its object insofar as it imitates or resembles the object. An actor portraying Benjamin Franklin in an advertisement and a flow diagram of a consumer choice model are iconic signs. An indexical sign relates to its object by some correspondence of fact, and the relationship is frequently causal. For instance, consumer satisfaction is an indexical sign in marketing theory that some desire has been fulfilled. A symbolic sign relates to its object in an entirely conventional manner and, as such, requires the participative presence of an interpreter to create the signifying connection. Thus, a point-of-purchase display for wine depicting a young couple lounging by a fireplace may represent “the good life” or decadence, love or licentiousness, depending upon the codes of the interpreter’s background.

For Peirce, these three important sign categories are not mutually exclusive, since a sign may function in all three capacities. According to Hawkes (1977), the trichotomy is usually hierarchical, with the context of semiosis establishing the priorities of the sign types and the interpretants generated.

Deduction, Induction, Abduction. The sign-interpretant relationship in semiosis was also a major focus of Peirce’s work. Influenced heavily by Kant, Peirce’s epistemology could be termed constructivist; that is, he held that all knowledge and meaning is derived. For Peirce, cognition is a process of knowledge and meaning generation through signs and it takes three forms: deduction, induction, and abduction. To illustrate, suppose a person believes that, as a rule, all women who

are good mothers serve their families three nutritionally balanced meals per day. By deduction, the rule and a given case entail a result:

- rule 1. All women who. . . .
- case 2. Jane is a good mother.
- result 3. Therefore, Jane serves her family three nutritionally balanced meals per day.

By induction, given a case and a result, the rule is inferred probabilistically:

- case 1. Jane is a good mother.
- result 2. Jane serves her family three nutritionally balanced meals per day.
- rule 3. Therefore, all women who. . . .

By abduction, a result and the rule infer the given case probabilistically:

- result 1. Jane serves her family three nutritionally balanced meals per day.
- rule 2. All women who serve. . . .
- case 3. Therefore, Jane is a good mother.

The potency of abduction is particularly obvious if we consider Jane a new neighbor or a fictional character in an advertisement about whom little else is known. For the person who wonders why Jane acts as she does, abductively the person need only invent or, more likely, instantiate a rule that has been socioculturally learned and rehearsed, and the explanation for Jane’s actions is derived. Since codes and rules are necessary for an interpretive response, each time a sign is confronted abduction occurs (Eco 1976).

Peirce’s Philosophy of Science. Peirce’s semiotics is a doctrine of experience—indeed, a phenomenological doctrine of consciousness (Zeman 1977). But for Peirce and his man-as-sign conclusion, consciousness is of signs only; it cannot obtain an indubitable science of reality. Though he stressed that his semiotics was an observational normative doctrine, Peirce also emphasized that humanity’s primary tools of understanding are symbols: words, diagrams (iconic symbols), mathematical formulas, statistical tests, etc. All are arbitrary and conventional and depend on social agreement for their significance. Peirce also wrote that all of our “knowledge of the internal world is derived by [abductive] reasoning from our knowledge of external facts” through the multiple and potentially endless chain of interpretants (5.317). Taken together, these views exemplify, on the one hand, Peirce’s realism, and on the other, his tenet of fallibility, i.e., that exactitude in science can never be attained (1.135–149).

Other Contributors and Orientations

Charles Morris. Shortly after Saussure and Peirce, Ogden and Richards (1923) spurred the development

of semiotics with their classic work, *The Meaning of Meaning*. Though few acknowledge it, the venerable semantic differential has direct origins in Ogden and Richards and in the American semiotician Charles Morris (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum 1957, pp. 3–10). As the most influential American semiotician up to the present day, Morris's goal was to fuse semiotics with developments in the social sciences to produce a comprehensive science of signs (1938, 1946, 1964, 1971, 1976). Morris defined semiotics as (1946):

The science of signs. Its main subdivisions are *semantics*, *syntactics*, and *pragmatics*. Each of these and so semiotics as a whole, can be *pure*, *descriptive*, or *applied*. Pure semiotics elaborates a language to talk about signs, descriptive semiotics studies actual signs, and applied semiotics utilizes knowledge about signs for the accomplishment of various purposes.

Accordingly, syntactics is the study of sign–sign relations, semantics is the study of sign–object relations, and pragmatics is the study of sign–interpretant relations. Note that in terms of theories of meaning, syntactics is Saussure's focus, semantics is the traditional emphasis, and pragmatics is Peirce's concentration. Contrary to Morris's claims, Singer (1984) and others have since argued that pragmatics presupposes both syntactics and semantics because semiosis occurs only through the irreducible Peircean triad of sign–object–interpretant. Regardless, the trichotomy of syntactics–semantics–pragmatics is probably the most enduring aspect of Morris's semiotic legacy (cf., in sociolinguistics, Greenburg 1964; in marketing, Holbrook 1978). However, the infusion of behavioral psychology into his semiotics and the ongoing controversy over his alleged misapplications of Peircean concepts has tended to diminish Morris's position in contemporary semiotics (Rochberg-Halton and McMurtrey 1983; Steiner 1978).

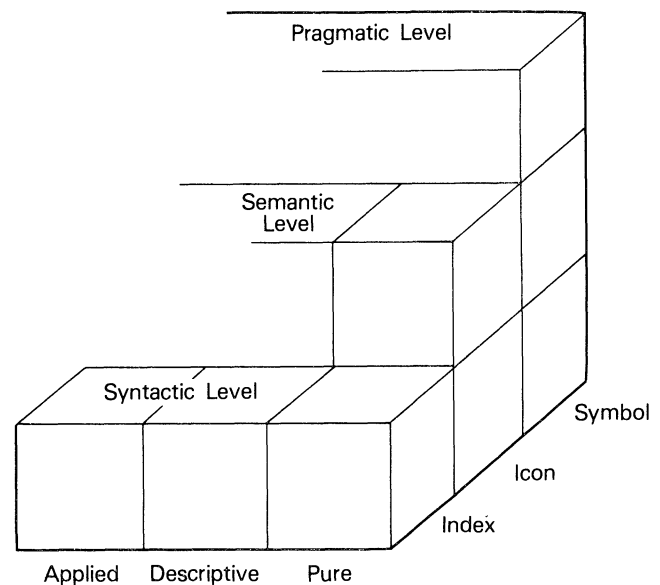
A Semiotic Cube. Nauta (1972) has built from Morris's work a cube that serves as a useful framework for multifaceted semiotic inquiry. We adapt the cube here (Figure B) with minor alterations in terminology to illustrate how Peirce's trichotomy of icon–index–symbol can be united with Morris's trichotomies of syntactics–semantics–pragmatics and pure–descriptive–applied semiotics.³

For example, pure semiotics elaborates a metalanguage to talk about signs of any type at any level of semiosis. Historically, theoretical semioticians such as Eco, Morris, Nauta, Peirce, and Saussure dominate this slice of the cube. Componential specifications of consumer semiosis are virtually nonexistent. A fruitful start

³Like most theoretical semiotics, Nauta's original cube extends the doctrine beyond human communication to all possible forms of signification. For example, Nauta incorporates signals into the cube (e.g., hormones, electric signals) that perform teleological control functions in organisms and machines.

FIGURE B

A SEMIOTIC CUBE



Source: Nauta, Doede (1972), *The Meaning of Information*, The Hague: Mouton De Gruyter.

would be to consider what aspects of acquisition, consumption, and disposition behaviors involve or, perhaps, accentuate certain signs (and combinations thereof) over others. Further, it is likely that icons, indexes, and symbols themselves can be taxonomized to provide more precise theoretical foundations for semiosis in consumer behavior. Consider gift-giving behaviors that are intrinsically semiotic and that have drawn increased attention from consumer researchers (Belk 1976, 1979, 1982; Sherry 1983). Taking a pure semiotics approach, signs can be taxonomized as intrapersonal and interpersonal; gifts as symbols can be similarly classified. Yet, the majority of gift-giving literature in consumer behavior emphasizes the latter over the former despite various consumer indulgences to “reward” the self for past behavior. As a symbolic self-dialogue, intrapersonal gifts are likely to have important, unexplored distinctions from interpersonal gifts along social, personal, and economic dimensions.

Continuing the pure semiotics slice of the cube, gifts are also iconic and indexical and can be further taxonomized as aesthetic, educational, utilitarian, and so on. A print of a Monet painting and a child's spelling calculator may be thought of, respectively, as aesthetic icons and educational icons (the latter being an iconic sign for a personal computer). Indexically, the print-as-gift may be a sign of a desire to appear “sophisticated” while the calculator-as-gift may reflect a parent's prioritized values on education and on the child's initiation rites for a technological culture.

For descriptive semiotics, inquiry focuses on actual signs. Advertisements in particular have been subjected

to descriptive semiotic analyses by Fiske (1982), Leymore (1975), Umiker-Sebeok (1979, 1981), Wernick (1983) and Williamson (1978). In fact, our gift-giving illustration became a partial descriptive semiotic as the actual signs (the print and calculator) were referred to.

By placing actual signs in specific contexts of acquisition, consumption, and disposition, one engages applied semiotics. Instances of applied semiotics include physician–patient relations (Shands 1970; Shands and Meltzer 1977), advertising-information consumption (Fiske 1982), and cultural anthropology research (Geertz 1973, 1983; Singer 1984).

In all three modes of pure, descriptive, and applied inquiry, the signs can be detailed in relation to other signs (syntactics: Does a Monet print fit with art deco furniture?), in relation to their objects (semantics: Do a spelling calculator and a video game refer similarly to the computer culture?), and in relation to their interpretants (pragmatics: What consequences do the Monet print and spelling calculator have for their users today and how do those impacts change with use over time?). The semiotic cube can be employed to analyze consumer semiosis diachronically as well as synchronically as advocated by Saussure.

Contemporary Semiotics. Although Morris is probably the most openly recognizable link between Peirce/Saussure and current semiotics in North America, semiotics has subtly permeated a broad spectrum of disciplines worldwide. Among others, many philosophers (Cassirer, Langer, Whitehead), linguists (Halliday, Hjelmslev, Jakobson), anthropologists (Douglas, Geertz, Levi-Strauss, Singer), and sociologists (Warner) have argued for the primacy of signs in human experience, especially the symbolic dimension. In addition, theoretical and methodological positions espoused by field theorists (Lewin), symbolic interactionists (Blumer), ethnomethodologists (Garfinkel), phenomenologists (Schutz), structuralists (Levi-Strauss), conversational analysts (Sacks), and socialization theorists (Goffman) share numerous indirect affinities with semiotics. As a result, Culler (1981) has commented that a precise tracing of the intellectual tradition of semiotics after Peirce and Saussure is difficult since “one suspects that semiotics could well have defined itself [without Peirce or Saussure] as the logical outcome of an intellectual reorientation that had been under way for some time” (p. 24).

Barthes (1968, 1972, 1983) is perhaps the person most responsible for bringing semiotics to contemporary public light. Currently, Eco (1976, 1979, 1984) and Sebeok (1972, 1974, 1976, 1981) stand as the two predominant semioticians in an enveloping, interdisciplinary doctrine that now includes a vast range of topics in both human and nonhuman communication (see Eco 1976, pp. 9–14, for a panorama of the field).

To be sure, semiotics is not without its critics (Pettit 1975; Sperber 1974). Sperber has claimed that semioticians assume that the human environment overflows

with meaning, a premise he maintains is no less ethnocentrically arbitrary than the symbols in which semioticians find so much arbitrary meaning (see Winner 1978 for a rejoinder to Sperber). Despite such criticism and the considerable challenge most readers first encounter with semiotic texts, the field continues to grow and influence.⁴

Summary. This concise introduction to semiotics has identified the sign as the fundamental vehicle connecting objects in the broadest sense and human reactions (interpretants). This overall process of semiosis is the basic subject of semiotics and the mechanism by which meaning is created, maintained, and altered. There are different kinds of signs by virtue of their relations with their objects (e.g., icons, indexes, symbols); signs also relate to their interpretants in various ways (e.g., deductively, inductively, abductively). Since signs cannot function independently, the systemic structural level of sign relations is focused upon as codes with underlying rules. Saussure’s specification of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations and Morris’s distinctions among syntactics-semantics-pragmatics and pure-descriptive-applied semiotics are exemplars of semiotic approaches to the study of codes, semiosis, and meaning. As Peirce emphasized, signs in the human environment—especially symbols—must be understood by the way they are situated within a wider social context, where both their arbitrariness and meaningfulness are revealed.

So why semiotics and consumer research? Because consumers behave based on the meanings they ascribe to marketplace stimuli. And yet consumer researchers, with few exceptions, have characteristically avoided detailed and systematic inquiry into meaning processes. Perhaps this reflects the shortcomings of current theory and methodologies in consumer research. Or perhaps the role of meaning appears obvious, but also ineffable or intractable. To its advantage, semiotics is a mosaic of terminology and methods that can help us clarify and understand the role of meaning as embodied in the semiosis of consumer behavior as well as researcher behavior. Fortunately, a few in our field have already recognized the value of a semiotic perspective and their work deserves review.

EXPLICIT SEMIOTICS IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

Advertising Language

The first reference and use of semiotics in consumer behavior literature appeared in Holbrook’s 1978 article

⁴For the relatively uninitiated, a path of sequential semiotic readings is recommended that moves progressively into more complex semiotic philosophy: Fiske (1982), Innis (1985), Hawkes (1977), Singer (1984), Sebeok (1976), Eco (1976), and Deely (1982).

on the differential impact of varied information characteristics on attitudes. Holbrook evoked Morris's work in discussing the isolation of key content dimensions in persuasive communication (1978, p. 547):

Especially conspicuous by its absence [from advertising research] is any message variable derived from a systematic consideration of the nature of language—its semantic substance, syntactic structure, and pragmatic uses.

Holbrook focused his study on the semantic properties of verbal advertising messages, making a distinction between factual vs. evaluative content—i.e., “logical, objectively verifiable descriptions of tangible product features” vs. “emotional, subjective impressions of intangible aspects of the product” (p. 547). Although Holbrook did not use the term “semiotics” in his article, the influence of his semiotics-derived factual/evaluative dichotomy has been sustained (Hirschman 1980; Shimp and Preston 1981; Yalch and Elmore-Yalch 1984). The Morris trichotomy was later renewed by Hirschman and Holbrook in their introduction to *Symbolic Consumer Behavior* (1981).

Artifactual Communication

Holman's 1976 dissertation on the communicational properties of women's clothing was the first extensive exposition and application of semiotics by a marketing and consumer behavior researcher. Much of her subsequent work, which is not reviewed here, has built upon semiotic orientations (1980a, 1980b, 1981a, 1981b, 1983). Her 1976 study investigated syntactic and semantic levels of consumer semiosis from pure, descriptive, and applied perspectives (see Figure B) by examining the clothing system as a code and particular clothing ensembles as messages. Looking for the sociocultural rules that endow clothing with meaning, Holman sought first to identify the multiple messages possible within a context-specific clothing system through the description of its structural form. She then examined the strength and consistency of correlations between specific ensembles and attributions made about ensemble wearers.

Among the distinctive features of Holman's study was her insistence on thoroughly specifying the paradigmatic alternatives (among ensemble components) before exploring how they combine to form a coherent message. Thus, only after performing a pure and descriptive analysis at the syntactic level did she embark on semantic analysis.

Holman began by unobtrusively photographing 392 women students and describing their ensembles in terms of a 171-item numerical taxonomic procedure. From cluster analyses of the data, six groups of ensembles emerged, which then guided additional photographing of women students dressed similarly to one of the six groups. Subjects from a student population were then each shown one of the second-phase photographs and

asked to make attributions about the woman in the photograph using 31 six-point scale items. Eight variables were found to be statistically significant in attribution differences across ensemble clusters (e.g., sorority membership, femininity, beer drinking habits), though the total variance explained was small.

Outside of introducing semiotics, Holman's work emphasizes the value of unraveling the meaning of a conspicuous product by seeking its interpretation not from the individual user (to whom much of the meaning is likely obscured in subconsciousness), but from the user's audience, which readily detects subtleties of meaning in uninhibited artifactual semiosis. Although she did not acknowledge abductive inferencing as the cognitive mechanism her subjects employed, in fact Holman's study centered on the sociocultural rules that facilitate abduction in consumption symbolism. The abductions were of the form:

1. This coed in the photograph is dressed in a *Z* ensemble.
2. College coeds who are characteristically *X* dress in ensembles like *Z*.
3. Therefore, this coed is characteristically *X* (probably).

As such, Holman's work represents a semiotic perspective on symbolic consumer behavior and advances a sociology of consumption meaning (cf., Nicosia and Mayer 1976).

Sharing Holman's focus on artifactual communication, Kehret-Ward's dissertation invoked Saussurean perspectives to study how children perceive products as conveyors of information about themselves and others.⁵ Her subsequent work also reflects Saussure's semiotics (1982; Kehret-Ward, Johnson, and Louie 1985). In particular, she has argued that products-as-symbols are like linguistic units in that meaning emerges from differences between them, scarcity being the guarantor of difference. These differences in products, in association with their owners, signal social positioning of various modes.

Her study of 7-, 10-, and 13-year-olds confirmed that certain situational and developmental variables mediate the relationship between a product's communication value and its relative scarcity. For example, after manipulating the perception of scarcity, she found that older subjects (aged 13) more often than younger subjects (aged 10 and 7) preferred a scarce brand to a common brand and attributed their preferences directly to the scarcity factor. Kehret-Ward concluded that both younger and older children treat commercial products as linguistic units, but that only the older ones have acquired the ability to choose and display scarce arti-

⁵Kehret-Ward's dissertation was completed under the name Murray; for consistency we use Kehret-Ward throughout our discussion. In the reference list, see Murray (1981).

facts for purposes of communication. From a semiotic viewpoint, this shows how pragmatic context and the semantic properties of products arise directly from perceived syntactic relations between products.

Kehret-Ward has also extended Saussurean semiotics to consumption symbolism in adults (1982). She has pointed out that as product designs and styles evolve, the meaning of already-owned products and the perceptions of (attributions about) their owners are altered even though the products themselves and their owners have not changed. For instance, the domestic car owner who is perceived as successful in part because she drives a large automobile (Belk, Mayer, and Bahn 1982) may be seen as indulgent or wasteful years later when the new model of the car brand is downsized along with competitors in its class to emulate imported automobiles and improve fuel efficiency. Thus, neither the automobile nor the owner is an autonomous, unarbitrary sign; each is a symbol made meaningful by its distinction from and relationship to competing symbols.

Kehret-Ward (1982) reiterates her argument that products qualify as linguistic signs and goes on to invoke the Peircean icon-index-symbol trichotomy. She argues that a semiotic approach to consumption symbolism leads to two immediate insights (the Peircean terminology in brackets is ours):

1. If a product is purchased for its communication value, then product differentiation [sign alteration by the marketer] for its own sake is meaningless [no interpretant] in the absence of a corresponding consumer trait, need, or desire [objects].
2. The pragmatic meaning of a product [interpretant], especially for its owner [who is both an interpreter and a sign to others], can change when the product's competitors make design or style changes [sign alterations], in effect making a move on the Saussurean chessboard, and in doing so affecting syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic relations throughout.

While the first point is straightforward though crucial, as product failure rates attest to, the second point benefits from further illustration. The emergence of advertising product tags like "all natural ingredients," "lite," and "low fat content" imbue competitors' products with meaning-by-implication like "few or less natural ingredients," "high caloric levels," and "high fat content"—this despite the fact that the competitors' products have not been changed. As the tags proliferate and eventually saturate different product constellations, their communication value paradoxically diminishes (they are no longer scarce) and inflates (in Eco's sense, becomes "overcoded;" 1976). Thus, the "lite" symbol now stands for nothing and many things, including contradictions: low calories, less filling, must continue to use to become or stay thin (no escape), but can eat more portions, can eat more often, can substitute other food for the saved calories (freedom).

Advertising—Marketing Communication

Sherry has recently adopted a provocative semiotic orientation in arguing that "advertising is a cultural document, a way of presenting and apprehending the world" (1985, p. 1). As Peirce perceived symbols as "man made" and "man making," Sherry sees advertising "as a way of construing the world, in much the same way as religion, science, common sense, art, ideology, or play represent ways of knowing . . . advertising [is] a way of understanding" (p. 3). Beyond Williamson's (1978) claim that advertising creates meaning, Sherry rightly contends that advertising also discerns and discovers meaning; i.e., through its verbal and nonverbal rhetoric and its symbolic and iconic conventions, advertising transports its audience via ritualized enactments through the dimensions of experience the culture esteems (Fox 1984). The repetitive ritualizations conserve the culture by reducing the variance in the distribution of cultural behaviors, and thereby move it toward resolving inherent contradictions. At the same time, however, the extensive ritualization leads cultural perceptions to become natural perceptions; in other words, instead of a cultural representation, advertisements come to be seen as representations of the whole world or of definitive reality. Besides the resulting ethnocentrism, Sherry suggests that other aberrant results may manifest themselves in commodity fetishism (Marx 1876), product therapy (Henry 1956), and overconsumption (Bodley 1982). To date, however, these troubling propositions have not been adequately researched (Pollay 1986).

In another article, McCracken and Pollay (1981) argue that advertising seeks regularly to bestow a product with properties beyond its intrinsic features by exploiting two principles that frequently figure into semiotic inquiry: contiguity and similarity (cf., Leach 1976). The former involves bringing together in the ad a select set of objects, persons, and activities with the product. The latter takes over as the audience is invited to acknowledge resemblances and, in effect, transfer properties between the co-present entities. For example, critics of cigarette ads cast on beaches or in locker rooms often claim that the invigorating, healthy qualities of natural settings and athletic exertion are improperly signified in the cigarettes through the resemblances advocated by contiguity.

Finally, Mick (1987) has blended semiotics with schema theory, which specifies the structure, content, and processes involving attitudes, memory, and cognition as well as written and spoken texts (Brewer and Nakamura 1984; Hastie 1981; Thorndyke and Yekovich 1980). Mick proposes incorporating three genres of schema theory into marketing communication research as a first approximation of more wholistic research: goal, knowledge, and text schemata. The goal and knowledge schemata relate to both the marketer and the consumer;

the text schemata involve the linguistic messages in marketing communication. Mick argues that as schema theory and schema-specification methodologies are refined, these schemata should be stipulated before and after marketing communication occurs, i.e., moving beyond post-test-only designs and using more within-subjects approaches. Mick also engages Morris's semiotics to foster a metalanguage and a framework within which schema theory can enrich marketing communication research. For example, the structural elements and combinatory forms of schemata can be examined at the syntactic level, the conceptual ramifications of the schema as a research metaphor can be investigated at the semantic level, and developmental issues and context-specific uses of schemata can be approached at the pragmatic level.

IMPLICIT SEMIOTICS IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

There is other consumer research possessing implicit affinities with semiotic orientations. While practically all consumer research on symbolism, and an array of tangential topics, could be explicated within semiotic philosophy, the following studies have actually used similar concepts.

Consumption Use Systems

Wasson, for example, emphasizes at one point in his consumer behavior text consumption use systems: "consumption of a product involves the use of more items than just the product alone, and requires a step-by-step procedure of some sort" (1975, pp. 9-10). For example, oatmeal as a breakfast food and oatmeal as an ingredient in baking cookies require different companion ingredients and kitchen utensils to make and consume the end product. Thus, "oatmeal is not one product, but several different products, each with its own use system" (p. 10). These use systems are reminiscent of Saussure's structural analysis of language, particularly paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations: oatmeal-as-sign has changeable value and identity, dependent upon its selection and combination with other components of use systems.

Consumer Mythology

Levy has drawn from the work of the French anthropologist Levi-Strauss to study consumer myths. For Levy, "myths are ways of organizing perceptions of realities, of indirectly expressing paradoxical human concerns [which] affect people's daily lives" (1981, p. 52). Thus, consumer mythology is a type of code. To study consumer myths Levy interviewed housewives about food consumption attitudes and behaviors involving various family members and found an affluence

of values and preferences reflected in family traditions and activities. He uncovered symbolic distinctions among certain foods, preparation methods, and consumption behaviors directly related to mythic proportion oppositions, including family togetherness versus separation and celebratory versus everyday cuisine. In all, the study demonstrated the usefulness of anthropological field methodologies and the insightfulness of semiotic and structuralist analyses of consumer mythology: like many other topics in consumer research, dietary behavior has been studied too narrowly in the past when considered only in isolation or with over-emphasis on product attributes.

Symbolic Interactionism

Several consumer studies have invoked symbolic interactionism, a sociological theory sizably influenced by Peirce (Kernan and Sommers 1968; MacCannell 1976; Schenk and Holman 1980; Solomon 1983). Solomon writes that "symbolic interactionism focuses on the process by which individuals understand their world . . . [it assumes] that people interpret the actions of others rather than simply reacting to them." Moreover, the interpretations are "a function of the meaning attached to such actions . . . which is, in turn, mediated largely by symbols" (Solomon 1983, p. 320). Solomon's overview of the history and tenets of symbolic interactionism suggests many overlaps with semiotics and, as he himself hints, the more refined metalanguage of semiotics holds significant promise for symbolic interaction theory and research (p. 322, footnote 7).

Like most semioticians, symbolic interactionists view human minds as fundamentally social—existentially dependent upon shared symbols. According to both, meaning is negotiated and constructed through intrapersonal and interpersonal discourse; it is not an individual enterprise, but rather "a social procedure for defining objects to achieve a practical effect" (Gallant and Kleinman 1983, p. 5). Thus, the two perspectives share Peirce's pragmatic conception of meaning.

Experiential Aspects and Abduction

Finally, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) have called for more concerted attention to the "experiential" aspects of consumer behavior, emphasizing the importance of pre-reflexive reactions to the less objective features of products, nonverbal cues in stimuli, and syntactic versus semantic characteristics of communication. The hedonic responses Holbrook and Hirschman focus on are akin to what Peirce called the emotional interpretant, and their emphasis on syntactics is clearly Saussurean. Furthermore, the authors' appeals to the latent levels of knowledge, emotion, and consumption symbolism as well as their discussions of cre-

ativity, play, and artistic endeavors all point to the semiotic concern with the codes and underlying rules of intrapersonal and interpersonal communication, including abductive inferencing.

Peirce also conceived abduction as the method by which the hunches, intuitions, and revelations of human experience take place (Spinks 1983). Eco (1976) argues that this mode of abduction occurs especially in undercoded contexts, i.e., when pre-established rules are deficient or absent. A person who uses a product in an inventive fashion—for instance, adding a previously untried ingredient to a recipe or using aluminum foil in a window to block the summer sun—has taken certain objects not normally associated and, based on some provisional hypothetical rule, has made an abductive inference and impacted the relevant code. A more thorough understanding of this aspect of abductive inferencing can contribute insights into the experiential events of consumer behavior as well as the mechanisms by which hypotheses are generated in consumer research.

DISCUSSION

As Old is New

Many who confront semiotics for the first time often remark that, in one manner or another, they have been “doing semiotics” all along. In fact, however, until recently consumer behavior theorists and researchers have tended to treat signs and their functions indiscriminately. Moreover, meaning has been merely ancillary to the inquiry on fundamental human behavior we choose artificially to call consumer behavior. If, as Crosson maintains, “. . . the problem of meaning is central to our age” (1967, p. 99), and if meaning and consumption are as commingled in the residue of the industrial and consumer revolutions as McCracken (1985) contends, then we must marshal a new orientation for these ancient concerns that will elevate meaning to the same priority in consumer research that it compels in consumer life. First, semiotics satisfies the three epistemic requirements laid out by Hirschman (1981) for the construction of a novel paradigm for the study of symbolic consumption: a sociological level of analysis, because symbols require agreement in meaning for the social construction of reality; a focus on both the production and consumption of symbols; and a concern with the rhetoric of symbols or who controls their meaning over time. Second, semiotics promotes a degree of retrospection and open-mindedness about prevailing theories and methods we are usually unaccustomed to. In so doing it offers the opportunity to improve consumer research by identifying conceptual ruts and by encouraging multiple modes of research. Third, as researchers and consumers of the signs of our time, semiotics can make us better communicators

among ourselves, with our subjects, and with our students.

Human experience is mediated by a panorama of signs and codes both linguistic and non-linguistic and it is the meanings of these phenomena that we act upon, not the objects of quasi-existence that we assume supports them. This is a crucial semiotic premise for consumer research in an era of ethnocentric Western materialism where “the belief that the ultimate goals of personal life can be fulfilled by things and sensations . . . is losing credibility in the face of facts” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, p. ix).⁶

Acquisition, Consumption, Disposition as Semiosis

In Peirce’s semiotics, meaning ultimately issues from the symbolic qualities of signs through the pragmatic implications and realizations of semiosis. Anthropologist and semiotician Mary Douglas (1970; Douglas and Isherwood 1979) has criticized economists—and by implication their marketing progeny—for concocting theories about rational individuals abstracted from their symbol-perfused sociocultural habitat. Olshavsky and Granbois (1979) have reproved consumer researchers for an equivalent myopia.

Although Schenk and Holman (1980) and a handful of other consumer researchers have shared the Douglas and Isherwood opinion, few have gone beyond the perception of goods as subsistence or competitive display tools to the more penetrating semiotic perspective espoused by Douglas and Isherwood—namely, that goods are “needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture” (p. 59). Douglas and Isherwood maintain that “the essential function of consumption is its capacity to make sense” and they exhort researchers to “forget that commodities are good for eating, clothing, and shelter . . . treat them as a nonverbal medium for the human creative faculty” (p. 62). Probably no single programmatic study has as thoroughly substantiated this conception of consumption-as-semiosis as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s (1981). Extending semiotics to the universe of all acquisition, consumption, and disposition behaviors, whether directed at goods and services or at information, can point toward similar new vistas on consumer life.

Considering advertising research especially, we must move beyond conceiving advertising in terms of what it does to people and view it more in terms of what people do with advertising (Lannon and Cooper 1983; Mick 1987). Advertising is both “a model of and a model for reality” (Sherry 1985, p. 9)—in the Geertzian metaphor (1973), a flowchart and a blueprint. Such a

⁶For brief but excellent historical inquiries on the acquisition and consumption of worldly goods, see Belk (1983, 1985) and McCracken (1985).

perspective enlightens our comprehension of the dynamics of global and national advertising. In the cross-cultural scene, semiotics finds obvious the source of communication gaffes that have been well-documented (Aman 1982; Ricks, Arpan, and Fu 1974). Intracultural codes of language, beauty, proxemics, animals, and colors have been unwittingly and variously violated. For instance, in 1963 Dow Breweries introduced a new beer in Quebec, Canada and liberally borrowed French-Canadian nationalistic emblems in the hopes of enticing patriotic loyalty to its product. Instead, an enormous public outcry erupted and the campaign was scrapped within fifteen days (Elkin 1969).

More generally, Bryant and Jordan (1978), Goffman (1979), and Umiker-Sebeok (1979, 1981) have argued that advertising renders human behavior in predictable, repeatable patterns and depicts an artificial world of anachronistic role models. An illusory "realism" is achieved through the use and abuse of the semiotic concept *metonymy*. Whereas *metaphor* transposes the qualities of one object to a dissimilar object by way of implied comparison, crossing strata of reality through imaginative association, *metonymy* remains on a single stratum and through the principle of contiguity chooses a part of something to represent the whole. For instance, laundry commercials regularly depict people in the contracted roles of bumbling husband, homebound and antisepsis-expert wife, and careless children. As Fiske points out (1982, p. 97), "The selection of the metonym is clearly crucial, for from it we construct the unknown remainder of reality." Since it is part of what it represents (consumer life), the laundry scene metonym, along with the role behaviors portrayed, is an indexical sign. This accounts for its power. But the part that represents the whole is a paradigmatic and arbitrary choice of the advertiser. Moreover, in its rhetorical usage the arbitrariness of the selection is often glossed over and undetected.

Goffman and Umiker-Sebeok have also shown how widespread sociocultural changes, fueled especially by the women's movement, have been either ignored or trivialized by many advertisers (see also Bartos 1983; Courtney and Whipple 1983; Roberts and Koggan 1975). Continued insensitivity to these pervasive but often recondite changes in the signs of our time are likely contributing to the darker opinions expressed about advertising (Barksdale and Perreault, Jr. 1980; Zanot 1984), particularly by subgroups like single parents, white-collar professional women, and minorities whose beliefs about a common social world are not wholly convergent with traditional American views (cf., Arnould 1983).

The Primacy of Tacit Knowledge

Semioticians frequently focus on communication coding rules as they account for the interpretability of

reality (Culler 1981; Eco 1976; Fiske 1982). In so doing, they probe the realms of both culturally (Hanson and Hanson 1981) and biologically (Gopnik 1981) derived tacit knowledge, identified in various times by Plato, Poincaré, Kant, Freud, Geertz, and Polanyi. By tacit knowledge we mean the store of learned and inherited experiences that serve in the automatic and integrative intuition of the environment and the guidance of behavior. One of Polanyi's examples is the effortless skill of a bicycle rider. For Geertz, tacit knowledge underpins common sense (Geertz 1983). Few consumer researchers have acknowledged the role of tacit knowledge in acquisition, consumption, and disposition behaviors (e.g., Rook 1985) despite the fact that to some degree all forms of knowledge are rooted in tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1958, 1969). According to Hanson and Hanson (1981), tacit knowledge is evidenced in sociocultural principles that act as coding rules in the generation and interpretation of signs. As we grow up and are assimilated socioculturally, these principles are rarely made explicit, though our conventional behavior is grounded in them.

Semiotics can contribute to those emerging areas of consumer theory and research where tacit knowledge is implicated. Consumer values research (Clawson and Vinson 1978; Pitts and Woodside 1984; Pollay 1983), consumer schema and script theory (Crocker 1984; Leigh and Rethans 1983; Mick 1987; Puto 1985), consumer rituals (Rook 1985), attribution theory (Belk, Mayer, and Bahn 1982; Kehret-Ward and Yalch 1984; Smith and Hunt 1978), and symbolism research in general all focus on the deeper levels of knowledge and consciousness that play vital roles in behavior, though they resist identification.

Methodological Implications

For Polanyi, Geertz, and semioticians in general, human consciousness and experience is suffused with tacit knowledge. But, enveloped as it is in the signs and meanings of its sociocultural context, and unlike the typical constructs consumer researchers have historically sought to gauge with scales, tacit knowledge eludes specification. To appreciate and approximate the tacit knowledge of consumer behavior, we must realize that it is consumer reality we are studying, not our theory. How do consumers construe the consumer world? How do they formulate and utilize the meanings of acquisition, consumption, and disposition? What is important to them and how do they define those aspects of consumer life (Schneider 1976)?

Consider Figure C, reprinted from Lannon and Cooper (1983). If every consumer study appearing in major publications during the last 20 years was positioned in the figure according to its methodology, the figure would topple over. The upper levels of Figure C reflect the methodological dogma of operationalism

FIGURE C
AN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH CONTINUUM

METHOD	LAYER			OUTPUT
Simple questioning	PUBLIC	COMMUNICABLE	Spontaneous	Immediate, spontaneous response
Asking/reminding			Reasoned conventional	Justifications, explanations
Pressing			Preconscious	Detailed elaborations/introspections
Sympathetic probing	PRIVATE	NON-	Concealed, personal	Personal admissions
Play, drama, non-verbal			Intuitive	Symbols, imagination analogy
Projective approaches			Unconscious	Repressed attitudes, motives

Source: Lannon, Judie and Peter Cooper (1983), "Humanistic Advertising: A Holistic Cultural Perspective," *International Journal of Advertising*, 2, 195-213.

which, in its most famous and now debunked form, behaviorism, seeks to explain complex social behavior in terms of select salient variables. For tacit knowledge, consumption symbolism, and consumer life meaning, such approaches are insufficient at best.

Fortunately, several researchers have mined the lower portions of Figure C. Levy (1978, 1982) has argued for the rich insights to be gained from projective techniques like storytelling, personal consumption-oriented diaries, fantasizing, word associations, Thematic Apperception Tests, and depth interviews. Sherry (1983) and Rook (1985) have called for researchers to immerse themselves in consumer environments as ethnographic, participant observers. Phenomenological ethnography and hermeneutics suggested by Bruyn (1967), Oiler (1982), and O'Shaughnessy (1985) seem useful as well. The much maligned case-study methodology recently revived by Lincoln and Guba (1985) also promotes deeper understanding of tacit knowledge and semiosis. Sherry (1984) and Fine (1985) have advocated closer inspection of consumer anecdotes and oral histories that reveal consumption and mercantile legends containing important symbolic meanings. Ultimately we need a range of methods to obtain a span of data from which a Geertzian "thick description" can be built and interpreted.

Along similar lines, Turner (1967) has suggested that the multilevel nature of symbolic meaning requires varied but funnelled research methods:

1. Exegetical meaning represented by verbal interpretations of symbols by informants
2. Operational meaning represented by actual symbol usage observed by the researcher
3. Positional meaning represented by the researcher's efforts to see a symbol's relationship to others belonging to the same complex or Gestalt

Put another way, as Peirce would surely have supported, we must approach semiotic issues through triangulation—i.e., the convergence of various methodologies and knowledge on the elucidation of consumer semiosis (Deshpande 1983; Hirschman 1985; Webb 1978).

The Semiotic Challenge

In accentuating naturalistic field research for inquiry into consumer semiosis, the anthropologic-ethnographic vein of semiotics is venerated. However, semiotics is not necessarily contrapuntal to other forms of scientific research like experimentation or survey research (see Anderson et al. 1984). What semiotics rebelliously contests is any sort of methodological dogmatism that seeks to govern what is knowable—hence, what can or cannot be true. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) and McCloskey (1983) have argued, the last century has witnessed the rise and domination of a scientific credo grounded in logical positivism, logical empiricism, operationalism, and behaviorism, an amalgam dubbed "modernism" by McCloskey and mockingly called "the Received View" by its critics. One of its precepts holds that only the indubitable can count for knowledge—an article of faith professed loudly in late 19th century physics and mathematics, but today discredited (Capra 1977; Davis and Hersh 1981; Kline 1980). By and large, most social scientists and consumer researchers have honored modernism, or at least its image. Among its axioms, Lincoln and Guba (1985) and McCloskey (1983) list:

- Inquiry is value free
- Knower and known are independent, a dualism
- Time- and context-free generalizations (nomothetic statements) are possible
- Reality is single, tangible, and fragmentable
- Prediction (and control) is the goal of science
- Objectivity is to be treasured; subjective "observation" (introspection) is not scientific knowledge
- Kelvin's Dictum: "When you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind"

Thayer describes the pursuit of this *scientism* as "an ideology that permits us to believe that what we are studying is 'out there' rather than 'in here,' and that what we are after is the 'truth,' which is, for those who subscribe to the faith, some function of large masses of data" (1982, p. 35).

There are at least two fallacies at the heart of the Received View. First, objectivity is impossible: theories precede facts and interpretation precedes perception, otherwise how would some signs be singled out and prioritized as more significant or more meaningful? Second, the reality observed is one that pre-exists, pre-coded to sustain meaning in social spheres. Researchers,

like any other group of human beings, admittedly or not, have essential, vested interests in that meaning.

In Peircean semiotics, each person is a sign, in fact principally a symbol—a regenerating spiral of interpretants in a social world of endless semiosis. In consumer research this translates into a higher degree of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity by researchers concerning (1) the pre-existing interpretations they bring to their work, (2) the openendedness of their evolving insights, and (3) the inherited and created symbols they employ in the quest of consumer science. On these exact issues Levy implicitly invoked semiotics while discussed three *ACR* papers on product symbolism (Levy 1982, p. 543):

The discussion of these three papers highlights to me what we might call a serial regress of perceptions, as in a mirror where an observer sees an observer who sees an observer, to infinity. I am made self-conscious in commenting on and trying to sort out my perceptions of these authors' perceptions of their subjects' perceptions; and you will observe mine, perhaps mention them to others, etc.

Levy's concluding remark injects the semiotic doctrine into consumer research (p. 543):

We academicians observe and think about the relationships among symbols by studying the ways that selves use them and the interpretation made by others who observe the selves. Although we may dignify our observations and thoughts by calling them data and theories, it may be salutary to recognize that we are just more others observing selves; and that data and theories are symbols of our profession. It is necessary to face up to the subjectivity that is involved on all sides.

Though not explicitly mentioning semiotics, Bristor (1985), Lakoff and Johnson (1980), McCloskey (1983), Palmer (1978), and Ward and Ruekert (1984) have concentrated on exposing researcher/scientist symbol systems. Their insights together with a heightened semiotic competence can contribute to improved scholarship in theory building, testing, and communicating. For instance, popular research metaphors include cognition-as-computerlike and behavior-as-scriptlike. These are symbolic icons whose power derives from agreed-upon similarities. As Ward and Ruekert point out, while such metaphors often facilitate understanding, they also commonly harbor surpluses and deficiencies of meaning that, if unchallenged or unrecognized, can confound more than clarify. As these symbolic icons are promulgated and accepted, they become themselves a code among researchers—an interpretation that precedes the facts. One of Peirce's chief goals was to humanize the sciences by fostering an ethics of scientific terminology and tools, but as Pignatari (1978) notes, though scientists continue to be inveterate metaphor makers, they spend little time examining and re-evaluating their symbolic icons (Palmer 1978).

This may explain why semiotics is intellectually dis-

comforting: it insists on an ongoing reflexivity where the researcher's presuppositions—prior beliefs, theories, models, metaphors, etc.—are regarded as integral to the inquiry's outcome. This active skepticism and resistance to disciplinarity turns semiotics inward to such an extent that Kristeva has suggested that "semiotics cannot develop except as a critique of semiotics" (Kristeva 1969, p. 30). This is a bold prescription, but one that applies equally to consumer research. Semiotics joins with marketing and consumer researchers like Anderson (1983), Bristor (1985), Peter and Olson (1983), and O'Shaughnessy (1985) in fostering a more relativistic, sociological philosophy of science which, as Lincoln and Guba and McCloskey show, is gaining credibility as modernism totters from the weight of its unverifiable epistemological and metaphysical dogmas.

The intense reflexivity expected from its adherents and the provisionality it layers over all explanations conjured by humanity make semiotics as insightful as it is sometimes obtuse. The formidable metalanguage and the virtuosic flair that make some semiotic writings unduly obscure have retarded the diffusion of semiotic thought into areas like consumer research. These problems are, nonetheless, surmountable and worth overcoming, as Eco and Douglas have each argued. On provisionality, Eco has written (1978, p. 83):

The semiotic approach is ruled by a sort of indeterminacy principle: insofar as signifying and communicating are social functions that determine both social organization and social evolution, to "speak" about "speaking," to signify signification, or to communicate about communication cannot but influence the universe of speaking, signifying, and communicating.

On reflexivity, Douglas has pointed out (1982, p. 199):

Wherever it has been applied, semiotics has raised controversy. Any academic discipline that has been sleepily taking for granted the conditions of its own communications finds that semiotic analysis can open new depths of awareness and raise new theoretical questions . . . Inevitably, exploiting a new understanding of structures of communication in a given medium brings to the surface thorny epistemological problems that formerly could be ignored by practitioners in that medium.

These remarks provide glimpses of the substantial opportunity semiotics offers to consumer research at a time when one surveyor of our field has opined that our existing methods and tools are obviating our brains (Jacoby 1978; see also Hirschman 1985). No lone perspective, including semiotics, could in itself guide us out of the quagmire thus described. Semiotics, in fact, would suggest that the condition is largely intrinsic to Western thought, if not human nature and the whole symbolic environment; accepting the condition and gaining wisdom through the anxiety is the initial step toward the enlightenment we all seek.

Does this mean that we will wallow in relativism,

solipicism, and nihilism? Those who believe the purpose of consumer research is to reach the truth about consumer life will likely answer "yes." What semiotics contends is that the cybernetic matrix of the symbol-human environment will not permit us to arrive at the truth. From this vista, Thayer asks, "Would we go about our business any differently if we sought not to arrive, but to contribute to and enrich the dance of life?" (1982, p. 38). Wood affirms Thayer and implicates semiotics as an essential doctrine in the inquiry into consumer behavior (1982, p. 7):

Symbolic ability is central to humanity. . . . Whatever paths we take, we will be acting in ways uniquely human, because we will employ symbols to reach our ends. Humans have such choices only because we can create, use, and abuse symbols to affect our own lives and worlds. This is why symbolic ability defines humanity. It is also why each of us should learn about our symbolic abilities and how we can use these to enhance ourselves and our worlds.

Clearly, semiotics can cultivate our understanding of our symbolic abilities as consumers and as researchers.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article has been to profile the doctrine of semiotics, and to explore and suggest ways in which consumer researchers can achieve added insights in their efforts to comprehend symbolism in the marketplace, in consumer life, and in the research arena itself. Semiotics is not a panacea, or even at this juncture a unified body of thought. In fact, like our own field, semiotics has been criticized for as yet not having produced a core of systematized theorems. In response, some semioticians as well as a few intrepid consumer researchers (Bristor 1985) have taken the position that a general theory for human nature (or consumer behavior) is neither realizable nor germane. Nonetheless, while the absence of unified hypotheses is often considered a weakness, it can also lend flexibility to applications and stimulate expanded research. And while semiotics may seem at first to be best suited as a logic of discovery, to counterbalance an overemphasis on the research of justification (Bouchard 1976; Kassarjian and Sheffet 1981), semiotics suspends if not rejects the discovery/justification distinction along with a host of other reality grids that have taken on the appearance of necessity (MacCannell and MacCannell 1982): self/other, mind/matter, theory/data, form/content, definition/operationalization, independent/dependent variables, and even subject/researcher. Though not a theory in the sense that modernists like Hunt (1983) subscribe to, perhaps the most cogent role semiotics can play is that of an epitheory (Bartels 1970)—that is, as an integrator of previously compartmentalized, incongruent, or unjuxtaposed theories, models, methods, concepts, and so on. In relating semiotics to economic

theory, and by implication to marketing and consumer research, Douglas has written (1982, pp. 201–202):

If semiotics can embed the extremely successful macro-analysis of individual decision-making into a new analysis of cultural interaction, it will be critically important in the history of Western thought. For we suffer from the lack of a methodologically satisfactory way of relating the cognizing individual to his cognized social environment, accounting for the feedbacks and reinforcements each gets from the other. In the growth of a long, slow wave of criticism of the fundamental assumptions of Western thought, semiotics has a unique part to contribute.

Consumer researchers are encouraged to investigate and fulfill the promising contribution semiotics seems poised to make.

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