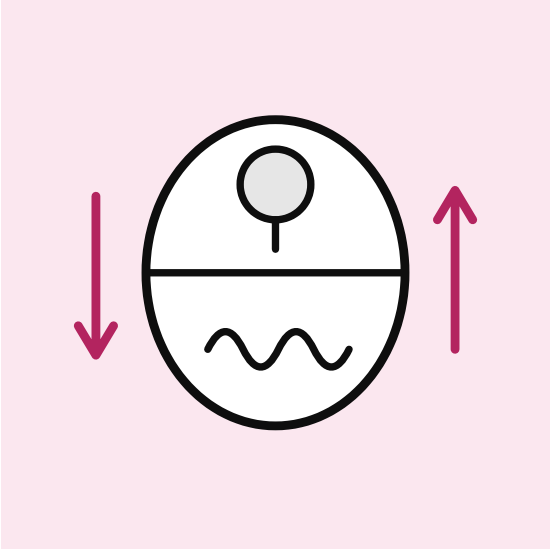
Concept

Signifier and signified

The two sides of a sign according to Saussure: the signifier is the form that is perceived (a sound, some letters, a stroke) and the signified, the idea that form brings to mind.



In Spanish
Significante y significado

Origin
Saussure (1916), a posthumous work published by Bally and Sechehaye

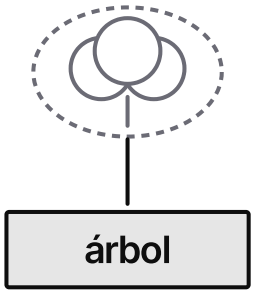
What problem it addresses

It separates form from idea so you can ask whether the chosen form brings up the intended idea. Design almost always works on the signifier, so that it reaches the right signified.

An example

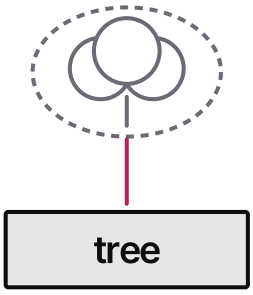
An example using Saussure's own case: the idea of "tree" in two languages.

In Spanish



The idea of a tree is tied to the form "árbol."
One form.

In English



The same idea is tied to the form "tree."
Another form, the same idea.

Nothing in those letters looks like a tree: the link between form and idea is a convention that has to be learned. That's why a new name or logo has to be taught.

Why it happens

1

You perceive a form, a sound, some letters, or a drawing;

2

you link it to an idea that you learned with your language and culture;

3

if you don't know that convention, the form tells you nothing.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Separate form and idea in your design: write down what it should bring to mind and check whether the chosen form achieves it.

Avoid

Assuming a name, a color, or an icon means something on its own, without anyone having learned it.

Don't fall for it

You already know the meaning you were after; ask other people what idea the form brings to mind.

72%

By chance

Observed

What the research says

Responses that matched "bouba" with a round shape and "kiki" with a spiky one, among 917 people speaking 25 languages; chance would give 50% (Ćwiek et al., 2022).

●●○ **Debated evidence.** The effect appeared in 17 of the 25 languages: the link between sound and shape is not always as arbitrary as Saussure assumed, who saw onomatopoeia as rare and approximate.

Connections

Used in

- Brand identity design
- UX writing

Related to

- Affordance
- Denotation and connotation
- Icon, index and symbol

Authors and works

1916	**Ferdinand de Saussure**	Described the sign as the union of a sound-image and a concept, which he called signifier and signified, and argued that the link between them is arbitrary. The book was published after his death by two of his former students, Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, from notes taken in his classes.
2022	**Ćwiek et al.**	Showed across 25 languages that certain sounds are linked to certain shapes, a limit to the idea of arbitrariness.

Sources

Original sources

- Saussure, F. de (1916). Cours de linguistique générale (C. Bally & A. Sechehaye, Eds.). Payot.
- Ćwiek, A., Fuchs, S., Draxler, C., Asu, E. L., Dediu, D., Hiovain, K., … Winter, B. (2022). The bouba/kiki effect is robust across cultures and writing systems. Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B, 377(1841), 20200390. View source (https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2020.0390)

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