Even in the most naïve sense, without qualification, the term *sign* imposes great difficulties. The word designates any thing, whether gesture, mark, token, symbol or even natural event, that expresses, indicates or refers to a meaning or to something else. Yet even that most general and innocent statement offers at best a futile answer, as if to a question that already presupposes it: “what does the word *sign* designate?” The presupposition of a prior meaning infects all interpretations of the word *sign*, which is always thus figured as a latecomer, standing in for something, a thing or a concept that precedes it. But the concept *sign*, if it does refer back to a prior meaning, refers back only to itself—that which means something other than itself. Jacques Derrida, the most eloquent of modern philosophers, deliberately adopts the undoubtedly clunky rhetorical procedure, borrowed from Martin Heidegger, of crossing out the words presupposed by the question of the sign: “The sign is that ill-named thing, the only one, that escapes the instituting question of philosophy: ‘what is...?’” (*Of Grammatology* 18). These clumsily visible removals—of the copula and its predicate—nonetheless contribute to a suggestive series: erasure; sign; singular; ill-named; escape. Effects of the copula and of predication do indeed occur but only because the sign erases itself; it differs from itself in its repetition, thus escaping the economy of predication that it makes possible. The formulation in effect compromises any distinction between signs and what they signify, and reveals instead an economy of repetition that precedes and makes possible all acts of signification and, more pertinently, must be presupposed by the instituting question of philosophy, “what is ...?” The sign would thus differ from itself in its singular repeatability, always the same but never identical (A=A). For the combined effects of difference and repeatability Derrida has used the word iterability, which can confidently be substituted for the notion of *the sign*.

Previously meaning had always been explained in terms of the relationship between signs and either their referents (discrete things that exist in the world) or their senses (which
like gods, fictional characters and qualities like goodness or nothing, need not have referents). An implicit and often explicit hierarchy is often assumed, according to which mental activity or experience produces signs of thoughts for the purposes of communication. Aristotle, for instance, asserts that “spoken words are symbols of mental experience and written words are symbols of spoken words.” In *Of Grammatology* Derrida argues that this theoretical separation between the spoken word and the written word (which he calls *phono-centrism*) serves across centuries to protect the idea of a *topos noetus*, a divine understanding removed from time, otherwise known as the primary sense, or the transcendental signified. Against this, Derrida demonstrates that the characteristics normally and uncontroversially identified with the written mark, i.e. its iterability, necessarily apply to anything that could be said to function as a sign, including spoken words. In this way he helps to hasten a fundamental reconsideration of meaning and signification that has been implicit in Western thought since at least Plato.

In the nineteenth century, the pragmatic philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce isolated three different types of sign. The *symbolic* sign is like a word in so far as it refers by symbolizing its referent. It neither has to look like it nor have any natural relation to it. There is nothing about a cat requiring that it be called a “cat.” A poetic symbol like the sun (which may stand for enlightenment and truth) has an obviously symbolic relation to what it means. The *indexical* sign is like a signpost or a finger pointing in a certain direction. An arrow may accompany the signpost to Heathrow or to “Departures”; or the index of a book will have a list of alphabetically ordered words with page numbers after each of them. These signs play an indexical function. The *iconic* sign refers to its object by actually resembling it like a picture (as with road signs).

Useful as Peirce’s distinctions are, the study of so called *iconic* signs can lead to the temptation to distinguish certain types of supposedly iconic writing from say *alphabetical* writing. Iconicity describes any signal, or component of a signal, which is in some way geometrically similar to what it stands for (e.g., the wing design on the British Airways Jumbo Jets). Certain kinds of hieroglyphic writing as well as Asian ideographic systems have led people to believe that they function as icons. In his influential *Course in*
General Linguistics (published posthumously in 1915), the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure proposes that the linguistic sign, as the basic element of the language system (see langue and parole), should be regarded as the paradigm for all signs. Saussure departs from previous theories of meaning by discovering that language can be examined independently of its referents (anything that a linguistic sign might refer to, including fictions and abstractions). This is because the sign contains both its signifying element (the image of a sensible sound or mark) as well as its meaningful content (what that mark means). The sign “cat” must be understood as being made up of two aspects. The marks, “C” “A” “T,” form a single word, “cat,” which simultaneously triggers a thought. The relationship between the sign and what it means has its basis in the repeatability of conventional connections, whether it is geometrically similar to some other object or some other sign or not. The sign need not resemble the object it signifies, though it sometimes might do. A similar mistake is often made concerning onomatopoeia, the formation or use of words to imitate sounds, like whispering, clang and sizzle, which people have believed constitute the earliest words. Again a mark or gesture needs only to be repeatable for it to participate in the economy of signs, whether it resembles some object or sound or not.

To assess Saussure’s theory of the sign it is worth examining the so called “triangle of signification.” Signification in its broadest schematic sense is generally described as a triadic relation (or three dyadic relations) between A, the sign (e.g., a signifier), B, a concept (or signified), and C the thing referred to (significatum or referent).
According to traditional accounts, the word (A) signifies the thing (C) by mediating concepts (B). In the Latin this is yet more explicit: “vox significant rem mediantibus conceptibus,” with vox of course designating “the voice.” Saussure points out that the sign is made up of the two components A+B (word + concept) and categorizes them as the two sides of a composite of mental elements: “If I hear the name ‘table,’ I shall think of a table; if I think of a table, I shall articulate the name if required” (69-70). The sign is thus composed of two mental or abstract entities: one corresponding to sensation (usually concerning the eye or the ear) and the other one corresponding to thought. The point of the triangle labeled “C” (referent, significatum, thing) has no place in general linguistics and so is put out of account. Saussure observes that people used to think of language as a correspondence between word and thing. The thing, though, has nothing at all to do with how language functions—it is irrelevant:

A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern [image acoustique—of course we now know that we must extend this to written marks as well—any repeatable image might become a signifier]. The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer’s psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses (66).

So the minimal unit of the language system is the sign, which is made up of two sides—an abstract image of a sensible form (the signifier) and an idea or concept (the signified). Saussure underlines the abstract quality of the two-sided sign, which is, for him, a psychological impression rather than something actual. A physical manifestation of writing or the sound of speech would each time manifest an abstract entity. There can be considerable variation among different handwriting styles, variable sizes and fonts, variable accents among speakers of the same language. This is because the mark or sign itself remains abstract like a triangle in geometry. The “acoustic image” is no less mental than the concept.
Henceforth the study of linguistics will focus on the institutions and systems by virtue of which certain marks not only correspond to but also produce meanings. The meaning of the word cat is not any particular cat that may have existed nor any that one day surely will. The meaning of the word cat is its potential to be used (e.g., in the sentence “your cat kept me up all night”). Language requires an inexhaustible and thus relatively indeterminate usability. So cat strictly has no absolutely determined univocal meaning. This is why Saussure was able to isolate language from the actual events of reference that it makes possible. Although the meaning of a word is determined to a certain extent in conventional use there is always something undetermined, always something yet to be determined, about it.

The signified is strictly impossible to picture, for the picture would serve only as another signifier (an image of a sensible). Saussure has to use all kinds of strategies (the quotation marks around the word tree or the image of a tree in another example) in order to get the point across. The fact is that the concept itself—the signified—does not exist as such in any sensible form. It is a thought. Furthermore, the relation between the two sides of a sign is arbitrary. He says:

The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary […] The idea of “sister” is not linked by any intrinsic relationship to the succession of sounds s-ö-r which serves as its signifier in French [or s-i-s-t-e-r which serves as its signifier in English]; that it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by differences among languages and by the very existence of different languages: the signified “ox” has as its signifier b-ö-f on one side of the border and o-k-s (Ochs) on the other (68)

Only the system, langue, can account for the way arbitrary relations between sounds and concepts come about, so the linguist is constrained to explain the whole system before he can explain how individual meanings come about.
Saussure qualifies his use of the word *arbitrary*. He says: “The term should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker; I mean that it is unmotivated, i.e., arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified” (69). Later he will add to this point the argument that, “the individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community” (69). The arbitrary convention that allows free choice requires only that it be fixed by tradition, over time, thus implying a semiotic universe without reference to any natural or necessary hierarchy of signs: “It is because the linguistic sign is arbitrary that it knows no other law than that of tradition, and because it is founded upon tradition that it can be arbitrary.” The sign would always be governed by unmotivated institutions. Saussure did not have time before his death to pursue the implications of his thesis, which are now a little better understood: all systems of determined signs function according to the laws of an economy of repetition. The difference of the mark from itself in its repetition ensures both the relative stability of signs and at the same time an openness to others: unheard of addressees, unheard of contexts. A further substitution, then, for the notion of *the sign* might be the relation to the other.

**References**
