Soc 108
(Summer 2008)
Lecture 1-3
“‘What is Meaning?’”
I. A Formal Approach to Meaning:

A. Structural Linguistics:
   Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) (Swiss)

I. Langue (Language) vs. Parole (Speech):

   social   vs.   individual
   essential   vs.   accidental
   given   vs.   created
1. A Formal Approach to Meaning:

2. Langue (Language) = System of Signs

Spoken (or written) language
language of facial expressions,
language of gestures,
language of fashion,
language of traffic lights.
language of music

Any sound of word image or object which functions as a sign, and is organized with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning is, from this point of view, a language.
1. A Formal Approach to Meaning:

3. Sign = Signifier (acoustic image) + Signified (concept)

(Note: Neither is the “real” thing itself)

4. Three key features of Signs:

(i) Arbitrary

- multiplicity of languages
- Lack of intrinsic connection to physical objects
- caveat 1. Onomatopoeia
- caveat 2. not arbitrary re: individual speaker
- caveat 3. not fixed, but evolving
1. A Formal Approach to Meaning:

4. Three key features of Signs:

(ii) Constituted via Difference:

- “Geneva to Paris Train” (at 8:25)

- Relational not Substantive

- $T$ vs. $t$ vs. $\bar{T}$ vs. $\bar{t}$ vs. $\bar{T}$ vs. $\bar{t}$ vs. $\bar{T}$ vs. $\bar{t}$

(iii) Neither Signifier nor Signified is Prior (Duality)
1. A Formal Approach to Meaning:

5. Synchrony (in the moment) vs. Diachrony (over time)
   - Emphasizes relationality & totality of system
   - only synchrony allows us to grasp essence of language
2. A Theory of Culture as Representation:

We have many ways of organizing classifications. By sequence, by causality, by taxonomy, etc.

Meaning depends on the relationship between things in the world, people, objects and events, real or fictional, and the conceptual system which can operate as mental representations of them.

We each have a conceptual map which we carry around in our head. Mine may be totally different from yours, in which case you and I would interpret or make sense of the world in totally different ways. We would be incapable of sharing our thoughts or expressing ideas about the world to each other.
2. A Theory of Culture as Representation:

However, even though each of us does understand and interpret the world in a unique and individual way, we are still able to communicate because we share broadly the same conceptual maps and thus make sense of or interpret the world and roughly similar ways.

That is what it means when we say we belong to the same culture. Because we interpret the world and roughly similar ways, we were able to build up a shared culture of meanings and us constructive social world which we inhabit together. That is why culture is sometimes defined as ‘shared meanings or shared conceptual maps’.
3. From Linguistics to Semiotics:

1. Semiotics: General theory of sign systems
   - All cultural objects convey meaning, so--
   - must rely on signs and work like a language

2. Levi-Strauss (1908-1996) (French)
   - Kinship as a sign system
   - myths as signs systems
   - elementary rules of order and combination