An Analysis of Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory: Focusing on Denotation, Connotation, and Myth

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ABSTRACT

This article has an objective to discuss Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. It focuses on the concepts of denotative meaning, connotative meaning and mythological meaning and builds upon Ferdinand de Saussure's foundational semiotics. This research has a common methodological way of writing that is by using qualitative method or library research. The result of discussion is applicable to Barthes' theory in comprehending of sign ways to account for cultural and ideological dimensions. His model of myth as a second order of semiological systems offers a powerful frame work for comprehending the ways in which everyday objects and media carry deeper ideological meanings. Through the analysis of selected texts of media, this research postulates how denotation and connotation are exemplified and providing literal and non-literal meanings. Denotative meaning provides literal meaning, connotation gives interpretative depth or individual meaning, as myth naturalizes ideological construction and it becomes part of artificial meanings. This article makes the conclusion that Barthes' theory of semiotics is essential for critically decoding message in contemporary media culture.

Keywords: *semiotics, denotation, connotation and myth.*

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

This article is concerned with Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and focusing on denotation, connotation and myth. In language, denotation is very crucial in human life in the most of communication and must use conceptional meaning or literal meaning. As connotation is usually used by the people in informal communication so that among the speaker and listener may not misunderstanding. Myth is a term which becomes part of human belief due to strong influence from convincing of the society. Semiotic theory on the bases of Barthes' owns is part of the discussion in this research.

It is known that Barthes was pursued his education at the University of Paris (the Sorbonne), focusing on literature and classics. Throughout his life, Barthes struggled with illness, particularly tuberculosis, which influenced his academic career by forcing him into periods of convalescence.

Despite this, he became a prolific writer and thinker, contributing significantly to structuralism, semiotics, and post-structuralism. His major works include *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), *Mythologies* (1957), *S/Z* (1970), and *Camera Lucida* (1980). Barthes tragically died in 1980 from injuries sustained in a traffic accident. Despite his illness, Barthes pursued a career in academia, teaching in Romania, Egypt, and later in France. He became a researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and eventually a director of studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). In 1977, he was appointed as professor of literary semiology at the Collège de Francean elite and prestigious academic institution.

Semiotics, the study of signs, plays a crucial role in understanding communication and cultural practices. Ferdinand de Saussure's early work defined the sign as composed of the *signifier* and the *signified*, but Roland Barthes expanded this model to explore how signs operate in culture, especially through media. Barthes argued that meanings are not fixed but are shaped by ideology, leading to the creation of myths that serve dominant power structures.

1.2 Biography of Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes was born on November 12, 1915, in Cherbourg, France. His father, a naval officer, died during World War I, leaving Barthes to be raised by his mother and grandparents. Barthes pursued his education at the University of Paris (the Sorbonne), focusing on literature and classics. Throughout his life, Barthes struggled with illness, particularly tuberculosis, which influenced his academic career by forcing him into periods of convalescence. Despite this, he became a prolific writer and thinker, contributing significantly to structuralism, semiotics, and post-structuralism. His major works include *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), *Mythologies* (1957), *S/Z* (1970), and *Camera Lucida* (1980). Barthes tragically died in 1980 from injuries sustained in a traffic accident.

1.2.1 Explanation of Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory

Semiotics is the study of sign and symbol. As one of branch of linguistic studies, semiotics is studying a symbol, sign and even pictures (Dunn at al., 1990). Barthes' semiotic theory builds upon Ferdinand de Saussure's foundational work. He conceptualized two orders of signification:

- **Denotation** is the primary, literal meaning of a sign — what we directly see or recognize.

- **Connotation** refers to the secondary meanings — the emotions, values, and associations that a sign carries based on cultural or personal contexts.

- **Myth** is a culturally constructed meaning or belief system that naturalizes and reinforces dominant ideologies. It's a form of speech or communication that transcends mere language, encompassing visual and symbolic representations, and often simplifies and reduces complex realities into simplistic narratives. Barthes argues that myths are not objective truths but rather ideological constructs that serve to maintain social structures and power dynamics (https://en.wikipedia.org).

Barthes (1972) introduces the concept of connotative that more complex and have wider meaning than the concept of denotative (Sabillah, 2019).

Myth in Barthes' thought is communication system, a message, so it is a myth, it is not an object, concept or idea, it is mode of signification, a form (Barthes, 1972).

Beyond these two levels, Barthes introduced **myth** as a second-order semiological system. Myth is a way in which the connotations attached to a sign become naturalized, turning historically and culturally specific meanings into seemingly universal truths. Through myth, culture communicates ideological messages, reinforcing dominant social values and norms.

1.2.2 Application of Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory

Barthes' theory can be applied to a wide range of cultural products such as advertisements, films, fashion, literature, and media. For example, analyzing a fashion advertisement:

- **Denotation**: The image shows a woman wearing a luxurious dress.

- **Connotation**: The dress symbolizes wealth, elegance, and sophistication.

- **Myth**: The underlying myth suggests that beauty and high status are naturally linked to wearing expensive fashion, reinforcing capitalist and elitist ideologies.

By applying this framework, we can uncover how media messages reinforce societal ideologies under the guise of natural meaning.

1.2.3 Applying Examples and Analysis of Denotation, Connotation, and Myth

Example 1: A Red Rose

- **Denotation**: A red flower with a green stem.

- **Connotation**: Love, romance, passion.

- **Myth**: The idea that giving a red rose is a universal and timeless expression of true love, obscuring the cultural and historical specificity of this practice.

Example 2 : A Soldier Saluting the Flag

- **Denotation**: A soldier standing straight and saluting.

- **Connotation**: Duty, honour, patriotism.

- **Myth**: The narrative that serving in the military is the ultimate act of loyalty and heroism, presenting military service as naturally virtuous.

Example 3: Fast Food Advertisement (e.g., a juicy hamburger)

- **Denotation**: A picture of a large, juicy hamburger.

- **Connotation**: Satisfaction, indulgence, happiness.

- **Myth**: The cultural belief that eating fast food is a quick and easy way to happiness and fulfilment, ignoring health risks and labour conditions behind the food industry.

1.3 Research Problem

Despite the influence of Barthes' semiotics in cultural and media studies, the layered process of meaning especially the transition from denotation to myth is often underexplored in application. Understanding how myths are constructed and perpetuated is essential in an age of mass media and consumer culture.

1. What are the components of Barthes' semiotic theory?

2. How do denotation, connotation, and myth function within a sign system?

3. How can Barthes' theory be applied to modern media and reveal the hidden ideologies?

1.4 Objectives

2   To explore Barthes' components in semiotic theory.

3   To clarify the relationship between denotation, connotation, and myth.

4   To analyse how Barthes' theory be applied to modern media and reveal the hidden ideologies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Ferdinand de Saussure and the Structuralist Model

Saussure conceptualized the sign as comprising two elements: the *signifier* (sound/image) and the *signified* (concept) (Saussure, 1916/1983). He emphasized that the relationship between them is arbitrary, laying the groundwork for structuralism.

2.2 Barthes' Contribution to Semiotics

Barthes advanced semiotics by introducing a second-order system. In his seminal work *Mythologies* (1957), he analysed everyday cultural objects and showed how signs become tools of ideology. According to Barthes, myth is a type of speech that turns historically specific meanings into naturalized truths (Barthes, 1972).

2.3 Denotation and Connotation

Denotation refers to the explicit or literal meaning of a sign, while connotation involves the cultural or emotional associations attached to it (Barthes, 1967). For example, a rose denotes a flower but connotes romance or passion.

2.4 Myth as Ideology

Barthes (1972) describes myth as a "second-order semiological system." A sign in the first system (denotation) becomes the signifier in the second, where the connotative meaning is naturalized as "common sense." Thus, myth disguises ideological messages under the guise of natural truth.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research is using qualitative or descriptive research or by using library research. It means all the references are taken from the books or textual ways as well as google bases. It is the same case with the opinion done by Moleong (2012) that qualitative research is the research that is intended to understand the phenomenon of what is experienced by researcher, such as behaviour perception, motivation, action at cetera with holistic means and by description in the form of words and language in a specific context scientifically. According to Yin (2011), there are five steps in analysing data: compiling, disassembling, interpreting and concluding (Barus 2023).

3.1 Research Approach

This qualitative research employs semiotic analysis to interpret visual and textual media. Barthes' theoretical model provides the analytical framework.

3.2 Data Collection

Images and advertisements from contemporary media (print and digital) were selected based on their representational richness and ideological implications.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

Each selected image is analysed in three stages:

1. **Denotative Level**: Literal elements identified.

2. **Connotative Level**: Cultural meanings explored.

3. **Mythical Level**: Ideological messages deconstructed.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Language is very important in human life, without language, of course, human cannot do anything in terms of verbal actions. On the other hand, in language meaning is crucially needed so that between one and another mutually understand what they communicate.

In making communication, there must be the terms what they are called denotation, connotation and myth. Denotation means the literal or conceptual meaning or dictionary definition of a word as well as its basic and straightforward meaning. It is the objective meaning, free from any emotional or subjective association, free from individual meaning. For example, the denotative meaning of the word "house" is the place where one resides, and the word "table" may mean the thing which is flat surface, made of wood, painted and having four legs (https://www.studiobinder.com).

4.1 Denotation

Denotation is the actual meaning of word which is usually said as the universal meaning of language. It does not have any subjective meaning of language. It is also said as the truth of meaning.

Here's a more detailed explanation on the definition of denotation.

- **Literal Meaning:**
Denotation focuses on the direct, factual meaning of a word. It's what you'd find in a dictionary entry.
- **Objective:**
Denotation is detached from personal feelings or experiences. It doesn't have any specific emotions or associations.
- **Example:**
The denotation of "rose" is a type of flower.
- **Contrast with Connotation:**
Connotation, on the other hand, refers to the implied or suggested meaning of a word, including any emotions, memories, or associations it evokes. For example, "rose" might also have connotations of love, beauty, or fragility.

There are some examples of denotative meanings on the basis of Barthes' theory:

- **Examples:**
  a. A photograph of a person represents that person who are there in the picture.
  b. The word "rose" denotes a specific kind of flower which is there in the pot or growing in the farm or besides the house.
  c. A red stop sign literally means "stop". It is conceptually seen as a sign on the street such as traffic lights.
  d. The word "chef" denotes someone who prepares food or the person who is skillful in cooking and preparing food.

  (https://journals.ums.ac.id)

  e. "Chef and Cook" Both words denote someone who cooks and prepares food.
  f. "House and Home" Both words denote a place where people live or reside.
  g. "Shrewd and Clever" Both words denote intelligence. ...
  h. "Skinny and Slim" Both words denote thinness.

  (https://www.litchats.com)

Denotation (Rohmani, Arif Lutfi, 2025) is the first level of signification that includes the direct or linear relationship between a sign and its reference at this level. According to Barthes (1964), each sign consists of a signifier and a signified. The concept of meaning includes both denotation and connotation. Denotation is often described as the defined, literal, clear, or sensible meaning of a sign. In the contest of linguistic signs, denotative meaning refers to what is usually given by a dictionary and is the first level of significance. It describes the literal or obvious meaning of a sigh, without including a subjective evaluation. In visual imaginary, denotation refers to what everyone can see without being related to their culture, ideology, or society. Barthes stated that the message conveyed by denotation has an analogous nature and is a major part of the signification process.

4.2 Connotation.

Roland Barthes has suggested that connotation is a term used to explain the way in which signs work. Furthermore, It is the implication evoked by words or statements and images over what they actually denote, also' connotative signs can be personal and individual or general and universal '(J.A Cuddon 1998).

Connotation (Rohmani, Arif Lutfi, 2025) is the second level of signification involving markers, signs, and processes that connect the two (signification), which should occur at the first level in every system Barthes (1964). In his frame of thought, connotation is a sign that comes from a denotative sign marker, so that the denotation leads into the chain of connotations. Barthes places great emphasis on connotation, and notes that separating the marker from the marked is not easy (Barthes, 1967), meanwhile Wilden (1987), explains that the term 'connotation' is used to refer to the socio-cultural and personal (ideological, emotional, etc) associations of a sign. For Wilden, connotation is the hidden meaning behind these socio-cultural and personal associations. We see to identify the firth level of significance to clearly understand the signs that reveal these hidden meanings.

The followings are some examples of connotation, such as:

a. Wine in French Society

Barthes analyzed how wine was portrayed as a robust and healthy habit. Contrasting this bourgeois ideal with the realities of wine consumption, like its potential for being unhealthy or inebriating. So, the meaning of wine depends on how the thing is utilized by human and sometime, it is influenced by the culture of the society. In one place or country, wine is part of making healthy, and in one place based on their culture, it is used to increase their strength, but the opposite effect become unconscious and weak.

b. **Advertising Taglines:**

Researchers in a study on UIN Jakarta examined Coca-Cola and Pepsi taglines, finding connotative meanings beyond the literal words, like "The Daring Achiever" suggesting strength and confidence.

c. **Visual Signs in Advertisements:**

Barthes would analyze how images in advertisements, along with the text, contribute to the overall meaning. For example, a person with gray hair might connote wisdom or experience, according to Journal Unindra.

d. **Signs in Wrestling:**

Barthes analyzed wrestling as a semiotic system, where even the physical appearance of a wrestler, like the "vileness personified" of Thauvin, could create a powerful connotative association.

e. **Starbucks Logos:**

The evolution of Starbucks logos was analyzed to see how changes in color, shape, and text influenced the brand's connotations, according to Repository UNSADA.

These examples demonstrate how connotation adds layers of meaning beyond the literal or denotative, making it a powerful tool for understanding how signs communicate and convey messages.

It is seen that all about the examples of connotation above, whether they are verbal or non-verbal are interpreted as out of conceptual meanings. Verbal sign means the spoken language, as non-verbal sign means the visible thing which can be interpreted as part of meanings in language or communication.

4.3 Myth.

Myth in Roland Barthes's concept in his book Mythologies explores how seemingly simple images and objects can convey complex, often hidden ideologies. He argues that myth is a form of speech, not just language, but also visual and symbolic communication. Barthes deconstructs these myths to reveal how they naturalize dominant ideas and ideologies, often obscuring underlying power structures (https://soundenvironment.files.wordpress.com).

Barthes divide myth into six parts, such as:

a. **Myth as a form of speech:**

Myth can be defined by Barthes as traditional means beyond the story and descriptive to put it in visual and symbolic figures or representations. He suggests that any sign can be taken as part of meaning, which brings into the form of communication or verbal signs.

b. Deconstructing myths:

Deconstructing myths according to Barthes describe variety of well-known ideas or things, such as the youth of soldier surprising the Indonesian ideas and things of strong alcohol, to open the deeper, frequently hidden Barthes analyzes various popular images and objects, like the young soldier saluting the French flag or images of wine, to uncover the deeper, often hidden meanings they use. meanings they carry.

4. Naturali

Barthes shows how myths naturalize certain ideas, presenting them as universal truths or facts, even when they are rooted in specific social and political contexts. For example, he analyzes how the image of wine is often presented as a symbol of inherent Frenchness, masking the underlying economic and social forces that shape this association.

5. Depoliticization:

By presenting a simplified and often idealized version of reality, myths can obscure the complexities and power dynamics that exist in society. This depoliticization can make it harder for individuals to challenge or question dominant power structures.

6. Impact of myth:

Barthes emphasizes that myths have a powerful impact on how we perceive and understand the world. By making certain ideas and beliefs seem natural and obvious, myths can shape our individual and collective understanding of reality.

7. Beyond simple images:

Barthes's analysis extends beyond individual images and objects, exploring how myths are woven into the fabric of popular culture and consumer society. He examines how advertising, media, and other cultural forms contribute to the creation and dissemination of myths.

V. CONCLUSION

This research can be concluded that the theory done by Barthes, concerned with Denotation, Connotation and Myth is clearly understood and scientific. Each sign consists of a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the language which describes about the thing or object which is defined each sign consists of a signifier and a signified. The concept of meaning includes both denotation and connotation. Denotation is usually signified as the conceptual meaning or dictionary meaning. It describes the literal or obvious meaning of an object. As connotation is described as subjective meaning or individual meaning. It is also said as unlimited meaning and influenced by the culture as well as emotional meaning. Myth is part of human's belief or they suppose that it is already common for social culture.

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