

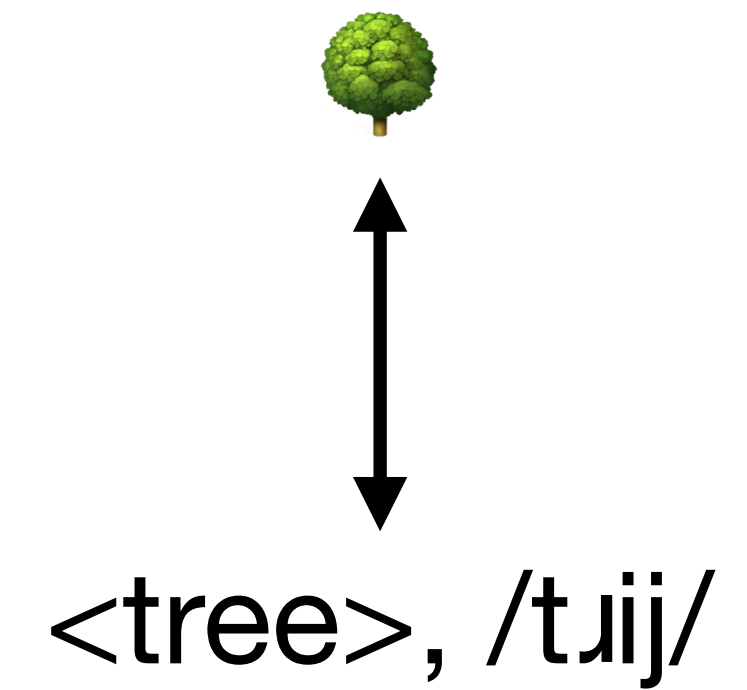
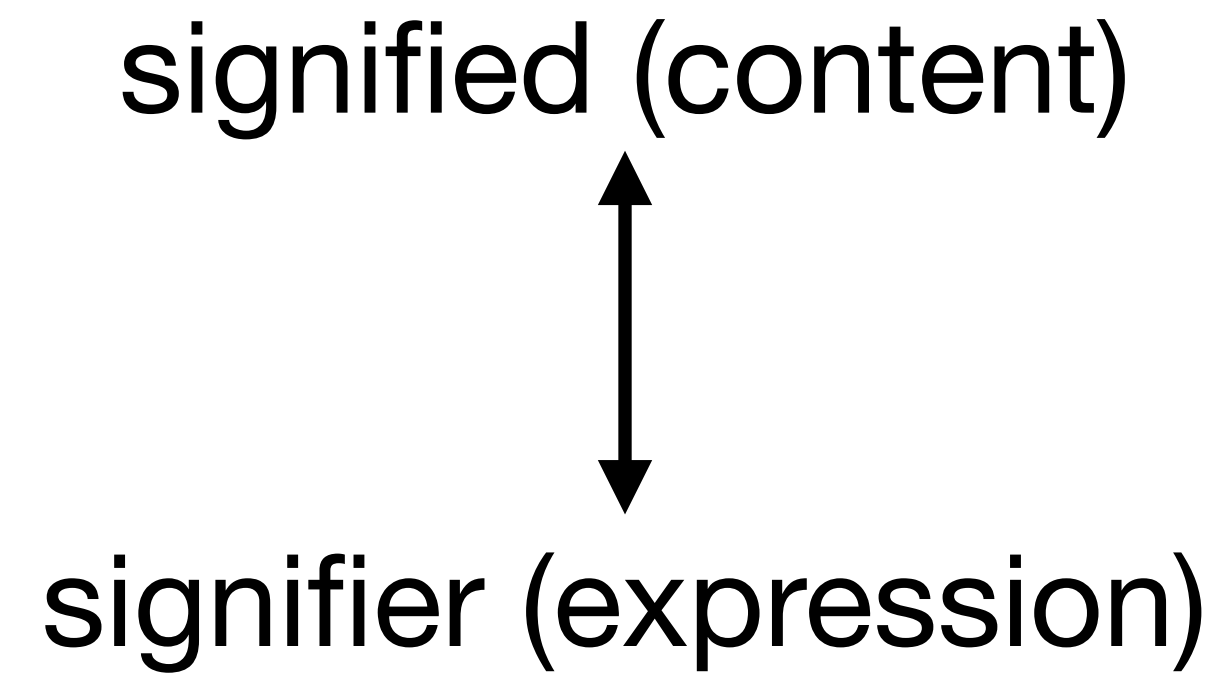
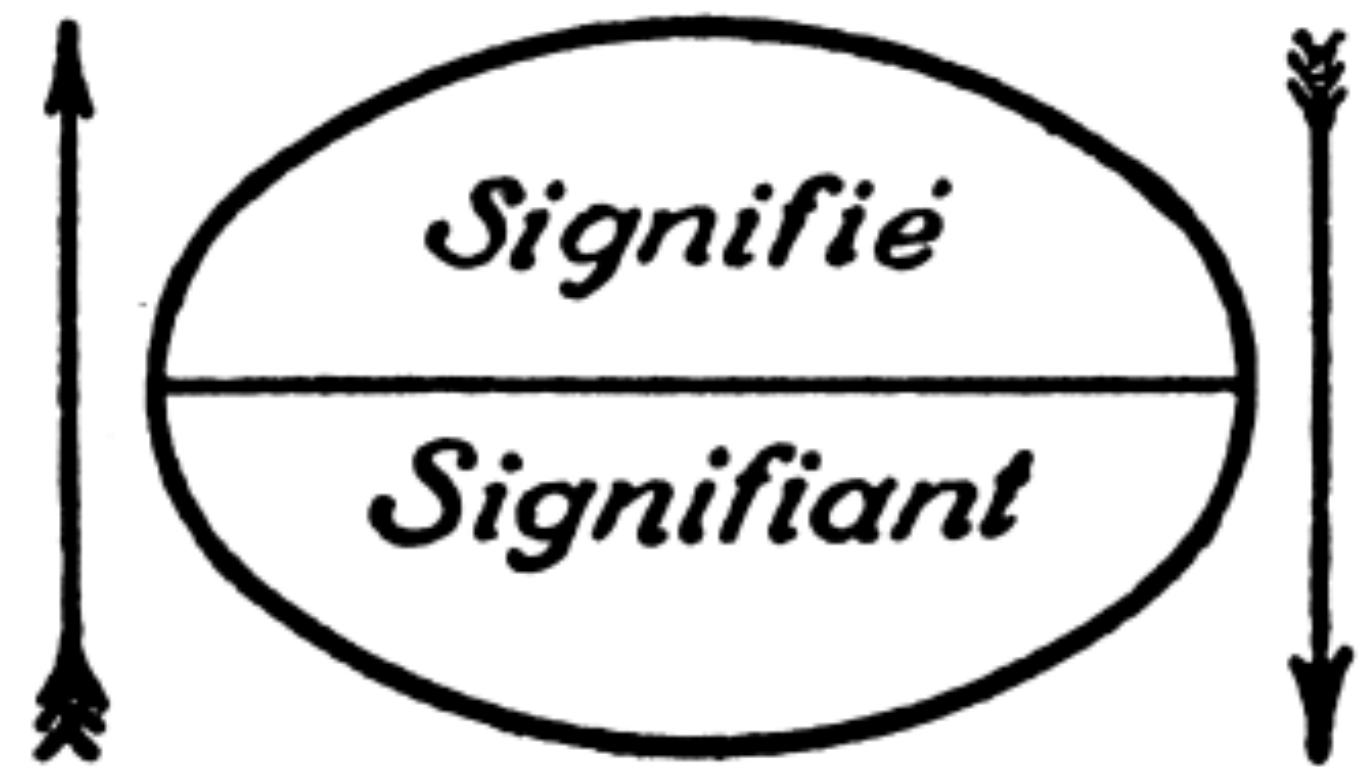
language and materiality, a tentative approach

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highlight

communication theory and materiality

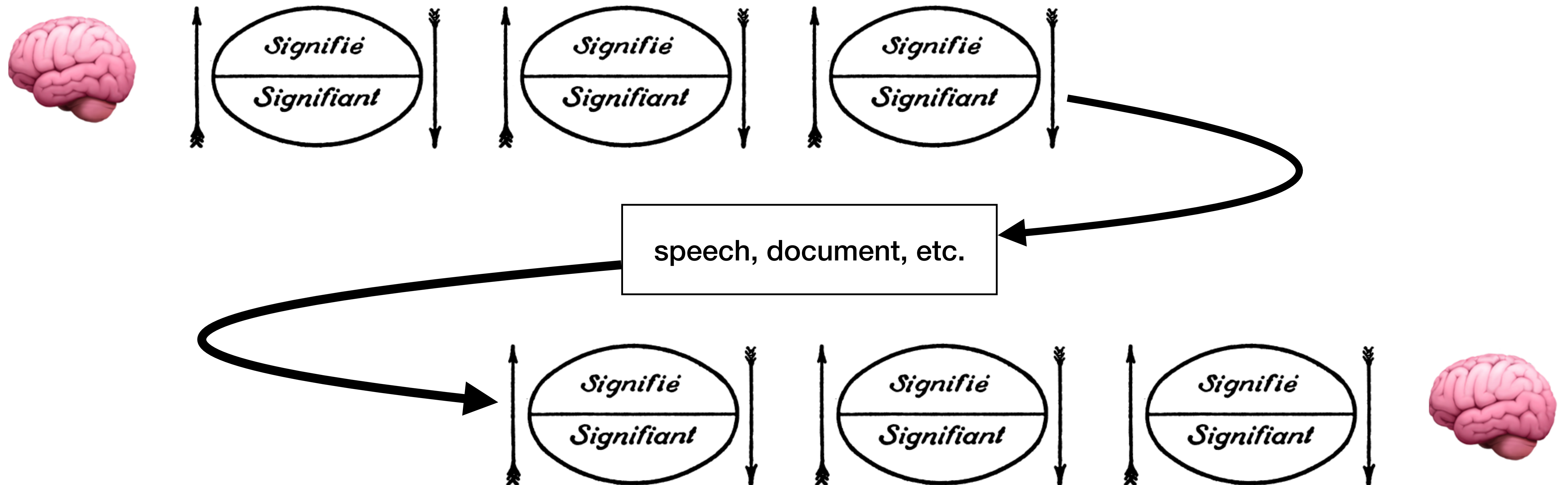
Saussure's theory of the sign



According to Saussure:

- the relationship between signifier and signified is *arbitrary* (trivial example: the word for 🌳 in French is *arbre*, but it [arguably?] refers to the same *concept*)
- signs are different from *symbols*, which have some iconicity in form
- signs work through *convention* (you have to learn the relationship between signifier and signified) and *difference* (signs work in relationship with one another and you have to understand how they're different)

transmission theory of communication



some trivial counterexamples

- Same concepts and truth value, different uses: *I broke the vase vs. The vase got broken.*
- Meaning and intention don't match up: *Can you pass the salt?*
- Deictic words don't have a single referent (or "signified"); they have no sense outside of physical, temporal, social context: *You left yesterday.*
- Meaning is generated and constructed in real time; speech doesn't just convey information, it also *manages* it: "*The season finale of Game of Thrones was amazing! I can't believe —*" "*Hey, no spoilers!*"
- Puns require knowledge of the signifier's form (in particular, what it sounds like): "Denial ain't just a river in Egypt."
- etc.

Exactly as in the reality of spoken or written languages, a word without *linguistic context* is a mere figment and stands for nothing by itself, so in the reality of a spoken living tongue, the utterance has no meaning except in the context of the situation.


—Malinowski, B. (1923). “The problem of meaning in primitive languages.” In Ogden, C.K. & I.A. Richards, The meaning of meaning: A study of the influence of language upon thought and the science of symbolism. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, p. 307

- "linguistic materiality" is when language *itself* is an important context
- in this class in particular, we concern ourselves with literary arts that *draw on linguistic materiality as a creative resource*
- in particular in particular, we concern ourselves with literary arts that draw on the ways that digital media and computation shape linguistic materiality

translation

"perfect" translation

- a "perfect" translation between languages can only exist if the transmission model is accurate: i.e., that meaning has a deep underlying structure that is the same in all minds, and that the surface form of signifiers is arbitrary
- to assert that two utterances can "mean the same thing" is to assert that context doesn't matter
- this is the idea behind Chomsky's "universal grammar" (and Star Trek's universal translator)

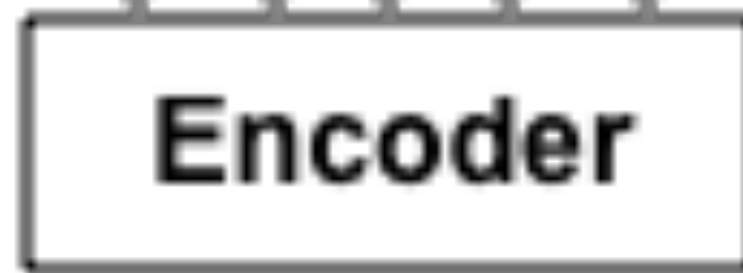


would you allow 2,000
people aboard this station

(this is all a long-winded way of saying that language model-based systems of translation *even in the perfect machine learning capital-U Utopian future* will always necessarily have gaps, because there is no such thing as language outside of the total context of language, including, you know, the physiology of the mouth parts, arrangement of bodies, tactical ambiguities, and weird Dukat-esque flirting)

"le chat est noir" <EOS>

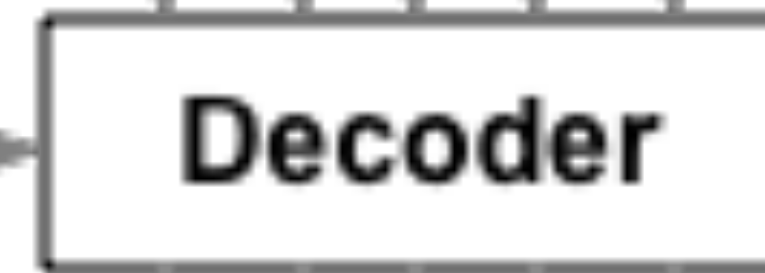
[02 85 03 12 99]



Context

<SOS> "the cat is black"

[00 42 82 16 04]



[42 82 16 04 99]

"the cat is black" <EOS>

luzh

日月

light

lysy

lumiere

lumene

swiatto swiat

swiatotto

ZAP

PAN

A

Montfort's *Heftings*

'To "heft" something is to lift it, as if to see how heavy the item might be, what heft it has. The concept of Heftings is not to translate (etymologically, to carry across) by lifting a source text, bearing it along, and bringing it triumphantly into a new language. Rather, we are content to heft literary works, to see in what ways they are difficult to grasp and to discuss different ways to try to hold them. [...] A translation attempt, even if it is unsatisfying as a translation, often makes particular qualities of the poem immediately clear and awakens new insights into the poem.'

明 (míng, *bright*; sun radical + moon radical)

Translations from Montfort, Nick. "Two Radical Translation Projects: Renderings and Heftings." Convolution, no. 4, Fall 2016, pp. 62-68.

"[T]hose who are skilled in the use of incantations, relate that the utterance of the same incantation in its proper language can accomplish what the spell professes to do; but when translated into any other tongue, it is observed to become inefficacious and feeble. And thus **it is not the things signified, but the qualities and peculiarities of words, which possess a certain power for this or that purpose...**"

Origen (in Richardson, Ernest Cushing, and Bernhard Pick, editors. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. C. Scribner's sons, 1905, pp. 406–407)

**pithy formulation: "translatability"
and "materiality" are inversely
related**

materiality/translation case study:
Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*

Tw'as brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!”

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

“And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!”
He chortled in his joy.

'Tw'as brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Eric Malzkuhn's ASL translation

- Performed by Joe Velez <http://videocatalog.gallaudet.edu/?embed=6518>
- "For the verb phrase, "gyre and gimble," Malzkuhn amplifies a handshape previously assigned to the word "tove" in a series of motions that doesn't represent but actually reproduces the sensation of this particular movement for the viewer to sense. For the adjective "vorpal," Malzkuhn mimics the act of drawing the sword but modifies "the manner in which the sword is drawn to indicate that the sword is not straight," conveying the speaker's own perception of the action for the viewer to internalize. Watching Velez execute Malzkuhn's rendition is a material sensation in itself." Mansfield, Jeffrey. "Space, Time and Gesture: Gestural Expression, Sensual Aesthetics and Crisis in Contemporary Spatial Paradigms." *TACET*, no. 3, 2014, https://web.archive.org/web/20160922040138/http://www.formsofcouncil.org/en/inquiries/30_tacet/784_space_time_and_gesture.

**let's talk at some other (mostly
digital somehow?) works**

- Sesame Street feat. Smokey Robinson, u really got a hold on me https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ws_vnXup7so
- Romy Achituv & Camille Utterback (ITP alum!), *Text Rain* <http://camilleutterback.com/projects/text-rain/>
- Vera Molnar, *Lettres de ma mère* <https://digitalartmuseum.org/molnar/lettersfrommother.html>
- Sharon Hopkins, *listen* https://docstore.mik.ua/orelly/perl/prog3/ch27_02.htm
- bpNichol, *First Screening* <http://www.vispo.com/bp/introduction.htm>
- Jenny Holzer, New York 2019 <https://projects.jennyholzer.com/projections/new-york-2019>