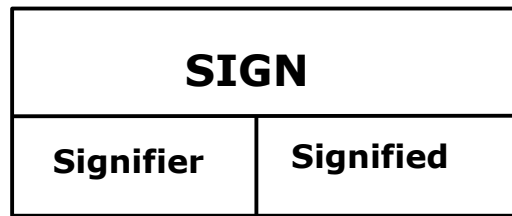


The Structuralist Definition of “Sign”

The diagram below shows the structuralist definition of a sign as in Roland Barthes' [*Elements of Semiology*](#). This definition is *dyadic* as opposed to the definition based on C. S. Peirce, which is *triadic*.

Structuralist critics, such as Barthes, used this definition as a basis for talking about “empty signifiers,” i.e, texts without reference. I find their approach limited and not very helpful.



In relation to the triadic definition of a sign, the *signifier* = the physical vehicle, and the *signified* = the cultural content. What is missing in the dyadic definition is the *referent*, the range of experiences that the sign can refer to. A sign, after all, “stands for something or other in some way.” This structuralist sign doesn't “stand for” anything.

This definition of *sign* derives from the work of the early twentieth century linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who said that the signifier and signified cannot be separated, that they are related like the two sides of a coin or a sheet of paper. Despite that, structuralist critics did separate them.