

# 1.15 The Language of Signs and Symbols

## Aim

- To understand the value of signs and symbols in communication.
- To understand the process of encoding and decoding
- To enlighten on African signs and symbols.

## Materials Required

- Posters displaying the signs given in the procedure.



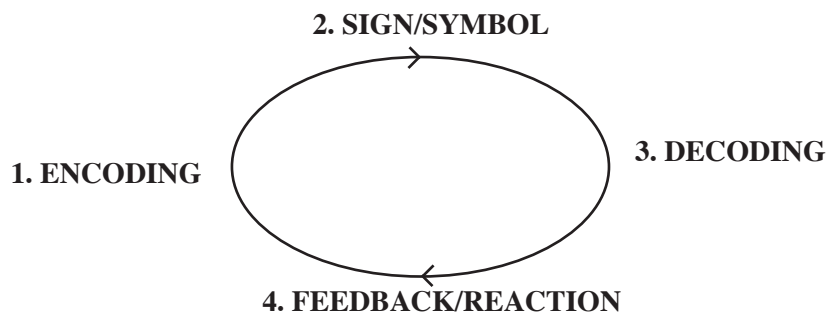
## Procedure

- Display poster No.1. Challenge each member to write down the meaning of each sign.
- Ask the group these questions:
  - Why were these signs recognizable?
  - Who has given them conventional status?
  - Why are they conventional signs?
  - Which signs are accepted internationally, nationally, locally?

(Answers): 1. No Smoking 2. Taking of Photographs Prohibited 3. Fragile 4. Waste Disposal 5. No Running 6. No Digging 7. Restaurant 8. Hospital 9. Church 10. HIV/AIDS 11. Information 12. Airport 13. Medical Services

## Input

Public signs are conventional symbols to communicate certain messages of public importance. They are conventional because they have been accepted by society over a long period of time. The geographic area covered by their acceptance can vary. Some signs are internationally accepted while some are not e.g. the dove a sign of peace is accepted internationally while the Kenyan flag is only accepted locally. Some signs have their origin in an event and are better understood in the context of that event, e.g. the peace symbol of Woodstock, No.7 Their use over the years has reinforced their value as powerful tools for communicating. Here is the process through which signs are created and understood.



- Signs and symbols originate because of the need to encapsulate a meaning in order to communicate that same meaning. This process of ‘encapsulating’ in a symbol or sign is called encoding the sign.

- But the process of understanding the sign involves a reverse process of relating the sign or symbol back to a real life context - a context within which the sign discloses a particular meaning which is to be understood. This process of understanding the sign is called decoding.
- Consequently, the feedback or reaction of the decoder follows.
- (To explain the process vividly, the teacher could welcome a volunteer/encoder to communicate a message to another volunteer/decoder across the room using only sign language or drawings on the black board. Once this is done and the decoder has understood the message, the class could be asked why particular signs were chosen, why some were more understandable than the others etc...)
- Signs and symbols have to be very clear such that they allow for only one interpretation. If a sign had many interpretations then the process of decoding would be complex and lack uniformity and consequently varying reactions would emerge.
- Therefore, when encoding public signs the artist or visualiser has to choose the simplest yet apt figure to convey the message. Colours too have to be striking in order to grab attention. Moreover, public signs are beyond language barriers. Hence the figure or symbols chosen must speak to people of all cultures. Traffic signs are a clear example of the process of encoding.
- Notice the process of encoding-decoding as the basic communication process. Corroborate by giving other examples: letter writing, sign-language for the deaf and dumb...

### Types of Signs

**Natural Signs** - A natural sign is a part of a greater event of a complex condition, and indicates the rest of the situation of which it is a notable feature. Sign then is a symptom of a state of affairs. There are three significant features to be noted in the use of signs in communication: the sign, its object and the subject who relates the sign and the object signified. The sign and its object (for example, smoke and fire) are logically related to form a pair. In any such combination one of the terms is less important--smoke, in this case--than the other--fire. The less important term, smoke, becomes the sign of the more important one, fire. The less important term is normally more easily available than the other term in the pair. For example, a scar as a sign is more easily available than the accident which is inferred from the presence of the scar. The accident then is the meaning of the scar as a sign.

**Artificial Signs** - Sometimes we produce artificial or arbitrary objects and actions and correlate them with important ones that serve as their meanings. These are called artificial signs. Traffic signs are good examples of artificial signs. For example, red light has been used arbitrarily to mean "stop" or "prohibition." Colors are also used arbitrarily to mean many different things. Thus in the indigenous Ghanaian culture brown is used as a color for mourning and so brown clothes are customarily worn to funerals and memorial services. Placing the arm or arms across the middle of the head or clasping both hands at the back of the head is used as another sign of mourning in Ghanaian society.

### Symbols

Symbols are used to communicate complex knowledge, abstract truths and ideas about life and its meaning. A symbol is therefore a vehicle for the conception of an object, enabling us to conceive or form a view of an object; it calls forth mental images. Thus, for example, Fidel Castro in his relationship to the United States of America might give rise to the thought of a modern Old Testament David who stood against a Goliath. The conception of a symbol therefore consists in what it means, and Castro as a symbol may mean the fact of the continued existence of the weak and the powerless in spite of threats from the mighty or it may mean the spirit of defiance.

Here are some examples of indigenous African symbols and the conceptions they evoke in the mind:

1. The elephant: symbol of power and kingship
2. The lion: symbol of ferocity, danger and royalty
3. Woman: symbol of peace, productivity, creativity, life and growth
4. Rugged Triangle: symbol of stability and inner repose; true life is secure, stable and lasting or has safe and stable foundations; life that has a solid basis.
5. The ram and its horns: symbol of pacific disposition combined with strength and power.
6. Black colour: It is the official mourning cloth at funerals especially for a person who has died at unripe age.
7. White colour: Symbol of purity and jot. It is worn at funerals especially of an older member.
8. Red colour: It is a spiritual colour and has powerful religious significance. It is the colour of the cloth used to adorn the table in the shrine.

### Review

1. Public signs are conventional symbols to communicate certain messages of public importance.
2. Signs are conventional because they have been accepted by society over a long period of time.
3. Some signs have their origin in an event and are better understood in the context of that event.
4. The first step in creating a sign is to encode it into a sign/symbol. The receiver then decodes the sign and then sends back the feedback which is then encoded into a sign/symbol and then decoded and more feedback sent back. The process is continuous.



5. Signs and symbols have to be very clear so as to allow for only one interpretation.
6. There are two types of signs: Natural signs which are a greater event of a complex condition e.g. a scar and artificial signs. Sometimes we produce artificial or arbitrary objects and actions and correlate them with important ones that serve as their meanings. These are known as artificial signs.

## Reflection

Reflect and comment on the following: 'A symbol is a vehicle for the conception of an object, enabling us to conceive or form a view of an object; it calls forth mental images.'

## Relevant Skills

Research on the different type of signs and symbols, and how they evolved and came to be accepted in your community. You may need to talk to resource people such as experts and the older generation.

## Resources

BOSCOM-INDIA, 2000. 'SHEPHERDS' FOR AN INFORMATION AGE. Matunga: Tej Prasarini.