

Objects of Commemoration: Sign Convergence and Meaning Transfer

STEPHAN A. WALL
Clark University, USA

When a person experiences the death of a close friend or relative, objects associated with the deceased take on a new meaning. These objects are often kept safe in hiding or put on display in acts of commemoration. After World War I, “trench art” put on display in the house of British civilians expressed memories of the war and dead soldiers. In modern day Britain, photographs of dead soldiers are used in memorials to express the personality of the soldier, to show that the soldier was individually important, not just another cog in the war machine. Seven participants were interviewed about objects they associate with deceased friends and/or family. Objects were found to express memories of the deceased, to take on a sacred nature and in some cases objects were even found to express the presence of the deceased. The link between objects and the deceased was established through repeated exposure to the object and the deceased before death or through one meaningful experience before or after death. Using a post-Saussurean semiotic framework, this paper seeks to develop a model of asymmetrical sign-convergence that explains the emergence of semiotic commemorative objects and the expression of the deceased through linked objects.

Keywords: post-saussurean, semiotics, death, sign-convergence, commemoration, semiotic commemoration, objects

INTRODUCTION

Alexander always enjoyed spending time with his grandmother and hearing stories about her life. He would listen to stories about her falling in love and running off to marry at 18, her struggles as a young mother with a husband at war, and her passion for poetry. He listened closely at family dinners and while talking over the telephone, asking detailed questions. He tried to absorb as much as possible about her life—his heritage fascinated him and his grandmother had the most vivid memory out of all his grandparents. He could also connect with her well; they were both talented at writing poetry and enjoyed discussing politics. Now all of Alexander’s opportunities to take in his grandmother’s experiences were gone. She died late at night from a sudden heart attack. After the funeral, his mother brought a box of her things home and told Alexander he could choose a few to have to remember her. He found her necklace and a pin she won at a poetry contest to be the most meaningful to him out of the objects. Through the next several weeks, he began to involve the objects in his daily life. He wore her necklace around his neck and placed a pin on his backpack. Through the necklace, he felt guided with her age-old wisdom and through

the pin, he felt inspired by her way of looking at the world in all its complexity. Through these objects, he felt as if she was still with him.

Just like Alexander, we all use objects to remember people or events. When we do this, the original meaning of the object is set aside for the new meaning. For example, a baseball can be used to throw back and forth like it was originally intended. But a baseball can be also used to remember; it may remind us of our favorite batter, of our favorite game we played, or of our youth. We might put it on display in a transparent box on a mantle or hide it in a drawer for safekeeping. In its new meaning, the ball is no longer used to throw back in forth or hit with a bat, it is used to remember or feel as we did the day when we caught a home-run ball from the best batter in the league or going to baseball games with a father. Other objects are more commonly used to remember. We remember days at the beach with small pebbles, weddings with large white dresses, and travels with foreign currency. These objects may be commonly present in our everyday lives only to become associated with events, places, or people and held as sacred as physical reminders of events. Alexander, in an attempt to preserve the experience of his grandmother, surrounds himself with her objects — serving as physical reminders and a way to preserve her effect on him. Through these objects, he is able to feel qualities of her and she still feels alive to him. In a way, she lives on through them.

This paper seeks to explore the everyday process by which certain objects take on different meanings. Specifically, the use of an object to remember an event, place, or person that can no longer be experienced will be explored. The manuscript focuses on bereavement cases because the act of commemoration is so closely connected with bereavement of individuals and groups of people. Cases of personal commemoration provide an intimate description of the commemorative process where unique displays of commemoration can be examined closely. Through this examination, I would like to investigate how and in what situations commemorative objects emerge.

A process of sign convergence is developed within this manuscript, where the concept of the deceased, lacking a signifier (argued as the presence of the deceased) is expressed through the signifier of the object. In other words, through repeated exposure to the object and deceased or one meaningful experience, the concept of the deceased person is expressed through the associated objects. The type of commemorative objects involved varies from participant to participant—from a specific type of flower to a quilt made out of a deceased mother's clothes—but the process by which it becomes a commemorative object stays constant. Through narratives, this associative link between objects and the dead is exposed. Through this link, the object undergoes asymmetrical sign convergence with the deceased, where certain qualities of the deceased are expressed through the object. The functions of some objects are the same, causing participants to remember the deceased, however some objects took on a sacred nature while others expressed the presence of the deceased.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Commemoration and Beyond

In order to better understand the process of semiotic commemoration through a theory of sign convergence, the following theoretical contributions will be used to support its conceptual validity, which will then be tested for empirical validity in the next section. With a discussion of a current laymen's definition of commemoration and examples of traditional personal commemoration through objects and post-Saussurean semiotics, we can see that the integration of these ideas to form a cohesive model of semiotic commemoration.

Cultivating Commemoration:

We commemorate the death of relatives and close friends with plaques, candles, and tombstones. Great losses from war and conflict are memorialized with statues, flags, and tattered uniforms. These objects are used to establish the deceased as dead and are visited by friends and relatives to remember the dead. In a way, the objects physically mark the existence of the people they commemorate.

The definition of "to commemorate" is:

to call to remembrance, or preserve in memory of; to be a memorial or memento of; to mention as worthy of remembrance (Commemorate, 1989, p. 545).

These actions of preserving memories serve to remember the dead and to hold their lives as something special and unique. Memories of the dead are discussed at funerals and later recalled in the presence of the grave. In a way, the grave stands in place of the dead. Commemoration can also involve untraditional objects like clothing. In some cases, the deceased are venerated: rock music musicians' clothing are held as sacred and fans put them on display or sell them at an auction for a high price. In other cases, the deceased are abhorred: criminals' clothing is burned to show disapproval.

Clare Whittingham (2008) discusses an example of semiotic commemoration on a mass scale. "Trench art" is artwork created from the collection of shrapnel from bunkers during World War I. It was displayed in the homes of civilians in Britain after the war ended. Trench art provided a way for

"individuals through discreet display in domestic, private space...[to manipulate] memories of war into collectible yet confounding artifacts" (Whittingham, 2008, p. 87).

The memories of war, which many civilian families had, were expressed by the trench art,

which they created by fusing together remnants of metal objects like metal helmets and artillery shells from the battlefield. This is a commemoration of the soldiers that died during the war and also the disruption that the war caused British society. Whittingham has acknowledged that the concept of war is expressed by the trench art in the form of memories, which is a form of semiotic commemoration as defined in later sections. The event of the war was over and the trench art acted as a way of expressing the concept of the past war in a physical form.

When commemorating deceased soldiers, authorities can vary the degree of personalization of the soldier, which affects the nature of the commemoration. Anthony King (2010) mentions the effect of displaying the face of the soldier in the form of a photograph during commemorative rituals,

“Given its symbolic role, it is significant that the face of the dead soldier has become a central motif in current commemorative practices; it embodies their personality in the most efficient and emotive way” (King, 2010, p. 11).

Displaying hats or other objects the soldier wore can evoke memories of the person, but a photograph evokes the personality of the person who has died. This quote reveals the power of a commemorative object (photograph) to evoke certain aspects of the dead. The personality of the deceased is expressed through the photograph because the original material expression of the soldier is absent.

Davies discusses how commemorative traditions in The Netherlands seek to reconnect people with the deceased. At the “All Souls Day” celebration (a day celebrating the dead) in The Netherlands, people celebrate their connection with the deceased. Some of the activities are

“...burning letters to the deceased in fire baskets... People can release a written message to their deceased loved one in a candle-lit float...They can also speak anonymously to their deceased loved ones on telephones connected with a device that plays back messages recorded at the receiving end” (Davies, 2012, p.168-169).

These rituals reestablish a personalized connection with the deceased, so that they are able to reveal certain new aspects of their lives to the deceased through written messages over the telephone. This is a way of maintaining a connection with the deceased as if they are still alive. Through these rituals, “...the relationship between the living and the dead finds expression” (Davies, 2012, p. 169). Because the deceased no longer exist in physical reality, there is a need for the expression of them and their relationship with the living. The relationship with the deceased is not apparent and these traditions seek to find expression of the relationship by sending messages to the deceased. It is through these rituals that participants are able to connect with the “concept” of the deceased.

It is through these types of objects and rituals that people are able to remember and stay connected with the deceased. A shortened definition of “to commemorate” is: to remember; to preserve in memory of. This paper will explore both of these forms of commemoration in the functioning of semiotic commemorative objects. The functions of some commemorative objects are beyond remembering and celebrating. Some come to wholly express that which they are commemorating. Participants literally feel in the presence of the deceased while in the presence of that object. It is through these objects that participants maintain a connection with the deceased.

Saussure’s Semiotics

A model for the analysis of a certain form of semiotic commemoration is proposed. In this model, the signifier of a sign is lost and the concept of the sign is expressed through another sign. This is proposed as an example of asymmetrical sign convergence, where one sign is expressed through another but not visa-versa. The signifier, e.g., the presence of the deceased, is lost and so the concept of the deceased is expressed through associated objects.

Saussurean sign theory can be used to analyze complex psychological events. Developed to apply to a system of linguistics, Ferdinand Saussure intended the link between the signified and signifier to be “between a concept and a sound pattern” (Saussure, 1983, p. 66). The concept is an abstract notion or idea, unexpressed in words. It is represented in the example in the diagram below as “arbor,” which is Latin for “tree.” The sound pattern is the expression of the concept by a common auditory pattern. It is represented in the diagram below by the word “tree.” In abstract theoretical terms, the concept is commonly referred to as the signified and the sound pattern is referred to as the signifier, as it signifies the concept.

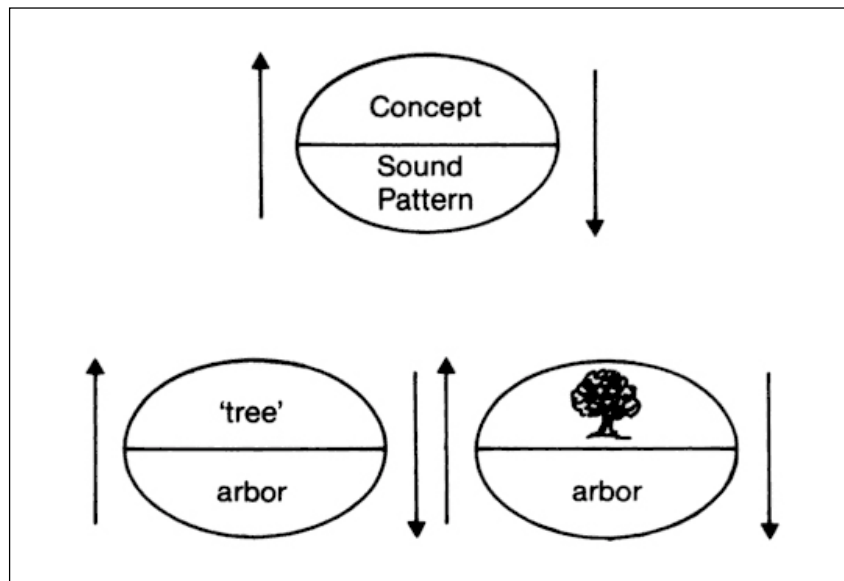


Figure 1. Saussure's Model of a Sign (taken from Saussure, 1983, p. 67)

Saussure stresses that the bond between the signified and signifier is arbitrary. He says,

"...that it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by differences among language and by the very existence of different languages..." (Saussure, 1983, p. 69).

The signifier "tree" (the word) and the concept of tree (expressed by Saussure for the purposes of the diagram with the word "arbor") have no relationship outside of the bond of the two within the sign. This is proven with the fact that two words in different languages can stand for the same concept, such as the words "fleur" in French and "kwiat" in Polish can both stand for the concept "flos" (Latin for flower).

The spoken word "tree" does not operate in the same sign system as the signifier "tree." In Saussure's original theory of signs, the signifier of the sign has no material quality. In its modern day use, post-Saussurean theorists have extended his idea of the signifier to many different "substances," which include spoken word and material expression. Hjelmslev suggests that both content (signified) and expression (signifier) have both form and substance (1961, p. 49). This means that there are four categories of the makeup of a sign, the substance and form of the signifier and substance and form of the signified. This extension of the theory allows for the signifier of the sign to be material, because the substance of the signifier can be material. Other theorists (see Tudor, 1974, p. 110; Baggaley & Duck, 1976, p. 149; Metz, 1981) have elaborated Hjelmslev's idea, although sometime disagreeing, into the four categories displayed below.

	Substance	Form
Signifier: plane of expression	Substance of expression: physical materials of the medium (e.g. photographs, recorded voices, printed words on paper)	Form of expression: language, formal syntactic structure, technique and style
Signified: plane of content	Substance of content: 'human content' (Metz), textual world, subject matter, genre	Form of content: 'semantic structure' (Baggaley & Duck), 'thematic structure' (including narrative) (Metz)

Figure 2. Chart of signifier and signified with both form and expression (taken from Chandler, 2004, p. 57)

In this chart, the signifier and signified are separated into the categories of substance and form. As an extension of Saussure's theory of a sign, these ideas are used to analyze various texts external to the mind. Applied psychologically, we can draw that the substance of the signifier can be external to the mind and be represented by physical objects. The framework in which the construct of semiotic commemoration exists is such, where many different kinds of objects and phenomena can signify the concept of the deceased.

Max—beyond Commemoration

One of the most common acts of commemoration in western culture is putting a tombstone or grave on top of the burial site of the deceased. The grave refers to the person below; it acts as a formal substitution for their physical presence. In some instances, people further commemorate the deceased by laying flowers on the tombstone or decorating it with different objects. One study presents the function of the tombstone past commemoration. This is a focus on the

“...meaning making activity at the grave... [meaning,] (a) how the person relates to the grave in constructing the deceased's image and voice, and (b) how the person constructs his or her own future in relation to the grave” (Josephs, 1998, p. 185).

Josephs assumes that the grave refers to the person below it and that the participants construct an image and voice from this reference. The participants then engage in a dialogue with the image and voice of the deceased, in which a future is constructed in relation to the grave. Eighteen German adults were interviewed, all of which were Christians and had lost a loved one in the past. Only a few had maintained a strong relationship with the faith or the church. The most interesting of these interviews was that

of a 66-year-old woman, Lena, who had lost her husband, Max, about 1 year before. While visiting her husband's grave, the widow imagines as if he is there, speaking to him just as though he is there to respond.

"I go to the grave and say 'hello, here I am'-- as if he were still alive. Well, this is a visit. Yes, I visit him... A photo is no equivalent, not at all. The grave is: There he is— like a visit to a hospital" (Josephs, 1998, p. 187).

For Lena, the grave refers to her dead husband, whose body lies under it, as if he is the grave. The grave is different from other objects that could potentially be commemorative, like a photo or his clothes. The grave has undergone the process of semiotic commemoration; it expresses his presence, to which she says upon greeting, "hello, here I am." She also seeks to further preserve his presence by creating an arrangement of the grave that "is Max,"

"In arranging the grave, I consider Max's tastes. He liked manicured lawns and cultivated flowerbeds... I made it look just right for him... The tombstone is really outstanding. It is Max" (Josephs, 1998, p. 187).

After arranging the grave, making it look neat and orderly, she decides that her efforts were effective in further preserving Max's presence. She is doing something "for him"; she changes the appearance of the area around the grave to appeal to his tastes, "manicured lawns and cultivated flower beds." Her expression that it is outstanding means that it would appeal to Max and therefore she approves of the new appearance because the grave represents Max and expresses his presence.

Relating this scenario to our previously reviewed knowledge of Saussure's semiotics, we understand the grave as a sign made up of the signified and signifier. The signified is the concept of a grave and the signifier is the presence (or abstractly, the image) of the grave. The dead husband is a sign as well; the signified is Lena's abstract concept of her husband and the signifier is the presence of him. Because the presence of her husband is no more, the concept of the husband in Lena's mind is expressed by the grave. Visiting the grave is like "a visit to a hospital." After making the appearance of the grave more appealing to Max, Lena exclaims, "It is Max."

A THEORETICAL MODEL OF SEMIOTIC COMMEMORATION

Semiotic Commemoration

Present studies of commemoration were discussed above and a post-Saussurean sign system was proposed for analysis. In this next section, semiotic commemoration is hypothesized as "the expression of a sign through the signifier of a different, but related, sign." After being defined, this concept is outlined in terms of process (how it comes to be)

and function (how it operates).

Semiotic Commemoration Defined

Semiotic commemoration is “a process of asymmetrical sign convergence where the material signifier of one sign is lost and the concept of the sign is expressed through the material signifier of another, linked sign.” The process of semiotic commemoration is asymmetrical because it only occurs one way. The concept of the second sign is not also expressed by the signifier of the second.

When the process is described, sign A will stand for the sign that loses its material signifier and sign B will stand for the linked sign which expresses the concept of sign A. Also the term expression will be often be used interchangeably with the term signifier and the term concept may be replaced by the term signified, as post-Saussurean semioticians have used them synonymously (Hjelmslev, 1961, p. 47ff).

The term “semiotic commemoration” describes commemoration through signs, which are not limited to cases of bereavement but can be found in a wide range of situations. A person spends a whole summer at the beach, bonding with friends and enjoying the seashore. He/she takes a small pebble from the beach to remember his/her experiences and memories of it. After he/she leaves the beach, the physical presence of the beach, which is the physical signifier of the sign “beach,” becomes absent. The concept of the beach (which includes the memories and experiences) of the beach is expressed through the physical signifier of the pebble, the presence of the pebble, and in the form of memories and experiences of the beach.

The Process of Semiotic Commemoration

Semiotic commemoration is a process of asymmetrical sign convergence, where the functions of two signs change. Using the example of the pebble, the process of sign convergence is explained. In this example, “the beach” is sign A and the pebble is sign B. This process occurs in 4 steps:

Step 1. A link is established between sign A and sign B.

An associative link between sign A and B is established. This may be through repeated exposure to both signs together or one meaningful moment with the two when the link is established. The scenario where the link is established through repeated exposure is presented in Figure 2. Relating this step to the example above, the person spent a lot of time at the beach where pebbles are a large part of the aesthetic beauty of the beach. The person takes a pebble with them when they leave to remember the beach.

Step 2. The material form of the signifier of sign A becomes absent.

The physical presence of sign A must become temporarily or permanently absent. The physical presence of sign A is considered the signifier of sign A. When the person leaves the

beach, the physical presence of the sign is absent. In some cases, step 2 may occur before step 1. The link may be established after the material form of the signifier is lost if there is a strong material substitution for sign A, for example, a grave.

Step 3. The concept of sign A is expressed through the signifier of sign B.

The concept of sign A is deprived of its material expression and is expressed through the material signifier of sign B. It is expressed in the form of a reminder, as sacred, or as a substitution. These are described in detail in the next section. Relating to the example of the pebble, the concept the beach (sign A) is expressed through the material form of sign B (the pebble) in the form of memories about the beach (a reminder).

Step 4. The concept of sign B is expressed stronger than the original concept of sign B.

The concept of sign A is expressed through the material expression of sign B stronger than the original concept is. Sign B has a concept and signifier before sign convergence, just like sign A. After asymmetrical sign convergence occurs, the concept of sign A is expressed stronger than the original concept of sign B. Relating this step to the example, the concept of the pebble before sign convergence which we can say is “piece of stone” becomes weaker after semiotic commemoration, because the expression of the concept of “the beach” overbears the original. When the person picks up the pebble, the concept “piece of stone” does not arise in the mind as readily as the memories of the beach do.

Functions of Semiotic Commemoration

The phenomenon of semiotic commemoration functions in three ways. The concept of sign A is expressed through sign B

1. As a reminder: causes person to remember sign A.

The concept of sign A is expressed through the signifier of sign B as memories or a reminder of sign A. While in the presence of sign B, memories of sign A come to mind or the person is reminded “generally” of sign A. From the anecdote described above, the person takes the pebble home with him/her and puts it on his/her desk. From time to time, the person looks at the pebble and memories of sign A, the beach, arise. This is considered a form of weak semiotic commemoration.

2. As sacred: takes on a sort of sacred nature and is treated as such.

The concept of sign A is expressed through the signifier of sign B and functions as sacred nature. Sign B takes on a nature similar to sacred objects in a church. They are put on display in a designated place and/or steps are taken to preserve the state of the object. Relating this to the example, the pebble could be put in a small glass case and kept in a drawer or put on display. This is considered a weak form of semiotic commemoration.

3. As a substitution: cause person to experience sign B as sign A.

The concept of sign A is expressed through the signifier of sign B as if sign B is sign A. The

person “feels in the presence” of sign A, while in the presence of sign B. When the person comes into contact with the pebble, they experience the beach once more. Waves are heard crashing upon the shore, the air smells of a salty sea breeze, and sand is felt between their toes. In this moment, they are re-experiencing the beach. This is considered a strong form of semiotic commemoration.

The Case of Alexander

The case of Alexander illustrates how the components described above outline the phenomenon of semiotic commemoration.

There is an associative link between sign A (the deceased grandmother) and sign B (the objects). Alexander associates both of the objects with her. He saw her wear the pin at large family outings and he never saw her without the necklace. The next step of sign convergence is (2) the material signifier of sign A becomes absent. The grandmother dies and her body, her material signifier, becomes absent from Alexander but the concept of the sign still exists in his mind. (3) The concept of sign A is expressed by the signifier of sign B. The grandmother lives on through the objects. The necklace and pin express her wisdom; he feels guided while wearing them. Through these objects, he doesn't feel as though she is lost. As these objects begin to express the grandmother, the expression of their prior concept becomes weaker. The last step of the process is completed (4) the concept of sign B loses meaning as the other concept is expressed through its signifier. Before the grandmother (sign A) dies, the presence of these objects (sign B) express different concepts. After she dies, the pin and the necklace became a way of remembering her day to day. In a way, the objects (sign B) are her (sign A). The way the pin and necklace function is an example of function 1 and 3; they enable Alexander to remember his grandmother and, at times, feel the presence of her.

EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION

I have presented theories that when synthesized validate the conceptual or theoretical existence of semiotic commemoration. I hypothesized this to be the asymmetrical sign convergence of two objects, where one of the concepts of a sign (sign A) is expressed through the material signifier of another object (sign B) in the absence of the material signifier of the original sign (sign A). Commemorative objects function as a reminder of sign A, as a sacred object, or as a substitution for sign A. So now I will put the theoretical postulate to the test, diving into an empirical investigation of these ideas.

Research questions and elaborations.

Research questions were constructed to inquire into and explore the process and function of commemorative objects as well as the definition of semiotic commemoration. The questions were:

“How can we define semiotic commemoration?”

“By what process do objects emerge as commemorative objects?”

“How do semiotic commemorative objects function once they emerge?”

“What conditions allow for the object to become a commemorative object?”

In societal examples of commemoration (war memorials, etc.), objects used to commemorate are built upon consensus and cultural norms. A study focusing on mass scale commemoration would focus on larger scale culture and processes, while examination of individual psychological phenomena can be closely examined and analyzed via qualitative interviews.

Method

Before participation in the study, all participants read and signed an informed consent form and were told they could leave the study at any time without penalty, that their interview data would be kept separate from their consent form, and that their interview data would be kept completely confidential. The interviews were transcribed and all given a different randomly-selected number from 1 to 7. The consent forms were kept in a file cabinet in a locked research room and interview files were kept in a password-protected file.

Design

Research questions were qualitatively investigated by way of interviews with students that had lost a close friend or family member. The researcher focused on bereavement cases because the act of commemoration is so closely connected with bereavement of individuals and groups of people. Cases of personal commemoration of the deceased provide an intimate description of the commemorative process where unique displays of commemoration can be examined closely. The first part of the interview served as a sort of prime to thinking about objects of commemoration before actual experiences of the deceased were discussed within the second part of the interview.

Subject Pool

Seven participants were recruited by announcement of the study during a Psychology 101 lecture at a northeastern University. Students then signed up for different time slots. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 25.

Procedure

A semi-structured interview was used; one half of the interview was dedicated to a simulation of the death of a relative or close friend via prompt. This acts as a hypothetical scenario used to test processes of semiotic commemoration in a lab setting. They were asked to imagine that a close friend or relative was dying and the person giving them an

apple, an object that could undergo asymmetrical sign convergence. The prompt was as follows:

“Someone you care deeply about is in the process of passing away. You spent a lot of time with them when you were a child, often going outdoors. One particular thing you can remember doing with him/her is going apple picking, you seemed to do this once a year no matter how busy you're lives were. During a visit with them at the hospital, he/she hands an apple to you and whispers the words, ‘remember me.’ Suddenly your parent calls to you from out of the room, something about a dentist appointment. You quickly say goodbye and leave the hospital. That night, your mother calls you and tells you that the person passed away hours after you left the hospital. Soon after hanging up the phone you see the apple on your desk.”

Participants were then asked what they would do with the apple. I expected participants to develop creative responses in real time and then I would inquire about specific aspects of their decision of what to do with the apple and how the action would meaningfully compare versus the original apple.

Questions initially focused on charting out what exactly was done with the apple. Then they were directed towards what the new form of the apple meant to the participant and whether it was more meaningful before or after they engaged with the object. This prompted the participant to think about different forms of commemoration so they could relate it back to their lives in the second part of the interview.

The second half of the interview was an inquiry to various objects that became meaningful to them after losing someone. This is a test of “real-life” validity of semiotic commemoration. Questions began inquiring to what relation the person they lost was to them and how they passed away and moved to various relevant experiences before and after death. I also asked about particular objects that they have associated with the deceased and their understanding of the meaning of the objects.

Coding

After the interviews were conducted, the interview data was coded for questions outlined above and further analyzed to build a model of sign association and asymmetrical sign convergence. The model was developed using a semiotic system of analysis based on post-Saussurean theory (as discussed above). After analysis, the term “semiotic commemoration” is defined and the application of the construct to non-bereavement cases is discussed.

FINDINGS

Sign A and B link.

A model has been developed to describe the process of semiotic commemoration with respect to the examples of bereavement. It shows how objects are linked with the deceased prior to death through repeated exposure to the objects while in the presence of the person. Participant 1 is used as an example to describe the model. She is a student whose grandmother died around 6 years ago. Her grandmother was a very important part of her life and it was difficult for her when she died. The objects of yellow roses and yellow butterflies underwent semiotic commemoration with her deceased grandmother.

In the model, irreversible time is assumed and designated by the horizontal arrow at the bottom with dotted lines to indicate sections of time spent away from the person who dies.

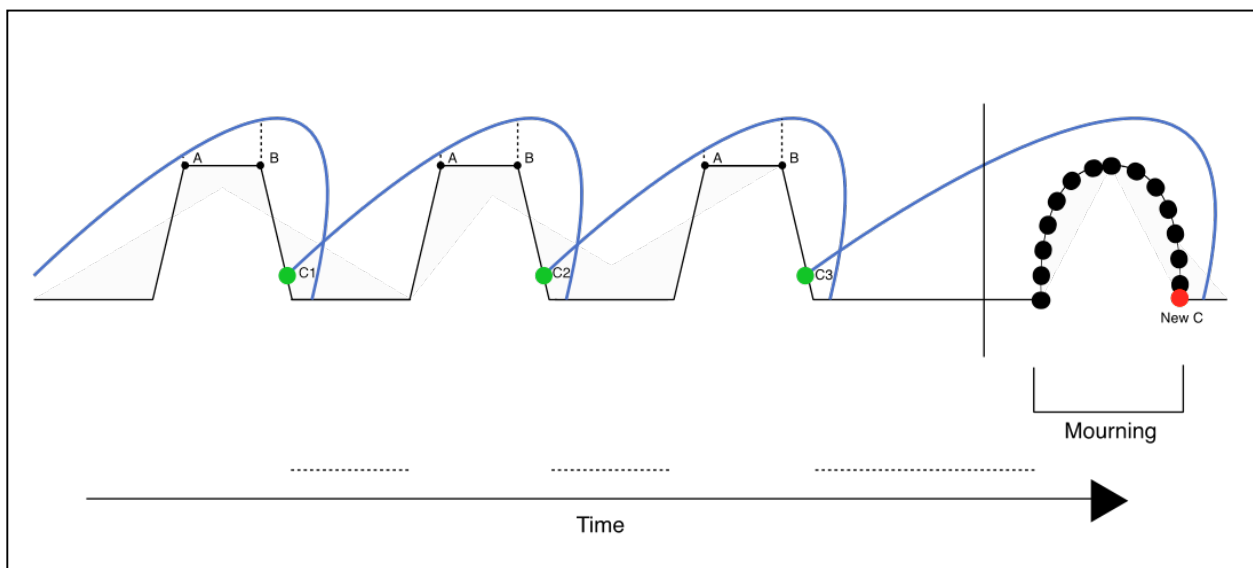


Figure 2. Model of Deceased (Sign A)/Object (Sign B) Link Established Through Repeated Exposure

Point "A" represents visiting the deceased person (sign A) while point "B" represents coming into contact with the object (sign B). The blue line represents the changing concept of the deceased person with new experiences. Points C1, C2, and C3 represent the concept of the deceased person after the participant comes into contact with the deceased and the object. A different "C" is designated after each new meeting because with every new experience, the relationship is reconstructed. The dotted lines from A and B designate the affective distance between the concept of the deceased person and the immediate experience of him/her. This is because only some aspects of the concept of the deceased are relevant in the immediate moment, hence the distance.

This period describes how the link between sign A and B is established. In most cases, sign

B, the objects which sign A is expressed through, is a piece of clothing or something that belonged to the deceased. In the case of Participant 1, a link was established between yellow roses and her grandmother. The link was established through repeated exposure as described above. She would visit her grandmother often and every year, there were yellow roses growing in the garden. She says,

P1: "...my Nana used to have like a flower garden and every year she would plant like yellow roses and you know, normally sometimes you would think they wouldn't blossom but it would always be... everything else might be dead but this yellow rose would blossom."

As participant 1 grows older and her perspective of the world changes, her perception of her grandmother changes. This is represented in the diagram by points C1, C2, and C3. Every time she visits her grandmother, her conception of her grandmother is reconstructed, and the link between her grandmother and the yellow rose is reestablished. The link sets the state for semiotic commemoration.

In some cases, the link may be with an object not associated with the deceased prior to death. In this case, the link would not be established through repeated exposure, but to a meaningful moment or set of meaningful moments when the association is made. This is the case for another object participant 1 associates with her deceased grandmother,

"...there was like... happened to be this one big beautiful yellow butterfly that landed on her grave and ever since then it's kind of like this like family—not joke but kind of known fact, when butterflies fly by, 'Oh, its Nana checking up on us.'"

In this example, the link between the butterfly and the deceased grandmother formed after-death. This particular moment involves the grave, which is already a traditional form of semiotic commemoration. At this moment, the butterfly took on the same function as the grave, but was mobile. Now the next step in the process will be discussed, when "the material form of the signifier becomes absent."

A-symmetrical sign-convergence.

After death, the signified of the deceased exists in the minds of people mourning, but the physical expression of the signified (the signifier) no longer exists. Through the associative link between the object and person, the structure of the linked object sign changes to incorporate that of the deceased as one of the signified. The linked object exists in reality and the concept of the deceased is so strong that it "speaks" through the objects.

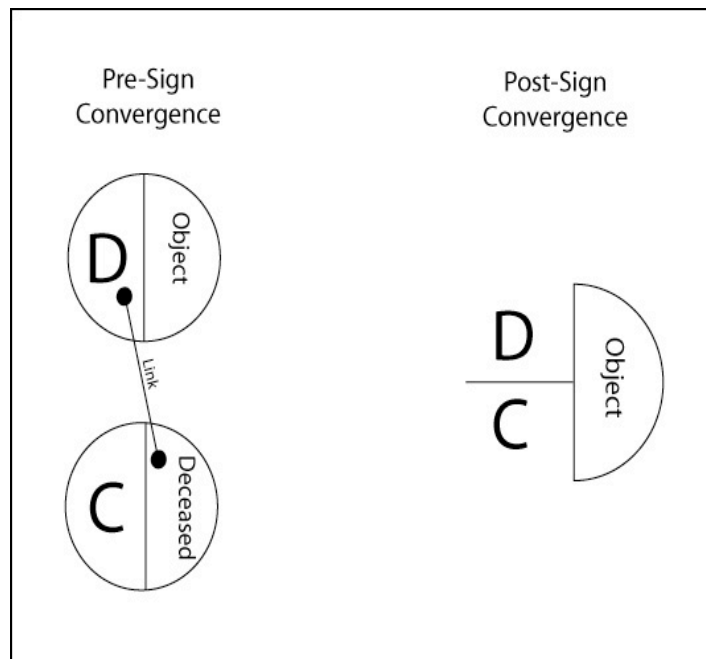


Figure 3. Model of Asymmetrical Sign Convergence.

In figure 3 we have two signs, the object and the deceased (C/ Presence). We see that before death, the construct of the deceased (C) is signified by the presence of that person. After death, the linked object becomes the signifier to the concept of the deceased. Evidence of this completed process can be found in narratives about the object,

“...like the butterfly, I just stop and like I see it, I just have to take a moment to myself, because its... in a way its a reminder but once again its just more than just a reminder, to me its like a way of actually being with them like them coming to me through something else.”

Participant one experiences her deceased grandmother through the signifier of the butterfly. Even though the presence of the butterfly is a signifier for both the original concept of the butterfly and the concept of the grandmother, after the sign convergence takes place, the concept of the deceased is expressed more often or stronger than the original concept of the object. This is described above as step 4 of the process of semiotic commemoration. The concept of sign B loses meaning as the other concept is expressed through its signifier.

Through this process of associative linking of two signs and asymmetrical sign convergence, semiotic commemorative objects emerge. The different ways the objects emerge and their functions are discussed in the next two sections below.

Emergence Typology

The types of objects undergoing semiotic commemoration vary from participant to participant. The two most compelling forms of emergence occur in participant one's experience. The linked objects of the yellow rose and butterfly undergo sign convergence with her deceased grandparents. In the case of the yellow rose, the link is established through repeated exposure. The associative link between the yellow rose and the grandmother occurs with repeated exposure to the flowers in the garden of her grandmother's house during visits. The yellow rose is special and an exception to all the other plants in the garden, "...everything else might be dead but this yellow rose would blossom."

After death, the yellow rose underwent asymmetrical sign convergence with the deceased grandmother, expressing the concept of the grandmother. She says when she is in the presence of yellow roses planted in her garden at her parents' home, they "...made you feel like she was there."

The grandmother's presence can be felt through the flower. This is a case of strong semiotic commemoration occurring with a link established through repeated exposure. In this case, sign A and B were linked through participant one visiting her grandmother and seeing the yellow rose in the garden every time she visited her. This case of semiotic commemoration is strong because sign A (the grandmother) can be felt in the presence of sign B (the yellow rose).

Another object can undergo strong semiotic commemoration through sign convergence without repeated exposure. The sign of a yellow butterfly undergoes sign convergence with the concept of participant one's deceased grandmother. During the funeral ceremony, a yellow butterfly lands on the grave of her grandmother. Her whole family acknowledges it later becoming a collective symbol for her grandmother.

"...There was like happened to be this one big beautiful yellow butterfly that landed on her grave and ever since then its kind of like this like family—not joke but kind of known fact, when butterflies fly by, "Oh, its Nana checking up on us."

Through the experience of the butterfly landing on the grave, her whole family is reminded of the grandmother and experiences the butterfly and the grandmother as the same. The butterfly is the grandmother. This is especially evident in the case of the participant's personal experience of the yellow butterfly. She describes the experience of the butterfly as if it is her grandmother,

"...it might be like the butterfly because its like my Nana reincarnated, just floating around in the world you know, just flying, fluttering, doing her own thing."

Participant one experiences the sign of the butterfly as if it is her grandmother. The link between sign A and sign B was established through one meaning experience, rather than through repeated exposure. This is a case of strong semiotic commemoration, where sign A can be felt in the presence of sign B.

For participant four, a group of objects undergo a weaker form of semiotic commemoration than in participant 1's experience. The link between her deceased father and the objects is also through repeated exposure. Many common objects become strongly attached to memories of her deceased father. She describes how the front door to her house reminds her of her father,

"Just the way he came home, the way the door would open up, open... you would remember instantly, you know, that's the way he would open the door."

She then describes a series of objects that together cause her anxiety because it reminds her so much of him. She says,

"He used an elliptical so that reminded me of it... [a basement] that's where he slept or like did his hobbies or whatever... [and] DVD collections that he had, that he like made for the family...going down to the basement was, I think I avoided that place forever because that's where he slept or like did his hobbies or whatever."

The expression of the signifier is weaker than in participant one's experience. In participant one's experience, she felt in the presence of her deceased grandmother when she was in the presence of the butterfly or yellow rose. Referring back to step 4 of the process of semiotic commemoration, we see that the original concepts for these objects are less meaningful. The door is no longer just an entryway, the elliptical no longer a means to exercise, and the DVD collections are not just a source of entertainment. The extraordinarily strong memories of the father experienced by participant four in the presence of these objects are evidence of the expression of the concept of the deceased father. The link between the deceased father and the objects occur through repeated exposure. Participant four experiences her father using and interacting with all of these objects before he dies. This occurs frequently over a period of many years – the father did not just start using the objects right before he dies. This is a case of weak semiotic commemoration through repeated exposure.

A different form of emergence occurred with participant five's experience. The link between sign A and sign B is established through repeated exposure and alteration of the material form of the objects. Soon after his mother dies, a family friend creates a quilt out of his mother's clothes. He describes the quilt as expressing qualities of his mother,

“She was very expressive of herself and her clothing and like nice warm, kind of... I don't know I kind of picture her with her clothes like you know, like just kind of pretty colorful kind of nice, warm colors that I think could be... has her personality in the clothing and in the quilt...”

After the family friend creates a quilt out of the clothes, the quilt undergoes asymmetrical sign convergence with the deceased mother. The altered material from the mother's clothes becomes a signifier for the mother. What is interesting about this case is that the sign convergence occurs after the material from the clothing is altered. A physical alteration of the clothing brings a change of meaning from “clothing of mother” to “material that expresses personality of mother.” This is a case of repeated exposure because participant five sees his mother's clothing worn by her repeatedly over a period of time before she dies.

The emergence of semiotic commemorative objects occurs after repeated exposure or during a moment of great meaning, like during the funeral in the case of participant one. The semiotic commemorative objects established through repeated exposure are often everyday objects involved in their daily lives but afterward become a way for the concept of the deceased (sign A) to be expressed. These objects are likely to be clothing, tools, jewelry, flowers in a garden, etc. Semiotic commemorative objects emerging without repeated exposure are objects less commonly used in everyday life but still linkable to the deceased. In the case of the yellow butterfly in participant one's experience, the object was present during a moment of great meaning (the funeral) and became connected to the grandmother through landing on her grave. Many objects may be linked to the deceased (sign A); for the yellow butterfly, it was the family's acknowledgement of its importance.

The emergence of semiotic commemoration can be weak or strong. In weak cases, the deceased (sign A) is expressed in the form of memories. This occurs in participant four's experience, as being in the presence of the door only causes the memory of the father opening it, not his presence. Participant five's experience is also a form of weak semiotic commemoration, as only the mother's personality can be felt in the presence of the quilt, not her presence as a whole. Strong semiotic commemoration occurs in the form of a felt presence of the deceased (sign A) in the presence of the object. This is described as a functional typology in more detail below.

Function Typology

Once the semiotic commemorative objects emerge, they function in distinct ways. The three major ways semiotic commemorative objects functioned was as a reminder, as sacred and as a substitution. Participants were found to either embrace, ignore/avoid or simply observe the function of the objects. This can be found in the context in which they describe the object.

as a reminder

One of the consistent functions of semiotic commemorative signs was remembering. Actual memories of the deceased were not observed because the objects were not present during the interview. The researcher observes a second hand account of the participant describing “remembering” while near the object or holding the object. Participant one reports after bringing a yellow flower to her aunt before her cousin’s dance recital.

“I brought her daughter some flowers and I brought her a yellow rose and she broke out in tears and I mean, it just has that effect because it just brings us back, it just reminds us of somebody whose so important and just inspiring in our lives and I mean you never forget that person.

Participant one understands the yellow rose as something that reminds her and her family members of her grandmother. She brings the yellow rose to her aunt before a dance recital and they both remember the grandmother. After the concept of the grandmother and the yellow flower undergo asymmetrical sign convergence, the yellow flower becomes a way to remember the grandmother. The participant embraces this function as she encourages her aunt to remember the grandmother through the flower by bringing it to her at a special moment. She most likely intends to simulate the grandmother being at the recital to show support for the Aunt’s daughter. This type of functional remembering is when an object triggers the remembering of sign A as relevant to the present moment. The memory of the grandmother “as an inspiring person” relates to the dance recital and the accomplishments of the aunt’s daughter.

An object for participant six also functions as a reminder. She says,

...so there's this picture that I always loved of him and me and its like he's combing my hair and it was like when I was really little and I remember he was always like really gentle like he always thought that he would hurt me, I was like ‘Grandpa, you can comb my hair’ and he would be like, ‘no I don't want to hurt you.’

The image functions as a reminder for the common occurrence of the grandfather combing the girl’s hair when she was younger. After death, the image undergoes weak asymmetrical sign-convergence with the concept of the deceased grandfather. The concept is expressed through the object of the photograph in the form of memories of the grandfather combing the hair of participant six when she was younger. Participant four is most likely embracing the function of the photograph because she describes the moment with the photograph with positive affect.

Remembering is the most common function of semiotic commemorative signs. In this scenario, sign A (the deceased) is expressed through sign B (the object) in the form of a reminder of sign A. This reminder is in the form of some kind of conglomerate of different memories fused into one “this is how he/she did something” (participant six) or the trigger

of a memory of someone which is relevant to the moment (participant one).

Now we will discuss situations where participants hold the semiotic commemorative sign as sacred.

as sacred

Some participants hold their semiotic commemorative objects as sacred. It is unclear whether the participants are embracing or avoiding/ignoring the function of the object when it is sacred, but because evidence of the object as sacred actively involve the participant protecting the state of the object, we can assume in both cases described below, they are embracing the function of it. This involves keeping the object "safe" and making effort to preserve the state of the object. Participant five keeps the quilt made of his mother's clothing in his closet,

"...it's like almost too special to just have around so I just kind of like keep it in the closet and look at it."

The concept of the deceased mother is expressed through the sign of the quilt in the form of taking on a sacred nature. In response to this, participant five keeps it in the closet instead of keeping it on his bed like he used to. This action reflects the quilt taking on a sacred nature. Participant three attempts to preserve the quilt by keeping it hidden, he only brings it out to observe it which is evidence of its sacred nature.

In participant one's experience, the yellow rose also took on a sacred nature. She reported saving the petals of the rose and putting them in a container to preserve them. She says that she would "save like the rose petals and everything and I like put it in a bag." This is an attempt to preserve the state of the yellow rose by putting it in a container. The yellow rose expresses the concept of the deceased in the form of taking on a sacred nature. Participant one responds to this by treating it as sacred and attempting to preserve the state of it.

as a substitution

Another form in which the concept of the deceased was expressed through an object was as a substitution for sign A. This form was most profound in the case of participant one. The yellow butterfly undergoes asymmetrical sign convergence with the concept of the deceased grandmother. Afterward, when participant one saw the yellow butterfly, she also senses the grandmother's presence, "...it's like my Nana reincarnated, just floating around in the world...". The concept of the grandmother is expressed through the yellow butterfly as a substitution for the physical presence of her.

Another object undergoes asymmetrical sign-convergence in the case of participant one. This occurs with both her grandparents. After her grandfather dies, participant one comes to possess her grandparents' engagement ring,

“I actually... after they both passed away, for graduation he had been planning on giving me my Nana and his engagement ring so I actually got that and that was very beautiful...”

The presence through the ring expresses the concept of her grandparents after both of them die. The link is established with the meaning of her grandfather giving her the ring after her graduation and it being related to a major ritual of commitment between her two grandparents. She describes afterward that while wearing the ring, she feels like she is in the presence of her grandparents,

“I just feel like I'm like, they're just with me when I wear it, they're just protecting me, loving me and just like little angels floating around me...”

This is an example of sign B acting as a substitution of sign A. Both concepts of her grandparents are expressed through the object of the ring in the form of their presence. This is a complete form of semiotic commemoration because the complete concept of sign A is expressed through sign B (not just memories or a sacred nature).

The process of association of the deceased and a sign can occur before death and after death. During a period of reflection and mourning, the sign undergoes signification so that it expresses the concept of the deceased. This is a process of sign convergence where the signifier of the object-sign replaces the signifier of the deceased (which is considered his/her presence and is no longer). The object-sign can be objects, places, or events. The function of the object-signs vary from causing the person to remember the deceased, taking on a sacred-nature, and/or allowing the person to feel in the presence of the deceased while in the presence of the object-sign.

DISCUSSION

Signifiers are exchangeable. Concepts lacking a means of expression adapt to express through other signifiers of related signs. Semiotic commemoration may occur in many other realms of life such as between a beach and a small pebble taken from the beach. Another case may be if a person in a romantic relationship spends an extended amount of time in a different country. He/she may take particular objects such as a bracelet the other made, which reminds the person of their significant other. Qualities of the other may also be expressed through the bracelet (warmth, comfort, etc.). Also like in participant one's experience, the object may allow the person to remember and also experience the other while not being in the presence of them. In this instance the object acts as a temporary material signifier for the other. There is also the case of the use of religious objects as a material signifier for God. A rosemary could be a material signifier for God for a Christian person, while the object of a Torah could be the material signifier for God for a Jewish

person.

Relating the process of semiotic commemoration back to the literature review, “trench art” discussed by Whittingham is a material signifier for certain aspects of World War I for British citizens. Specifically, British citizens who had lost family members in the war or British soldiers who had come home after experienced the war created Trench art. The event of the war was over and so the signifier of the sign of World War I, which is “presence of World War I,” is lost while the concept of the sign of World War I still existed. The concept of World War I is expressed through the trench art in the form of memories of the war.

The example of the personality of deceased soldiers being expressed through displayed photographs of faces of the soldiers can also be analyzed according to our model. The material signifier of the soldier (his presence) is lost while the concept still exists in the minds of families and friends. The concept of the soldier is expressed through the photograph in the form of his personality. This is why adding the photograph greatly personalizes the memorial of the dead soldier.

The example of “All Souls Day” as discussed by Davies is not fully analyzable with our model because there is no distinct object that is to commemorate the deceased. The participants communicate with the deceased through abstract means. The ritual of burning letters and floating messages allows participants to communicate (one-way) with their concept of the deceased through abstract means. The ritual involving the telephone is partially analyzable using our model. The person speaks with the deceased while someone on the other end of the line plays back recordings of the deceased with responses. The recordings of the deceased express the concept of the deceased and the participants are able to interact with it, simulating a communication with the deceased.

CONCLUDING POINTS

We can now say that the material expression (or signifier) of signs is not fixed. When the material expression of an important concept is inhibited, other ways of expression evolve. When participant one's grandmother passed away, the objects of the butterfly and the yellow rose underwent asymmetrical sign convergence with the concept of the deceased grandmother. Participant one could then be in the presence of these objects and feel the presence of her grandmother. This connection is made possible through the associative link between the signs of the objects and the deceased grandmother, which is evident through narratives. We can also say that signs can be linked through both repeated exposure and also a small number of deeply meaningful experiences. Examples in this study show that asymmetrical sign convergence is possible, where a dominant sign loses a material signifier and the concept of the sign is expressed through the linked sign.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Stephen A. Wall is currently serving as an AmeriCorps VISTA, Research Associate with Peace First Inc. in Boston, MA. He earned his B.A. in Psychology from Clark University, where he focused in Social and Cultural Psychology. He went on to earn his Masters in Public Administration degree from Clark and is currently pursuing a career in fundraising and development for non-profit organizations. Email: wall.stephen.a@gmail.com