Semiotics, from the Greek sêmeion, is the study of all forms of activity, conduct or process that involve signs. Semiotic anthropology explores the role language and other sign systems play in the ways we, the human animal, inhabit the world and our bodies, the ways we interact with each other, finally the ways in which power is distributed and operates in our everyday lives.

As a distinct field of empirical research and theoretical inquiry, semiotic anthropology addresses fundamental questions about the place and workings of signs in the human form(s) of life. How to understand, for example, the relationship between the many kinds of signs that we use in the course of our everyday life, and what these signs stand for or represent? If our ability to make sense to each other depends on the stability of this relationship, how is this stability achieved across a multitude of sign-users? And how to account for the extraordinary force, too, that signs can acquire in our interactions, as demonstrated in the efficacy of religious and other rituals, the devastating impact of spells or insults, or the hold some words (e.g. “man” or “woman”) come to have on our intimate sense of who we are and what we can do? While we humans like to revel in our unique ability to create signs, are we not, just as much, the creation of the signs that we inherited and put to use?

In dealing with such questions, and by looking at the multiple answers they have received in a variety of social and cultural worlds, semiotic anthropology has developed a powerful set of conceptual and methodological tools that can be applied to a wide range of sociocultural contexts and questions. The objective of this seminar is to introduce you to the demands and pleasures of semiotic anthropology as a rigorous method for analyzing sociocultural phenomena, and to encourage you to mobilize this method for understanding the action of signs in your own life, and for strengthening your research projects, too. We will acquaint ourselves with the works of Saussure, Peirce, Bakhtin, Jakobson and other important authors who sought to theorize the structure of signs and sign-systems, and we will learn to recognize how these works inspired classical and newer modes of anthropological interpretation. As importantly, however, we will do close readings of case studies that demonstrate and exemplify how the toolbox of semiotic anthropology can be brought to bear on a range of topics, including how social norms (and “discourse”) operate in our everyday interactions, how publics (e.g. “the Lebanese nation”) and counterpublics (e.g., “secularists” or “queers”) emerge or fail to do so, what it means to be “modern,” and even how to live ethically with other lifeforms in the age of global warming.
LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Identify and describe the two main traditions of modern semiotic theory (based, respectively, on Saussure’s "semiology" and Peirce’s "semeiotics"), and demonstrate an understanding of their basic analytical concepts and distinctions (including langue/parole, signifier/signified, synchrony/diachrony, and object/representamen/interpretant, index/icon/symbol).

- Recognize and explain how various modes of anthropological interpretation (including structural anthropology and post-structuralist approaches) are grounded in and developed from these two semiotic traditions.

- Apply principles and concepts of semiotic analysis in order to explain the structure and force of various types of signs (linguistic and otherwise) we encounter and mobilize in a wide range of social interactions and institutional contexts.

- Appraise the role signs, sign-systems and ideas about (how to properly use) signs play in major social institutions and phenomena such as gender and sexuality, nationalism, modernity, the social formation of subjectivity, religion and environmental catastrophe.

- Design research projects that utilize the toolbox of semiotic anthropology both at the stage of data collection and data analysis.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS (including instructions for the various assignments)

1. **Attendance, participation, reading (20% of the final grade):** This course will be run as a seminar. In other words, the attendance and informed participation of each and every student is not just required, it is the very substance of our endeavor. I will deliver lectures on the course material, but what we learn will be driven in good part by the questions, comments, ideas and energies that you bring to our discussion. There is no point in coming to class if you have not read, annotated and thought carefully about the course material and have no intention to contribute to the discussion. A failure on your part to do this work of preparation on a regular basis, or to make it evident to me through your participation in class, would significantly impact this portion of your final grade.

   Note in this respect that this a **reading-intensive** course. The reading load for each week sometimes reaches 100+ dense pages; shorter reading assignments mean that the texts are peculiarly difficult and that you should devote a significant amount of your time to them all the same. You should plan on keeping a strict, organized reading routine throughout the semester in order to cope with this load (i.e. starting the readings the day before class will not work). I also expect participants in this course to do close, active readings of the material. You should come to class with a clear idea of the plan of the chapters or articles you have just read, of the argumentative strategies that authors employ to engage with ideas to move them in new directions, and a
handful of key words and specific passages in mind for discussion. A valuable resource for methodological tips and guidelines on how to engage anthropological readings critically can be found in the section “Moves anthropologists make” (pp. 13-18) of the Student Guide to Reading and Writing in Social Anthropology (SGRWSA) published by Harvard’s Anthropology department (this document will also be available on Moodle).

2. There will be five unannounced quizzes on the assigned readings of the week, four of which will count towards the course grade, i.e., the lowest score will be dropped (20% of the final grade, 5% for each of the top four quizzes).

3. Presentations (10 x 2 = 20% of the final grade): Starting on week 3, one session per week will be led by two participants, who will highlight the important concepts and argumentative moves in the reading(s). Each student will thus share the responsibility for two such presentations (about 30-min. long) over the semester. You should prepare these presentations jointly by meeting up and discussing the reading(s) together. I know that group work can be difficult to organize, but the point is precisely to fight the atomizing effect of the rest of our lives on our academic community.

An unfortunate misconception, widespread even amongst advanced undergraduate and MA students, is that a class presentation consists in “a summary of the reading” sometimes adorned by fancy-pants Powerpoint slides. This is not what I expect from you. Rather, you should strive to strike a balance between summary, analysis and critique (not necessarily criticism), and plan on ending up the presentation with a set of specific questions to open up the class discussion, and ideas on how to apply the readings’ concepts to your research projects and the analysis of your own social worlds. Before your first presentation, read the SGRWSA guidelines on how to prepare a response paper (pp. 21-23) as these guidelines apply equally well to the preparation of a good class presentation.

4. Research project (in stages, 40% of the final grade): Finally, you will compose over the course of the semester an in-depth research paper exploring a particular case of signs-in-use relevant either to the social world you live in or your research project, and which strikes you as peculiarly interesting and significant. You should start thinking of a research topic for this assignment in the very first weeks of the semester. I will be happy to consider and discuss with you topics you bounce off me in advance. In general, three considerations should guide the choice of the topic you will research. First, this topic should be specific enough to undergo a reasonably thorough treatment in the space of 15 pages. Second, it should concern uses of signs that you can document ethnographically with relative ease over the course of the semester. Finally, it should be guided by the ideas and concepts we discuss in class. In other words, the point is to put the analytical tools we will acquire to the test of a case study. The composition of the paper itself will involve a number of steps, each of which will count toward the final grade. You will first submit a
paper proposal (5% of the final grade), followed by a conceptual note (5%), an outline (10%) and finally at the end of the semester the research paper (20%) itself.

Here again, refer to the guidelines contained in the SGRWSA for useful advice and resources on “taming the term paper monster” (pp. 26–31) and “working with sources” (pp. 33–37).

Take advantage of the writing resources available to you, first among them the AUB Writing Center where you can schedule an appointment for advice and feedback at any stage of the writing process. The Writing Center’s website includes a page collecting most useful writing links. Specific guidelines on how to write an anthropology paper can be found here.

All written assignments must be uploaded as Microsoft Word documents on Moodle on specified dates. They must be double-spaced with one inch margins all around. Your last name and the page number must appear in the upper-right corner of every page. Part of your grade for written assignments will have to do with your documents’ presentation. Proofread and edit them for obvious typos, misspellings, and basic errors in grammar, usage and punctuation before submission.

In accordance with the conventions followed by the American Anthropological Association, you should use the Author-Date Chicago citation style in your written assignments. Refer to the How to cite your sources page on the AUB library website for the necessary information on the Chicago citation style and useful citation management tools. Schedule an appointment at the library or the writing center if you are unsure of how to use these resources.
COURSE ETIQUETTE AND POLICIES

• **Attendance**: I will take attendance at the beginning of each class session. By coming late to class, you will be marked as absent, unless you come to see me at the end of the session with a valid excuse for being late. Absences for which a medical excuse is provided (on professional letterhead) will be recorded but not figured in the attendance grade. Likewise, one absence for which advance notice is given by email will not be figured in the attendance grade. Any significant tardy arrival in, or early departure from, class will be figured as a half absence. Otherwise, one absence will be penalized by 5% of the final grade, two absences by 10% of the final grade, three absences by 15%, and **anyone who has more than four class-long, unexcused absences will receive an “F” grade for the course**.

• **Late assignments**: Late assignments will not be accepted without penalty unless there is an emergency situation and you contact me immediately and *in advance* to discuss an extension. Otherwise, one late assignment will be penalized by 5% of the final grade and two late assignments by 10% of the final grade.

• **Classroom behavior**: There is to be no computer, cell phone or electronic notepad usage in class except to access the reading. You will be publicly shamed and asked to leave the classroom if caught using the above for any other purpose. Please use a pen and notebook to take notes. The effort is to recapture the old charm of listening, writing by hand and speaking in class.

• **Academic integrity**: Please familiarize yourself with issues pertaining to academic honesty by consulting the AUB Student Code of Conduct, Section 1. **Plagiarism** (stealing other people’s work and words and trying to pass them to me as your own) is a peculiarly objectionable sin and I will not hesitate, in grave cases, to penalize it most heavily. The AUB website contains a useful page with information and tutorials designed for students on this topic. You are also always welcome to come and see me before submitting your assignment if you are not sure of whether the way you handle a peculiar source is appropriate.

• **On the ethics of anthropology**: The anthropology class is an ethical space where differences are negotiated. These differences pertain not only to the unfamiliar forms of life sometimes conjured up in ethnographic texts, but also to the diverse political, moral, spiritual or intellectual commitments that students and instructor bring with them into the classroom. Taking this course implies a willingness, on each participant’s part, to learn to recognize, through the medium of anthropology, the layering of dispositions, heritages and social forces that help to compose our personal orientations to the world. It also implies a firm commitment to attend to our differences in this regard in a spirit of mutual responsiveness, generosity and respect.
WEEKLY READING SCHEDULE

Electronic copies of all the required journal articles or book chapters will be made available on Moodle.

I reserve the right to make (slight) modifications to this reading list as the semester unfolds, but the topics covered will remain the same.

Week 1 Saussure’s semiology


Week 2 From structural linguistics to structural anthropology


Week 3 Embodied meaning in structural anthropology: two examples


Week 4 and 5 From semiology to sem(e)iotics


Week 5 An illustration: pragmatics and metapragmatics of interviewing

Week 6 How to make sex with words

Week 7 Circulations, publics, counterpublics

Week 8 The semiotic mediation of the self

Week 9 Semiotic ideologies and religious moderns

Week 10 Interspecies companionships
Week 11 Amazonian other-than-human encounters


Week 12 Semiotics and ethics in the Anthropocene
