

Masks in East and West: Conflicts, Bifurcation and Interpretation under the Pandemic — From a Semiotic Perspective

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The word “mask” has become prevailing and medical face masks have widespread increasingly since the outbreak of the Covid-19. However, at the beginning of the pandemic, the interpretation of wearing a medical face mask is extremely different and controversial in some Eastern and Western countries. It is not difficult to find some news reports about conflicts and bifurcation of wearing a mask in public space in the East and West. This paper proposes a semiotic perspective to decoding this interesting phenomenon and reveals the contradictions of wearing masks by employing Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic theory. Peirce formulated a triadic model consisting of an object, a representamen, and an interpretant (Peirce 1932). In this case, people in the East and West are considered interpretants, who create meanings of medical face masks as signs from their point of view. Conflicts and bifurcation arise due to the distinct perception of wearing medical face masks in divergent cultural models. Through a comparative analysis of totally contrastive interpretation of wearing a mask, this study draws a conclusion that, on the one hand, in the East, taking China as an example, wearing masks is more receptive and consciously, which is regarded as a behavior by default to protect oneself as well as others at the current situation. The semiotic ideology behind it is a shared identity of the community and a shared value of collectivism. On the other hand, in the West, taking America as an example, a mask is treated as a device that transforms the meaning of identity delivered by the face itself and challenges their rights to express their bodies (Gell 1975). It seems that wearing masks hinders individual behaviors and becomes a stumbling block to individualism. Although people in the West are gradually accepting wearing a medical face mask, to some extent it still results from the idea of individualism.

Keywords: Pandemic, Face, Masks, Peirce, Semiotics

There are many news reports about the rejection of wearing a medical face mask in Western countries since the outbreak of the pandemic as well as some conflicts and bifurcation between the

Westerners and Easterners about wearing face masks. Why under the same situation, the pandemic, many Westerners resist this protective method while Easterners, especially China, Japan and South Korea, are consciously wearing a medical face mask in public? As the coronavirus disease continues to spread around the world, Westerners are also beginning to wear masks in public. Then another interesting thing appeared. The face masks that Westerners wear tend to be more diversified, while face masks worn by Easterners are more standardized, namely the same shape and same color. How should we understand the cultural meaning behind them?

There have been studies about the masks issues under the pandemic from various perspectives. Howard (2020) analyzed this issue from the gender studies perspective. He proposed that gender has a significant impact on the perception of wearing a face mask during Covid-19. For men wearing a face mask is an invasion of their independence and freedom, while women consider wearing a face mask as an uncomfortable practice. Another perspective came from Tso and Cowling. Tso and Cowling (2020) emphasized the importance of face masks from a medical perspective. They believed that "Protective behaviors and actions at the individual level can contribute to reducing transmission at the community level" (Tso and Cowling, 2020, p. 2195). However, little research focuses on the semiotics of medical face masks in this particular situation. The latest study of Massimo Leone, a professor from the University of Turin, proposed a semiotic interpretation of medical face masks. He mainly provided some anecdotic evidence about the differences in the semiotics of medical face masks in the East and Europe, taking Kyoto and Turin as examples (Leone 2020). The major contribution of this article is the clarification of research about faces and masks as well as the relationship between them in the history of scholarship. However, how to interpret the meaning of face masks concretely in a particular semiotic approach is still a research gap that no one touches on.

Applying Peirce's triadic model of sign, this article aims at interpreting medical face masks from a semiotic perspective. The multiple interpretations of medical face masks created by people from different cultural backgrounds will be presented. This paper also attempts to examine how the process of interpretation is conducted by Chinese society and American society. Finally concludes that the debate or conflicts between East and West about wearing medical face masks is not only a medical argument about whether masks have any utility but also about different values and different semiotic ideologies.

Peirce's Triadic Model of Sign and The Basic Meaning of Medical Face Masks

There are two major scholars in defining a sign in semiotics: Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). Saussure, a famous linguist, offered a structuralist perspective and classic bisection of defining a sign. From his point of view, a sign consists of the signifier (the form the sign exists) and signified (the concept the sign carries) (Chandler 2007). This connotation of a sign is widely applied in language studies for a long time. According to Saussure, the relation between the signifier and signified construct the sign as a whole. Every single signifier has a particular and corresponding signified in the meaning system (Chandler 2007). This definition is effective in linguistics. However, it has some shortages in interpreting multiple social signs due to its strictly binary model of sign. Peirce, the American philosopher and scholar, provided another perspective of defining and interpreting a sign. On the one hand, Peirce believed that a sign is a sign when it is perceived as a sign (Chandler 2007). On the other hand, he proposed a triadic model of sign, consisting of the representamen, the interpretant and the object (see Fig. 1). Every single part

in this triadic system has its own meaning. The representamen refers to the form that a sign exists. It is worth mentioning that the form is not necessarily material but also can be mental. The interpretant is not an interpreter, but the explanation that allows the sign to make sense in a certain cultural system. And the object is what the sign or the representamen refers to (Chandler 2007). In Peirce's analytical framework, the sign is a synthesis of representamen, interpretant and object which always occur simultaneously in a meaning system. They are considered as an integrated whole for their tight relations with each other. In this case, if they can be named separately, they do not exist in the same meaning system any more (Peirce 1932).

It is revealed in Peirce's triadic model of sign that the process of interpreting a sign is infinite. In this three-part system, when the representamen is interpreted, the interpretant of Sign 1 becomes the representamen of Sign 2 (see Fig. 1). In this new process of interpretation, a new interpretant and a new object are produced. If continues, there will be endless representamens, interpretants and objects, all of which contribute to constructing the meaning of a sign.

Why is it necessary to interpret a sign continually? There are some implications here. First, this approach unifies the interpretant 1 and the representamen 2, which significantly create an interaction between the "signal world" and the "real world" (Peirce 1932). The interpretant 1 follows the literal and direct way, which is similar to Saussure's definition of a sign. However, this is a signal game without considering different social backgrounds and cultural models. Consequently, it would be meaningful to make a continuous interpretation of a social sign considering all kinds of possibilities to make relatively full meaning of a sign. It is worth pointing out that, on the one hand, the representamen 1 and the object 1 usually occurred as terms. At the same time, their relationship is similar to what Saussure (1969) called the binary structure of a sign, namely the signifier and signified. On the other hand, the interpretant 1 and all the elements of sign 2 would possibly be an argument or a proposition (Peirce 1932). The process of how Peirce's triadic model of sign works is shown by Fig. 1.

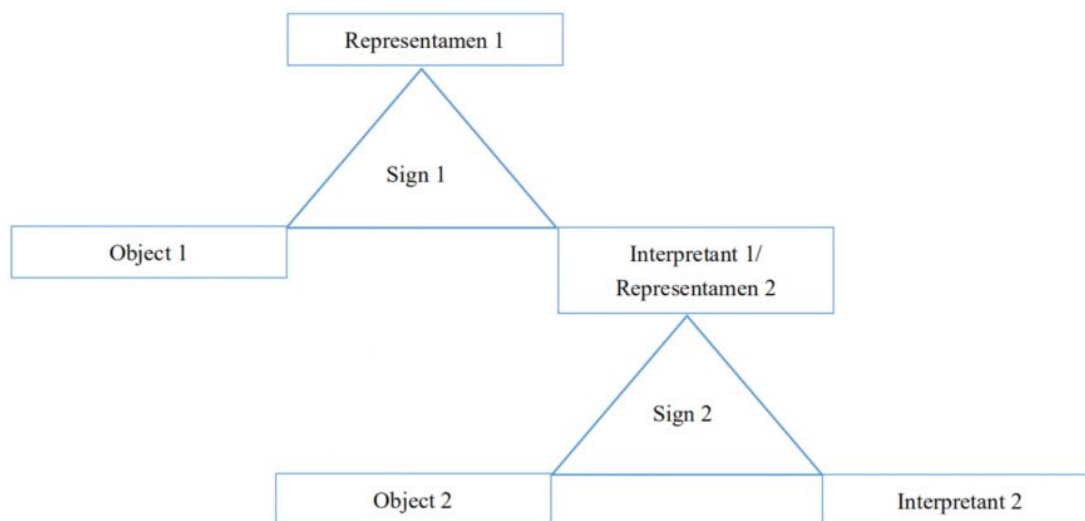


Fig. 1 Two stages of the infinite interpretation process by Peirce (adopted from Peirce 1932)

Before we go deeper into the multiple meanings of medial face masks, the basic meaning of it needs to be examined. A basic meaning of a sign is the most direct, literal meaning despite the influence of different cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs or other standpoints (Zhang & Sheng 2017). In this case, the direct and literal meaning of a mask is that it is something that covers the face. The relation between the representamen and the object can refer to Saussure's sound-image/concept structure. However, the process in Sign 1 is just a signal activity. Therefore, in order to investigate the comprehensive social meaning of a medical face mask as a sign, more attention needs to be paid to Sign 2.

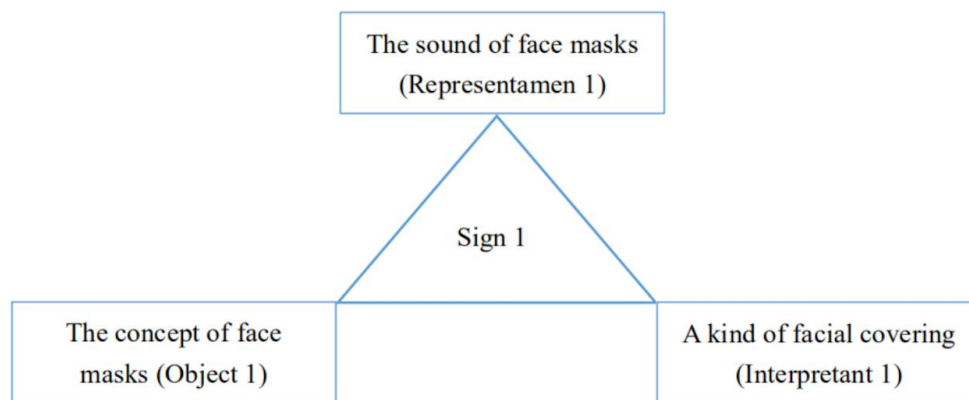


Fig. 2 Basic meaning of face masks (adapted from Chandler 2007, p. 32)

Multiple Interpretations of Masks

American People's Interpretations

From a large number of authoritative media news reports, such as the Washington Post, BBC News, the New York Times, and so on, American people refuse to wear masks for the following reasons. First, the government's coercive orders violate their freedom of choice, and no wearing masks is a resistance to such authoritarianism. People who are unwilling to wear medical face masks thought that their lives were controlled by the government and the virus, which made them so angry about masks (Hensley 2020). As we know, human rights and freedom are fundamental for Americans. The public will regard any excessive centralization of power as a violation of their freedom and rights. Then the boycott follows. Forced wearing masks has been isolated from the original scientific and rational discussion. When science contradicts human rights and freedom, people will choose human rights and freedom over science. Second, even if the government does not force masks, most people still think that wearing them is a constraint on personal freedom. Unlike Japan, the United States and other Western countries do not wear masks in daily life. Wearing a mask is uncomfortable and limits facial expressions. Moreover, such behavior can be regarded as impoliteness and offensiveness (Xu 2020). The face is crucial for identification. Voices, eye contacts or postures are difficult to identify a person comparing with faces. When someone can not be identified, uncertainty and suspicion come out. Then people regard it as a dangerous sign. This is

related to the image of masks in America's history, such as the image of the 3K party. They are associated with witchcraft, violence, persecution of minorities, and so on, which do not arouse good feelings. Although the medical face masks usually cover only part of a face, it still makes identification harder. Finally, it is hard to see the distinction between "infected" and "uninfected". Preventive measures based on this distinction mean that some people are subject to open discrimination. No one wants to be isolated or rejected by others, so some choose not to wear a mask, even if they tested positive for the virus.

In short, the interpretation from the American people can be concluded as follows: the representamen 2 (interpretant 1) is that a face mask is a kind of facial covering; the interpretant 2 is that a mandatory order of wearing medical face masks violates the individual liberties; the object 2 is that face is part of individual's body.

When Covid-19 spread in Western countries, government mask orders seemed to work. People had to face reality and wear masks. But there is an interesting phenomenon about wearing face masks. It seems that American people often wear a variety of masks. We can see masks of different materials, colors, and shapes on public transport or in the street. However, in China or other Eastern countries, we see more standardized medical face masks. These masks are uniform specifications, colors, and shapes. This is a question worth thinking about. Even if American people are willing to wear masks, does it prove that they are beginning to consider the collective interest? Does it show that they give up the personal rights and freedoms they have been pursuing? The answer is no. Instead, this reflected their pursuit of freedom and individualism. The key point here is that they wear masks according to their preferences of masks. As we can see in some news reports, they pay more attention to the shapes, colors, and even the expression of identity, rather than the masks' medical function. For example, people tend to wear masks to show their political position.

However in China, masks' medical function to protect themselves from viruses and prevent their own diseases from spreading to others is far more important than the aesthetic meaning of masks.



"Man with a straw hat & a Trump 2020 COVID-19 face mask at supermarket" by Gilbert Mercier is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND

In short, the interpretation in this situation can be concluded as follows: the representamen 2 (interpretant 1) is that a face mask is a kind of facial covering; the interpretant 2 is that how to wear a medical face mask is an individual choice; the object 2 is that face is part of individual's body.

Chinese People's Interpretations

As a native of China, I have witnessed the initiative and consciousness of wearing masks. Under the Government's orders, everyone must wear masks in public, and violators are punished by the relevant laws. For a moment, the masks were snapped up. Under the totalitarian management system, most people choose to wear masks in public spaces and there are no big differences in their daily lives. On the one hand, the government's official propaganda makes people think wearing masks is a self-interested thing, which can prevent virus invasion and spread. On the other hand, the medical efficacy of masks has become the focus of attention. N95, KN95 and various types of medical masks are preferred to protect against the virus, while other industrial or unprotected masks are not accepted by the public.

Asian countries show a tendency to collectivism to varying degrees, which is also part of the Asian value different from Western individualism. As an all-inclusive concept, Asian value is proposed by many cultural researchers. Collectivism is an important part of it. As a centralized country, collectivism is naturally valued. People pay attention to the community; collective interests are higher than individual interests. Therefore, for collective safety, sacrificing oneself and wearing a mask brings no trouble. On the contrary, if, in the collective, the individual's behavior is not carried out in

accordance with the requirements of most people, then blame and punishment will follow (Wong 2020).

In the choice of masks, Chinese people tend to choose medical masks with a high protective effect, rather than all kinds of personalized masks. Basically, in public, people wear the same masks, the same color, the same shape, the same material, for the same purpose. The mask's protective function is more important than other functions such as aesthetics. This is also a reflection of collectivism. People are used to unity, standardization, consistency, rather than diversification, personalization.

In short, the interpretation from the Chinese view can be summarized as follows: the representamen 2 (interpretant 1) is that a face mask is a kind of facial covering; the interpretant 2 is that a mandatory order of wearing medical face masks benefits the communities; the object 2 is that face can be altered for the collective.

Conclusion

The outbreak of pandemic is undoubtedly a major turning point in human history. At this particular moment, everything is full of uncertainty and indeterminacy. The semiotic meaning of the medical face mask, this little ordinary facial covering, also changes. Its abstract meaning is closely related to the face. In the Western world, the face is perceived as part of the body and the individual has the right and freedom to show it. There is a close relationship between the use of masks, personal freedom and human rights. The government's orders to wear masks are clearly an affront to such human rights and freedom in Westerners' eyes and are unacceptable. With the lasting pandemic, people in the West began to accept wearing masks in public. It is not a waiver of human rights or personal freedom, but a declaration in another way. This can be seen from the way they wear medical face masks. The masks they wear are always diverse, showing different shapes, colors, materials, decorations, and even expressing different political positions. The medical function of masks is not their main consideration. Things are different in the East, especially in China, masks tend to be more like an icon, and people pay more attention to their effectiveness in preventing viruses than the feeling of comfort or aesthetics. As part of Asia's values, collectivism is fully reflected in the behavior of wearing medical face masks. It is acceptable to sacrifice the free expression of one's face for the benefit of the community by default. People fought the Covid-19 together in a mechanism of mutual supervision. Back to the series of questions raised at the beginning of the article, we now know that from Pierce's semiotic point of view, the debate or conflicts between East and West about wearing medical face masks is not only a medical argument about whether masks have any utility but also about different values and different ideologies.

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