3.2 Representations: spoilt for choice

Most deliberate explicit human communication relies on representations made by people and designed for that purpose. Devising a representation involves two assumptions:

- by and large, the relationship between a particular form and its contents is not predetermined; and
- people can choose which form to associate with which content.

The relationship between form and content

The relationship between form and content is not predetermined. As the following exercise will show, there is usually nothing that means a particular sign will have a particular meaning.

**EXERCISE 3.3**

For each icon in Figure 3.1:

(a) write down what you think it stands for;
(b) suggest a plausible (alternative) interpretation.

(a) Figure 3.1(a) stands for ‘No smoking’.
(b) Figure 3.1(b) is used as a ‘Stop’ sign on Italian roads.
(c) Figure 3.1(c) is the symbol for a battlefield on UK Ordnance Survey maps.

(b) When stuck on the side of a bin in a smokers’ area, Figure 3.1(a) means ‘Do not dispose of burning cigarettes in this bin’.
(b) Figure 3.1(b) assumes an understanding of Italian. An alternative interpretation might be ‘Meeting point for altos’ at a conference for singers!
In Figure 3.1(c), the two crossed symbols stand for swords. At the entrance of a mountainside restaurant, they might stand for ski-poles in a sign indicating 'Ski-pole stand for restaurant customers'.

Exercise 3.3 shows that in principle any form could be associated with any content. It is essential for effective communication that all parties agree on which form is paired up with which content.

**De Saussure and the relationship between form and content**

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss scholar, laid the foundations of modern linguistics at the beginning of the twentieth century. He was interested in establishing which principles underlie languages. Pivotal to his work was the notion of sign, a unit of meaning which has both a form (the signifiant), and a content (the signifié). He argued that the relationship between the two is not intrinsically fixed: the pairing between a word and its contents is accidental. There is no reason, for instance, why the word 'chair' should not refer to tables.

De Saussure was not the first to study this issue. The relationship between objects and their names has been debated since antiquity. Plato was undecided on whether names can refer to arbitrary objects, and suspected divine intervention. Aristotle thought names only exist because they became symbols by convention.

**People can choose representations**

People can choose how they get a message across. Exercise 3.4 will clarify this point.

**EXERCISE 3.4**

(a) What is the content of the four symbols in Figure 3.2?
(b) What other ways are there of representing the same content?