

# Marked and unmarked: A choice between unequals in semiotic structure

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## Introduction

Markedness — the asymmetrical and hierarchical relationship between the two poles of any opposition — has been a central concept in both phonology and semantics (grammar) in linguistics since the 1930s, when it was first defined and utilized in a systematic way by Nikolaj Trubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson.<sup>1</sup> Since that time it has found wide application both in linguistics and in other studies of semiotic systems, for example, Claude Lévi-Strauss's work in anthropology. It has become increasingly clear, however, that the nature of markedness has been misunderstood by linguists and other semioticians alike and that in particular semioticians have based their understanding of markedness on the phonological model (and often a misunderstood phonological model, at that), while for most semiotic work, markedness in semantic (grammatical and lexical) systems proves to be the much more powerful and insightful analog. This is especially so since the semantic system is that area where oppositions obtain in the *signatum* while phonology is that area where oppositions obtain in the *signans*. Furthermore, the semantic system correlates the oppositions in the *signatum* with differences in form, while in phonology the oppositions in the *signans* are correlated only with 'differentiatedness' (=otherness) in the *signatum*. (It is this difference that is the basis for 'double articulation'.<sup>2</sup>) If we take the type of *signatum* as criterial, then we can say that phonology is that area based primarily on the 'differentiatedness' of the *signatum*, while semantics is that area based primarily on the 'significativeness' of the *signatum*, its association with a given conceptual category. Since most work in semiotic systems deals with significative domains, it would seem then to be a phonological (and perforce linguistic) contraband to apply notions such as 'differentiatedness' to domains that are properly 'significative'.