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## **IBM rebus:Linguistics and Avant-garde**

The **IBM rebus** poster was created by the well known graphic designer Paul Rand in 1981. The poster was made in support of the IBM THINK motto. A rebus is a puzzle in which words are represented by combinations of pictures and individual letters. In the rebus poster, the letters I and B are represented by illustrations or symbols and the M is from the **IBM** logo. The **IBM** rebus is now a part of the of the **IBM** visual history and can be found at the Museum of Modern Art permanent collection.

The **IBM rebus** seems to me, to be influenced by *Ferdinand de Saussure*. *De Saussure* believed that linguistics is the study of language, and the study of the sign of human speech. Language is the connection between mental image and sound, and is a way for thoughts to be expressed as sound. Thoughts have to become mentally organized, and sounds have to be physically expressed, for language to occur. De Saussure expressed that language is really a link between thought and sound, when thought and sound are combine communication occurs. De Saussure also says that linguistics is also connected with the history of languages, and with the social and or cultural influences that frames the development of language. In De Saussure "*Course in General Linguistics*" he discusses the **sign**, **signifier** and the **signified** and how they all work together to communicate to get an idea or message across. The signified is the concept

the designer comes up with. The signified would be the images and or graphics the designer creates or gather that is associated the signifier. And the sign is connection between the designers idea and images or graphics that that is designed to convey a message visually and clearly.



IBM rebus poster. Designed by Paul Rand in 1981.



IBM 8 bar logo



IBM rebus totem

In the **IBM** logo, the letters I and B were replaced with pictures of an **eye** and a **bee** to them symbolically. Eye is is the signifier, signified is “organ used for sight” and the sign is the picture or illustration of an eye. Bee is the signifier, “insect that makes honey and pollinate plants” is the signified, and the sign is the illustration of a bee.

The IBM rebus has a second function, the totem form of the rebus. The eye and the bee are stacked on top of the M and this made the rebus look more human like, the eye represented the head, the bee acts as the body and arm and the M are the legs. “The totem connects with us because it speaks to the human factor, the user, and the ever-evolving relationship between mankind and machines. It reminds us that good design should primarily serve people and move us toward progress.” (IBM). The quote from the IBM website explains that technology and people are always changing, and that designers should strive for “good design” in order to serve the need of the people. This is similar to how *Helen Armstrong* believe designers have social responsibility to the world around them, whether it’s political, cultural or environmental and not put all effort into unbiased communication . “issues of social responsibility, like graphic authorship, have also entered graphic design educational curriculum, encouraging students to look beyond formal concerns, to the global impact of their work. No longer primarily led by restrictive modern ideals of neutral, objective communication, the design field has expanded to include more direct critical engagement with the surrounding world.” (Armstrong 15).

The IBM rebus poster by Paul Rand, embodies the theories of the linguistic, with how the letters I and B were represented by pictures and created a sort of new language. The totem rebus version embodies the aspects of the avant-garde where the designer was focusing more moving society forward rather than objective consumer communication.

In conclusion the **IBM rebus** embodies the linguistic theory of of *Ferdinand de Saussure*, the sign, signified and the signifier and that there is some kind of underlying link between the name and its object. The rebus's totem form also embodies the characteristic of the Avant-garde movement, it's progressive, bold and experimental, even though it doesn't look like it fits with what one would consider Avant-garde, the meaning and characteristics do match.

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