

THE SEMIOTICS OF STANDARDIZED SIZING SYSTEMS

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.
Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest

DOI: 10.36253/fh-3904

Abstract

This Lexigraphy examines standardized clothing sizing systems through a semiotic lens, arguing that size labels are not neutral measurements but function as culturally charged signs. Drawing on Saussurean semiotics, sizing is analysed as a language in which labels operate through socially agreed conventions, producing meaning via differentiation rather than intrinsic reference. The Lexigraphy demonstrates how these conventions are deeply entangled with gendered body norms, particularly within womenswear, where size categories carry implicit judgments of desirability, value, and social acceptance. Historical and contemporary inconsistencies across global sizing systems further reveal the instability of both size labels and the measurements they claim to represent, exposing the tension between mathematical precision and semantic distortion. In response, the Lexigraphy proposes initial criteria for imagining alternative, non-hierarchical size languages that seek to decouple bodily measurement from value judgment. Ultimately, this research invites continued scholarly and creative engagement with sizing as a semiotic system, advocating for more inclusive approaches that respect the lived experience of the body.

Keywords: *Clothing sizing systems; Saussurean semiotics; Sociocultural body norms*
Vanity sizing; Non-hierarchical language.

INTRODUCTION

The practice of reading the body is central to fashion. It functions as a form of communication, operating through aesthetic expression (including dimensions) and social meaning. For decades, wearing a size “S” (small) has been regarded in the “West”, as the ultimate fashion must-have. But also in Asian cultures, such as Japan, China, and South Korea, there has long been a strong emphasis on thinness (Abdoli et al., 2024). In African contexts, there is generally a more inclusive view of body types. However, recent studies indicate that South African adolescents, particularly those living in urban spaces, tend to prefer thinner bodies influenced by Westernized standards.

(Szabo & Allwood, 2006.)¹ This preference for thinness is inscribed in multiple ways, most notoriously through contemporary sizing systems. Metric systems play a crucial role in constructing these charts. Although ostensibly neutral, they encompass far more than the centimetres they intended to measure. Sizing charts aimed at female-identifying bodies in particular carry with each size category a range of cultural connotations. This Lexigraphy offers a semiotic-theoretical analysis of sizing as a form of language, employing Saussurean semiotics to interpret clothing sizes as signs composed of a signifier and a signified,

¹ Middle Eastern and Latin American countries on the other hand exhibit greater diversity in preferred body types and sizes.

together with their inherent connotations. Size labels (S, M, L, etc.) are not neutral measurements but linguistic and symbolic constructs. It demonstrates how size terminology functions as a hierarchical language, assigning social meaning to corporeal difference. This Fashion Lexicography critically examines the limitations of existing sizing systems and proposes a discussion of speculative, non-hierarchical alternative size languages that seek to decouple bodily measurement from value judgment.

THE SEMIOTIC CONSTRUCTION OF SIZE

One of the founders of semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure, provides a useful framework for analyzing sizing systems through his dual construction of the linguistic sign. He proposes that a sign is composed of two inseparable components, both of which, like fashion, operate through socially agreed conventions. The first component, the signifier, is the material form of the sign, such as a word, sound, or image. The second is the signified, the concept or meaning that this form conventionally represents (Saussure, 1959/1916). Together, the signifier and the signified constitute the sign. Apart from a limited set of onomatopoeic forms², the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary. In the context of fashion, this means that there is no inherent connection between the word or sound of “trousers” and the signified textile silhouette draped around the legs. Nor are garments connected (in any uncontested way) to notions of elegance or fashionableness, as these are based on conventions, which can shift over time and are different depending on localities, rather than being framed within a strictly linguistic framework, as Roland Barthes (2010/1967) was forced to conclude.

This makes semiotics a field that demands continuous nuance and re-evaluation, as meaning is never entirely fixed. Consequently, there are gradients in this dynamic; some words appear more objective, less burdened with value judgments than others. Words that refer to garments conventionally considered appropriate for all genders tend to fall into this more neutral category, such words are: t-shirt, socks, or pants. However, the more specific the garment in question becomes, the more it

tends to be gendered and associated with particular notions of (un)fashionability. A “bandage dress”, for instance, carries far more specific connotations: the term itself invokes associations with the female body and is read through a gendered lens, which in turn invites judgments about the body and its displayment. Moreover, garments such as the bandage dress are shaped by the spirit of their time: what may be considered acceptable today might have been regarded as immodest in another moment in time. Their popularity, and thus their perceived “fashionability,” fluctuates across periods: while the bandage dress was highly popular in the 2000s, it became less prominent in the 2010s, and has more recently been claimed to resurface in the mid-2020s (Jackson, 2025).

Even more burdened with subjectivity are terms associated with the body and its size are of a different gradient, being especially culturally loaded. Ferdinands et al. (2022) provide evidence for this, observing that female bodies with larger sizes are far less visible and celebrated in mainstream media compared to female bodies with smaller sizes. Their observation displays how sizing systems and affiliated terms carry implicit judgments about beauty, desirability, and acceptance. These value judgments are far from a matter of mere vanity. As Foucault has explained extensively in his works on biopolitics, the body is politicized, regulated, disciplined, reshaped, and reconstructed³. Adopting a Foucauldian lens uncovers effortlessly how social norms are a manifestation of policing the body through an omnipresent sense of surveillance, pushed under the gaze of attractiveness.

An exemplary dynamic of this is standardized sizing systems. Although some dexterity is necessary to pinpoint where and when this policing of the body occurs. As these sizing systems suggest operating on the premise of factuality, being based on numerical and linguistic labels derived from mathematical precision. As a measurement system expressed through numbers is, in essence, neutral. Reasoned mathematically, it functions as a formal language: it has a clear syntax (rules for combining symbols), a defined semantics (meaning of combinations), and, above all, no ambiguity (a single interpretation). While the measurement system aligns with this mathematical logic from a

² Onomatopoeic words imitate the sounds they describe (e.g., bam, splash), creating a non-arbitrary link between signifier and signified.

³ Foucault, Michel. 1976. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13607-w>

production standpoint, semiotics resonate more with the cultural way of reading and interpreting measurements, in which numbers are treated as symbols within a language system. Such a symbol can be interpreted in diverse ways depending on one's background and context, diverging sharply from the mathematical notion of a single, fixed interpretation.

Because sizing systems are embedded within the cultural practice of dressing, they are by default deeply intertwined with culturally ingrained hierarchical meanings and in turn influence how people feel about their bodies (Bishop et al. 2018). Indeed, they operate according to the very conventions on which the Saussurean sign is based, where meaning emerges not from the label itself but from the network of associations and norms that surround it.

Take, for instance, the word “small,” though arbitrarily assigned to represent the idea of a shorter and/or slender body with a lower body-fat percentage, has accrued a multitude of connotations and culturally determined values.

In the section Variant of Size (XV) of Barthes' *The Fashion System*, he discusses how size—and words like “big” and “little”—functions as a linguistic tool to express dimensions in an often subjective way (Barthes, 2010/1967, p. 136). Unlike precise measurements in inches or centimeters, these size words are what he calls indefinite or impression-based, allowing for a perception-driven description. To support his statement he grouped big with the words audacious, giant, immense, and monumental, while little is associated with simple and sympathetic. This illustrates that using size words in fashion language does more than describe physical dimensions; it also communicates aesthetic judgment.

Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth* (2002), elaborates on the effect of such indefinite and impression-based size words, by addressing the large-scale problem of how many women in the “west” experience social pressure to be thin. Not only is thinness as an Eurocentric ideal favoured over larger bodies, but it is often celebrated. It stands in contrast to the word “large”, which, as Barthes aptly demonstrated, functions as the signifier for a body that is objectively bigger in comparison to the previously labelled “small” body, and it carries its own set of socially constructed meanings. Feminist literature offers explanations for how this conditioning to value a body that can wear a

garment labeled “S” over one labeled “L”, or even “M”, is rooted in centuries of the social positioning of women (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). The interpretation of size is also gendered: a “Large” on a male body is understood differently than on a female body. This distinction is reinforced by the fact that men's and women's clothing sizes are generally constructed along different lines: men's sizes are primarily defined by body measurements, typically chest size, whereas women's sizes are coded numbers corresponding to bust, waist, and hip measurements (Bogusławska-Bączek, 2011). Such examples illustrate how through the categorization of body sizes, by linking words and symbols to physical dimensions, the size label as a symbol is not merely descriptive of bodily size but operates as a carrier of socially agreed meaning.

A meaning that is historically contingent, context-dependent, and therefore inherently unstable.

FROM TAILORING TO INCONSISTENT STANDARDIZATION

Not only is the meaning of a size label unstable, but the size it represents is also constantly in flux. The reason for this is the existence of multiple sizing systems being utilized around the world. In today's globalised shopping environment, these systems must frequently be converted across national or industry standards. In theory, such conversions should be straightforward; however, design scholar Monika Bogusławska-Bączek concluded that significant discrepancies exist between different sizing systems, making precise conversions nearly impossible (2011). She describes how diverse metric systems and varying anthropometric methodologies have produced a contemporary clothing market in which sizes no longer correspond consistently to their numerical labels. (Bogusławska-Bączek, 2011, p.1). This confusion is exacerbated by manufacturers creating their own so-called industry tables, which, when combined with subcontractors using their own measurements, can result in products labeled with the same size code but fitting very differently. Bogusławska-Bączek aptly states that purchasing clothing solely based on symbolic sizes “represents a lottery,” suggesting that sizing has very little to do with objective measurements and more to do with contextual, possibly even arbitral realities. This raises questions about the assigned value to such

systems and its symbols, both from a semantical and mathematical perspective. The unstable essence of the size label has major implications. First, the discrepancy between the size as a label, an image, a symbol, and the true bodily dimension of the wear, can create an experience in which the wearer does not recognize their own body. Secondly, it is all the more worrisome how sizing systems are a way of communicating measurements in which mathematical precision becomes distorted through the use of words and semantics. Whatever the actual dimensions may be, Wolf (2002) points out that it is generally agreed—or rather within the “west” are socially enforced—that the smallest size is the most socially approved and therefore the most desired. Further evidence for this is found in what is called vanity sizing. This is the gradual enlargement of garments despite unchanged size symbols on the labels, aimed at making the consumer feel better about themselves by allowing them to fit into a smaller size than they would normally wear (Bogusławska-Bączek, 2011).

SIZING AND SAUSSUREAN LOGIC OF DIFFERENTIATION

Vanity sizing is a lucrative practice that exploits socially ingrained conventions, often boosting sales by aligning perceived body size with desirable labels. Research has demonstrated that vanity sizing helps people to imagine themselves more positively (Aydinoğlu & Krishna, 2012). This phenomenon can be understood as a response to a widely ingrained connotation about different sizes; when a person reads the label “small,” an image of a slender individual is often immediately evoked, accompanied by attributes such as activity, success, friendliness, and intelligence. Conversely, the label “large” evokes the opposite associations, along with its own set of culturally constructed connotations. In other words, the size label as a sign—and the sizing system as a language—is the product of socially agreed conventions. It functions precisely because size categories are differentiated, allowing distinct cultural values to be assigned to each, thereby reflecting and reaffirming established hierarchies of bodily worth.

In order to understand the necessity of this differentiation in the constitution of language and messaging, it is necessary to return to Saussure's (1959/1916) conception of language as a system structured by difference rather than by intrinsic meaning. He states that meaning is not established

solely through individual definitions. A singular word in isolation means little. Multiple words are needed to point out how words differ from each other. A “blouse” is not a pair of “trousers” or a “shirt.” They are all garments, but they have different forms and cover different parts of the body. The same applies to sizes: a “small” is not a “medium” or a “large.” Therewith, another dynamic occurs where the words become progressively removed from each other due to metric categorizations, and in turn create a widening semantic gap. From a sociocultural perspective this demonstrates how body norms, together with contemporary commercial systems, shape the form of garments and the meanings we assign to size.

This effect is even more pronounced when the word “extra” is placed in front of either small or large, creating a heightened sense of difference along with more pronounced value judgments. The distinctions established through words and adjectives such as “extra” demonstrate how culturally assigned value dominates the meaning the word is intended to communicate. “Extra small” is expressive in various ways depending on the metric system used: in Europe, it generally corresponds to a size 34, in the US a 4, and in Japan a 9 (Fig. 01 and Fig. 02). These sizes are celebrated and regarded as the most prestigious, particularly in fashion contexts where the image of the tall, slender female body remains rigidly idealized above all other body types (Wolf, 2002). This is important aesthetically because research has shown how girls learn from an early age that thinness is required for being seen and heard (Ferdinands et al., 2022). Consequently, a larger body becomes the signified for social disapproval that often results in women with larger bodies being ignored, overlooked, and marginalized (Ferdinands et al., 2022).

ALTERNATIVE SIZING SYSTEM

Is it then the word that serves as the signifier of the body as the signified, or rather the body that functions as the signifier for the word that is the signified? After all, it is the body that gives context to the word and its labels, imbuing them with associations. The word, in its sound and arrangement of letters, may be arbitrary, but the shape of the body, situated within a culturally dense context, is not. The body is politicized, regulated, disciplined, reshaped and reconstructed, as argued by Michel Foucault (1976). Arguably, many would benefit from a language that deviates from suppress-

INT	XS	XS	S	S	M	M	L	L	XL	XL	XXL	XXL
EU*	32	34	36	38	40	42	44	46	48	50	52	54
UK	4	6	8	10	12	14	16	18	20	22	24	-
US	2	4	6	8	10	12	14	16	18	20	-	-
JAP	7	9	11	13	15	17	19	21	23	-	-	-

Fig. 01



Fig. 02

sive standards and instead communicates in ways free from judgments and value systems. When adopting such a view, what steps would need to be taken to create a non-hierarchical size language that addresses the sign as a body, rather than the body as a sign?

Drawing on Saussure's semiotics, initial steps can be formulated: The first, and most obvious, step is to eliminate the "extra" designation. An "extra" functions as an amplifier of the already judgmental categorization. A linear sequence where each step is equivalent, without escalation through adjectives would be desired. Second, we must remove words that are connected to culturally constructed ideas of beauty. As noted above, "small" in a contemporary context is in many parts of the world more highly valued than "large." Moreover, both terms carry aesthetic connotations beyond their function

within sizing systems. Sizing based on numbers can support a more neutral approach, or possibly even better non-lexical symbols⁴. Step three is to select words that are distinct from one another, indicating differences as is currently carried out by using "Small," "Medium," "Large", etc. Building on these principles, an alternative clothing size system that functions culturally neutral could then take shape. These suggestions come with caveats. First, because sizing is defined by bodily dimensions and proportions – which vary across individuals and populations – it is inherently linked to body shape. It reflects and depends upon the physical form it is meant to accommodate. To remove this connection would defeat the system's purpose. The second

⁴ It must be noted that the use of non-lexical symbols would be extremely inconvenient, as they consist of vocal sounds, gestures, or expressions and therefore cannot be printed on a label.

challenge is to select words that carry objectivity or possibly randomness. Here, a loop presents itself: words can be changed, but the underlying ideas will persist, transferring onto new words. Thus, the solution does not lie solely in the measurement system, the words, the symbols, or even non-lexical symbols, but in the imagery constructed around them—the ideals of beauty.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary clothing sizing system functions both as a practical tool and a culturally charged construct. Viewed through a semiotic lens, size labels can be understood as signs that attempt to capture the ever-changing nature of the body in numerical form. Fashion, imbued with evaluative language and a tendency to communicate in ways that produce exclusion or marginalization, has created an understanding of size symbols that is both restrictive and problematic. By carefully formulating initial criteria for an alternative system, this Lexigraphy demonstrates how the intersection of semiotics and metric measurement opens the possibility of imagining non-hierarchical size languages. Ultimately, this approach invites continued scholarly and creative engagement, encouraging the development of a size-symbol system designed to respect the lived experience of the human body and to operate from a principle of inclusion rather than exclusion.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Womenswear size guide.

This table excludes France, Spain, and Portugal, as these countries again use different sizing systems.

[Fig. 02] Four clothing labels communicating different sizing systems.

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