



Exploring Emotions in *Inside Out*: Semiotic Perspective on Language

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Abstract

This study examines how emotions are expressed through language in *Inside Out* (2015) using Saussure's semiotic theory. The research focuses on how dialogues spoken by Joy, Sadness, Fear, Disgust, and Anger function as signs that represent Riley's emotional states. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the study analyzes the relationship between signifier (words and phrases used in dialogue) and signified (the intended emotional meaning). The findings indicate that emotions in the film are conveyed through specific verbal expressions, showing how language operates as a system of signs. This research contributes to the field of semiotics by providing insights into how words shape emotional meaning in animated storytelling.

Keywords: Emotions; *Inside Out*; Language; Movie Script; Semiotics

INTRODUCTION

Animated films are a powerful medium for storytelling, combining visual and linguistic elements to deliver meaning. It can also increase vocabularies for the audiences (Ahmad et al., 2021) & (Younas & Dong, 2024). Pixar Animation Studios, a leading animation company, has created films with deep themes, including *Inside Out* (2015), directed by Pete Docter (Pixar, 2025). This film presents emotions as characters with human-like traits, making it an interesting subject for linguistic and semiotic analysis.

Language plays a key role in shaping the characters and emotions in *Inside Out* (Alpuim & Ehrenberg, 2023). The dialogues spoken by Joy, Sadness, Fear, Disgust, and Anger not only drive the story but also reflect Riley's emotional experiences. Through a semiotic perspective, these dialogues can be analyzed to understand how emotions are represented as signs. Examining how language functions in this context helps reveal the semiotic processes behind emotional expression in animated storytelling.

Ferdinand de Saussure, a key figure in semiotics, defined a sign as the combination of two elements: the signifier and the signified. The signifier refers to the physical form of a sign, such as spoken words, written text, or sounds, while the signified represents the concept or meaning that the sign conveys. For example, in *Inside Out*, the phrase "Yaaay!" spoken by Joy serves as the signifier, while the signified is the feeling of being excited or happy that the expression conveys. Saussure explained that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary and socially agreed upon, meaning words gain meaning through shared understanding rather than inherent properties (Saussure & Baskin, 2011) & (Chandler, 2007). This concept is crucial in analyzing how language in *Inside Out* represents emotions through spoken words.

Several studies have analyzed *Inside Out* from different viewpoints. Mujani et al. (2024) examined the emotional themes in *Inside Out*, using Peirce's semiotic theory along with psychological theories to study how emotions connect to external experiences. Their research covered both visual and linguistic elements but did not focus on language specifically. Similarly, Wardiah & Burhamzah (2024) investigated Riley Andersen's emotions using Freud's psychoanalysis and Goleman's emotional intelligence model, emphasizing her emotional balance. However, their study was more focused on psychology than language. Hendarsyah (2020) analyzed character development in *Inside Out* through Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, focusing on visual representations of emotions rather than verbal expressions.

While these studies provide valuable insights, there is still a lack of research on how emotions are represented linguistically through Saussurean semiotics. This study aims to address this gap by analyzing how Joy, Sadness, Fear, Disgust, and Anger use language as signifiers that shape emotional meaning. By applying Saussure's semiotic theory, which explores the relationship between signifier (words and phrases in dialogue) and signified (the emotional meaning of those expressions), this study examines how verbal expressions in the film communicate emotions.

This research contributes to semiotics and film studies by emphasizing how language enhances emotional storytelling in animation. Additionally, it offers valuable insights for scriptwriters, linguists, and educators on how language is used to express emotions effectively. The scope of this study is limited to analyzing the spoken dialogues of the five emotion characters in *Inside Out*, excluding visual and musical elements.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach (Creswell, 2014), as it is effective for analyzing linguistic patterns in dialogues. The data consists of selected dialogues from *Inside Out* that explicitly convey Riley's emotions. The primary source of data is the official movie script (Docter, 2015), transcribed manually to ensure accuracy.



Figure 1. The Barcode of the *Inside Out* Screenplay
Source: (Docter, 2015)

Data collection involves identifying relevant dialogues spoken by Joy, Sadness, Fear, Disgust, and Anger that reflect Riley's emotional states. These dialogues are categorized based on Saussure's signifier-signified model (Saussure & Baskin, 2011) & (Chandler, 2007), where the signifier represents the linguistic expression and the signified denotes the underlying emotional meaning.

Data analysis follows three stages (Miles & Huberman, 1994):

1. Data Reduction: Selecting and categorizing dialogues that best represent emotional expressions.
2. Data Presentation: Organizing the findings to highlight patterns of emotional representation.
3. Conclusion Drawing: Interpreting the connection between the dialogues and their semiotic significance, ensuring validity through multiple reviews.

This structured approach ensures a systematic exploration of how language functions as a semiotic system in representing emotions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Findings

This section presents the findings of the study based on the semiotic analysis of selected dialogues in *Inside Out*. The analysis is structured according to the five main emotional characters—Joy, Sadness, Fear, Disgust, and Anger—whose dialogues serve as linguistic signs that reflect Riley's emotional journey. Using Saussure's theory of the signifier and signified, this study examines how specific words and phrases function as verbal representations of emotions in the film.

The findings indicate that each emotion is associated with distinct linguistic expressions, reinforcing Saussure's concept that meaning is formed through conventional associations rather than inherent properties. By examining how the dialogues construct emotional meaning, this study provides insights into how language operates as a semiotic system within animated storytelling. The discussion further elaborates on the patterns found in the dialogues and how they align with semiotic principles.

Data 1. Joy: "It was amazing. Just Riley and me, forever..." (page 2, line 6)

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| a. Sign | : Happy |
| b. Signifier | : "Amazing" |
| c. Signified | : Showing or feeling pleasure of someone or something |

In this dialogue, Joy expresses her excitement and deep connection with Riley after witnessing her first smile as a newborn. The word "amazing" serves as the signifier, representing Joy's perception of this moment as something extraordinary and delightful. The signified is the feeling of happiness, conveyed through Joy's enthusiastic tone and choice of words. According to Saussure's semiotic theory, the relationship between signifier ("amazing") and signified (the sense of pleasure and emotional connection) is socially constructed, meaning that the word gains its emotional impact based on how it is conventionally understood. This moment highlights Joy's role as Riley's dominant emotion at birth, reinforcing the idea that happiness is a fundamental part of her early experiences.

Data 2. Joy: "Oh, I love Honesty Island! And that's the truth!" (page 8, line 6)

- | | |
|--------------|----------|
| a. Sign | : Loving |
| b. Signifier | : "Love" |

- c. Signified : Showing or feeling love of someone or something

In this dialogue, Joy enthusiastically expresses her admiration for Honesty Island, one of the core aspects of Riley's personality. The word "love" serves as the signifier, representing a deep sense of affection and appreciation. The signified is the emotional attachment Joy feels toward this important part of Riley's identity. According to Saussure's semiotic theory, the connection between signifier ("love") and signified (a strong feeling of fondness or attachment) is shaped by social conventions, where the word "love" is commonly associated with deep positive emotions. This moment emphasizes Joy's role in cherishing and reinforcing Riley's fundamental values, illustrating how emotions contribute to shaping an individual's sense of self.

Data 3. Joy: "Okay, first day of school! Very, very exciting! I was up late last night figuring out a new plan. Here it is." (page 34, line 22)

- a. Sign : Excited
 b. Signifier : "Very, very exciting!"
 c. Signified : Showing or feeling very happy and enthusiastic.

In this dialogue, Joy expresses her enthusiasm as Riley prepares for her first day at a new school. The phrase "Very, very exciting!" serves as the signifier, conveying an intense sense of anticipation and eagerness. The signified is the feeling of excitement, demonstrated through Joy's energetic tone and repetition of the word "very" to emphasize her enthusiasm. Based on Saussure's semiotic theory, the relationship between signifier ("Very, very exciting!") and signified (a heightened state of happiness and enthusiasm) is established through linguistic convention, where certain words and expressions are culturally associated with strong emotional responses. This moment highlights Joy's proactive nature in ensuring Riley's transition to a new school is seen as a positive experience, reinforcing her role as the dominant emotion guiding Riley's outlook on change.

Data 4. Joy: "Alright everyone, fresh start! We are gonna to have a good day, which will turn into a good week, which will turn into a good year, which turns into a good LIFE!" (page 36, line 25)

- a. Sign : Optimistic
 b. Signifier : "Fresh start!", "Good day", "Good week", "Good year", "Good LIFE!"
 c. Signified : Feeling hope or believe that good things in the future

In this dialogue, Joy encourages a positive outlook as Riley leaves for her first day at school, emphasizing the importance of starting fresh with optimism. The phrases "Fresh start!", "Good day", "Good week", "Good year", and "Good LIFE!" serve as the signifiers, reinforcing the idea that a single positive experience can lead to long-term happiness. The signified is the sense of optimism, where Joy expresses confidence that Riley's new beginning will bring good things in the future.

According to Saussure's semiotic theory, the connection between signifier (repeated use of "good" and "fresh start") and signified (hope and belief in a positive future) is shaped by how language conveys encouragement and motivation. Joy's enthusiastic tone and escalating structure from a day to a lifetime reflect her effort to maintain Riley's emotional stability despite Riley's worries about adapting to a new environment.. This moment highlights Joy's determination to frame new experiences positively, illustrating how language influences perception and emotional resilience.

Data 5. Sadness: "Oh, Riley can't live here." (page 15, line 15)

- a. Sign : Powerless
 b. Signifier : "Can't"
 c. Signified : Having no power or control of something

In this dialogue, Sadness conveys a sense of powerlessness as Riley experiences repeated disappointments with her new home. The word "can't" serves as the signifier, expressing an inability or lack of control over the situation. The signified is the feeling of helplessness, as Sadness verbalizes Riley's frustration after encountering a dead rat in the house, reinforcing her perception that the new home is unsuitable.

According to Saussure's semiotic theory, the relationship between the signifier ("can't") and the signified (a lack of power or control) is shaped by social and linguistic conventions, where the word "can't" is commonly associated with restriction or impossibility. In this scene, Sadness' statement reflects Riley's emotional struggle, as her expectations of a new, comfortable life are met with disappointment. This moment highlights how language can serve as a vehicle for expressing internal distress, illustrating the role of Sadness in processing Riley's emotional hardships.

Data 6. Sadness: "Yeah, that hurt. It felt like fire." (page 25, line 31)

- a. Sign : Hurtful
- b. Signifier : "That hurt" and "It felt like fire"
- c. Signified : Feeling hurt both emotionally and physically

In this dialogue, Sadness recalls a past experience where Riley laughed uncontrollably while drinking milk, causing it to come out of her nose. The phrases "That hurt" and "It felt like fire" serve as the signifiers, emphasizing both the physical discomfort and the emotional impact of the memory. The signified is the feeling of pain and embarrassment, as Sadness perceives the incident as something unpleasant rather than humorous.

According to Saussure's semiotic theory, the connection between signifier (words expressing pain and intensity) and signified (the emotional and physical distress caused by the event) is constructed through language, where certain expressions like "felt like fire" metaphorically convey extreme discomfort. This moment highlights how Sadness interprets Riley's past experiences differently from Joy, reinforcing her role in processing not only sorrow but also sensitivity to emotionally and physically distressing moments.

Data 7. Sadness: "Oh yeah, I know. I'm sorry." (page 41, line 5)

- a. Sign : Guilty
- b. Signifier : "I'm sorry"
- c. Signified : Feeling when someone has done something wrong or bad

In this dialogue, Sadness expresses guilt after unintentionally altering Riley's memory by touching the memory orb, turning it from yellow (happiness) to blue (sadness). The phrase "I'm sorry" serves as the signifier, representing an acknowledgment of wrongdoing and an attempt to express regret. The signified is the feeling of guilt and responsibility, as Sadness recognizes that her actions have affected Riley's emotional state and apologizes to Joy.

According to Saussure's semiotic theory, the relationship between the signifier ("I'm sorry") and the signified (a sense of guilt or remorse) is shaped by social and linguistic conventions, where apologizing is a widely recognized way to express regret. This moment highlights Sadness' struggle with her role in Riley's emotional system, as she often feels like a burden rather than an essential part of Riley's experiences. Her apology to Joy further reflects her uncertainty about her purpose, reinforcing the idea that sadness, though often perceived as negative, plays a crucial role in emotional processing.

Data 8. Fear: "Ahh! Look out!!! No!" (page 3, line 6)

- a. Sign : Terrified
- b. Signifier : "Ahh! Look out!!! No!"
- c. Signified : Feeling when someone is very frightened

In this dialogue, Fear reacts instinctively when Riley, as a toddler, runs around the house and nearly touches a power cord. The phrases "Ahh! Look out!!! No!" serve as the signifiers, representing an immediate verbal response to a perceived danger. The signified is the feeling of terror and alarm, as Fear's exclamation reflects an intense reaction to a potential threat.

According to Saussure's semiotic theory, the relationship between the signifier (screams and warning phrases) and the signified (a heightened state of fear and urgency) is shaped by linguistic convention, where exclamations like "Ahh!" and "No!" are universally understood as expressions of panic. This moment illustrates Fear's essential role in Riley's emotional system, ensuring her safety by recognizing and reacting to possible dangers. His exaggerated response also highlights how Fear perceives even minor risks as serious threats, reinforcing his protective yet often overly cautious nature.

Data 9. Fear: "Oh, I'm so jumpy, my nerves are shot!" (page 28, line 21)

- a. Sign : Anxious
- b. Signifier : "I'm so jumpy, my nerves are shot!"
- c. Signified : Showing when someone is very worried and nervous

In this dialogue, Fear expresses anxiety and nervousness when Riley hears strange noises outside her room, causing shadows to appear on the wall. The phrase "I'm so jumpy, my nerves are shot!" serves as the signifier, conveying a heightened state of distress and sensitivity to potential danger. The signified is the feeling of intense worry and nervousness, as Fear reacts strongly to an uncertain and possibly threatening situation.

According to Saussure's semiotic theory, the relationship between the signifier (phrases expressing nervousness and physical tension) and the signified (a deep sense of anxiety and unease) is shaped by linguistic convention. The phrase "my nerves are shot" is a common expression indicating extreme stress or fear, reinforcing Fear's tendency to overreact to ambiguous stimuli. This moment highlights Fear's role in keeping Riley alert to potential dangers, even when the actual threat is unclear, demonstrating how emotions influence perception and response to uncertain situations.

Data 10. Disgust: "A DEAD MOUSE!!! I'm gonna be sick..." (page 14, line 18)

- a. Sign : Disgusted
- b. Signifier : "A DEAD MOUSE!!! I'm gonna be sick..."
- c. Signified : Feeling intense aversion or strong disapproval toward something.

In this dialogue, Disgust reacts with intense aversion upon seeing a dead mouse in Riley's new home. The phrase "A DEAD MOUSE!!! I'm gonna be sick..." serves as the signifier, expressing a strong emotional and physical response to something perceived as repulsive. The signified is the feeling of extreme disgust and rejection, as Disgust verbalizes Riley's instinctive reaction to an unpleasant and unhygienic sight.

According to Saussure's semiotic theory, the relationship between the signifier (words expressing repulsion and nausea) and the signified (a strong sense of aversion and disapproval) is shaped by social and linguistic conventions. The phrase "I'm gonna be sick" is commonly associated with a reaction to something disturbing or revolting, reinforcing Disgust's function in protecting Riley from exposure to things deemed undesirable. This moment illustrates how emotions, particularly disgust, play a crucial role in shaping personal preferences and avoidance behaviors, highlighting its importance in decision-making and self-preservation.

Data 11. Disgust: "It's the worst. It's absolutely the worst." (page 15, line 19)

- a. Sign : Awful
- b. Signifier : "It's the worst. It's absolutely the worst."
- c. Signified : Feeling that something is very bad.

In this dialogue, Disgust expresses strong disapproval and dissatisfaction as Riley repeatedly encounters disappointments with her new home. The phrase "It's the worst. It's absolutely the worst." serves as the signifier, emphasizing an extreme negative reaction to the situation. The signified is the feeling of frustration and aversion, as Disgust verbalizes Riley's growing disappointment from her expectations of a beautiful home to the reality of a dark, empty, dusty space, culminating in the sight of a dead mouse.

According to Saussure's semiotic theory, the relationship between the signifier (repetitive emphasis on "worst") and the signified (a deep sense of dissatisfaction and repulsion) is constructed through language. The repetition of "the worst" intensifies the negative connotation, reinforcing Disgust's role in expressing Riley's emotional rejection of an unpleasant environment. This moment highlights how language is used to amplify emotions, illustrating Disgust's function in shaping Riley's preferences and reinforcing her tendency to avoid undesirable experiences.

Data 12. Anger: "This house stinks." (page 15, line 19)

- a. Sign : Critical
- b. Signifier : "This house stinks."
- c. Signified : Showing when someone saying or making negative judgments of something

In this dialogue, Anger expresses strong criticism after Riley discovers a dead mouse in her new home. The phrase "This house stinks." serves as the signifier, conveying a direct and negative judgment about the house's condition. The signified is the feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration, as Anger verbalizes Riley's disappointment by associating the unpleasant experience with the overall quality of the house.

According to Saussure's semiotic theory, the relationship between the signifier (negative statement about the house) and the signified (a harsh critique and discontentment) is shaped by linguistic convention, where words like "stinks" not only refer to bad odor but are also commonly used as metaphors for expressing strong disapproval. This moment illustrates Anger's role in reinforcing Riley's frustrations, showing how emotions influence perception and language choice, especially in moments of distress.

Data 13. Anger: "GAAAAAA!!!!" (page 62, line 19)

- a. Sign : Furious

- b. Signifier : "GAAAAAA!!!!"
 c. Signified : Feeling very angry

In this dialogue, Anger expresses intense frustration as Riley experiences feelings of insecurity and exclusion during a video call with her best friend, Meg. The exclamation "GAAAAAA!!!!" serves as the signifier, representing an uncontrolled emotional reaction. The signified is Riley's overwhelming anger and irritation, as she struggles with the idea that Meg has formed a close bond with a new hockey teammate, making her feel replaced.

According to Saussure's semiotic theory, verbal expressions such as screams and exclamations serve as linguistic signs that convey emotions beyond conventional sentence structures. Unlike structured dialogue, "GAAAAAA!!!!" relies on sound intensity, tone, and prolongation to communicate an extreme emotional state. The meaning of such expressions is shaped by social and cultural conventions, where loud vocalizations are commonly understood as signals of distress, anger, or frustration. This moment highlights how verbal exclamations function as powerful linguistic tools for expressing emotions that words alone may fail to capture, reinforcing the role of language in shaping and intensifying emotional experiences.

B. Discussions

The findings of this study reveal that language plays a crucial role in constructing and conveying emotions in *Inside Out*. Through the dialogues of the five main emotional characters (Joy, Sadness, Fear, Disgust, and Anger), Riley's emotions are verbalized, allowing the audience to understand her internal struggles and experiences. By applying Saussure's semiotic theory, it becomes evident that each emotional expression in the film consists of a signifier (the linguistic expression) and a signified (the underlying emotional meaning), reinforcing the idea that language is a structured system of signs.

The dialogues spoken by the characters are not merely narrative devices but serve as linguistic representations of Riley's emotions. Joy's lines often feature enthusiastic and optimistic expressions, emphasizing happiness and encouragement. Sadness frequently uses language associated with helplessness and regret, reflecting Riley's struggles in adapting to her new life. Fear's speech patterns include exclamations and expressions of distress, highlighting the instinctive reaction to potential threats. Disgust's dialogues are filled with rejection and disapproval, reinforcing Riley's sense of discomfort with undesirable situations. Anger's words are often short, intense, and direct, conveying frustration and dissatisfaction. These patterns suggest that each emotion is linked to a particular linguistic style, aligning with Saussure's theory that meaning is shaped by convention and context.

Another notable finding is the role of repetition and emphasis in reinforcing emotional meaning. Characters often repeat words or phrases, such as Joy's use of "Good day," "Good week," "Good year," and "Good LIFE!", which escalates in intensity to emphasize an optimistic outlook. Similarly, Disgust's phrase "It's the worst. It's absolutely the worst." demonstrates how repetition strengthens negative evaluation. According to Saussure's perspective, this pattern indicates that language intensifies emotional expression through structural reinforcement, making the conveyed emotion clearer to the audience.

Furthermore, verbal exclamations like screams also function as linguistic signs. For example, Anger's loud outburst "GAAAAAA!!!!" functions as a verbal expression of extreme frustration when Riley feels insecure during a video call with her friend. The elongated scream serves as the signifier, representing an uncontrolled emotional release, while the signified is Riley's overwhelming anger and irritation. This form of verbal exclamation emphasizes how language can extend beyond structured dialogue to convey raw emotional intensity, further illustrating the role of linguistic signs in expressing strong emotions. This suggests that even non-verbal expressions carry signification, as their meaning is socially constructed and universally understood. This aligns with Saussure's argument that signs are not limited to words alone but extend to all forms of expression that convey meaning.

The findings also emphasize that context plays a significant role in shaping meaning. For instance, Sadness saying, "Oh, Riley can't live here." gains its full significance when placed in the context of Riley's repeated disappointments with her new home. Without the narrative background, the phrase might seem neutral, but within the film's storyline, it conveys a deep sense of powerlessness and emotional distress. This supports Saussure's assertion that the meaning of a sign is not inherent but depends on its relation to other elements in the linguistic system and broader context.

Overall, this study confirms that emotional expressions in *Inside Out* align with semiotic principles, where language functions as a structured system of signs. The dialogues of Joy, Sadness, Fear, Disgust, and Anger demonstrate how verbal expressions shape emotional meaning, contributing to the broader understanding of how language encodes and communicates emotions in animated storytelling. Future research could expand on this by examining multimodal elements, such as visual and auditory cues, to explore how they interact with verbal language in constructing meaning.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that language in *Inside Out* plays a crucial role in representing Riley's emotions through a semiotic framework. By applying Saussure's signifier-signified model, it is evident that the dialogues spoken by Joy, Sadness, Fear, Disgust, and Anger serve as linguistic signs that shape emotional meaning. Each character exhibits distinct speech patterns that align with their respective emotions—Joy with excitement, Sadness with sorrow, Fear with

anxiety, Disgust with rejection, and Anger with frustration. These verbal expressions help convey Riley's emotional journey, reinforcing the idea that language is not just a communication tool but also a structured system of signs that encode meaning.

Furthermore, the study highlights that context plays a vital role in determining meaning, as the same words can carry different interpretations depending on the situation. Additionally, verbal exclamations, such as Anger's "GAAAAAA!!!!", demonstrate that emotional intensity can be conveyed not only through structured words but also through vocal expressions. This supports Saussure's argument that signs extend beyond conventional language and are shaped by social and cultural understanding.

Overall, this research provides a deeper understanding of how emotions are linguistically constructed in animated storytelling. Future studies could explore how other elements, such as visual cues and tone of voice, contribute to emotional representation, offering a more comprehensive analysis of semiotics in film narratives.

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