

## Loves Me or Loves Me Not?

# Passing through the Forest of Love Symbols and Unveiling Its Social Nature

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### Abstract

This article unveils how love, as a signified, can be constituted by the artificially constructed symbolic signs (“signifiers”) represented in our everyday life. Only when we regard love as a symbolic system and try to decipher its meanings can we understand how love is transmitted through sociomental patterns. This article attempts to provide examples from language, symbolic materials, the imprinted body, the code of temporality, and the spatial aspect to interpret the general elements that commonly form the forest of love symbols. Moreover, this article introduces cognitive sociology as a significant analytic approach to examining love. On the one hand, taking the “semantic square” proposed by Zerubavel, I articulate that when we want to understand the meanings of symbols, we usually have to embed them into their symbolic context. On the other hand, based on the distinction between marked and unmarked social categories proposed by Brekhus, I explain that more often than not, we can shed light on the marked love types even when we focus on love issues. Last, this article reminds us that the symbols of love are not fixed and constant but change according to the transformations of context.

**Keywords:** social construction, symbolic interaction, social psychology, social mentality, cognitive sociology

### 1. Introduction: The Symbols of Love

Love plays a crucial role in our emotional, symbolic system (Luhmann, 1998). For most people, love is an indispensable element of everyday life (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Bell, 2001; Giddens, 1993; Jamieson, 1998). However, many sociologists regard love either as a personal issue relevant only to lovers or a universal mystery of the human condition; hence, they avoid delving into it (Rusu, 2018; Swidler, 2001). In this article, I claim that love, as a signified, is represented by intersubjective symbols and is a topic for sociological study. As a signified, love is notable for its excessive penetrability and redundancy. Many symbols are chosen and created to express love, and lovers seek greedily for these love symbols as proof of “true” love. Love as a signified is notorious for its insatiability, and the redundancy of the symbols of love works to ensure that its message is heard (Gordon, 2017; Zerubavel, 1989).

Love is one of several highly abstract concepts conveyed through different aspects of our life. Its message demonstrates the individual state of being either in or out of love. The conventional symbols of love penetrate people’s everyday lives from diverse dimensions: People address their lovers by specific nicknames, change their status to show they are “in” love with someone, and tolerate the shrinking of their privacy. However, people revere love symbols so devoutly because they misconceive these symbols as inherently equal to what they are meant to express. In other words, they believe the signifier (love symbols) is equal to the signified (love) and take this artificial relationship for granted. It is common for lovers to equate flowers and sweet talk with love itself. The symbols of love (the signifiers) usurp the role of the signified and entrap lovers in a veritable forest of love symbols.

Moreover, I argue that certain kinds of love affairs are “marked” by our society, and these extreme types are sociomentially colored (Brekhus, 1998), in contrast to most other kinds of love relationships that are unmarked and unmentioned. The disproportionate exaggeration of prototypes to which the marked love affairs are subject leads to unrealistic expectations of love, increasing ignorance of the nature of unmarked love affairs (Swidler,

2001). I conclude that only by treating love as a symbolic system and deciphering its symbols can we understand how love is sociomentially conveyed.

## 2. Literature Review: Unveiling the Social Nature of Love with Cognitive Sociology

This article adopts cognitive sociology as the research approach to analyze love and symbols representing love (Brekhus, 2007; Zerubavel, 1999). On the one hand, cognitive sociology is an effective research approach to facilitate our observation of those seen but unnoticed sociomental logics and the resulting behavioral and attitudinal social patterns in our daily lives (Garfinkel et al., 2005). On the other hand, since not much about cognitive sociology is known in academic circles, this article takes the discussion of love symbols via cognitive sociology as an example to introduce this very research approach. Therefore, the goals of this article are twofold. In addition to unraveling the social constructiveness of love symbols, the analytic strength of cognitive sociology research is highlighted. This by no means indicates that other research approaches are less important. I suggest that cognitive sociology provides a specific analytic perspective that deserves to be systematically introduced and serves as a significant companion to given research approaches. (Note 1)

Zerubavel (1999) introduces cognitive sociology as a subfield of sociology, articulated its main features, and distinguished it from other subfields. Having studied under Goffman and being heavily influenced by Durkheim, Simmel, and ethnomethodology, Zerubavel (2004; 2007; 2013; 2015) not only gives rich (and valid) examples to support his arguments, but he also has a sharp eye, based on his extensive interdisciplinary knowledge, to observe and illuminate social patterns. As Brekhus (2007) claimed, a “Rutgers School” is characterized by “Zerubavelian Culturalist Cognitive Sociology” due to many students adopting cognitive sociology as a research approach and obtaining rich findings (Brekhus, 2003; DeGloma, 2014; Friedman, 2013; Isaacson, 1996; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Simpson, 1996).

The main focus of cognitive sociology is the intersubjectivity among people in the social world. It investigates how social context, such as belonging to particular social groups, influences individuals and how individuals internalize the community perspectives through socialization to develop their practices and attitudes. Cognitive sociologists are dedicated to finding seen-but-unnoticed social patterns and articulating their sociomental underpinnings (Zerubavel, 1999). Following Simmel’s argument, cognitive sociology emphasizes “form” over “content.” It highlights the in-depth observation of people’s daily lives (to get insight into social patterns) due to Goffman’s influence. Lastly, the way cognitive sociology foregrounds the seen-but-unnoticed social patterns perfectly corresponds to the argument by Garfinkel (and other ethnomethodologists). These scholars claimed that we should never take social order at the micro level for granted. Combining all these characteristics, cognitive sociology tries to locate general patterns beyond specific contexts. (Note 2) Moreover, following Durkheim’s definition of social facts, anomalies cannot negate the generally seen social patterns.

While cognitive sociology has already been applied to investigate various issues and phenomena, the aspects it delves into can be summarized as *attention*, *classification*, *identity*, and *memory*, and *time*. In terms of attention, cognitive sociologists maintain that the social world tends to distribute imbalanced attention to things. Following different sociomental logics, socialized individuals foreground certain social categories while marginalizing, ignoring, or moving other social categories into the background. More interestingly, foregrounding and backgrounding are like two sides of one coin. The imbalanced attention that people attribute to things is, to some extent, a social mechanism to make individuals’ daily lives possible (Brekhus, 1998; Simpson, 1996; Zerubavel, 1999). Second, cognitive sociology focuses on classification analysis (Isaacson, 1996; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Zerubavel, 1993). According to Durkheim, classification is the most basic task of people in the social world. We classify sacred and mundane, normal and abnormal, and good and bad in our daily lives. On the one hand, cognitive sociologists suggest that various logics and patterns of classification exist in the social world and that these logics and patterns guide people in their boundary-drawing.

On the other hand, cognitive sociologists argue that the existence of all social classifications is “neither natural nor neutral” and definitely not inevitable. In other words, they try to explain the influences from social constructive-ness and contexts. Third, all the discussions on attention and classification can be related to cognitive sociologists’ concerns about identity. That is, cognitive sociologists unveil the ways in which attention distributing and classifying under specific contexts, through socialization, are transformed into numerous sociomental underpinnings to determine people’s social identity (Friedman, 2013). Lastly, cognitive sociologists maintain that memory and time are two key factors in the social world. Therefore, they investigate issues such as the employed strategies of collective memory invention, the quality of time, and the hidden rhythms of the social world (DeGloma, 2014; Zerubavel, 1985, 2004).

### 3. Method

As a research approach, cognitive sociology enables researchers to obtain insights into various social issues. (Note 3) Adopting cognitive sociology as an analytic approach indicates that the research method and data-gathering style should be employed (Brekhus 2015). In brief, to identify general patterns across different social contexts, cognitive sociology research derives materials and data from all possible sources. Thus, novels, movies, songs, newspaper reports, proverbs, personal interactions, legends, autobiographies, memoirs, and official records are all possible data sources to support arguments. In this article, when analyzing the symbolic meanings of love, I collect information from various sources to enhance my understanding of and represent the types, meanings, and constructiveness of love symbols. In the following sections, I discuss love symbols.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1 *The Forest of Love Symbols (Note 4)*

Many conventional signifiers represent love, and I classify them into five main categories: language, symbolic materials, the imprinted body, the code of temporality, and the spatial aspect. (Note 5) As an abstract concept, love is encoded in several dimensions in our life.

##### 4.1.1 Language

Language is the most abstract albeit powerful symbol to express meanings. “Love” can be encoded in distinctive ways depending on individuals’ use of language. First, the word “love” itself is employed as the strongest signifier of love quality. Therefore, every lover is eager to hear the other say, “I love you,” and a mental gap exists between “I love you” and “I like you.” Second, lovers talk to each other using certain words they never use when speaking with people they do not love. Usually, lovers’ conversation is full of sweet talk. In addition, lovers adopt special nicknames to call their companions (e.g., honey, sweetheart, darling, honeybunch). In the symbolic system of love, “honey” no longer represents the edible sweet liquid produced by bees but rather an extraordinary positive affection one feels toward a specific person. In other words, while lovers go out of their way to adopt distinctive ways of describing and talking when interacting with the one they love, individuals ordinarily avoid using similar words in their interaction with people they do not love. For instance, in Taiwan, when people use darling or honey to address somebody they do not love, it is usually considered a joke or, worse, it can be regarded as harassment. Most people carefully distinguish these two kinds of conversation (the in-love talking and the out-of-love talking) to prevent themselves from being accused of disloyalty or false-heartedness.

##### 4.1.2 Symbolic Materials

Conventionally, many materials are employed as signifiers of love (Emond, 2016). People frequently use these materials to manifest their love, and such materials are closely related to the feeling of affection. For example, on Valentine’s Day, chocolate becomes the symbol of love, and givers can be sure that most receivers understand what they want to express with chocolate even without any additional words. Red roses that also represent the feeling of love are another example. People are assured that giving a bouquet will loudly declare how they feel. In Taiwan, Christmas is a great occasion to express love, and florists usually triple the price of red roses. In many cultures, jewelry, especially a diamond ring, symbolizes the highest form of undying romantic love. Not surprisingly, many females expect to receive a diamond ring when their partner proposes, and some may even believe that only the blue box and little blue bow from Tiffany & Co. represent “true” love.

Furthermore, many other things can represent love, and once these material things are encoded with love, these love symbols become imbued with the sacredness of love. (Note 6) For example, lovers wear the same shirts, shoes, and the same necklaces and carry the same cell phones to signify their relationship. These symbolic materials then are infused with the sacred quality of love, and sometimes, when a loved one damages these objects, the significant other may feel their love has also been damaged. Moreover, some lovers perceive sharing these symbolic objects with other people as the intrusion of a third party. (Note 7) In most societies, the shape of a heart is linked to love, and we can find lovers frequently using it in their love letters, emails, and texts. A simple drawing of the heart shape can represent the feeling of love, and the shape of a broken heart betokens the death of love. However, it is intriguing that our affection is not controlled by our organic heart, and even when it is, the shape of the symbolic heart is different from our organic heart.

A vivid example of people being inclined to consider the signifiers as inherently transferable to the signified is that people readily calculate the value of symbolic materials to judge how much their companions love them. Thus, individuals who gift cheap or fake diamond rings are sometimes considered false-hearted, showing disrespect for the love relationship. Furthermore, failing to give chocolate and roses on special days as gifts may evoke suspicion. I remember when a male friend of mine gave me a hardcover book as a gift on Valentine’s Day.

Although it was an expensive book that I was eager to own (*Abnormal Psychology*), I seriously doubted whether he wanted to express his love. (Note 8) However, we should not conclude from such observations that “money” is an effective symbol of love; money is, at most, a quasi-symbol of love. Although money can buy symbolic materials to express lovers’ affection, directly giving money to lovers instead of exchanging it for chocolate, roses, and jewelry may be regarded as insufficiently romantic or overly pragmatic. The social brain of individuals leads them to consider some materials as being endowed with the symbolic meaning of love and misapprehend the inevitable relation between them.

#### 4.1.3 The Imprinted Body

Love is a sacred thing that is also symbolized through our bodies. While socialized people prefer to maintain their insular self and bodies (Zerubavel, 1991), for lovers, eliminating the separation of their bodies becomes a conspicuous way to encode their affection. Therefore, although most individuals consider that spit, sweat, semen, and smegma are disgusting once these secretions are outside the body (regardless of whether they originate in our own body or that of others) (Douglas, 1996), lovers do not mind exchanging spit (through kissing and sharing foods or drinks), sweat (through the close contact of their bodies), or semen and smegma (through sexual intercourse) with each other (Davis, 1983).

Lovers attempt to eliminate the separation of their bodies to represent intimacy, depending on the context. For example, in public places, it is common to observe lovers walking hand in hand, and frequently we can also observe lovers hug or kiss each other. Moreover, the hickey and kiss mark are regarded as another way to express the state of being in love when the other lover is absent. Although a hickey is just an area of blood stasis from the medical perspective, it is usually deemed a symbol of love from the sociomental perspective. In a private place, lovers have sex. Intercourse is also called “making love,” which perfectly represents that people consider “intercourse” as a practice of lovers. Thus, while having sex is an acceptable practice between lovers, prostitution and random sex are unacceptable for most people. Sexual intercourse is commonly treated as a symbol of love, and money may desecrate it. Most people also deem a “one-night stand” or having sex with a companion “too soon” as morally unacceptable because they assume there is no love (or only “superficial” love) between these sex partners, which may lessen the value of love as a symbol. This also explains why many people do not know how to refuse their companion’s request for sex. Many people stubbornly believe that sexual intercourse symbolizes love, and for one person to deny it to another manifests that the two are not in love. While sharing food and drink, kissing, holding hands, hugging, and having sex are all cultural codes of love and should not be refused between lovers, most people cannot tolerate performing these acts with someone they do not love. In addition, for a husband and wife to refrain from sex is a warning signal that love is dying.

People in love also encode the special quality of love through distinctive types of clothing when they have a date with their lover. It is not unusual for someone to receive the following comment: “Your dress is fantastic today. You must have a date tonight!” That is, people assume that when somebody is dressed up, it is a symbol of love. People even suppose that someone full of vim and vigor must be in love. Therefore, we often hear, “Are you in love? You look so good these days!” Some people tattoo the name or the face of their lover on their bodies; for them, this is another way to imprint their lovers on their bodies.

Another example of how people symbolize their love is through kissing. For example, prostitutes can have sex with their clients, but most of them do not allow their clients to kiss them on the lips. For them, kissing on the lips means “true love”. People’s obstinacy regarding the bodily symbols of love appears to be “institutionalized” into the law. In Taiwanese civil law, one crucial piece of evidence for a judge to determine a couple should divorce is if either one of the couple can prove that he or she has not had sexual intercourse for a long time. That is, going a long time without having sex proves a lack of love.

#### 4.1.4 The Code of Temporality

Zerubavel (1987) reminds us to note “the language of the time” and be aware of how socialized people speak it. For example, he claimed that

...people manipulate various dimensions of temporality (e.g., duration, speed, frequency, timing) as virtual semiotic codes through which they manage to convey various social messages (e.g., about priority, importance, commitment, respect, intimacy, informality) without having to articulate them verbally (p. 343).

I argue that temporality is also a code to convey love. For example, although we avoid contacting people late at night, we consider it quite acceptable to contact our lover at any time. Moreover, lovers always do their best to spend weekends with each other. This is because weekends are deemed more private and valuable, and lovers

prioritize their time together on weekends. Should lovers fall back on having a date on Tuesday night without a special reason, the other member may take it as a message of indifference. Alternatively, as Zerubavel (1987) pointed out, while we should make appointments with people in advance (according to the situation, it can be days, weeks, months, and even years ahead), we can always call upon our lover at the last minute. The frequency and duration of dating between lovers are also symbolic codes of love. High frequency and long duration express the feeling of love, while low frequency and short duration symbolize the cooling down of love. Additionally, with the prevalence of instant communication software and applications, the frequency and timing of sending messages and, more importantly, the speed of replying to messages is another criterion for judging lovers' love.

The willingness to devote one's time to the other person between lovers is a significant symbol of love. Whereas jewelry and flowers are substantial materials used to transmit the message of love, sometimes people without money can dedicate their time to compensate for the insufficiency of material abundance. Thus, people in love are much moved by knowing their lovers have spent a great deal of time to produce a handmade gift for them (e.g., handmade scarves, cards, floral crowns). In addition, a willingness to rearrange one's schedule to accommodate one's lover is another way to express love. For instance, canceling a dinner party with fellow workers and going to a movie with one's lover is sure to reassure the lover.

To some extent, in the symbolic system of love, the proverb "time is money" should be replaced by "time is love." In many cultures, the long duration of waiting for lovers is seen as a code of love; for example, a famous Chinese traditional love story describes how a wife waited eighteen years for her husband to return from the battlefield and extolled their true love. Likewise, in Western culture, Penelope waited ten years for her husband Ulysses, representing a mythic encoding of the value of waiting in the symbology of love.

Another dimension of the temporal code of love is that lovers celebrate their love on the anniversaries of important events, such as the date they met, the date of their wedding ceremony, and their birthdays (I know some people who even require the other side to memorize the date of their first kiss, the date of the first time they held hands, and the date of their first intercourse). Remembering and celebrating these anniversary dates becomes another symbol of love; forgetting these dates and doing nothing to celebrate them is taken as a negative sign of love.

#### 4.1.5 Spatial Aspect

Love can be symbolized through the spatial aspect. Whereas people ordinarily prefer to maintain a certain distance between themselves and those they do not love, lovers manifest their love by permitting the loved one to enter into their private space. Cohabiting without legal marriage and living together after legal marriage is seen as a sign of love (although marriage earns more credits within the love realm). Living together usually indicates the acceptance of each lover in each other's private space, and the greater overlap in the lovers' lives means less privacy either person would have. The shrinking of private space is illustrated in many ways; for instance (even before cohabiting and marriage), pictures of lovers may appear in wallets, on the wallpaper of cell phones, and office desks.

Moreover, lovers sometimes share their passwords for every possible account to prove their true heart (e.g., the password of an Internet shopping account or electronic mail account). (Note 9) Additionally, to demonstrate their extraordinary relationship, lovers cannot refuse to report every detail of their daily schedule and may have to permit the other person to check their items (such as pockets, wallets, records of cell phone communication, and the "sent" folder of a mail account) to eliminate suspicions. Few people can tolerate their privacy being "invaded" and "harassed" by those they do not love, and we usually call such people stalkers.

Interestingly enough, sometimes simply appearing in a space without any third party also represents love. To some extent, only acknowledged lovers could stay in a place alone, and staying in a place with incompatible people may evoke rumors. Therefore, it is common for Taiwanese professors to keep their office door open when a student of the opposite sex is with them inside the office. Moreover, in traditional Chinese society, a married person should avoid being in a room alone with a person of the opposite sex. (Note 10) Socialized people know well that when two people stay in a place or go to certain "romantic places," it may express the message of love; thus, on the one hand, people try their best to avoid doing these things with people they do not love and, on the other hand, people employ these practices as symbols to demonstrate their love.

#### 4.2 Deciphering the Symbols of Love

Individuals actively employ love symbols to express their love and passively employ them to judge other people's love. How then do socialized people "receive" the meanings that the symbols represent?

#### 4.2.1 The “Semiotic Square” and Tautological Relations

More often than not, we can only know the meaning of a symbol by first knowing what it is not (Illouz, 2019; Zerubavel, 1997). We must contrast symbols with other symbols to understand their distinctive meaning. According to Zerubavel (1997),

The meaning of symbols generally derives not from their own inherent properties but from the way they are semiotically positioned in our minds vis-à-vis other symbols (p. 72).

Therefore, Zerubavel introduced the “semiotic square” to decipher the meaning of symbols. As Zerubavel (1997) suggested, we not only have to take note of the association between the signifier and the signified (which is the “semantic association”), but we also have to investigate the association among signifiers and signifieds (which is the “syntactic association”). He claimed that,

Semantics, in short, is inseparable from syntactics. In order to fully understand the meaning of a symbol, we must transcend the narrow confines of a strictly semantic analysis and consider also the syntactic within which it is structurally embedded... (p. 73).

When asked why the shape of the heart means love, people usually respond because the shape of a broken heart means no more love; when asked why receiving a diamond ring can express love, people typically state that not receiving a diamond ring means no love. Moreover, red roses are conventionally associated with love generally because yellow roses are traditionally associated with the death of love. Similarly, the sociomental association of kissing and having sex with love can only be realized within the context of the association of not having intimate relationships with people we do not love. The conventional relation of being willing to spend time and tolerate the shrinking of private space for love can only be understood in contrast to the unwillingness to spend time with or tolerate the invasion of our private space by those whom we do not love.

People can mentally distinguish between meanings by using symbols. For example, in Taiwan, because the carnation conventionally represents children’s appreciation of their mothers, and the chrysanthemum is reserved for funerals to symbolize grief, lovers do not feel these two flowers can symbolize their love. Moreover, while in Taiwan, gold accessories are usually exchanged between parents and children, lovers choose diamond accessories to represent their love. (Note 11) If all children gave red roses to their mothers to symbolize their gratitude, lovers could give carnation flowers to their beloved without any hesitation, and if all parents gave their children diamond accessories, lovers might come to prefer gold accessories as gifts. Figure 1 illustrates the semiotic square of love symbols.

a. the shape of a heart b. diamond ring c. red roses d. kissing and having sex e. consuming a long time f. permitting entry into private space	(-)	a. the shape of a broken heart b. no diamond ring c. yellow roses d. refusing to kiss and have sex e. consuming a short time f. only interacting in public spaces
(+)		(+)
a~f. love	(-)	a~f. no love

Figure 1. The Semiotic Square

+semantic association

-syntactic contrast

#### 4.2.2 The Artificial Association of Love Symbols

Employing the semiotic square enables us to decipher the symbols of love. Their tautological relationships unveil the artificial association between signifiers and signifieds. After all, whereas some people insist on sexual intercourse as a crucial symbol of love, the “one-night stand” and prostitution invert its symbolic meaning, as people can have sex without difficulty even in the absence of love. Since some females believe that red roses testify to their companions’ love, it is common for males to feel obligated to buy red roses for their partners just because it is a conventional gift. There is no inevitable association between the conventional love symbols and love, and people are socialized who assign the meaning of love to chocolate, diamond rings, and high frequency of dating. Many socialized people misapprehend the signifiers and the signifieds and believe they are inseparable. Therefore, lovers repeatedly request their companions to make sweet talk about proving their love; the

anniversary celebration becomes “love” itself, and forgetting the anniversary may imply indifference to love and have serious consequences, such as quarrels, breakup, and even divorce.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Marked Love and Unmarked Love

Brekhus (1996) elaborated on the linguistic concept and developed social marking and mental coloring concepts. Taking sexual identity as an example, he maintained that the social marking process uses six dimensions to construct discrete identities at each extreme. Brekhus claimed that we sociomentally construct an asymmetrical classification of the social world through social marking. In this section, I argue that several extreme types of love affairs are marked in most cultures, while other types of love affairs are unmarked. Swidler (2001) pointed out four “love myths”: “love at first sight”, “one true love”, “love conquers all”, and “happily ever after”. These love myths are examples of the most marked love, and none of them is the general type of love. We mentally color these extreme types of love and disproportionately exaggerate them.

#### 5.1.1 The Different Dimensions of Marked Love (Note 12)

Depending on the timing of falling in love, we mark two categories, falling in love “at first sight” (too soon) or “after some time” (too late). In the fairy tale, the princess often falls in love with the prince at first sight, and people believe that falling in love at first sight, is a sign of predestination. Alternatively, in love stories, a common plot is that the protagonist suddenly falls in love with someone he or she has known for a long time. Along another dimension of the timing of love, we mentally color the category of love in which lovers fall in love at a young age (too young) and mark the category of love in which lovers fall in love at an old age (too old). Furthermore, “first love” is another category of marked love and, thus, innumerable love stories, movies, articles, and songs praise the unforgettable first love. On the opposite extreme, “the final love” is a category of marked love. The separation of loved ones in life or death is a touching plot in stories.

We also mark categories of love according to the number of lovers, falling in love with only one person (too little) as a “true love” and having love affairs with “too many” people as “players.” In addition, we mark the category of love based on the lovers’ social background, where lovers come from very different social classes. For example, we perceive the love affair between two people, one from the upper class and one from the lower class, as “love conquers all.” The popular movie *Titanic* describes the love between poor painter Jack and rich lady Rose, touching millions of viewers. We also mark love that other people do not tolerate; for instance, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* became a classic because Romeo and Juliet fall in love despite the feud between their families. People not only mark the categories of love in which the social distance between lovers is “too far” (e.g., the love between married people and unmarried people or the love between young people and old people), but they also mark the categories of love between people in which their social distance is “too close,” such as love between the same-sex persons and love between close relatives. We also assign marks to the category of love according to the distance between lovers; therefore, we mark “the long-distance relationship” (too far) as well as the categories of love in which lovers work in the same office and study in the same school (too close).

#### 5.1.2 Refocusing on Unmarked Love

Brekhus (1996) proposed two models of markedness: the binary model and the trinary model. The markedness of love usually follows the trinary model, and we are prone to amplify the lower and upper extremes but leave the middle region unmarked (see Figure 2).

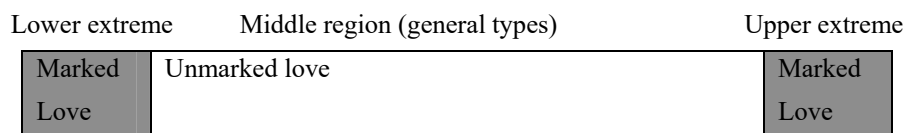


Figure 2. Trinary model of love

Although unmarked love appears much more frequently in our society, people sociomentally enlarge the proportion of the marked categories of love and downplay the unmarked love. Therefore, while people crave love, they mistakenly perceive the extreme types of love as the “prototypes” of love. Most types of love are unmarked and therefore are rarely mentioned in love stories, movies, and popular songs. However, we should redirect our focus to the unmarked types of love; after all, these sociomentally colorless love types play a crucial role in most people’s everyday lives.

### 5.2 How to Send a Love Message

Individuals are socialized to know how to use the symbols of love. As mentioned, the association between symbols of love (signifiers) and love (signified) is unmistakably artificial; therefore, people have to learn these symbols before they can fully understand their meaning. For example, my four-year-old nephew cannot “decipher” the distinctive social meanings behind the shape of a heart and the shape of a skull, and he always tries to call his father “honey” or “sweetie” because his mother always does so. Moreover, young children do not know how to express their affection; thus, it is common for young children to send their message of love by playing pranks or hitting. Because we have to employ redundant symbols to represent our love, even adults experience the continuity of the socialization of love symbols. For instance, after the invention of smartphones and instant communication applications, people learned to respond to lovers’ messages promptly because “message seen but ignored” implies a lack of love. Many adults do not know how to use symbols to show their love; therefore, many magazines advise readers on choosing gifts for their lovers. Many advertisements promote products to help buyers boldly express their affection.

Socialized people also impose normative characteristics on love symbols. People need to know the love symbols to avoid sending negative messages to their lovers or sending love messages to people they do not love. In Taiwan, some objects should never be chosen as gifts for lovers; for example, giving shoes as a gift implies that “I want you to leave,” giving a clock as a gift indicates that “I curse you,” while giving pears as a gift means “let’s break up!” Not employing the symbols to express love properly may evoke punishment (typically informal). People who do not spend their weekend with lovers without a reasonable excuse may be blamed for selfish or disloyal behavior; people who do not share their private space with their lover may be suspected of being involved in an affair; people who do not send gifts on special days may be accused of being penny-pinching or lacking love.

### 5.3 Variation of Symbolic Meaning

The meaning of symbols may vary from one environment to another, and we should not assume that the symbols of love represent identical meanings in different contexts. Love as a signified is encoded through many symbols, and we should consider differences in symbolic meaning across cultures, within a culture, and across periods to avoid ethnocentric and contempo-centric pitfalls. Take hugging as an example; while in Eastern cultures, a hug unmistakably implies affection between lovers, a hug is a common greeting behavior between friends in Western cultures. Moreover, although in some cultures kissing on the face and walking holding hands express highly positive emotion, such behaviors express only social manners in other cultures. Even within the same culture, the meaning of symbols varies. While some people regard having sex as an obvious sign of love, prostitutes and “players” have different views. Generational differences in love symbols also reveal that the meaning of symbols may change with time. Therefore, whereas some older adults consider frequent contact and sharing food as symbols of love, younger people may feel these behaviors are common among friends.

## 6. Conclusion

Once we analyze love symbols through an academic lens, it is not surprising that some people spend a huge amount of money on the wedding; some people care much about the brand, size, and price of their wedding rings; and some people insist on showing the correct status of their “relationship” on Facebook. To put it simply, they wrongly regard the signifiers of love as love itself. Lovers can grasp love only when all these symbols represent it accurately. Unfortunately, love symbols constitute a forest of symbols, and lovers easily get lost in this labyrinth-like forest and find it difficult to get through. (Note 13) Nevertheless, I should add that many people enjoy it. While this article points out that cognitive sociology can help us comprehend the social constructive-ness of love symbols, it does not suggest that these symbols are no longer significant.

On the contrary, lovers obstinately “stick” to these love symbols and thereby imbue these love symbols with sacredness. As a result, love symbols overstep love’s authority and take on an extraordinary existence that is very different from the mundane existence (Durkheim, 1995[1912]). (Note 14) Hence, we see numerous songs, dramas, poems, and paintings that extol “eternal” love at all times and in all places.

Future academic research should pay more attention to love and related issues; after all, love plays a key role in people’s daily lives (Gordon, 2017). Cognitive sociology is an effective approach to understand love symbols. To examine love symbols and their varied symbolic meanings, we can employ content analysis to compare how literature, magazines, and movies represent love across cultures, times, and places. Alternatively, future research can employ in-depth interviews to investigate how people employ love symbols and how love symbols can or cannot effectively express lovers’ feelings in their everyday lives.



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## Notes

Note 1. Although not many academic studies have been conducted on love, several famous masterpieces on love (or, specifically, “intimate relationship”) deserve to be mentioned, including Jackson (1999); Giddens (1993); Jamieson (1998); Barthes (2010[1978]); Bauman (2003); Luhmann (1998); Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995); and Rusu (2018). However, these studies have mainly addressed how love (or, more specifically, “romantic love”) emerged under the influences of modernity and how, due to the characteristics of modernity, individuality is threatened by love’s ability to invade privacy, the decreasing stability of intimacy, the decline of sacredness of marriage, and various related social phenomena. Rarely do we see analyses of the use of symbols to represent love in people’s daily lives, the social construction-ness of symbols, or the sociomental logics beneath it.

Note 2. Hence, Zerubavel (2007) emphasized in his article “generally speaking...” However, this is not to say that cognitive sociology ignores the changes caused by social contexts. Quite to the contrary, while cognitive sociology is dedicated to searching for general patterns that go beyond specific contexts, it also tries to identify changes in patterns caused by temporal and spatial factors. Hence, cognitive sociology especially emphasizes how embedded social groups form optical lens and heavily influence people’s perceptions. Moreover, cognitive sociology usually reminds us not to draw fallacious conclusions that result from an ethnocentric and contempocentric perspective.

Note 3. Its academic heritage may explain why cognitive sociology rarely discusses the aspect of power. This can also relate to critiques of Durkheim's conservative and reactionary standpoint. However, when adopting cognitive sociology as the analytic approach, power, contention, and suppression are factors that especially need to be included on our analytic radar. After all, cognitive sociology is especially good at unraveling the societal construction-ness of classification and boundary-drawing; just one step further, it has to face the weaving issues of strategies and motivations behind them.

Note 4. I borrow Turner's (1970) description of general symbols to describe love symbols.

Note 5. In this article, I am not trying to provide an exhaustive list of all the employed love symbols. I merely provide various examples for further discussion.

Note 6. Nippert-Eng treats the lunch bag as another symbol of love; she says "...bag of lunch is...an item prepared especially for the preferences of a loved one. One group of men has even succeeded in getting their wives to good-naturally compete with each other through the cookies they send each day" (1996:94).

Note 7. Mary Douglas (1996) adopted the concept of "mental dirt" to describe how people feel when they are threatened by people or things that do not belong to a certain category or classification. Her argument can help us understand how a third party is thought to sociomentially "pollute" the symbols of love. Moreover, the rituals to "clean" the dirt (a third party) between lovers include throwing away polluted objects and deleting texts and messages sent by the third party. We should not forget that a third party also attempts to employ love symbols to express his/her love; what I want to point out here is the exclusive characteristic of symbols between lovers.

Note 8. We can observe the "fade-out" effect of symbols of love; for example, in most cultures, the diamond ring is considered to be a great symbol of love, as are diamond necklaces and diamond earrings. However, when the materials are located far from the symbolic materials of love in the mental geography, they do not have the ability to speak for love spontaneously.

Note 9. In other words, allow lovers to enter personal virtual "space."

Note 10. However, the normative restrictions on females and males are not the same. Usually, a married female may face more serious consequences if she stays with a person of the opposite sex.

Note 11. Compared to Western societies, people in Eastern societies use gold to express their love more often. For instance, we see a whole set of gold accessories in traditional weddings. This deserves a pragmatic consideration: After all, the logic is that gold accessories easily maintain (and even increase)

Note 12. The mental process of markedness may vary according to different contexts; thus, it is not only impossible to exhaust the dimension of markedness but also sometimes the marked and unmarked love may be inverted in a distinctive context.

Note 13. In fact, "horror lovers" about whom we usually learn from news reports can be regarded as the tragic consequence of wrongly deciphering love symbols and/or stubbornly insisting on the taken-for-granted love symbols. These "horror lovers" persist in invading others' private spaces or adopt a radical way to "fix" the problems when their targets no longer follow the "conventional" ways of using love symbols.

Note 14. Therefore, at all times and in all places, the search for love, such as seen in the description "love the beauty more than the country," is admired as graceful and extremely romantic.

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