

Truth and not much anything but the truth?

Pragmatistic meaning in Peircean semiotics and its consequences to biosemiotics as a generalised cognitive theory

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Task of semiotics

- Re-introduction or conceptualisation of the phenomena of *meaning* in
 1. Cognitive science \Rightarrow Cognitive semiotics
 2. Biology \Rightarrow Biosemiotics

But what kind of meaning?

Initial intuitions

Semiotics has two different basic orientations or intuitive starting points:

1. the concept of sign understood primarily as *means for communication* between semiotically equal individuals and
2. the concept of sign understood primarily as *means for representative cognition*.

What kind of meaning?

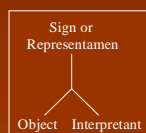
- Saussure's *semiology*: Psychological or social meaning
 - \Rightarrow Static concept, no possibility to meaningful meaning change (due to methodical choices)
- Peirce's *semeiotic*: Logical meaning
 - \Rightarrow Dynamic concept designed to deal with processes of learning, cognitive modeling, etc.

Peircean concept of sign

- The concept of sign described and defined primarily as

the irreducibly triadic unity of *Representamen*, its *Object*, and *Interpretant*.

- How universal is the concept?
- What kind of presuppositions its structure contains?
- What is its legitimate domain of application?



Ethics of terminology

"It is good economy for philosophy to provide itself with a vocabulary so outlandish that loose thinkers shall not be tempted to borrow its words." (CP 2.223, 1903)

- "First. To take pains to avoid following any recommendation of an **arbitrary** nature as to the use of philosophical terminology."
 - "Sixth. For philosophical conceptions which vary by a hair's breadth from those for which suitable terms exist, to **invent terms** with a due regard for the usages of philosophical terminology and those of the English language but yet with a distinctly technical appearance." (CP 2.225-6, EP 2:266, 1903.)
- \rightarrow Similarities and differences with ordinary concepts are significant.
 \rightarrow Changes and stabilities in Peirce's terminology should be taken seriously.

Is all thought really in signs?

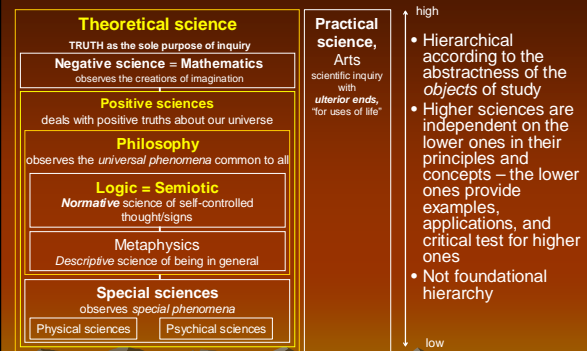
- Argument that “all thought is in signs” (1868), but in the argument
 - No use of the detailed structure of sign
 - sign = mediation
 - Point was to rule out the possibility of cognitions not determined from previous cognition
 - However, the detailed study of the structure, dynamics, and types of signs under the science of logic
 - Logic = science of self-controlled thought
 - ⇒ Not all thought is in *such* signs (but perhaps in some more general kind of signs?)
- ⇒ Two senses of sign: vague/general and detailed logical

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Logic and classification of sciences (before 1901)



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Peirce's logical concept of meaning

- The *only* concept of meaning that Peirce employed is the one defined in his “maxim of pragmatism”:

“In order to ascertain the meaning of an intellectual conception one should consider what practical consequences might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that conception; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the entire meaning of the conception.” (CP 5.9, 1907)
- ⇒ Peirce was interested only in meaning of *intellectual concepts*:

I understand pragmatism to be a method of ascertaining the meanings, not of all ideas, but only of what I call “intellectual concepts” (CP 5.467).
- ⇒ Peirce's pragmaticistic concept of meaning is special type of **logical meaning** — meaning is a ‘proposition’ that can be used as guiding the possible action. It contains information what would be rational to act in each conceivable circumstances.

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“Gate of perception”

- What elements does Peirce's detailed logical concept of sign contain and presuppose?
- According to one formulation of Peirce's pragmatic maxim:

“The elements of every concept enter into logical thought at the gate of perception and make their exit at the gate of purposive action; and whatever cannot show its passports at both those two gates is to be arrested as unauthorized by reason.” (EP 2:241, CP 5.212, 1903)
- ⇒ We need to study what *kind of perception* are the elements of Peirce's conception of sign based on, i.e. **how they were derived.**

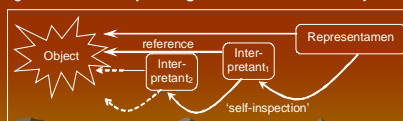
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Derivations of the concept of sign

- Peirce had two different derivations of the concept of sign, 1867 and 1907.
- 1st derivation: “On A New List Of Categories” (1867)
 - Starting point intuition: **proposition** or conception as an **internal thought-sign**.
 - ⇒ A present thought is directed to observe itself, i.e. directed toward *its object*, to find **truth** or **full consciousness** about it. This produces its **interpretant**, which is a new *mediating representation* that connects the representamen to its object.
 - ⇒ **Result:** The three **categories** and as a by-product the three **elements** of sign and the **concept of sign** as their irreducible unity.



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2nd derivation “Pragmatism” (1907)

- **Starting point intuition:** **external communicative sign**, an uttered and interpreted sign that is perceived from external *objective* perspective.
- Execution of the 2nd derivation:
 - The utterer is not necessary for all signs (e.g. natural signs)
 - ⇒ utterer abstracted and substituted by its *essential ingredient*, the **object** of sign.
 - The interpreter is not necessary either (e.g. uttered sign with only *potential* “would-be” interpreter)
 - ⇒ interpreter abstracted and substituted by its *essential ingredient*, the **interpretant** of sign.
- In order to get real, effective sign *process*, an actual interpreter is needed – signs without actual interpreters can act only *dynamically*, i.e. they can have only physical effects – there are no **sign-action**.
 - ← No examples of signs where *both* interpreter *and* utterer are absent
 - e.g. natural signs are not signs until they are *considered* as signs

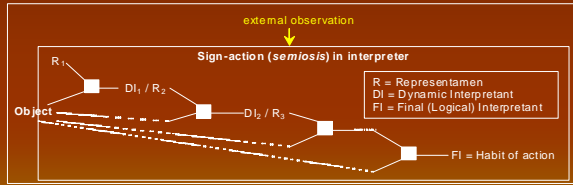
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2nd derivation "Pragmatism" (1907)

- The purpose of interpreter is to reveal the cognitive content of the uttered sign.
- The chain of interpretant-signs tends to internalize the full information that the sign contains ⇒ final logical interpretant being so irresistibly internalized conception that it carves itself in the object-agent's habits of action – this is *fixation of a belief*.

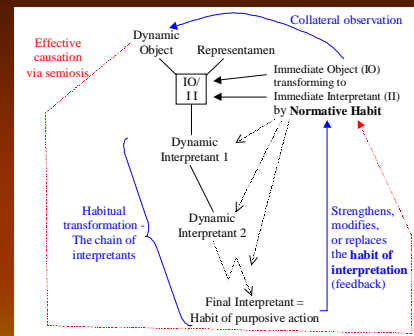


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Sign-process as self-controlled habit-formation



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Consequences of the derivations 1

In both derivations:

- The same concept of sign is derived, though from different perspectives.
- **THE INTERPRETANT IS CONSTRUCTED BY LOOKING FOR TRUTH ABOUT THE OBJECT** — no interpretant without an interest on truth
- ⇒ the **aim toward truth** —the *logical normativity*— is **inbuilt** in the construction of the triadic structure of sign, and consequently, in *any such departments of semiotic* that uses *this* concept of sign and *its three components* as its basic concept.
- Certain kind of interpreter is involved
 - 1st derivation: Transcendental subjectivity
 - 2nd derivation: if not actual, at least a 'would be' interpreter

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Consequences of the derivations 2

In both derivations:

- Certain kind of interpreter is involved
 - 1st derivation: Transcendental subjectivity
 - 2nd derivation: if not actual, at least a 'would be' interpreter
- ⇒ Necessary properties of the interpreter:
 - it must have such a minimal cognitive structure that makes it *capable* of interpreting the sign in question.
 - it has to be capable of *perceiving* those characters of the sign that connect it to its object.
 - The object must be somehow beforehand or independently acquainted
 - ⇒ The interpreter must have some *collateral observation* about the object:

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Consequences of the derivations 3

- The idea of an *inquiry* is not abstracted away in the derivations
- ⇒ the normative criterion of communication or any interpretation of a sign is still the truth about its object.
- **Concluding hypotheses:**
 1. The *only* role of the object of sign is to give to a sign a capability of being *true*.
 - "Truth is the conformity of a representamen to its object, *its* object, ITS object, mind you. [...] There must be an action of the object upon the sign to render the latter true. Without that, the object is not the representamen's object. [...] (CP 5.554, 1906)
 2. The concept of sign resulted from **both** derivations is the concept of **representational sign** designed to model rational or scientific inquiry

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Signs that do not seek the truth?

- Not all phenomena that are commonly considered as signs are interested in their truth.
- If the interpretation has some *other* normative criterion of success than truth (like practical applicability, effectiveness, novelty, 'beauty', entertainment value, etc.) or no criterion at all (e.g. 'wild' stream of consciousness), are there any need for the object?
- **Is the object of sign then irrelevant or epiphenomenal and thus 'reducible'?**
- Do such 'may-be' signs belong merely to the objects of relevant special sciences?
- Answer: perhaps not – the pre-logical normative science of Practics or (ant)ethics might be relevant.

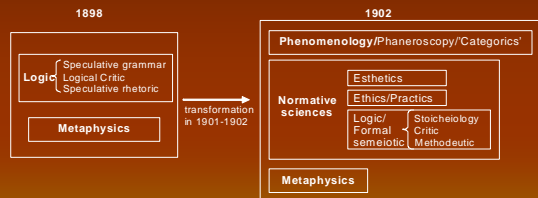
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New philosophical sciences (1902)

- From 1902 on Peirce discovered *pre-logical* philosophical sciences of Phenomenology, Esthetics, and Ethics in *Theoretical* philosophy.
- Esthetics = Science of deliberate formation of ideals, of that which is objectively admirable
- Practics ('ethics') = Science of deliberate or self-controlled conduct.



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Logic and Practics

Logic / semiotic

- Self-controlled thought
- Thought-guided thought
- Truth-seeking thought

vs.
vs.
vs.

Practics / (ant)ethics

self-controlled action
thought-guided action
thought seeking *practical ends*

- Theoretical normative logic = Science of self-controlled thought

Theoretical normative ethics = Science of self-controlled conduct = Science of thought-guided action

→ *Logic is a subspecies of Practics* (thought is a species of mental action).

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Concept of Practical sign?

- The concept of controlling thought in *Practics* should be **independent** on the *logical* concepts of thought and *sign*.
- Controlling thought in *Practics* does not need to be in itself controlled.
- Possible 'practical' concept of sign is purely future-oriented, **anticipative thought-sign**
→ **No object is needed**, because it does not have to be true of anything, its origin is irrelevant – all that matters is whether the resultant action is successful, whatever the practical normative criterion is.

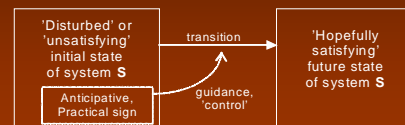
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The form of Practical sign

- An anticipative, non-representational sign **mediates** the transition between two states of a system, i.e. it has a triadic but non-representational form:



- The criterion for the success of the transition is determined solely by the *result state* – it is **independent** on the initial state.
- The origin of a practical sign is irrelevant to its successfulness.
- The initial state is **not** the object of sign

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The place of Practical sign

- Self-controlled action does employ also logical signs:
 - in a transition of an *Idea* into practice, i.e. into *action*, the conditions of actualization of the idea have to be *inquired*
 - The execution of control proper is done within logical signs
- However, the *Idea* that initiates the whole process of self-controlled action, is mere wish to get rid of experienced 'disturbing state of mind' that demands some action in order to feel better.

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Suggestion: Pragmatic meaning

- Peirce did not have time to develop his Practics and Esthetics much.
- ⇒ Proposal: adjustment of Peirce's pragmatic maxim to **Practics**, definition of a **Pragmatic meaning**:
"Consider what practical consequences could conceivably follow if a plan of action would be realized. Then their sum is the ethical/practical meaning of the action." (together with Mika Renvall).
- Together with a non-representational concept of practistic sign (*anticipative representation*) this might serve a promising starting point for determining the general concept of biological meaning.

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