

THE MEANING OF "INTERPRETANT"

The term "interpretant" is of great significance for Peirce' "Basistheorie" as well as for Bense's theoretic semiotics. The triadic theory of signs defines a sign as a relation of the vehicle, the object and the *interpretant*. Thus, an interpretant is an indispensable constituent of any sign conceived as the triadic relation. There cannot be a sign where is no interpretant. And semiotics necessarily deals with interpretants. Now, what is this interpretant? The term has neither common sense, nor clear distinctness; its meaning is veiled. It seems obvious that for such a new established field of research like semiotics, the new word which is void of any traditional sense might be of great usefulness. And every new term needs clarification. But the term "interpretant" has never received a clear explication. Peirce - the autor of the term - is not very exact at this point. And the translation of the interpretant into "Konnex" (s. Bense) does not explain much. Moreover, there are some obvious misunderstandings of the interpretant: for instance, Morris' idea, that an interpretant is just the interpreter of a sign or, more precisely, the mental reaction to a sign. Consequently, the analysis of the problem of interpretant still seems to be necessary.

However, my aim in this paper is only a preliminary one. I should like to focus my attention on the Peircean using of "interpretant" and in that way to come closer to the original meaning of the term.

In my opinion, the principal vagueness of "interpretant" in Peirce consists in its being a meaning of the given sign and simultaneously another which interprets the previous one. Thus, according to Peirce, the interpretant is an internal part of the initial triadic relation as well as an external operation of interpretation. Peirce uses the term "interpretant" in both senses. There are many passages in his writings where this ambiguity can be found.

In his definitions of the sign, Peirce defines the interpretant as the third constituent of a triad. He calls it: "the possible Third Correlate of a triadic relation" (2.242), or writes that the sign is a subject of triadic relation "...FOR a third, called its Interpretant" (1.541). And, frequently,

he names it just the meaning of a sign. He writes: "the Interpretant of the sign - its significance" (8.179), or defines interpretant as "the signification of a sign" (8.184). The interpretant is the content conveyed by a sign, it is "...all that is explicit in the sign itself apart from its context and circumstances of utterance" (5.474). Thus, each sign, as a triadic relation, includes its interpretant. This interpretant belongs to the triad and it constitutes the entire relation. Sometimes Peirce uses the term "interpretant" in the sense of a meaningful sign or a mediating representation (e.g. 1.553). Only once, to my knowledge, Peirce differentiates between the "interpretant" and the "meaning" when he writes concerning the sign: "...that which it conveys (is called) its meaning; and the idea to which it gives rise, its interpretant" (1.339). Mainly, however, the interpretant is the meaning of a sign or rather just a meaningful sign.

Yet, there is another sense of the "interpretant" in Peirce. In this second sense the interpretant is something interpreting a sign from the outside. It can be another sign, or some feeling and action. In this sense, "interpretant" is a name for the process of interpretation of a sign, taking no account of the sort of interpretation - it may be the intellectual, emotive or active interpretation. Such a sense of the "interpretant" is frequent in Peirce. He writes: "No sign can function as such except so far as it is interpreted in another sign. ... Consequently, it is absolutely essential to a sign that it should affect another sign. ... What I mean is that when there is a sign there *will be* an interpretation in another sign" (8.225, note 10). In the last quotation there is no term "interpretant" but it seems obvious that it could be used instead of "another interpreting sign" as it is in the next citation. A sign "...addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign. ... That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign" (2.228). And elsewhere: "...the interpretant is nothing but another representation..." (1.339). The sign determines its interpretant. Peirce writes: "In consequence of every sign determining an Interpretant, which is itself a sign, we have sign overlying sign" (2.94), and: "...sign determines some actual or potential Mind, the determination whereof I term the Interpretant" (8.177).

However, of special interest seem to be the passages where Peirce evidently combines the two senses of the "interpretant". That reveals his main idea that there is no meaning without interpretation, or, in other words, that every thought must give rise to another. Peirce writes: "In its genuine form, Third-

ness is the Triadic relation existing between a sign, its object, and the interpreting thought, itself a sign, considered as constituting the mode of being of a sign. A sign mediates between the interpretant sign and its object" (8.332). Here, Peirce' term "interpreting thought" means as well the constituent part of the first sign as another sign explaining the previous sign. The ambiguity cannot be unintentional. On the contrary, Peirce deliberately says that the meaning and its translation into another sign are unseparable. They are rather one and the same thing. There is no meaningful sign without another sign.

It seems that the ambiguity of the term "interpretant" reveals the substantial duality of the sign as well as of the semiosis. This last question seems to be of certain importance.

Every sign is, on the one hand, a separate unit having some meaning, but, on the other hand, it is as sign only due to interpretation in another sign. The concept of interpretant implies both aspects of a sign. The interpretant is the interpreted sign as well as the interpreting one. Every meaningful sign functions as something interpreting another sense and, at the same time, as something calling for interpretation. That which interprets must be interpreted itself.

Peirce provides an interesting analysis of the process of semiosis in his division of interpretants. He differentiates between the immediate, dynamical and final interpretants as well as the emotional, energetic and logical.

Interpretation is taken by Peirce as a compound process: it has various aspects and different grades as well as it can be performed either in all respects or only partially. Moreover, some forms of interpretation are of a genuine and some of a degenerate character. Peirce gives the best presentation of the diversity of interpretants in his letters to Lady Welby. And he writes in a very interesting way concerning the origin of his divisions of interpretants: "...while my three grades of Interpretant were worked out by reasoning from the definition of a Sign what sort of thing *ought* to be noticeably and *then* searching for its appearance" (Correspondence, p. 111). "My Immediate Interpretant is implied in the fact that each Sign must have its peculiar Interpretability before it gets any Interpreter. My Dynamical Interpretant is that which is experienced in each act of Interpretation and is different in each from that of any other; and the Final Interpretant is the

one of Interpretative result of which every Interpreter is destined to come if the Sign is sufficiently considered. The Immediate Interpretant is an abstraction, consisting in a Possibility. The Dynamical Interpretant is a single actual event. The Final Interpretant is that toward which the actual tends" (Correspondence, 111).

These three interpretants are only different "grades of interpretant", thus, only different aspects of meaning rather than different meanings. They are the modalities of meaning. The immediate is a possibility of anything meaningful. The dynamical is an empirical fact of interpretation or some factual results of understanding of a sign. And the final is a general rule of proper understanding. Only all of them taken together form the entire meaning. The most fundamental is the final interpretant. It is a meaning *in abstracto*, identical and permanently connected with a sign, autonomous with regard to all processes of mind. It is a pure thought independent of thinking. However, besides this ideal interpretation there also exists the actual understanding of a sign by particular minds. It "tends" to be in accord with the meaning *in abstracto*. Whereas the immediate interpretant is only a possibility of sense, a pure interpretability.

The immediate interpretant, according to Peirce, is: "...the interpretant as it is revealed in the right understanding of the sign itself, and is ordinarily called the meaning of the sign" (4.536). Moreover, it is "all that (a sign) immediately expresses..." (8.314). The immediate interpretant "consists in the Quality of the Impression that a sign is fit to produce, not to any actual reaction" (8.315). It is an interpretant "represented or signified in the Sign" (8.343). Returning to the previously mentioned ambiguity of the term "interpretant", one would say that the immediate interpretant is the meaning which belongs to the initial triad. It is that which is the third in a triad, or it is "all that is explicit in the sign itself apart from its context and circumstances of utterance" (5.474).

Yet, the final interpretant corresponds with the second - of the above mentioned - sense of the term "interpretant", - it is the translation of a sign into another sign which links it with other signs. The final interpretant is "nothing but another representation". Peirce calls it also the "interpretant in itself" (8.333). It is that "...which *would finally* be decided to be the true interpretation if consideration of the matter were carried so far that an ultimate opinion were reached" (8.184). It is "...the effect which would

be produced on the mind by the Sign after sufficient development of thought" (8.343). The final or normal interpretant is another sign explaining the meaning of the previous one. It is not a fact of interpretation but a rule of proper understanding of a sign. That is why all dynamical interpretants "tend toward it" and why "every Interpreter is destined to come to it if the Sign is sufficiently considered".

The dynamical interpretant is only a specimen of the final, a result of its implementation. It is "the actual effect which the Sign, as a Sign really determines" (4.536); it is that "whatever interpretation any mind actually makes of a sign" (8.315), or just the "interpretant as produced" (8.333). It is always of a dyadic character because it is the real effect. So, it never is a Sign.

It seems that Peirce' ambiguity in defining the interpretant as a meaning of the initial sign and simultaneously as the second sign interpreting the former one finds continuation in his distinction between the immediate and final interpretant.

The idea of three grades of interpretant explains much concerning the sense of that term; nevertheless, it does not provide the definitive solution of what the interpretant is. The interpretant always keeps its double nature. It is the interpreted sign as well as the interpreting one. In every sign the two functions are combined: it is an object and a subject of the activity of interpretation: and the unity of these two aspects of semiosis is expressed by the term interpretant.

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