

THE SIGN: ITS PAST AND FUTURE

Introduction

The temporal aspect of the sign and semiosis is not frequently analysed. However, the sign is a being in time and temporality constitutes the essential part of its existence. Every sign, if acting as a sign, originates the process of semiosis; so, as a sign it must have its own duration. The sign is rather a process than an event. This temporal nature of the sign results from its mediating function. The mediation for its realisation requires time. Impressions and perceptions might be momentary; they might be given once and instantly; but never is such the case with mediation. Semiotic mediation proceeds in time: the sign has to be interpreted and every sign starts the infinite process of interpretation in which new meanings are always revealed; all interpretation needs time. No meaningful sign is immediately given; what is directly given is only the vehicle of the meaning, but as a sign-vehicle it appeals for interpretation. Only interpretation can change the hidden meaning into something manifest. And all interpretation *becomes* in time, it *is* the temporal process. What is in time is thus determined by time and is called the temporal. So, the question of time must be a part and parcel of semiotics.

Peirce, in his philosophy of signs, provides an interesting analysis of the temporality of signs. His semiotics discovers the deeply rooted and manifold connections between the sign and time. It seems that there are several dimensions of the temporal nature of the sign. First of all, the question of time is already engaged in the triadic definition of the sign. Moreover, the concept of sign-interpretant has, besides the synchronic, also a diachronic sense. And furthermore, the question of time appears to be a significant aspect of the pragmatic maxim. In this article an attempt has been made to delineate some main problems of the relationship between the sign and time.

1. Triad as a being in time

According to Peirce, the sign is a triadic relation. And it is precisely the

triadic nature of the sign which is of a particular significance for our considerations concerning the sign and time. The question of the temporal character of semiosis appears differently depending on whether we operate with the dyad or triad as a pattern for the sign. The dyadic relation of signifying and signified does not necessarily include the temporal aspect as its constituent. The dyadic relation between the sign and its object is timeless; it does not imply any question of time. On the contrary, the triad is an entity which exists *in time*. Triad is a process, not an event, and time constitutes the substantial aspect of it. The triadic sign implies the question of time.

Peirce's definition of the triadic sign in terms of categories seems to be of particular importance for the time problem. He writes: "A Sign or Representamen, is a First which stands in such a genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its Object, as to be capable of determining a Third, called its Interpretant, to assume the same triadic relation to its Object in which it stands itself to the same Object." (Syllabus, 1902, 2.274)

The sign is a representation, or rather a mediating representation. The First, Second and Third are moments of the mediating triadic relation. They are moments, which means they are not self-subsistent elements; they do not exist as the First, Second, Third unless they are *not* the stages of a triadic relation. The relation is prior to its moments. A vehicle is the First, an object the Second, and a meaning the Third, only within the mediating representation. And they become the moments of a triad only on condition that they are interpreted as such. The Third, according to Peirce, is the last element linking the whole triad as well as the triad itself. This is the Third which constitutes the triad. Peirce writes: "The Third is that which bridges over the chasm between the absolute first and last and brings them into relationship." (1.359) Thus, the First, Second and Third are the beginning, end and middle. And this middle position of the Third is decisive: it generates the entire triadic relation, and in that way creates all of its elements. So, the sign as a triad is a movement between the three moments of which some are earlier and others later. The sign exists in time; it has its starting point and end; it is the process in-between the First, Second and Third. Time belongs to its substantial structure. The triad has its duration.

The Third mediates. And only this process of mediation creates the sign. Peirce identifies the sign with the mediating representation. Consequently, no

sign as a triad is immediately given; what is self-given is only the vehicle; it is that something which becomes the First of the Triad. The perception of the sign-vehicle is instantaneous. However, this perception is not yet the understanding of the sign. The understanding is a process in time. The sign which is a triad must be interpreted as a sign. The way of being of the sign is to be interpreted. There is no uninterpreted sign. The understanding is the process of interpreting a sign by another sign. The sign to be a sign must create another sign, its interpretant, which in its way originates other signs (interpretants) and so on ad infinitum. So, a sign implies necessarily the process of interpretation, or in other words, the understanding must be a process rather than a moment. Consequently, no single sign is possible; the sign exists only in the developing universe of signs reciprocally interpreting themselves. Signs have the faculty of self-reproduction. But this non-solitary nature of the sign can be expressed also in terms of time. It means that the triadic sign functions through its interpretations and that it starts the process of understanding which is indefinite by its genuine nature.

The best explanation of the triadic nature of the sign is provided by Peirce's conception of the interpretant. The term interpretant is very ambiguous, but some of its vagueness elucidates the temporal essence of the triad. The interpretant is a meaning of the sign and it is as well another sign interpreting the previous one. The interpretant as a meaning belongs to the triad as its Third moment. It links the first and the second and constitutes the meaningful sign. It is the sign with which we start our reasoning. However, the interpretant is also another sign interpreting the previous one. In this second sense "the interpretant is nothing but another representation". (1.339) It is the next sign which is determined by the previous one. The term interpretant with its double sense displays that the meaning is never a simple instant datum but that it is generated in the process of interpretation. Meaning becomes identical with the process of understanding because there is no meaning without its translation into another meaning. The interpretant is the interpreted sign as well as the interpreting one. That which interprets must be interpreted itself.

The term interpretant explains how the past and the future meet themselves in the sign. The already established meaning is the past of the sign and the new interpretations create its future. So, the mediating triad is a movement from the past to the future. The triad exists in time, is *has its time*. Peirce

describes the stream of time in purely psychological terms, but we can translate it into the semiotic language, too. He writes: "We are immediately aware only of our present feelings - not of the future, not of the past. The past is known to us by present memory, the future by present suggestion. But before we can interpret the memory or the suggestion, they are past: before we can interpret the present feeling which means memory, or the present feeling that means suggestion, since that interpretation takes time, that feeling has ceased to be present and is now past. So, we can reach no conclusion from the present but only from the past." (1.167)

So, one could say that the immediate perception of the sign-vehicle is the present of the process of semiosis; the past is existing knowledge: the known and understood meaning, and the future are new ideas, new conclusions implied by the given sign. That which is immediately given, links only the ideas of the past with those of the future. As soon as we have named the present, we are already thinking of the past and the future, the earlier and the later as distinct from the now. The present is only the no-longer-now of the past and the not-yet-now of the future. The present sign is only a temporal transition. The above mentioned double sense of interpretant reveals the anticipatory nature of the sign. The sign is constantly ahead-of-itself. The sign, according to its triadic nature, transcends its own boundaries in relation to another sign. It transcends the present in the direction of the future. One meaning intends to another. However, interpretation is not only a logical relation but it is also a process proceeding in time. The interpretant indicates the future of the previous sign. Triad develops; it constantly moves from the past to the future. It is a being ahead-of-itself.

## 2. Sign-interpretant

Peirce, explaining in his letter to Lady Welby the term "interpretant", differentiates three grades of interpretant, that is, the immediate, dynamic and final interpretants. This interpretation explains also how the sign develops in time. Peirce says of the dynamical interpretant that it "consists in direct effect actually produced by a sign upon an interpreter of it. (Hardwick, 1977: 110) and further he adds: "My Dynamical Interpretant is that which is experienced in each act of interpretation and is different in each from that of any other." (Hardwick, 1977: 111) So, one could say, that

the dynamical interpretant is the present meaning of a sign; it is a meaning as actually understood at the given moment. However, this present meaning might differ to a great extent from the genuine meaning of a sign. This is the future meaning of a sign. Peirce calls it the final interpretant. The final interpretant is "the effect the sign *would* produce upon any mind upon which circumstances should permit it to work out its full effect." (Hardwick, 1977: 111) Furthermore, it is "the one Interpretative result to which every interpreter is destined to come if the Sign is sufficiently considered." (Hardwick, 1977: 111) So, the final interpretant is a future meaning of a sign; it is the aim to which all particular interpretations intend. This future sense of a sign develops in the process of interpretation. The interpretation grows from immediate to final interpretant. Every act of interpretation is a dynamical interpretant; it creates the present meaning of a sign. However, it has its roots in the immediate interpretant, that is, in the possibility of interpretation or in the pure interpretability of a sign. Moreover, the present meaning is not only based on the past sign but it necessarily contains the intention of further interpretations; it is only a step on the way to the final meaning. So, interpretation is a process in time: it starts with the given sign, which already belongs to the past - its sense was established by the past act of bestowing the meaning - but an act of interpretation lasts only a while: it is a momentary present of the meaning -, and it is immediately followed by another meaning which subsequently is replaced by another. And the final interpretant is produced only after the "sufficient development of thought". The final interpretant is the future meaning of a sign. So, as long as any sign exists there must be a future interpretation.

It seems obvious that the term "interpretant" includes all phases of the process of interpretation: a) its beginning which starts with the past of a sign, that is, with the fact that something is presented as a sign for interpretation; that is the interpretability of a sign, its immediate interpretant; b) its present - a particular act of interpretation, the act of bestowing the meaning; this is the dynamical interpretant; and c) its relative end, the future interpretation. The final interpretant is that which all interpretation tends. Peircean three grades of interpretant design three stages of the temporal advancement of meaning.

According to the triadic definition, every sign needs an interpretant. However, as Peirce writes: "It is not necessary that the interpretant should

actually exist. A being *in future* will suffice." (2.92) So, speaking in terms of the above mentioned differentiation, one could say that the immediate interpretant is a normal interpretant in the future. The *conditio sine qua non* of a sign is the normal (final) interpretant. The present interpretation is only a point existing between the possibility of interpretation and the full interpretation, between the past and the future. The sign has its history.

### 3. The symbol and the icon

An interesting observation concerning the sign and time is made by Roman Jakobson in his last book: *Brain and Language*. Jakobson interprets the difference between the symbol and the icon in terms of time. He follows Peirce in his analysis. He relates different signs to the different temporal orientations of the brain's hemispheres. The left-side hemisphere is responsible for supplying abstract cognition. Sensitive cognition leans on the right space and on the past, whereas abstract cognition leans on the left space and future time. Jakobson notices the analog between contemporary knowledge and the human brain and Peirce's distinction between symbols and icons. Icons deal with the past, whereas symbols with the future. The icon has such being as belongs to the past experience. The icon is an immediate image and, when perceived, is already past. However, the symbol always speaks about the future experience. Peirce writes: "The value of a symbol is that it serves to make thought and conduct rational and enables us to predict the future." (4.448) And he interprets the sense of symbol when he says "whatever is truly general refers to the indefinite future ... It is a potentiality; and its mode of being is *esse in future*." (2.148) The nature of symbol is the nature of every genuine (non-degenerate) sign.

According to Jakobson's interpretation of Peirce, the icon and the symbol have different temporal orientations: symbol toward the future; however, icon has only its past experience.

### 4. Historicity of meaning

Semiotics interprets meaning as a temporal phenomenon. A meaning has its time: it lasts in time and creates the bridge between the past and the future.

Every meaning is only a step of developing thought. The historicity of meaning is implied by the idea of mediating representation. No meaning can be grasped directly; on the contrary, it is always mediated by another sign, that is, by another meaning. A meaning can manifest itself only through its interpretant. It is a product of a developing process of interpretation. Every idea appeals for its interpretant and points to another meaning. And all that is a process in time. The present meaning exists between the past idea, which originates it, and the future idea, which is implied by it. Peirce connects the temporal nature of thought with its symbolic character. He writes: "To say, therefore that thought cannot happen in an instant, but requires a time, is but another way of saying that every thought must be interpreted in another, or that all thought is in signs." (5.253) Thought is a process of semiosis in which the logical relations are identified with the temporal ones. Peirce does not make any distinction between the logical and the temporal - the premiss is an earlier phenomenon and the conclusion is the later one. He writes: "each former thought suggests something to the thought which follows." (5.284) All thought is a movement between the past and the future in which the old meanings disappear and the new are born. And time is: "the form under which logic presents itself to objective intuition." (6.87)

The category of future plays a particular role in Peircean semiotics. He writes that: "The rational meaning of every proposition lies in the future." (5.427), and he further adds that the pragmatist "locates the meaning in the future time". (5.427) Understanding of a sign is a projection toward the future; a projection is always future oriented and anticipatory. As mentioned above, the sign is constantly ahead-of-itself. It contains an intention of another sign and, consequently, it intends to the future. Only the future meaning explains the present meaning; only testified or rejected anticipation elucidates the present sense.

The historicity of meaning is expressed also by Peirce's pragmatic maxim: "according to Pragmatism, the conclusion of a Reasoning power must refer to the future. For its meaning refers to conduct, and since it is a reasoned conclusion must refer to deliberate conduct, which is controllable conduct. But the only controllable conduct is future conduct. As for that part of the Past that lies beyond memory, the Pragmaticist doctrine is that the meaning of its being believed to be in connection with the Past consists in the acceptance as truth of the conception that we ought to conduct ourselves according to

it." (5.461)

The historicity of meaning, which results from the idea of permanently developing semiosis, provides a solution to the question of the ineffable. Wittgenstein is right when he concludes at the end of the *Tractatus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." Indeed, the actual limits of semiosis restrain the field of our discourse. However, Wittgenstein is wrong when he interprets these limits as the absolute ones. The line between that which can be expressed and that which is ineffable is temporal and relative: it is permanently changing. There is no absolute ineffable. In our experience of thinking we meet only concrete and temporal bounds. The ineffable is always concrete and temporal. This means that it is inexpressible in the given system of signs and at the given moment. And thought persistently transcends its concrete and temporal boundaries; its development changes the ineffable into utterable. Peirce's idea of the temporally moving semiosis as well as his idea of the historicity of meaning provide a clear refutation of Wittgenstein's conception concerning the absolute limits of our language. As mentioned above, an appeal for interpretation is rooted in each sign. Its intentional directing to an interpretant makes the universe of discourse broader. The main goal of a sign is to produce other signs, i. e., to produce new meanings and to translate old meanings into new ones. An interpretation of a sign by another sign is a temporal process of creation.

The entire sign universe is permanently changing. It has spontaneous faculty for growing and spreading in time. The genuine essence of semiosis is the breaking of the limits of expressiveness. The bounds between ineffable and utterable are temporal. The growth in time of semiosis transcends the ineffable.

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