

## **Introduction to Peirce's semeiotic**

I am endeavouring to introduce historically the main ideas which led Peirce to semeiotic and to give a brief philosophical reading of the theory. In the first part, I shall be concerned respectively with the conceptions of categories, signs, meaning, logic and semeiotic; in the second part, I shall deal with the sign as semiosis, i.e. as the pragmatic relation of the three formal and indecomposable elements of a sign: representamen, object and interpretant. Peirce called this relation "semiosis" which he used to pronounce: see-my-osis. Hence the name of the new science: "semeiotic" or semiotic for which we will use the common appellation "semiotics" to differentiate it from Saussure's theory of signs known as "semiology".

Although my way of dealing with these conceptions will be historical, I wish to insist that I do not consider Peirce as a historical monument, but as a living thought which helps us to deal with or even sometimes solve many problems of our time.

### **PART 1:**

#### **Philosophical and logical foundations of the new conception of sign as action**

In order to understand the living Peirce, we have to insert him in the intellectual context in which he produced his philosophy. In short, his thought was formed in reaction to European philosophy. That is why Peirce is, to my mind, the symbol or, better, the emblema of American philosophy<sup>1</sup>.

The papers written by Peirce which I am going to use to stress some characteristics of Peirce's thought are proofs of what I am suggesting: 1. "On a New List of

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<sup>1</sup> See G. Deledalle, "Peirce dans l'histoire de la pensée: la philosophie américaine et la nouvelle philosophie universelle", *VS* 55/56, 1990: 29-40.

Categories" of 1867 is aimed at Aristotle and Kant; 2. "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man" and "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" of 1868 are against Descartes and Kant; 3. "How To Make Our Ideas Clear" of 1878 is anti-Cartesian; 4. In 1880, 1883 and 1885, Peirce published several papers in view of replacing Aristotelian logic by a new logic which could fit his new theory of categories and be a genuine logic — which Aristotle's is not — that is, a semiotics.

## 1. Categories

Let us start with the problem of categories. According to Aristotle, there are ten categories which are Essence or, rather Substance, Quantity, Quality, Relation, Place, Time, Position, State, Activity, Passivity. That there is a need for categories to understand or, in other words, organize mentally the world we are living in, is a fact. And Aristotle answered that need. But what are those categories?

Conceptions? Yes, certainly. Conceptions of what? Of things? Probably so, although what is classified could be the signs of things rather than the things themselves. In any case, one can see through them a grammatical model rather than an ontological model. That did not raise any problem for Aristotle nor for generations of logicians until the end of the XIXth century. Kant had no objection to it either, and his own categories — if they are an improvement on Aristotle's — are themselves grammatico-logical categories.

Here is the list of categories given by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*:

- Categories of quantity : Unity, Plurality, Totality;
- Categories of quality : Reality, Negation, Limitation;
- Categories of relation : Substance and Accident, Causality and Dependence, Community (Interaction);
- Categories of modality : Possibility-Impossibility, Existence-Non-existence, Necessity-Contingency.

They correspond to the "logical function of the understanding in judgments". (It is the title of the section in which Kant gives his classification of judgments.)

- Quantity : Universal, Particular, Singular;
- Quality : Affirmative, Negative, Infinite;

- Relation : Categorical, Hypothetical, Disjunctive;
- Modality : Problematic, Assertoric, Apodeictic.

In both lists of categories, Aristotle's and Kant's, there is an unsolved problem, according to Peirce who tries to solve it in his paper of 1867: "On a New List of Categories".

Peirce agrees with Kant that "the function of conceptions is to reduce the manifold of sensuous impressions to unity and that the validity of a conception consists in the impossibility of reducing the content of consciousness to unity without the introduction of it" (1.545)<sup>2</sup>. He also agrees with Kant that "the unity to which the understanding reduces impressions is the unity of a proposition" (1.548).

However, that does not explain how we pass from being to substance. If we say "The stove is black", the stove is the *substance*. How can we differentiate it from *blackness*? To say 'is black' does not help. The stove is already a black substance. "Thus substance and being are the beginning and end of all conception. Substance is inapplicable to a predicate, and being is equally so to a subject" (1.548).

How can we solve the problem? Peirce proposes a device which was to become instrumental to his new conception of the nature of categories.

Let us first take a close look at the device. There are, Peirce says, three kinds of distinctions: discrimination, dissociation and precision. Discrimination is a mental distinction which depends on the meanings given to the terms to be distinguished. Dissociation, although also mental, is, so to speak, a quasi-physical distinction, because it is imposed on our minds by the laws of association of ideas. Precision or precession from the Latin *prae-scindere*, is "the act of supposing (whether with con-

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<sup>2</sup> All references to Peirce's writings are given in the text in the following way: for the *Collected Papers* (Vol. 1-6, 1931-1935, Hartshorne and Weiss, eds, Vol. 7-8, 1958, Burks, ed., Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press): the n° of the volume and the § in the volume; for the chronological edition edited by the Peirce Edition Project under the title *Writings* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, Vol. 1-4, 1982-1990) : W, volume and page; for the *Correspondence with Lady Welby Semeiotic and Significs* (Hardwick ed., Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1977): H and page ; for the manuscripts the catalogue edited by Robin (The University of Massachusetts Press, 1967): Ms and the number in the catalogue.

sciousness of fiction or not) something about one element of a percept, upon which the thought dwells, without paying any regard to other elements" (1.549 note 1).

Peirce applies the above distinctions to red and blue, colour and space. One can discriminate red from blue, space from colour, colour from space, but *not* red from colour. One can dissociate red from blue, but *not* space from colour, *nor* colour from space, *nor* red from colour. One can prescind red from blue, space from colour, but *not* colour from space, *nor* red from colour. To understand the last process, one has to bear in mind that it is not a "reciprocal process" (1.549). It implies "a conception of gradation" (1.546), which Peirce had shown in the following table in a manuscript of 1866 (W 519).

	blue without red	space without colour	colour without space	red without colour
By discrimination	0	0	0	X
By pre-scission	0	0	X	X
By dissociation	0	X	X	X

Table 1 : The three kinds of distinction

Here lies the origin of what I call the principle of the hierarchy of Peirce's three categories. Let us consider, instead of red or blue, colour and space the relations of A, B and C in that order: A (1st), B (2nd), C (3rd). If, through pre-scission, we take A (1st) without B (2nd) and B (2nd) without C (3rd), we can prescind A (1st) from B (2nd)

and C (3rd) and B (2nd) from C (3rd). But we cannot prescind C (3rd) from B (2nd), nor B (2nd) from A (1st) . Hence the following table:

	B (2nd), without B (2nd)	B (2nd) without A (1st)	A (1st) without B (2nd)	B (2nd) without C (3rd)
By precision	0	0	X	X

Table 2 : Hierarchy of categories

Peirce's problem in reading Kant was that there was no way of passing from being to substance. Thanks to precision, Peirce has now grasped the solution. Not only can being and substance be differentiated, but they can be united through three gradated steps which are the three intermediate conceptions or categories of 1867, and which will later become the three phenomenological or rather phaneroscopic categories, respectively called Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness.

Let us remark that Peirce's categories were not intended to replace Aristotle's and Kant's categories. Although all of them will enter one or the other of the three Peircean categories, they will be no longer a way of uniting conceptions from outside, they will become, on the contrary, the unifying categories, not of thought alone, but of and in the universe.

In 1867, the three categories are First: Quality, Second: Relation, Third: Representation.

**1. Quality.** The first intermediate conception is quality or what Peirce called, at the time, the reference to a ground. In the proposition 'The stove is black', *blackness* is the quality or ground, not the 'black' of this stove, but 'blackness' as "a pure species or abstraction [precision] and its application to *this* stove is entirely hypothetical".

"Reference to a ground cannot be prescinded from being, but being can be prescinded from it" (1.551).

**2. Relation.** However, if we can assert the proposition 'The stove is black', it is because we know that this stove is black and not white or red. "We can know a quality only by means of its contrast with or similarity to another." The occasion of the introduction of the conception of reference to a ground is therefore the reference to a correlate. "Reference to a correlate cannot be prescinded from reference to a ground, but reference to a ground may be prescinded from reference to a correlate." (1.552)

**3. Representation.** "The occasion of reference to a correlate is obviously by comparison." For instance, Peirce says, "suppose we look up the word *homme* in a French dictionary; we shall find opposite to it the word *man* which, so placed, represents *homme* as representing the same two-legged creature which *man* itself represents". And the same thing applies to every comparison : "Every comparison ... requires a *mediating representation which represents the relate to be a representation of the same correlate which the mediating representation itself represents.*"

Such mediating representation, Peirce calls an interpretant, "because it fulfills the office of an interpreter, who says that a foreigner says the same thing which he himself says".

"Every reference to a correlate, then, conjoins to the substance the conception of a reference to an interpretant." And this is the third conception required to pass from being to substance. "Reference to an interpretant cannot be prescinded from reference to a correlate, but reference to a correlate can be prescinded from reference to an interpretant" (1.553).

Peirce concludes:

The five conceptions thus obtained ..., may be termed categories. That is

*Being*

Quality (reference to a ground)

Relation (reference to a correlate)

Representation (reference to an interpretant)

## Substance

The three intermediate conceptions may be termed accidents. (1.555)

The intermediate conceptions are correctly speaking the new categories which will be named Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. And the reason for so naming them is in the idea of precision which is at the root of the hierarchy of categories. "The category of first can be prescinded from second and third, and second can be prescinded from third. But second cannot be prescinded from first, nor third from second." (1.353)

Since no one of the categories can be prescinded from those above it, the list of supposable objects which they afford is

### What is

Quale (that which refers to a ground)

Relate (that which refers to ground and correlate)

Representamen (that which refers to ground, correlate and interpretant)

*It.* (1.557)

The categories are described as *ordinal* and not cardinal: a Quale, which is the object of Quality, a First, refers to one thing: its ground; a Relate, which is the object of relation, a Second, refers to two things: its ground and its correlate; a Representamen, which is the object of Representation, a Third, refers to three things: its ground, its correlate and its interpretant.

This is the first expression of Peirce's phenomenology or phaneroscopy. Later on, a First, although still a "quality", will be defined as a "possible", because, if a "quality" or "First" is the only element "upon which the thought dwells without paying any regard to" its relation with something and to its representation, it is prescinded from everything and therefore can only be possible, — the object of which is a monad; a Second, although still a "relation" will be defined, not as a "mental relation" or *relatio rationis* from which it can be prescinded, but as an existential or *de facto, hic et nunc*, relation, — the object of which is a dyad; a Third, although still a "representation", will

be more expressly characterized for what it is: the expression of the law of unification of the three "conceptions", — the object of which is a triad.

The same paper of 1867 contains also a schematic theory of signs, which cannot yet be called semiotic, because it lacks the triadic logic of its phaneroscopy. There are, Peirce says, three kinds of representations:

1. Likenesses (later called icons) ;
2. Indices or signs ;
3. Symbols or general signs (1.558).

Let us note that, correctly speaking, only the relations of signs with their objects are given here. The divisions of signs as they are in themselves and as they are in relation with their interpretants, are missing. However, and more essentially, the trichotomization of the relations of signs with their objects does not depart from the dualistic conception of Aristotle's and Kant's logic: the third distinction in the sense of discrimination (symbols) is the second generalized.

## **2. Signs *versus* Intuition**

The second series of papers I want to mention: "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man" and "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities", is of 1868. It is a very important series for our purpose. Peirce states against Descartes and Kant that "we have no power of Introspection, but all knowledge of the internal world is derived by hypothetical reasoning from our knowledge of external facts"; that "we have no power of Intuition, but every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions"; that "we have no power of thinking without signs"; and, especially against Kant, that "we have no cognition of the absolutely uncognizable" (5.265).

I am not going to elaborate. Suffice it to say that we have here the reason why Peirce's semiotics is not a semantics. Meaning is not something that signs produce. It is obtained in another way "by collateral experience", although it can be communicated only by signs.

### 3. Action: belief and meaning

Between 1868 and 1878, Peirce travelled in Europe for the U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. At the time, he no longer seemed to be interested in semiotics. The most important papers he published at the end of this period are apparently not concerned with semiotics. They are "The Fixation of Belief" (1877) and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878). The second one was written directly in the French language by Peirce during his journey to Europe in 1877. They are both anti-Cartesian.

They are the founding papers of pragmatism, namely pragmatism as a theory of inquiry, and pragmatism as a theory of meaning (not truth, as William James thought it was).

According to Descartes, we have to start with a methodological doubt. Peirce replies that we have to start with doubt only when there is something to doubt about, and if and only if the doubt is genuine. This is not new. Peirce had already said in the second article of 1868:

We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy. The prejudices are not to be dispelled by a maxim. ... and no one who follows the Cartesian method will ever be satisfied until he has formally recovered all those beliefs which in form he has given up. ... Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts (5.265).

Doubt is then, Peirce says in 1877, "an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief" (5.372). Of course, not James' will to belief, but the right to belief of the scientific inquirer.

And what is this belief? "It is", Peirce says, "the demi-cadence which closes a musical phrase in the symphony of our intellectual life." It does not only appease "the irritation of doubt", it also involves "the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say for short, a *habit*". "But, since belief is a rule for action, the application of which involves further doubt and further thought, at the same time that it is a stopping-place, it is also a new starting-place for thought" (5.397). This is a good enough description of what Peirce will later call a *semiosis*.

The second anti-Cartesian attack concerned the “clarity and distinctness” of ideas. As they cannot be self-evident, according to Peirce, we must find another way of distinguishing an idea which *is* clear from an idea which *appears* clear. The rule of action applies here again perfectly.

To develop [the] meaning [of an idea], we have, therefore, simply to determine what habits it produces, for what a thing means is simply what habits it involves. ... there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice (5.400).

Hence the pragmatic maxim: “Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (5.402).

From now on, the method of putting an idea to a test, to a *public* test, to “know” “clearly and distinctly” what it means will be the rule in all fields of science from physics (from the experimental method of which the pragmatic maxim is the philosophical corollary) to linguistics.

Dewey, Mead, Bridgman, and Wittgenstein are among the most influent philosophers who followed the Peircean lead and advocated the pragmatic rule.

Let us ... follow the pragmatic rule, and in order to discover the meaning of the idea ask for its consequences. (John Dewey<sup>3</sup>)

The meaning of a chair is sitting down on it, the meaning of the hammer is to drive a nail. (George H. Mead<sup>4</sup>)

The true meaning of a term, is to be found by observing what a man does with it, not by what he says about it. (Percy W. Bridgman<sup>5</sup>)

If a sign is *useless*, it is meaningless. That is the point of Occam's maxim [and Peirce's]. (If everything behaves as if a sign had meaning, then it does have

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<sup>3</sup> *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 1920, enlarged ed., 1948: 163.

<sup>4</sup> *Mind, Self and Society*, 1934: 104.

<sup>5</sup> *The Logic of Modern Science*, 1927: 3.

meaning). (Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>6</sup>)The meaning of a word is its use in the language. (Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>7</sup>)

#### 4. A new logic for semiotics

One reason why Peirce stopped writing on his theory of signs was that he was not satisfied with the logic (Aristotelian and Kantian) he had at his disposal. As I have already pointed out, Peirce thought right from the beginning that three kinds of signs were necessary: similarities, indices, and symbols, but symbols were only generalized indices, and the theory did not differ from the classical theories of signs; its logic was a dualistic one: things on one side, ideas on the other.

From 1880 to the end of the century, Peirce worked on a new logic which was to become his "logic of relatives" in which up to three terms could be related. At the same time, he built a new propositional logic, including the Philonian function and a new logic of terms for which he invented, with O. Mitchell, the quantifiers.

With the new logical tools he had designed for himself, Peirce was ready at the end of the century to work at his new theory of signs which he called "semeiotic".

Why "semeiotic" or "semiotics" to use the modern translation of the term? I should like to conclude the present introduction by answering this question and another one: Why does Peirce say that semiotics is the "quasi-necessary, or formal, doctrine of signs" (2.227) ? In other words, what is semiotics? If it is true that Peirce says that semiotics is the "quasi-necessary, or formal, doctrine of signs", he does not give to "formal" the meaning we give to the word today, in spite of the fact that he was, as I have just said, a pioneer in formal logic. Here is what Peirce wrote in 1898:

After trying to solve the puzzle [of a larger system of conceptions than Kant's list of categories] in a direct speculative, a physical, a historical, and a psychological manner, I finally concluded the only way was to attack it as Kant has done from the side of formal logic (1.563).

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<sup>6</sup> *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 3.328.

<sup>7</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, § 43.

Of course, Kant's logic is formal like Aristotle's, but not in the sense of "algebraic logic" or "logistic". It is formal because Kant and Aristotle were concerned with the "forms" of reasoning.

Thus, is semiotics a theory of signs or a theory of reasoning ? My answer is that it is both, but firstly a theory of reasoning and secondly a theory of signs.

It is a theory of reasoning. Peirce says that semiotics is "the doctrine of the essential nature and fundamental varieties of possible semiosis" (5.488). Peirce borrowed the word from Philodemus whose theory was that a "semiosis" is a type of reasoning, an "inference from signs" which involves, as Peirce describes it, "a cooperation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs" (5.484).

But semiotics is also a theory of signs, because the three "subjects" of any semiosis can be formally analyzed as signs, be it only because a semiosis is an inferential process triggered off by a sign.

## **PART 2:**

### **SIGN AND SEMIOSIS**

#### **1. Sign: semiosis and representamen**

For Peirce, the word "sign" has two acceptations: sign-action and sign-object. He calls the first *semiosis*, the second *representamen*.

Semiosis is the action of the sign, the sign in action, in process. For there to be semiosis, an event A (the sign-object or representamen: e.g. the order given by an officer to his troops) must produce a second event B (the interpretant: the *signified* result of the sign-object or representamen) *as a means of* producing a third event C (the object as such: here, the execution by the soldiers of the order given by the officer — the execution or object being for the officer the *cause* of the sign-object or representamen (encoding) and for the soldiers its *effect* (decoding) (cf. 5.473).

The representamen is an "object serving to represent something to the mind" (*Century Dictionary*, 1887). Peirce borrowed the idea of the representamen as sign-object from Hamilton, to whom Peirce refers in the *Century Dictionary*. Hamilton wrote:

The Leibnitio-Wolfians ... distinguished three acts in the process of representative cognition: 1° the act of representing a (mediate) object to the mind; 2° the representation, or, more properly speaking, *representamen*, itself as an (immediate or vicarious) object exhibited to the mind; 3° the act by which the mind is conscious immediately of the representative object, and, through it, mediately of the remote object represented<sup>8</sup>.

Peirce himself explicitly makes the distinction in the context of representation where 'sign' is given as a synonym of 'representation' defined as 'semiosis' and opposed to 'representamen'. "I confine the word *representation* to the operation of a sign or its *relation* to the object for the interpreter of the representation. The concrete subject that represents I call a sign or representamen" (1.540). The sign, the concrete subject of the representation or representamen is the sign-object which must not be confused with the common idea of the sign defined as "anything which conveys any definite notion of an object in any way" (1.540).

This latter definition refers to semiosis which is the object of semiotic analysis. By virtue of this, the sign-action or semiosis is the point of departure of the analysis and the sign-object or representamen "whatever that analysis applies to" (1.540), i.e. the repertory of representamens. Consequently, the representamen of the semiosis is, like the latter, triadic: it comprises the sign-representamen, the object-representamen and the interpretant-representamen.

A Representamen can be considered from three formal points of view, namely, first, as the substance of the representation, or the *Vehicle* of the *Meaning*, which is common to the three representamens of the triad, second, as the quasi agent in the representation, that is as the *Natural Object*, and third as the quasi patient in the representation, or that modification in the representation makes its *Intelligence*, and this may be called the *Interpretant*. Thus, in looking at a map, the map itself is the *Vehicle*, the country represented is the *Natural Object*, and the idea excited in the mind is the *Interpretant* (Ms 717).

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<sup>8</sup> *The Works of Thomas Reid*, Edinburgh, 1863, 6th ed., Vol. 2, p. 877 note.

And in fact Peirce always defines the sign-object, the object, and the interpretant as representamens.

*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 to itself to the same Object" (2.274).*

*A REPRESENTAMEN is a subject of a triadic relation to a Second, called its OBJECT, for a Third, called its INTERPRETANT, this triadic relation being such that the REPRESENTAMEN determines its interpretant to stand in the same triadic relation to the same object for some interpretant (1.541).*

These two passages describe the process of sign-action or semiosis, set off by the presentation of the sign-object or representamen. "Representamens are of three kinds, *icons* (or *likenesses*), *indices*, and *symbols* (or general signs)" ("Logic (Exact)" in Baldwin's *Dictionary*, 1902). Thus "an *Icon* is a Representamen whose Representative Quality is a Firstness of it as a First. That is, a quality that it has *qua* thing renders it fit to be a representamen" (2.276).

A representamen, or sign, is anything which stands at once in a relation of correspondence to a second thing (not necessarily real), its object and to *another possible representamen*, its **interpretant**, which it determines to correspond with the same object" ("Logic (Exact)" in Baldwin's *Dictionary*, 1902).

Another consequence of the distinction between sign-action or semiosis and sign-object or representamen: every sign is a representamen (1.540), but

possibly there may be Representamens which are not Signs. Thus, if a sunflower, in turning towards the sun, becomes, by this very act, fully capable, without further condition, of reproducing a sunflower which turns in precisely corresponding ways toward the sun, and of doing so with the same reproductive power, the sunflower would become a Representamen of the sun (2.274).

In other words, "all signs convey notions to *human minds*; but I know no reason why every representamen should do so" (1.540), although it must be conceded that "*thought* is the chief, if not the only, mode of representation" (2.274). It will be accordingly be granted that one may "call a thing considered as having a signification, a representamen" (Ms 796), and that a representamen is a third:

A 'representamen', like a word, — indeed, most words are representamens, — is of a single thing, but is of the nature of a mental habit, it consists in the fact that something *would be* (Ms 695).

However the representamen can exist only as materialized in some singular thing, a replica.

## 2. The representamen and the object of the sign

### *Representamen and representative.*

The representamen is not the sensory image, the sensorial reproduction of the object which it represents (although it may be). It stands for something, just as an ambassador stands for his country, represents it in a foreign country; just as a deputy represents his electors in an assembly (H193).

### *Semiosis and representative.*

The simile must not lead us to confuse semiosis or sign-action with representamen or sign-object. The representamen represents its object, and the action of the sign as such (i.e. as representamen) does not affect the object represented. Which is not the case of "a legislative representative" who "is, on the contrary, expected in his functions to improve the condition of his constituents". (H193)

This does not mean that the sign-action does not affect the world in which it functions. On the contrary, semiosis which can come into existence only by means of a sign-object, takes place in the world of things: it is a process immanent to the things of which signs are a part, thought-signs and man-signs — and which it informs and trans-forms (principle of pragmatism). The representamen may indeed be considered "as the quasi-agent in the representation" (in other words, the sign-action or semiosis) which, as far as the representation conforms to it, constitutes its truth (Ms 717), — a conformity which is not given once and for all, but is the "ideal limit" (5.565) which semiosis "is fated" to attain (407) Correctly speaking, semiosis starts because a representamen is opaque, but, when the representamen is transparent, semiosis becomes a blind process.

*The object in semiosis and the object outside semiosis.*

The representamen is the quasi-agent of the natural object in sign-action or semiosis (Ms 717). We must distinguish between the natural object outside semiosis which Peirce calls the dynamical or mediate object, and the immediate object in semiosis and of which the representamen is the quasi-agent (H 83) The representamen refers immediately to the immediate object and mediately to the natural object. But this distinction is a methodological or functional one, or, correctly speaking, a semiotic one.

Object and representamen.

Every sign-representamen has an object which it represents. Every sign has a single object, but this object may be a single set or continuum of objects (5.448). "In order that anything should be a Sign it must 'represent,' as we say, something else, called its *Object*, although the condition that a Sign must be other than its Object is perhaps arbitrary, since, if we insist upon it, we must at least make an exception in the case of a sign which is part of a sign" (2.230). But, even in this case, the one becomes the object of the other, for "on the map of an island laid down upon the soil of that island, there must, under all ordinary circumstances, be some position, some point, marked or not, that represents *qua* place on the map, the very same point *qua* place on the island" (2 . 230) .

Every object is not represented by a sign-representamen. The whole universe "is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs" (5.448). The universe of firstness being the universe of possibles, only those objects that come "before thought and the mind in any usual sense" are represented by signs, whether they be "perceptible, imaginable and even unimaginable" (2 . 230) .

Only objects already known in the universe of secondness, that of existence, objects known by collateral acquaintance (H72) can signify. "The Sign can only represent the Object and tell about it. It cannot furnish acquaintance with or recognition of that Object" (2.231). To the reader who might question this idea, Peirce gives an answer which explicits its meaning:

If there be anything which conveys information and yet has absolutely no relation nor reference to anything with which the person to whom it conveys the information has, when he comprehends that information, the slightest

acquaintance, direct or indirect - and a very strange sort of information that would be - the vehicle of that sort of information is not, in this volume, called a Sign" (2.231).

Elsewhere, Peirce explicits this still further:

A person who says Napoleon was a lethargic creature has evidently his mind determined by Napoleon. For otherwise he could not attend to him at all. But ... the person who interprets that sentence (or any other Sign whatsoever) must be determined by the Object of it through collateral observation quite independently of the action of the Sign. Otherwise he will not be determined to thought of that object.. If he never heard of Napoleon before, the sentence will mean no more to him than that some person or thing to which the name "Napoleon" has been attached was a lethargic creature. For Napoleon cannot determine his mind unless the word in the sentence calls his attention to the right man and that can only be if, independently, (a) habit has been established by him by which that word calls up a variety of attributes of Napoleon the man. (8.178)

Much the same thing is true of every sign. In the sentence quoted, Napoleon is the immediate object of a semiosis, an object known in other respects outside this semiosis as a "natural object" possessing many other attributes than lethargy. And lethargy is also an immediate object that "collateral experience had taught its interpreter" is a "natural object" whose attribution is not limited to Napoleon (8.178).

Consequently, an object may determine "a lying or erroneous sign" and an object may be "brought into existence by the sign": "The object of 'Napoleon' is the Universe of Existence so far as it is determined by the fact of Napoleon being a member of it," just as "the Object of the sentence 'Hamlet was insane' is the Universe of Shakespeare's Creation so far as it is determined by Hamlet being a part of it" (8.178).

All the objects of the Universe of Thirdness, which is that of mediating thought, are by definition represented by signs: "All thought ... must necessarily be in signs" (5.251).

### 3. From the sign to the object

In a letter to Lady Welby of December 14th, 1908, Peirce writes:

I do not make any contrast between Subject and Object, far less talk about "subjective and objective" in any of the varieties of the German senses, which I think have led to a lot of bad philosophy, but I use "subject" as the correlative of "predicate", and speak only of the "subjects" of those signs which have a part which separately indicates what the object of the sign is. A subject of such a sign is that kind of object of the sign which is so separately indicated (H 69).

A first and fundamental clarification is given here: "object" is not opposed to "subject". We are not in a dualistic universe where the "subject" — a human being — refers a "subjective" sign to an "object" — the "objective" world - outside itself.

"Object" says nothing more than the Latin word *objectum*. The object is "thrown" (*jectum*) "in front of" (*ob*). This calls forth two interrogative remarks: 1. Could not "objectum" (what is thrown in front of) be rather the definition of the 'object'? 2. Does it not imply that there is an obstacle, and consequently that the sign — since it is the sign which is in question here — should not normally encounter an obstacle, not have an object? But the sign has an object. Peirce writes:

I use the term "object" in the sense in which *objectum* was first made a substantive early in the XIIIth century; and when I use the word without adding "of" what I am speaking of the object, I mean anything that comes before thought or the mind in any usual sense (H 69).

Our preceding remarks must therefore be more precisely formulated. On the one hand, there is an object because there is a thought. On the other hand, it is when the object constitutes an obstacle for the thought that the thought gives itself a sign, not in order to know the object, but to try to get round the obstacle, or rather, to set up a screen in front of it. Which is why the sign is not transparent, but opaque. If the sign were transparent, the thought would not have to *designate* the object; it would not have to propose a sign to represent it. Now Peirce says explicitly: "The sign can only represent the Object and tell about it. It cannot furnish acquaintance with or recognition of that Object" (2.231).

These preliminary remarks lead us to ask under which conditions one can say something about the object. First, there is an "object" only for a thought which "sees" it on the sole condition that it represents in its own right this object in a sign. Is idealism the only other solution? Yes, unless we distinguish between an object in the sign and an object outside the sign. Which is what Peirce does: "It is usual and proper to distinguish between two Objects of a Sign, the Mediate without, and the Immediate within the Sign" (H 83). He usually calls the first "dynamical". Elsewhere he refines this distinction:

We have to distinguish the Immediate Object which is the Object as the Sign itself represents it, and whose being is thus dependent upon the Representation of it in the Sign, from the Dynamical Object, which is the Reality which by some means contrives to determine the Sign to its Representation (4.536).

As it is clear that it is either the thought or the mind which "determines" the sign to represent the object, the dynamical object appears as the projection out of the sign of the immediate object which is the only one produced by thought, unless thought be the Thought which created the Universe.

If Peirce thus appears to define the sign by this distinction between object in the sign and the object outside the sign, he is in fact only displacing the difficulties: the "outside" is in itself a problem if one rejects dualism. We shall examine this question later on. But the real difficulty resides in the nature of the sign itself as subordinate to thought. What is a sign? What is thought?

I do not intend to deal thoroughly with these questions here, but they cannot be eluded if one wishes to understand what constitutes the object so defined. Despite Peirce's terminological laxity, which must, paradoxically, be condemned in the name of the strict terminological ethics which he himself defended, it is possible, and even relatively easy, to answer these questions.

What is a sign? Taking into account only the texts quoted above, the written, gestural, or spoken sign, which is a determinable physical token, is usually confused with the "mental" sign in thought. In order to avoid this confusion, Peirce proposes to substitute two other terms, without always respecting his own rule of substitution: the sign, representing (by means of thought) the object, is called the "representamen";

the sign, as an act of attribution of an (immediate) object to a sign-representamen, is called sign-action, or usually semiosis or more rarely "semeiosis" (5.473). Semiosis is thus the production and attribution by a thought of the sign-interpretant, or more simply interpretant, of a sign-representamen to an immediate object, i.e. the sort of object that the thought takes for the object, given the action or semiosis it has accomplished. What is thought? It is what it does: a semiosis, thought in action, obviously. Thought in itself, if it can be distinguished from its actions, is the possibility of drawing up plans of action: a mind or quasi-mind, as Peirce termed it. But that is another story.

#### 4. The object in the sign.

At this point we can say that the object produced by the interpretant is in the semiosis or sign-action. The immediate object is thus closely connected with and, to be exact, is determined by, the nature of the interpretant. Peirce used the word "interpretant" with various meanings. I shall distinguish three types of meanings of the word. A formal one and two others I shall call temporal: one which is more social and public and the other one which is more individual and private, or, let us say "subjective", not by opposition to "objective", but to "social". It is not at all sure that the latter two are the formal interpretant incarnate, nor that the "subjective" interpretant is the same as the "social" interpretant seen from the point of view of the subject. I shall endeavour to be as clear as possible concerning the type of interpretants I am discussing.

1. Formally speaking, the interpretant is another sign or representamen that is occasioned but not "determined", correctly speaking (although Peirce does sometimes use the word) by the representamen which sets off the semiosis. A sign (or representamen) is "anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which it itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*" (2.303). In this formal context, the word "determine" obviously cannot have the same meaning as in a spatiotemporal context which is the scene of action for the interpretants which I shall now examine.

2. This *regressus ad infinitum* makes any definite grasp of the object theoretically impossible. But the sign as an act, the sign-action, a semiosis, is not formal and intemporal. It is *in time*. It starts, goes on and stops. The play of signs and objects is thus possible, providing the interpretant is defined, not formally, but in space and time. Whence the well-known Peircean trichotomy of the interpretant: immediate, dynamical, and final. Of course, there are not three interpretants, but only one interpretant which assumes different rôles distinguished by the words: immediate, dynamical and final. This distinction of rôles is itself no more than a convenient means of expression, and not a distinction between rôles that could be assumed independently from one another.

The immediate interpretant could be called the sign of interpretability. It is "familiarity with a sign and readiness in using it or interpreting it" (8.185).

The dynamical interpretant is interpretation in action *hic et nunc*. It is the "actual effect" of the sign-representamen on the *interpreter* (8.314). Here we must insist on the terms used by Peirce. "Actual effect" must be understood as the expression is used in physics: the result produced under certain conditions obtained at the moment at which it is produced. "Interpreter" is not a "sop to Cerberus" thrown to the reader in order to appease his or her incomprehension of the real nature of the interpretant. It means here the interpreter in possession of the immediate interpretants he or she has acquired and with which he or she is familiar to the point of interpreting certain signs in certain ways in a given situation.

The final interpretant I shall call "interpretantation". It is not a given "final interpretant", no more than that the immediate interpretant is a given "immediate interpretant". The latter is a disposition, the former a set of rules for interpreting which have become the interpreter's habits of interpreting signs as representamens.

3. This is so true that Peirce sometimes insists on a trichotomy which is the private (conscious) obverse of the trichotomy I have just described and which is, so to speak, its public (institutional) reverse. This trichotomy has three types of interpretants, respectively emotional, energetic, and logical. The emotional interpretant is "a feeling produced by it (the sign) ... Thus the performance of a piece of concerted music ... conveys, and is intended to convey, the composer's musical ideas; but these usually consist merely in a series of feelings" (5.475). The energetic interpretant "will always involve an effort ... The effort may be a muscular one ... but it is

much more usually an exertion upon the inner world, a mental effort" (5.475). But, Peirce specifies, "it never can be the meaning of an intellectual concept, since it is a single act [while] such a concept is of a general nature" (5.475). May this meaning be the distinctive feature of the logical interpretant? May the latter be this "general effect"? Peirce wonders. It may well be a "thought, that is to say, a mental sign", but then "it must have itself a logical interpretant; so that it cannot be the *ultimate* logical interpretant of the concept". In consequence, "the only mental effect that can be produced and that is not a sign but is of a general application is a *habit-change*; meaning by habit-change a modification of a person's tendencies toward action, resulting from previous experiences or from previous exertions of his will or acts, or from a complexus of both kinds of cause" (5.476).

Are these trichotomies homologous? Or does one of them overlap the other? It is certain, in any case, that the final logical interpretant includes both the logical and the final interpretants, since, according to Peirce, the final logical interpretant which concludes a semiosis is not a sign-representamen but a habit of acting in a certain way (5.491). As to the others, if they overlap — which they do — it is not surprising, being as they are indecomposable aspects of one formally defined sign-interpretant.

All these precautionary considerations are not unnecessary and are not leading us away from the subject. On the one hand, they situate rigorously the interpretant in its relation to the object. On the other hand, they shed light on the nature of the immediate object, whose unity and diversity in spatiotemporal contexts, which are by definition in continual transaction and reconstruction, they both determine and justify.

## 5. From the immediate object to the dynamical object.

The question which may now be legitimately asked is the following: since the play of interpretants in a given society at a given moment can be reduced to a geo-social habit which is the final logical interpretant of which Peirce says that 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), how can we distinguish the dynamical object outside the sign from the immediate object in the sign?

Admittedly, Peirce was alluding to a scientific truth "fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate" (5.407), and which would transcend the geo-social, and, a *fortiori*, the geo-political. However, he was here displaying a utopian attitude which would be thought very *naïve* today — when we know how easily ultimate truths can force themselves upon the community of scientific investigators as well as on the community of nations. But fortunately, Peirce foresaw "habit-changes" that investigation cannot fail, in the long run, to produce, in order to negotiate the obstacles along the path towards truth, which we are now convinced can never be ultimate.

Is it investigation as method, i.e. semiosis, or the dynamical object which denies the immediate object its claim to be an ultimate one?

Let us first look back to semiosis. The sign-representamen (of an object) "determines" a sign-interpretant to designate its object (the object of the sign-representamen). This designation is rarely pure designation : it spans a long process from the modification of a previously designated object to the production of a new object. But Peirce does specify, as we have already noted, that the representamen "can only represent the Object and tell about it. It cannot furnish acquaintance with or recognition of that Object ... namely, that with which it presupposes an acquaintance in order to convey some further information concerning it" (2.231). Where does this previous knowledge come from and what is the object concerned ?

By knowledge, Peirce means here what William James, following Grote, called "knowledge-by-acquaintance" and not "knowledge-about". The latter, which is indirect, is the knowledge by sign-representamens in the continuous process of sign-action or semiosis. And the object known in the latter case is the immediate object.

"Knowledge-by-acquaintance" thus concerns another kind of object: the dynamical object. How can it be known ? Peirce replies: by "collateral experience" (8.514) which is precisely a "collateral acquaintance" (8.144). This experience gives us knowledge of the existence of the dynamical object, but not of its nature in itself, its substantial nature. In any case, Peirce remarks, "it must be borne in mind" that the "substantive ... is not an indispensable part of speech" (8.184), whether it be grammatical or metaphysical.

If neither knowledge-by-acquaintance nor knowledge-about is knowledge correctly speaking, direct knowledge of the dynamical object — their object being the immediate object — can we dispense with the dynamical object? Peirce does not think so, because the immediate object is the object “cognized in the Sign and therefore an Idea” (8.183). We must, therefore, unless we fall back into idealism, admit the *existence* of an “external” object: the dynamical object which is “as it is regardless of any particular aspect of it, the Object in such relations as unlimited and final study would show it to be” (8.183). What is known is thus the relations of an *existing* object independent of ourselves in the course of the semioses in which we are, it and ourselves, engaged.

The ultimate object is consequently neither the dynamical object nor the immediate object. It is that unique object cloaked by methodologically necessary mental distinctions, which dualistic metaphysics consigns to “external” reality. As the distinction between the dynamical object and the immediate object is also methodological, a distinction of reason, it does not require an external reality. External to what, in any case, if one rejects idealism? There is only one continuous reality in which each of the two objects plays a particular part, according to how it is defined in terms of one or the other of the categories of being, the dynamical object belonging essentially to secondness, the immediate object to firstness and thirdness. This is confirmed by Peirce in the following passage, in which we have designated in square brackets the corresponding categories.

[T]he Dynamical Object ... is the Object that Dynamical Science (or what at this day would be called “Objective Science”) can investigate. Take, for example, the sentence “the Sun is blue”. Its Objects are “the Sun” and “blueness”. If by “blueness” be meant the Immediate Object, which is the quality of the sensation, it can only be known by Feeling [firstness]. But if it means that “Real”, existential condition, which causes the emitted light to have short mean wavelength ... the proposition is true. So the “Sun” may mean the occasion [secondness] of sundry sensations [firstness] and so is the Immediate Object, or it may mean our usual interpretation of such sensations in terms of place, of mass, etc. [thirdness] when it is the Dynamical Object. It is true of both Immediate Object and Dynamical Object that acquaintance cannot be given by a Picture or a Description, nor by any other sign which has the Sun for its Object. If a person points to it and says, See there! *That* is what we call the “Sun”, the Sun is *not* the Object of that sign. It is the *Sign* of the sun, the *word* “sun” that his declaration is about; and that *word* we must become acquainted with by collateral experience (8.183).

## 6. From the dynamical object to the representamen

To complete the cycle, we must examine the relation between the representamen and the dynamical object. This will be a semiotic cycle, formal and descriptive, for semiosis never comes back to the same point. It is not a "vicious circle", as Lady Welby said, but a "virtuous spiral". When Peirce says that

the Dynamoid Object determines the Immediate Object  
which determines the Sign itself,  
which determines the Destinate Interpretant,  
which determines the Effective Interpretant,  
which determines the Explicit Interpretant (Hardwick 84),

he is alluding to the circle. The spiral follows another path.

We are no longer at the beginning of time; we were born into a world which was already constituted, a world, it is true, and fortunately so, which is being continually reconstructed. Here, we do not start from the dynamical object. We start from signs. Not formal sign-representamens, but signs already constituted with their final logical interpretants and their objects. Our distinctions shed light on the processes of their constitution and reveal their functions. They do not describe states of things.

But these distinctions are technically necessary. The representamen is really what sets the process in motion. However, it also is constituted by and for a given society at a given moment. And it appears as if "determined" by the dynamical object. In fact, matters are more complex, as we have seen. If one has a weakness for diagrams, the semiotic triangle

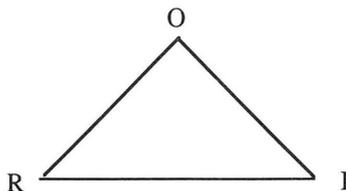


Fig. 1: The semiotic triangle

can be represented by a point where R, I and O merge into one : a representamen determines an interpretant to designate an object of which the representamen is the complete and finished expression, closed and fixed in a society of robots such as described by Aldous Huxley in *This Brave New World*. It is a geographical map on a world-scale: it is the world ... and supererogatory. At best, in a closed and fixed world where man is not yet a robot, a programmed computer, man can think "his" world. In this case, there would be two points in relation — a homothetic relation, of course — a fixed point (O-R together): the world, corresponding to each and every point of another point (R-I together): thought. It is in this way that we can understand the dualism of Western philosophy from Plato to Descartes.

If, in an open world, we are not satisfied with the formal triangle which is an analytical and didactic abstraction, it must be developed in spirals, but with stops when the sign-interpretant becomes a habit, fortunately always liable to be broken, as Peirce reminds us. Let us stay put at one of these stops, — and this will be the conclusion of the present article.

Let us suppose that this stop interrupts our progression — the process of a given semiosis — in front of a painting. We would have the following diagram.

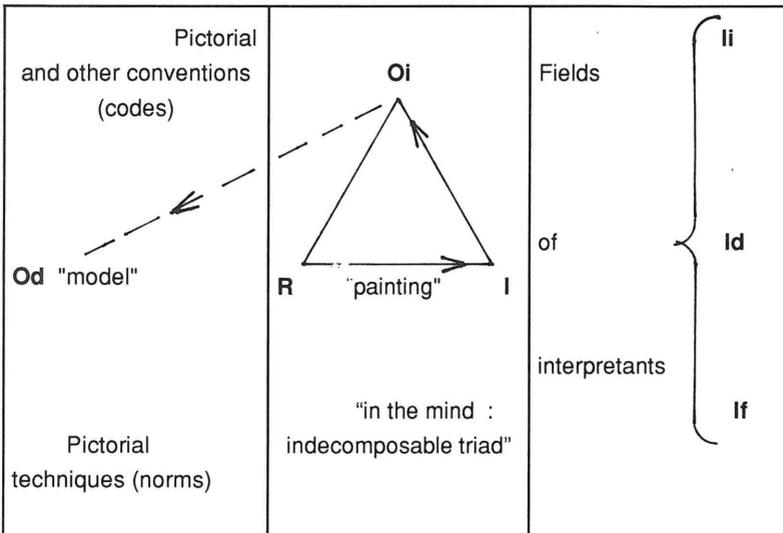


Table 3 : A case of semiosis

The painting (R) calls forth an interpretant (I) which is part of the fields of interpretants on three levels: that of the immediate interpretant (Ii) which is the interpretability of the painting ; that of the final interpretant which is the acquired habit of interpreting a painting according to the rules proper to a given group in a given society, and even to one member of this society; and that of the dynamical interpretant (Id) which is the interpretation of this painting at this moment in such an art-gallery by a given visitor. The interpretant, always multiple, of course, will refer to an immediate object (Oi) in the mind of the viewer. But the latter will not think for one second that there is no painting in front of him. He will think spontaneously that the representamen (R) is in his "mind" and it is also there at the same time in front of him, that what he is looking at is a dynamical object (Od). However the analysis does not stop here, because the representamen (R) — this painting : image (Oi) and thing (Od) — has not been created *ex nihilo*. The subject of the painting, whatever it may be, is with and by this painting rooted in a world we can call dynamical, whose constituents correspond very exactly to the levels of interpretants already described, the latter being "instantiated" in the manner in which a painter, with his pictorial and other conventions (codes) and the techniques (norms) at his disposal (all this being symbolically represented in the diagram by the palette), has revealed them to the eye.

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## Inhalt

Geburtstagsgruß für Hans Brög		3
Gérard Deledalle	Introduction to Peirce's semeiotic	5
Wojciech H. Kalaga	Subjectivity and Interpretation	33
Thomas Gil	Ernst Cassirers kultursemiotische Theorie der symbolischen Formen	67
Hans Brög	Dark future - a prognosis	77
Uwe Wirth	Die zeitliche Dimension beim abduktiven Schließen	93
Kurd Alsleben	Eine künstlertheoretische Frage an geneigte Semiotiker/Innen	101
Berichtigung zum Aufsatz von J. Klein in H. 77/78		104
Elisabeth Walther	Bericht über die Reise nach Taiwan und China	105
Inhalt des 20. Jahrgangs		111