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**The Dialogic Nature of Signs**

“Semiotics Institute on Line”

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**Dialogue and Sign**

**The sign as something which calls for a certain response,  
according to another something, i. e. the interpretant**

Dialogism is not a prerogative of discourse. Not only verbal signs, but any situation or *semiosis* is a relational process which presents different degrees of dialogism. The relationship between *sign* and *interpretant* is dialogic and is so at different degrees.

Sign is a factor in a process that can either be dyadic (signifier/signified) according to Saussure (*signifiant/signifié*) and his followers, or triadic (sign or *representamen/object/interpretant*) according to Peirce. From the perspective of Peircean semiotics, by contrast with Saussure’s *semiology*, anything may become a sign if it is interpreted by an interpretant as something which stands for another something under some respect, its object, by which that sign is mediately determined given that it is capable of determining an interpretant.

‘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 Interpretant, to assume the same triadic relation to its Object in which it stands itself to the same Object’ (Peirce, *CP* 2.274). Therefore, a sign stands for something, its object, by which it is ‘mediately determined’ (Peirce, *CP* 8.343), ‘not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea’ (Peirce, *CP* 2.228).

However, a sign can only do this if it determines the interpretant that is ‘mediately determined by that object’ (Peirce, *CP* 8.343). ‘A sign mediates between the *interpretant* sign and its object’ insofar as the first is determined by its object under a certain respect or idea, or ground, and determines the interpretant ‘in such a way as to bring the interpretant into a relation to the object, corresponding to its own relation to the object’ (Peirce, *CP* 8.332).

The interpretant of a sign is another sign, which the previous sign creates in the interpreter. The interpretant sign is ‘an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign’ (Peirce, *CP* 2.228). Therefore the interpretant sign *cannot be identical* to the interpreted sign, it cannot be a repetition, exactly because it is *mediated*, interpretive and as such it is always new. As to the previous sign, the interpretant is a *response* and as such it inaugurates a new sign process, a new semiosis. In this sense it is a more *developed sign*. By being a sign the interpretant determines *another* sign that acts, in turn, as an interpretant: therefore, the interpretant opens to a new semiosis, it develops the sign process, it is a new sign occurrence.

Indeed, each time there is a sign occurrence, including the ‘First Sign,’ there is a ‘Third,’ something mediated, a response, an interpretive novelty, an interpretant. Consequently, a sign is an interpretant by constitution. The fact that the interpretant (Third) is in turn a sign (First), and that the sign (First) is in turn an interpretant (already a Third) places the sign in an open network of interpretants: this is the Peircean principle of infinite semiosis or of the endlessness series of interpretants (see Peirce, *CP* 1.339).

Therefore, the meaning of a sign is a *response*, an interpretant that calls for another response, another interpretant. This implies *the dialogic nature of sign and semiosis*. A sign has its meaning in another sign that responds to it and is, in turn, a sign if there is another sign to interpret it and to respond to it, and so forth, it is a process ad infinitum.

Let us resume. *Interpretant* is a concept introduced in the framework of C. S. Peirce’s semiotics.

According to Peirce, semiosis, as we have said, is a triadic process whose components include sign (or representamen), object and interpretant.

Something becomes a sign that stands for something other, its object under some respect, or idea, or ground, because it is interpreted by another sign, the interpretant, in an open chain of interpretants (*infinite semiosis*).

The meaning of a sign is a *response* by another sign, the interpretant, that calls for *another response*, another interpretant.

Something presses for a response and becomes a *sign*, that is, something has meaning, if there is another something which interprets it and therefore plays the part of response, that is, of interpretant; this interpretant, in turn, means something and becomes a sign, if interpreted as something which calls for *another response*, another interpretant.

Therefore a sign is a dialogue between an interpreted and interpretant, and semiosis is an open dialogue among various interpreted and interpretant signs.