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The Dialogic Nature of Signs

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4.

Dialogue and Sign

The sign is firstly an interpretant, that is, a response

Now let's try to simplify Peirce's terminology, but without over-simplifying.

In our terminology, the fundamental terms that constitute a sign include the *interpreted*, and the *interpretant*, in a relationship where the interpretant makes the interpreted possible. So that a sign can subsist, there must be an interpreted sign and an interpretant sign, in other words, an object that acts as the interpreted of an interpretant. In Peirce's view the minimal relationship allowing for something to act as a sign is triadic and involves:

- 1) *something objective* (not necessarily a physical object), i. e. preexistent, autonomous, in this sense “material” with respect to interpretation (the Object in Peirce's terminology);
- 2) the *interpreted*, that is, this very object insofar as it ‘has meaning’ (the Sign in Peirce's terminology);
- 3) the *interpretant* by virtue of which the object receives a given meaning. Reduced to its minimal terms, the sign presents these three faces.

When we speak of the ‘interpreted-interpretant’ relation, our reference is to a (minimal and abstract) *triadic* relation. The interpreted implies the object of interpretation, so this expression must always be understood as a relation among ‘object-interpreted-interpretant’.

The interpreted becomes a *sign component* because it receives an interpretation, but in turn, the interpretant is also a sign component with the potential to engender a new sign: therefore, where there is a sign, there are immediately two, but given that the interpretant can engender a new sign, there are immediately three, and so forth, as described by the Peircean concept of ‘infinite semiosis’ or unending chain of deferrals from one interpretant to another.

According to Sebeok (1994: 10-14), both the Object (O) and the Interpretant (I) are Signs. Consequently, we may rewrite O as S_{O_n} and I as S_{I_n} so that both the first distinction and the second are resolved in two sorts of signs (see 1994: 12-13).

In our opinion – and in accordance with Peirce who reformulated the classic notion of *substitution* in the medieval expression *aliquid stat pro aliquo* in terms of *interpretation* – *the sign is firstly an interpretant* (see Pettrilli 1998: I.1). In fact, the Peircean terms of the sign include what may be called the *interpreted* sign on the side of the object, and the *interpretant* sign in a relation where the interpretant is what makes the interpreted possible.

To analyze the sign starting from the object of interpretation – the interpreted – means to start from a secondary level. In other words, to start from the object-interpreted means to start from a point in the chain of deferrals, or semiotic chain, which cannot be considered as the very point of departure. Nor can the interpreted be privileged by way of abstraction at a theoretical level to explain the workings of sign processes.

For example, a spot on the skin is a sign insofar as it may be interpreted as a symptom of sickness of the liver: this is already a secondary level in the interpretive process. At a primary level, retrospectively, the skin disorder is an interpretation enacted by the organism itself in relation to an anomaly which is disturbing it and to which it responds. The skin disorder is already in itself an interpretant response.

To say that the sign is firstly an interpretant means to say that *the sign is firstly a response*. We could also say that the sign is a reaction: but only on the condition that by ‘reaction’ we mean ‘interpretation’ (similarly to Morris’s behaviourism, but differently from the mechanistic approach).

The expression ‘*solicitation-response*’ or ‘*question-answer*’ (Italian: ‘*botta e risposta*’) is preferable to ‘stimulus-reaction’ in order to avoid superficial associations with the approaches they respectively recall. Even a ‘direct’ response to a stimulus, or better to a solicitation, is never direct but ‘mediated’ by an interpretation. Unless it is a ‘reflex action,’ the formulation of a

response means to identify the solicitation, to situate it in a context, and to relate it to given behavioural parameters (whether a question of simple types of behaviour, e.g., the prey-predator model, or more complex behaviours connected with cultural values, as in the human world).

The sign is firstly an interpretant, a *response* through which something else is considered as a sign and becomes its interpreted, on the one hand, and which is potentially able to engender an infinite chain of signs, on the other.

Consequently, the ‘ambiguity’ of the concept of semiosis discussed in the entry ‘Semiosis’ in *Encyclopedia of Semiotics*, edited by Paul Bouissac (1998), does not concern the term but the phenomenon of semiosis itself. In fact, semiosis is at once a process and a relation, activity and passivity, an action *of* sign or an action *on* sign, including sign solicitations and responses, interpreteds and interpretants. A sign presents various degrees of plurivocality and univocality, namely, various degrees of dialogism.

Therefore a signal may be defined as a relatively univocal sign, or, better, as a sign at low degrees of plurivocality.

Let us examine the difference between *sign* and *signal*, or, better, between sign at high level of *semioticity* or *signness* or, as we may now say, of *dialogism*.

In our terminology, within the triadic relation of semiosis, Peirce’s ‘First Sign’ (Representamen), which is the object that receives meaning, is the *interpreted*, while that which confers meaning is the *interpretant*. There are two main types of interpretant:

- a) *Interpretant of identification*, which is connected to *signal*, code and sign system; this kind of interpretant allows for recognition of the sign, that is, identification of something as significant, as meaningful;
- b) *Interpretant of answering comprehension* which, instead, is the specific interpretant of the sign, that is, what interprets the sense or actual meaning of a sign.

This second type of interpretant does not limit itself to identifying the interpreted, but rather expresses its properly *pragmatic meaning*, by installing with the interpreted a relationship of involvement and participation; in fact it responds to the interpreted and takes a stand towards it.

This bifocal conception of the interpretant is connected with Peirce’s semiotics, which is inseparable from his pragmatism. In a letter of 1904 to Victoria Welby (on the correspondence between Peirce and Welby, see Hardwick 1977), Peirce wrote that if a sign is understood in a

very broad sense, its interpretant is not necessarily a sign, since it might be an action or experience, or even just a feeling (see *CP* 8.332). In truth, as a signifying response which renders something significant and, therefore, in turn becomes a sign, the interpretant is a sign occurrence, a semiotic act, even in the case of an action, experience or feeling. The fact is that in this case we are dealing with an ‘interpretant of answering comprehension,’ and therefore with a sign.

Therefore the original modality of being a sign is otherness and dialogue. By contrast with univocality, reiteration, identity which characterize signals, dialogue and otherness are the original, constitutive modality of that which emerges as a sign in the proper sense. In other words, the sign subsists and is characterized as a sign insofar as it is a response and in relation to that which is other from itself. In fact, the sign is differentiated both from the object acting as a referent and from another sign acting as interpretant, without which it could not be a sign.

More exactly, the meaning of a signal is the class which contains that signal and its interpretants in relations of mere substitution (the red of a traffic light has a single meaning, is a signal, i.e., its meaning is the class of meanings that limit themselves to substituting the colour red: “Stop” in the graphic or phonic form, a policeman with outstretched arms, etc.).

Signs too contain the factor of signality and its correlate, self-identity, but they are not accounted for as signs in terms of such factors alone. To comprehend a sign is not to merely recognize the stable elements constantly repeating themselves. Signs are characterized by their semantic and pragmatic flexibility which makes them continually available to new and different contexts. Signality and self-identity are overcome by the characteristic features of signs: changeability, ambivalence and multi-voicedness:

In the speaker’s native language, i.e., for the linguistic consciousness of a member of a particular language community, signal recognition is certainly dialectically effaced. In the process of mastering a foreign language, signality and recognition still make themselves felt, so to speak, and still remain to be surmounted, the language not yet fully having become language. *The ideal of mastering a language is absorption of signality by pure semioticity and of recognition by pure understanding.* (Bakhtin -Voloshinov 1929; Eng. trans. 69)

In this sense the sign is a dialectic unit of self-identity and otherness. The actual sense of a sign consists in something more which is added to those elements that permit its identification. It is made of those semantico-pragmatical aspects that in a certain sense are unique, are peculiar to

it and indissolubly connected to the situational context of the semiosis in course. Bakhtin (Bakhtin-Voloshinov 1929) insists on the dialectic relation between these two aspects of the sign indicated with the terms “meaning” (all that which is reproducible and stable in the sign and is subject to a process of identification) and “theme” (the new aspects of the sign requiring active comprehension, a response, a viewpoint and are connected to the specific situation in which semiosis occurs). With reference to the verbal sign in particular and considering the dialectic relation between “theme” and “meaning”, observes Bakhtin:

[...] it is even impossible to convey the meaning of a particular word (say, in the course of teaching another person a foreign language) without having made it an element of theme, i.e., without having constructed an ‘example’ utterance. On the other hand, a theme must base itself on some kind of fixity of meaning; otherwise it loses its connection with what came before and what comes after - i.e., it altogether loses its significance. (*ibid.*: 100)

The distinction between “meaning” and “theme” finds correspondence in Peirce’s subdivision of the interpretant into immediate and dynamical interpretant. The immediate interpretant is fixed by use and tradition, it is given by the correct deciphering of the sign, by its recognition, “and is ordinarily called the meaning of the sign” (Peirce, *CP* 4. 536). The dynamical interpretant “is the *actual effect* which the Sign, as a Sign, *really determines*” (*ibid.*, italics my own). Considering the relation to both the dynamical interpretant and dynamical object, that is, to “the Reality which by some means contrives to determine the Sign in its Representation” (*ibid.*), the sign is never something repetitive in Peirce’s conception either. Each time it appears it takes its place in a new semiosical act.

The Peircean definition of semiosis is based on the notion of *interpretant* conceived – in our terminology – as *interpretant of answering comprehension*. As stated, the interpretant mediates between *solicitation (interpretandum)* and *response*. In Peirce’s view such mediation distinguishes semiosis from mere dynamical action — ‘or action of brute force’ — which takes place between the terms forming a pair; on the contrary, semiosis results from a triadic relation: it ‘is an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant’ and it is not ‘in any way resolvable into action between pairs’. The special relation existing between sign (interpreted) and interpretant, as conceived by Peirce, is a *dialogic* relation. Peirce highlighted *the dialogic nature of sign and semiosis*.

Dialogue does not start with signaling behaviour from a sender who wants to communicate something about an object. The whole semiotic process is dialogic. ‘Dialogic’ may be understood as *dia-logic*. The *logic* of semiosis as a whole is *dia-logic*. The interpretant as such is ‘a disposition to respond,’ an expression that does not only describe the dialogic interaction between a sender and receiver, but also the dialogic relationship between interpretant and interpreted.

Such connection between dialogue and semiosis makes the two terms coincide, not only in the sense that *dialogue is semiosis* but also in the sense that *semiosis is dialogue* — even if the latter is an aspect which would usually seem to escape. Dialogue subsists not only in

(1) semiosis of *communication* where the interpreted itself is already an interpretant response, *therefore an interpretation*, before being made a sign by the interpretant; dialogue also subsists in

(2) semiosis of *symptomization* where the interpreted is an interpretant response (symptom) which does not arise to the end of being *interpreted as a sign*; and in

(3) *semiosis of signification*, where an inanimate environment, object, acts, or process, that is, a ‘quasi-emitter,’ only becomes a sign because it is interpreted by the interpretant that is a response.

The dialogic relation between sign and interpretant has semiotic consequences from the perspective of the typology of signs, and logical consequences from the perspective of the typology of inference and argument. In light of Peirce’s sign typology whether we have an *icon*, *index* or *symbol* depends on the type of dialogic relation between sign and interpretant. Therefore, given that the relation between premises and conclusion is also conceived in terms of the relation between sign and interpretant, the Peircean triad that distinguishes among *abduction*, *induction*, *deduction* also depends on the sign-interpretant relationship understood as a dialogic relation. This topic will be examined in the next lesson.