

Lesson 6

Meaning, Significance and Values II

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1. Meaning and semiosis; 2. Meaning and interpretant; 3. Meaning and value; 4. Meaning and the pragmatic dimension; 5. Meaning and referent; 6. Meaning and sense; 7. Meaning and responsive understanding; 8. Meaning in the sign and in the signal; 9. Initial meanings and additional meanings; 10. Meaning and univocality; 11. Meaning and vagueness

1. Meaning and semiosis

As we have observed in the previous lesson semiosis is the process in which something carries out the role of sign, indeed the sign is inseparable from semiosis. And that the sign is inseparable from semiosis means that it cannot be separated from the relation, the process, or the situation in which it relates to other signs. Of course there are different conceptions of the sign. A sign is a factor in a process conceived either dyadically (signifier / signified) following Ferdinand de Saussure or triadically (representamen / object / interpretant) following Charles S. Peirce who (in this crucial particular) in fact restores the triadic character of semiosis, “the mode of being of a sign” as he also put it in 1904 (*CP* 8.332). In terminology today associated with Peirce we are describing here the movement of “unlimited” or “infinite” semiosis.

In our terminology, the fundamental terms that constitute a sign include the *interpreted*, on the side of the object, and the *interpretant*, in a relationship where the interpretant makes the interpreted possible (see Ponzio 1990: 15-60). For a sign to 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. It involves: 1) *something objective* (not necessarily a physical object), preexistent, autonomous, in this sense ‘material’ with respect to interpretation (the Object in Peirce’s terminology); 2) the *interpreted*, that is, this same

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. It ensues that the expression ‘interpreted-interpretant’ as we propose it refers to a (minimal and abstract) *triadic* relation given that the interpreted implies the object of interpretation, so that in reality it should be read as ‘object-interpreted-interpretant’.

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

To analyze the sign starting from the object of interpretation, that is, 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 starting point of semiosis. Nor can the interpreted sign be privileged by way of abstraction at a theoretical level to explain the workings of sign processes. An example: a spot on the skin is a sign insofar as it may be interpreted as a symptom of liver disease; 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 (see Petrilli 1998a: I, 1, 2001d, 2005a: V, 12).

To say that the sign is firstly an interpretant means that the sign is firstly a response. We might also say that the sign is a reaction: but only on the condition that by ‘reaction’ is understood ‘interpretation’, that is, as established by the behaviourism of Charles Morris, which contrasts with the mechanistic approach. We prefer the expression ‘solicitation-response’ to ‘stimulus-reaction’ in order to avoid superficial associations with the approaches that they recall respectively. Not even a ‘direct’ response to a stimulus, or, better, solicitation, is ever direct given that it is ‘mediated’ by an interpretation: unless we are dealing with ‘reflex actions’, the formulation of a response means to identify the solicitation, situate it in a context, and relate it to given behavioral parameters. Therefore, in the first place the sign is an interpretant, a response thanks to which something is considered as a sign and becomes its interpreted and, furthermore, is able to engender an open-ended chain of other signs.

2. Meaning and interpretant

The interpretant is a concept introduced in the framework of Peirce's semiotics. According to Peirce, semiosis is a triadic process whose components include sign (or representamen), object and 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 its Interpretant, to assume the same triadic relation to its Object in which it stands itself to the same Object' (CP 2.274). Therefore, the sign stands for something, its object, by which it is 'mediately determined' (CP 8.343), 'not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea' (CP 2.228). However, a sign can only do this if it determines the interpretant that is 'mediately determined by that object' (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' (CP 8.332).

The interpretant of a sign is another sign, which the previous sign creates in the interpreter. This is 'an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign' (CP 2.228). Therefore the interpretant sign cannot be identical to the interpreted sign, it cannot be a repetition, precisely because it is *mediated*, interpretive and as such always new. With respect 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. As a sign the interpretant determines another sign that acts, in turn, as an interpretant: therefore, the interpretant opens to new semioses, 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. It follows that a sign is constitutively an interpretant (Petrilli 1998a: I.1). The fact that the interpretant (Third) is in turn a sign (First), and that the sign (First) is in turn an interpretant (is already a Third) places the sign in an open network of interpretants: this is the Peircean principle of infinite semiosis or of the endless series of interpretants (cf. 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 respond and interpret it, and so forth *ad infinitum*.

In our terminology the ‘First Sign’ in the triadic relation of semiosis, the object that receives meaning, is the *interpreted*, and that which confers meaning is the interpretant. This may be of two main types: the interpretant that allows for recognition of the sign is an *interpretant of identification*, or an *identifying interpretant*, it is connected to the signal, code and sign system; instead, the specific interpretant of a sign, that which interprets its sense or actual meaning, is what we may call the *interpretant of responsive understanding*. This second type of interpretant does not simply limit itself to identifying the interpreted, but rather expresses its properly pragmatic meaning, installing with it a relationship of involvement and participation, it responds to the interpreted and takes a stand toward it (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: 9-10).

This conception of the interpretant is in line with Peirce’s semiotics, which is inseparable from his pragmatism (Petrilli 2004c). In a letter of 1904 to Victoria Welby (on the correspondence between Peirce and Welby, cf. Hardwick 1977), Peirce wrote that if we take a sign 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 (cf. *CP* 8.332). In this particular context the sign is understood in a strict sense. In reality, as a response that signifies, that renders something significant and, therefore, becomes a sign in turn, the interpretant is necessarily a sign occurrence, a semiotic act, even in the case of an action, experience or feeling. The fact is that we are dealing here with an *answering interpretant*, and therefore with a sign.

3. Meaning and value

Charles Morris distinguishes between *signification* and *significance*, with which he identified two different aspects of ‘meaning’: the semantic and the axiological (cf. Morris 1964). Analogically Victoria Welby had already introduced the term ‘significance’ to indicate the third dimension of her meaning triad, the other two being ‘sense’ and ‘meaning’ (cf. Welby 1893b, 1896).

This triad plays a central role in her ‘significs’, the neologism she officially introduced for the first time in the important essay ‘Sense, Meaning and Interpretation’, published in 1896, to designate her special approach to the study of signs and meaning. Welby experimented other possibilities such as ‘sensifics’ and ‘signics’ and actually coined ‘significs’ around 1894¹, preferring it to other readily available terms such as ‘semiotics’, ‘semasiology’, ‘semantics’, etc. The Oxford Dictionary entry ‘Significs,’ of 1911, published

¹ That same year, 1894, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) introduced the term ‘sémiologie’ as stated in an unpublished note, reported by Engler 1980: 3-36 (see Auroux and Delesdalle 1990: 106).

in *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (now available online), and approved by Welby, reads as follows:²

Significs. [f. Signific-ance], on the analogy of forms in *-ics* (see *-IC* 2). Introduced by Lady Welby in 1896.] A proposed science and educational method based upon the importance of realizing the exact significance of terms and conceptions, and their influence on thought and life.

The terms *signific/al* adjs., *significally* adv., and *significian* sb., have also been employed.

1896 LADY WELBY in *Mind* (Jan.) 32 Taking advantage of the child's endless store of interest and curiosity, it ought to be easy to make 'Significs' or 'Sensifics' the most attractive of studies. **1903** – *Ibid.* 161, Significs, then, will bring us the philosophy of Significance, i.e. a raising of our whole conception of meaning to a higher and more efficient level.

In that same year, 1911, appeared Welby's second monograph *Significs and Language. The Articulate Form of Our Expressive and Articulate Resources* (the first, *What Is Meaning? Studies in the Development of Significs*, was published in 1903), we find the following 'provisional' definition, says Welby, of significs: 'the study of the nature of significance in all its forms and relations, and thus of its working in every possible sphere of human interest and purpose', but she goes on to claim that 'the fact that this study is completely neglected even in education renders a fully satisfactory definition difficult at present to formulate. The interpretative function is, in truth, the only one in any direct sense ignored or at least casually treated. And yet it is that which naturally precedes and is the very condition of nonhuman intercourse, as of man's mastery of his world.' Continuing Welby states that the aim of her writing is to show with a 'the practical bearing of Significs not only on language but on every possible form of human expression in action, invention, and creation' (Welby 1985a [1911]: vii-ix).

Welby had already formulated a dictionary definition, co-authored with James M. Baldwin and George F. Stout, for *Baldwin's Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology in Three Volumes*, published in 1902, and an encyclopedic entry of 1911 (now in Hardwick 1977: 167-175), commissioned for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (vol. XXV). By contrast with 'semantics', 'semasiology' and 'semiotics', the term 'significs' was free from technical associations. This made it suitable to signal the connection between meaning and value in all its aspects – pragmatic, social, ethic, aesthetic, economic, linguistic, etc. The 1902 Baldwin dictionary entry reads as follows:

² The first edition of the Dictionary appeared in 12 volumes between 1888 and 1928; the specific entry on significs appeared in volume IX, published in 1911. See Welby's correspondence with André Lalande; and with Charles K. Ogden (Welby Collection, York University Archives, Toronto, Canada, now in Petrilli 2009).

Significs: Ger. Bedeutungslehre; Fr. théorie des significations; Ital. teorie delle significazioni (the foreign equivalents are suggested). 1) Significs implies a careful distinction between a) sense or SIGNIFICATION (q.v.), b) meaning or INTENTION (Q.V), and c) significance or ideal WORTH (q.v.). It will be seen that the reference of the first is mainly verbal (or rather Sensal, q. v.), of the second volitional, and of the third moral (e.g. we speak of some event 'the significance of which cannot be overrated'; it would be impossible in such a case to substitute the 'sense' or the 'meaning' of such event, without serious loss). Significs treats of the relation of signs in the widest sense to each of these.

2) A proposed method of mental training, aiming at the concentration of intellectual activities on that which is implicitly assumed to constitute the primary and ultimate value of every form of study: i.e. what is at present indifferently called its meaning or sense, its import or significance.

Significs affords also a means of calling attention to the backwardness of language in comparison with other modes of human communication, and to the urgent need of stimulating thought by the creation of a general interest in the logical and practical as well as the aesthetical value of all forms of expression. And it provides a convenient general term under which to work perhaps for an international consensus, and for a natural check upon wilful waste or misuse of the existing resources of language, by bringing to bear upon it a certain deterrent of social and academic 'constraint' (see the Editor's Preface, viii).

Significs make practically for the detection of lurking confusion or specious assertion in directions where the discipline of formal logic would help less directly and simply. But it is suggested that this study, so far from superseding or displacing or even distracting attention from the disciplines already recognized, would rather render them more effectual because more vitally significant: more obviously related to ordinary experience and interests. It would also bring out the moral value of a greater respect for the traditions and the future of language, and would in fact, while preparing the ground for an expansion of the limits of articulate expression, tend to create a linguistic conscience which must beneficially react upon thought, thus bringing about gradually and naturally a spontaneous consensus in definition.

Much work is already being done in this direction. Significs as a science would centralize and co-ordinate, interpret, interrelate, and concentrate the efforts to bring out meanings in every form, and in so doing to classify the various applications of the signifying property clearly and distinctly.

Literature: A. SIDGWICK, *Distinction and Criticism of Beliefs*; KARL PEARSON, *Grammar of Science*; MAHAFFY, *Modern Babel*, in *Nineteenth Cent.*, November, 1896; EUCKEN, *Gesch. d. philos. Terminologie* (1879); and *Monist*, July, 1896; BRÉAL, *Essai de Sémantique*; JESPERSEN, *Progress in Language*; F. TÖNNIES, *Welby Prize Essay*, *Mind*, January and April, 1899; BACON, HOBBS, and later WHATELEY, G. CORNEWALL LEWIS, and J. S. MILL are among those who have discussed the general subject. See also E. MARTINAK, *Psychol. Untersuch. z. Bedeutungslehre* (1901). (V. W., G. F. S., J. M. B.)

The term 'significs' takes account of the everyday expression 'What does it signify?', and focuses on the sign's ultimate value and significance beyond semantic meaning. As emerges from all her writing, it is clear that with her significs, in addition to a theory of meaning, Welby intended to propose a method, a 'significal method,' for critical thinking able to transcend pure descriptivism and strictly logico-epistemological boundaries in the direction of the relation between pragmatics and axiology, between signs, values and behaviour, and of the study of the conditions that make meaningful behavior possible (cf. Petrilli 2014a).

Central to signification is Welby's analysis of meaning into three main levels: 'Sense' – 'the organic response to environment'; 'Meaning' – the specific sense which a word 'is intended to convey'; 'Significance' – 'the far-reaching consequence, implication, ultimate result or outcome of some event or experience' (cf. Hardwick 1977: 169). According to Peirce, the triad sense, meaning and significance relates closely to his own triad and in fact he established correspondences with his own analysis of the interpretant into *Immediate Interpretant*, *Dynamical Interpretant* and *Final Interpretant*, respectively (*Ibidem*: 109-111).

After Welby Morris too related signs to values and, therefore, semiotics to axiology. In his own words: '[...] if we ask what is the meaning of life, we may be asking a question about the signification of the term "life", or asking a question about the value or significance of living – or both' (Morris 1964: vii). And the fact that usage of such terms as 'meaning' (with the polarity suggested) is so widespread suggests, continues Morris, that there is a fundamental relation between what he identifies as signification as distinct from significance.

But to return to Welby and her theory of meaning, signification conceptualizes in pragmatic and ethical terms the effects and consequences for human behaviour (which is never vulgarized or reductively understood in behavioristic or mechanistic terms) that ensue from the interconnection between signs and values. And, in fact, signification was Welby's response (developed across the years from 1881, year of publication of the volume *Links and Clues*, through to her death in 1912) to theoretical and pragmatic issues at the centre of contemporary debate as it progressed into the twentieth century. In this framework, Welby focused her attention on problems relating to meaning, language, knowledge, terminology, communication, signifying behaviour at large, the interpersonal relation, and subjectivity. As she says in the opening pages of her most important theoretical book, of 1903, *What Is Meaning?*:

Man questions and an answer is waiting for him. But first he must learn to speak, really to 'express' himself and the world. To do that he must learn to signify and to signalise. He must discover, observe, analyse, appraise, first the sense of all that he senses through touch, hearing, sight, and to realise its interest, what it practically signifies for him; then the meaning – the intention – of action, the motive of conduct, the cause of each effect. Thus at last he will see the Significance, the ultimate bearing, the central value, the vital implication – of what? of all experience, all knowledge, all fact, and all thought. (Welby 1983[1903]: 6)

Soon after, in the same volume, Welby links her thought to Oriental philosophy and the triad 'Express', 'Indicated', and 'Suggested' meaning, as described in the *Vedantasara*, to which she refers in the following terms:

It must be remembered that Significs implies in more than one 'sense' a careful distinction between sense, meaning, and significance. This triad is found in many forms, of which perhaps one of the most striking comes from the East: 'The meaning (that may belong to a word) is held to be three-fold, namely, Express, Indicated, and Suggested. The Express meaning is that conveyed to the understanding by the (word's) Denotation; the (meaning) Indicated is held to be conveyed by the (word's) Suggestion. Let these be the three powers of a word'. (*Ibid.*: 46)

Other triads introduced by Welby to explicate the 'three main levels of meaning' or 'classes of expression' include: in correlation to *sense*, 'tendency,' 'signification', and 'organic response to an environment'; in correlation to *meaning*, 'intention' and 'the specific sense it is intended to convey'; and in correlation to *significance*, 'ideal worth', 'essential interest', and 'ideal value'. In relation to *sense* understood as the first term of the triad, the reference is 'verbal' (or better 'sensal'), also 'instinctive'; in relation to *meaning* understood as the second term of the triad, the reference is 'volitional'; in relation to *significance*, the reference is 'moral'. That is, we feel discomfort or we see that a thing is true in a certain sense, we mean (that is, intend) to do something, and we speak of some event whose significance cannot be overrated. Welby writes:

The science of Man must remain in one sense abortive unless we can master the secrets of what we vaguely call 'meaning.' We have looked for purpose; let us rather seek purport; we have sought the final end, aim, object of action or process; let us rather seek for its Sense, its Meaning, and, above all, for its Significance. (*Ibid.*: 46-47)

Significs transcends pure descriptivism to study signs and meaning in their ethical, pragmatic and even aesthetic dimensions beyond the strictly epistemological and cognitive boundaries of semiotics, where semiotics and axiology intersect. Leading beyond the specialism of semantics, Welby's proposal of significs arises from the assumption that the relation between sign, meaning and value is of central importance in every possible sphere of human interest and behaviour. (For all these aspects, see Welby 1983, 1985a; Petrilli, "Introduzione", in Welby 2007, Petrilli 2009, 2015; Schmitz, 'Introduction', in Welby 1985a).

Significs also emerged as a possible foundation and departure point for research subsequent to Welby's on the specifically social and psychological dimensions of communication, which are the aspects most developed by the Signific Movement in the Netherlands during the first half of the twentieth century (see Heijerman and Schmitz 1991).

4. Meaning and the pragmatic dimension

What most interested Morris about Peirce was the latter's emphasis on the importance of behaviour for meaning. Peirce maintained that *to determine the meaning of a sign we must identify the habits of behaviour it produces*, which is the aspect Morris himself developed in his own theory of sign. On Morris's account, Peirce had the merit of rejecting old Cartesian mentalism as much as he spoke of *mentalism* in relation to his own work, eventually replaced, however, with the concept of *habits of behaviour*, which in Morris's view oriented semiotics toward a more adequate account of sign-processes.

Morris developed a pragmatic conception of meaning that led to his focus not only on signs but also on values. *Paths of Life* appeared in 1942, *The Open Self* in 1948. These books focus on preferential behaviour in human beings and describe 'fundamental choices' operated in different cultures. *Varieties of Human Value* was published in 1956 and collects the results of Morris's experimental research on values. His book of 1964, *Signification and Significance. A Study of the Relations of Signs and Values*, continues his research on values in relation to his studies on signs and consolidates the connection between semiotics and axiology. The English term 'meaning' has a dual acceptance referring not only to the semantic dimension of signs (signification) but also to the evaluative (significance): 'that which something signifies and the value or significance of what is signified' (Morris 1964: vii). Moreover, this book confirms Morris's approach to semiotics as an 'interdisciplinary enterprise' (*Ibid.*: 1) focused on signs in all their forms and manifestations, relatively to human and nonhuman animals, normal and pathological signs, linguistic and nonlinguistic signs, personal and social signs.

In *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* Morris divides semiotics into the three branches of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics, which correspond respectively to the three dimensions of semiosis, the syntactical, the semantical and the pragmatical. Fundamentally this trichotomy is the result of two main influences: logico-empiricism and behaviorism, on the one hand, and the pragmatic philosophy of Mead and Peirce, on the other (cf. Morris 1970). This explains how Morris was already aware, as early as 1938, of the importance of not separating pragmatics from semiotics, therefore the pragmatical dimension of semiosis from the syntactical and semantical dimensions (for all these aspects, see Petrilli 1988, 1999a, 2000, 2001e, 2004c; also the introductions by S. Petrilli to the Italian translations of Morris's works in Morris 1938a, 1948a, 1988, 2000).

The distinction between the three branches of semiotics is the most renowned aspect of Morris's theory of signs. However, despite the successful application of his description in

other semiotic frameworks, this aspect of his work has generally been misunderstood. The main misunderstanding concerns the fact that meaning has generally been associated exclusively to the semantical dimension of semiosis when, on the contrary, it is present in all three dimensions. When Morris claimed that syntactics deals with relations among signs this does not exclude that it involves meaning, which too is part of the relation among signs. Similarly, as much as pragmatics focuses on the relation of signs to interpreter, as says Morris, it too deals with signs and therefore with meanings. A scholar who has made a significant contribution to evidencing the traces of meaning in all three dimensions of semiosis and, therefore, to underlining the relevance of the question of meaning to all three branches of semiotics, is the Italian philosopher of language and semiotician Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1921-1985) (see his monographs on Morris, Rossi-Landi 1953 and 1975b; see also Rossi-Landi 1961, 1972, 1975c, 1992a).

5. Meaning and referent

Another important contribution made by Morris to sign theory concerns the question of the referent. At a given moment in the recent history of semiotics referential semiotics was contrasted to nonreferential semiotics. The starting point of the debate was Charles K. Ogden and Ivor A. Richards's famous but often deviating triangle, as described in *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), which presented three apexes denominated 'symbol', 'thought or reference' and 'referent'. On the basis of the fact that meaning was described as consisting in the relation of the 'symbol' to 'thought or reference', a position resulting from the influence, among others, of Saussure's binary conception of the sign which consists in the relation of a *signifiant* to a *signifié*, the question under debate became whether or not the 'referent' should be eliminated from this triangle. Supporters of nonreferential semantics included Stephan Ullman with his book, *Semantics. An Introduction to the Science of Meaning* 1962, and Umberto Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale*, 1975 (Eng. trans. 1976). Subsequently, Eco (1984) realized the relevancy of the concept of referent for semiosis, which he recovered implicitly with the concept of *renvoi* as elaborated by Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) (see Jakobson 1963, 1990; L. Ponzio 2015b).

If, instead, we examine the distinction established by Morris between *designatum* and *denotatum*, the question of the referent and the misunderstandings surrounding it are easily solved. This distinction was originally proposed by Morris in 1938, in his book *Foundations*, it was taken up again with terminological variants in his book of 1946, *Signs*,

Language, and Behavior, and again in subsequent writings. However, his position as described in 1938 remains the most convincing (see Petrilli 1999a, 2001e; Petrilli and Ponzio 1998; 2005: 80-136, 167-201).

As he says in *Foundations*: ‘Where what is referred to actually exists as referred to the object of reference is a denotatum’ (Morris 1971 [1938]: 20). For example, if the sign ‘unicorn’ refers to the object considering it as existent in the world of mythology, that sign has a denotatum since it exists in that world. On the contrary, if the sign ‘unicorn’ refers to its object of reference considering it as existent in the world of zoology, that sign does not have a denotatum since it does not exist in that world. In this case the sign has a designatum (Morris 1938), or a significatum, as Morris (1946) was later to call it (see also Morris 1964), but it does not have a denotatum. ‘It thus becomes clear that, while every sign has a designatum, not every sign has a denotatum’ (Morris 1971 [1938]: 20). Misunderstandings concerning the referent can in fact be avoided on the basis of Morris’s distinction between designatum and denotatum. In the triangular model of sign as proposed by Ogden and Richards (1923), the referent is always foreseen and forms one of the three apexes. On the contrary, in other semantic theories (cf. Ullman 1962; Eco 1975, 1984), the referent is eliminated altogether on the basis of the fact that what the sign refers to does not always exist as referred to by the sign. However, this means to fail to take account of the designatum. On the contrary, the sign always has a referent, or in Morris’s terminology, a designatum, and if this referent exists as referred to by the sign, it also has a denotatum: the referent of ‘Cheshire cat’ in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* is a designatum as well as a denotatum; ‘God’ has a referent both as a designatum and denotatum for the believer, whereas in the proposition ‘God does not exist’, ‘God’ has a referent (otherwise the proposition would not make sense), but only in the form of a designatum and not a denotatum (cf. Petrilli 1999a; Ponzio 1990a, 1994b).

This distinction is maintained in *Signs, Language, and Behavior* with the introduction, as anticipated, of a terminological variation – the term designatum is replaced with the term significatum. In the words of Morris: ‘Those conditions which are such that whatever fulfills them is a denotatum will be called a *significatum* of the sign’ (Morris 1971 [1946]: 94). The sign or sign-vehicle, as Morris says, may be said to *signify* a significatum. *To signify, to have signification* and *to have a significatum* may be taken as synonyms. In his description of the conditions that allow for something to function as a sign, the significatum, similarly to the designatum with which it converges, is differentiated from the denotatum. All signs have a significatum and therefore signify, but not all signs denote. The

significatum expresses the conditions under which a sign can have a denotatum and therefore will denote. Therefore, if the conditions obtain such that a sign denotes, the sign is endowed both with significatum and denotatum. The significatum of the buzzer (sign) that attracts the attention of Pavlov's notorious dog (interpreter) is that something edible is available; the food found by the dog that enables it to respond in a certain way (interpretant) as provoked by the sign, is the denotatum. To the dog's great disappointment, however, the latter may in reality not exist!

In *Foundations* (chp. II) Morris uses the term designatum instead of significatum. Every sign insofar as it is a sign has a designatum, but not every sign has a denotatum, because not every sign refers to something that really exists: where what is referred to (designatum or subsequently significatum) really exists as referred to, the object of reference is a denotatum. In other words, the designatum or significatum is that which the sign or sign-vehicle refers to, a set of qualities forming a class or type of objects or events to which the interpreter reacts independently of the fact that what is referred to actually exists (denotatum) according to the existence value attributed to it by the sign, the condition of possibility for the existence of the denotatum. In *Signification and Significance* Morris replaces the term 'significatum' with 'signification' while the term 'denotatum' is dropped altogether.

6. Meaning and sense

In 'Sense, Meaning and Interpretation' (1896), Welby had already excluded possible alternatives to the term 'significs'. These counted the neologism 'sensifics' and the corresponding verb 'to sensify': with these terms the connection with the world of the senses was too immediate and risked oversimplification with respect to a general theory of meaning. However, by contrast with the term 'verbal', which indicates linguistic form, sound, writing, the terms 'sense' and 'sensal' also evoke the word's signifying value in addition to recalling the latter's connection with the sphere of the organic.

Another key term employed by Welby is 'interpretation'. This term is listed in the title of her paper as the third level in her meaning triad. However, the term 'interpretation' was soon substituted with 'significance' given that 'interpretation' designates an activity involved in all levels and dimensions of signifying processes and not just the third, as one could have been led to believe.

In its primary meaning the term ‘sense’ corresponds to pre-rational life, to the primitive level of signification, that of the interpreter-interpretant’s undifferentiated organic-instinctive response to the signs forming its environment. Thus understood the concept of ‘sense’ is fundamentally organistic and involves all living entities populating the organic world. As claimed above, it is the condition for the capacity to adapt to the world insofar as it is a directly experienced world, a ‘perceived’ world. Furthermore, insofar as sense concerns the living world in its totality and not just the animal world, the capacity for ‘sense’ thus understood (as opposed to sense understood as signifying value), differently from ‘meaning’, is not specific to human beings: ‘The whole animal “kingdom” (if not also the plant order) shares the sense-world’: while in the course of evolution, ‘the advent of the sense of meaning – the highest kind of sense – marks a new departure: it opens the distinctively human era’ (cf. Welby 1983 [1903]: 28; Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: 80-137).

All signifying behavior, all experience from the organic to the cognitive and the axiological order presuppose the interpretive capacity at the level of sense. Indeed, ‘sense’ also indicates the pragmatic aspect of signifying processes given that it implies sign *use*, circumstance, and in higher forms of animal life, mental state, reference, etc., even if only at a pre-conscious level. On the other hand, we have seen that the term ‘sense’, in all its signifying implications including the sense of meaning and significance, constitutes the value of experience. In this broad sense, ‘sense in all “senses” of the word’ is used to indicate the ‘value’ of signifying processes, of semiosis, their general orientation in the sphere of life on the planet Earth. Therefore, insofar as it refers to experience value, sense is also connected to the intellectual, ethic and aesthetic dimensions of the world. ‘Sense in all its senses may be called the link or nexus between the intellectual, the moral, and the aesthetic worlds. For in all senses it is the sense wherein and whereby they are possible’ (*Ibid.*: 48). From this point of view, the term ‘sense’ assumes a specialized meaning, elicited by the question ‘In what sense?’, to concern the pertinence of the sign in its singularity for the individual interpreter / interpretant.

All that which has value for the human being is invested with meaning in a broad and global sense, that is, meaning understood not only in terms of intentional sense, but also as sense that exceeds and transcends the intentional, the foreseen in the direction of significance, meaning as the capacity to produce something more, a signifying surplus with respect to the already known, the already given, the already said. Such a capacity is connected with the ethical dimension of signifying processes, therefore of signifying behaviour with its capacity for opening toward the other, for criticism, hospitality and

responsibility, what we have indicated with the neologism “semioethics” developing Welby’s line of thinking in dialogue with such authors as Peirce, but also in an ideal dimension with Bakhtin and Levinas (see Petrilli and Ponzio 2003a, 2005, 2010; Petrilli 1990a, 2014, ed., 2015: 245-261).

7. Meaning and responsive understanding

Interpretation of a sign cannot be limited to its identification. Interpretation requires ‘active comprehension’, that is, ‘responsive understanding’. The sense of a sign, understood as signifying value, significance, consists in something more, an excess with respect to the elements that allow its recognition: sense is formed of those semantic ideological aspects which are indissolubly connected to the situational context of semiosis, and which under certain aspects are unique. Comprehension of the sign is ‘active comprehension’ because it requires a response, a standpoint. It arises from a dialogic relation and in turn engenders a dialogic relation: the sign flourishes as a rejoinder in a dialogue (cf. Bakhtin 1970-71; Ponzio 1998, 2004a).

Referred to the verbal, the sign is a complete utterance, it is not isolated from the social context, the field of the ideological or from the discourse genre to which it in fact belongs (‘the unending variety of discourse genres’, says Bakhtin in ‘From Notes Made in 1970-71’: his unfinished texts published posthumously include the title ‘The Problem of Speech Genres’, Eng. trans. Bakhtin 1986). The utterance is understood as a constitutive part of a socially and historically specified relation, as a living text and not as an inanimate thing; not as an isolated monologic expression to be interpreted on the basis of the relation between linguistic units and abstract language.

As Ponzio has demonstrated, on the basis of the Bakhtinian concept of sign associated with the Peircean, it is possible to construct a powerful semiotic model able to explain the complexity of signs or semiosis far better than any other model tending to reduce the sign to two perfectly correlated parts, that is, the *signifiant* and the *signifié*. Reference here is to semiology of Saussurean matrix (Saussure of the *Cours* rather than of the anagrams). The latter not only conceives the sign in terms of equal exchange between *signifiant* and *signifié*, but, as Bakhtin himself says, it only theorizes two poles in linguistic life between which all linguistic and (taking linguistics as the model) all semiological phenomena take place: these two poles are the unitary system (*langue*) and individual use of this system by the single speaker (*parole*).

As Peirce demonstrated, a sign or representamen stands to someone for something, its object, in some respect, insofar as it creates in the mind of that someone ‘an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign’, i.e. an interpretant (*CP* 2.228). Therefore, let us add that the meaning of a sign is an (open) class that includes that sign and all its possible interpretants. The mediating function between the meaning and object of a sign is in turn achieved through the mediation of other signs. According to Peirce, a sign exists according to the category of ‘thirdness’, in other words, it presupposes a triadic relation among itself, its object and the interpreting thought, it too a sign. A sign always plays the role of third party given that it mediates between the interpretant sign and its object.

A sign grows as a consequence of its excursions to the outside with respect to itself, and of its relations with other signs. Nor are the relations we are alluding to relations of equal exchange. On the contrary, equal exchange characterizes the signal where, by contrast to the sign, a one-to-one correspondence is established between signifier and signified (on this aspect the analyses of Bakhtin-Voloshinov are enlightening, see the volume by Bachtin e il suo Circolo 2014).

8. Meaning in the sign and in the signal

More precisely, the meaning of a signal is the class which contains that signal and its interpretants according to relations of mere substitution (a red traffic light has a single meaning and is a signal, in other words, its meaning is the class of meanings that substitute the color red: ‘Stop’ in the graphic or phonic form, a policeman with outstretched arms, etc.).

The sign no doubt also contains a factor of signality and its correlate, self-identity, but this does not characterize it as a sign. Comprehension of a sign is not merely a question of recognizing fixed and repeatable elements. Human signs are characterized by their semantic and ideological flexibility, which makes them available to ever new and different signifying contexts. Where there are signs, the factors of signality and self-identity are transcended by the traits that are specific to 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. (Voloshinov 1929, Eng. trans.: 69)

This is what is understood by the claim that the sign is a dialogic unity of self-identity and otherness. The actual sense of a sign consists of something more with respect to the elements that permit its recognition or identification. Actual sense is formed of those semantic-ideological aspects of a sign that in a certain sense are unique to it, peculiar to it. Moreover, it is indissolubly connected to the situational context of the semiosis in course.

Bakhtin-Voloshinov insisted on the dialogic relation between these two aspects of the sign, indicating them as ‘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 which require active comprehension, a response, a standpoint, 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’, Bakhtin observes the following:

[...] 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)

9. Initial meanings and additional meanings

In *Significato, comunicazione e parlare comune* (Meaning, communication and common speech, 1961, new ed. 2006), Rossi-Landi grafts the line of thought that leads from Peirce to Morris, combined with elements from Oxonian analytical philosophy, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, and Hugo Dingler’s operationism onto the trunk of Continental, non idealistic historicism. In this book Rossi-Landi introduces the concept of *common speech* which he subsequently developed into the concept of *linguistic work* (Rossi-Landi 1968, new ed. 2007), and also proposed an important distinction between *initial meaning*, that is, explicit meaning, and *additional meaning*, that is, implicit meaning.

The distinction between initial meaning and additional meaning is part of a general conception that views meaning as part of and inseparable from the real processes of communication and interpretation. It cannot be reduced to Chomsky’s distinction between ‘surface structure’ and ‘deep structure’. Chomsky separates language from its communicative function as well as from its social, intersubjective and dialogic dimension.

On the contrary, Rossi-Landi's 'initial meaning' involves experience, practice, value, familiarity with a given environment, and possible speakers that range from the restricted family group to the extended context of a whole cultural group, and beyond. 'Additional meaning' is determined in the intersubjective and dialogic character of signifying practices and presupposes knowledge, orientation toward the viewpoint of others and toward the various sectors of cultural life.

The distinction between initial meaning and additional meaning cuts across the distinction between meanings fixed by use and meanings dependent on context. Implicit, indirect, latent, hidden, absent, remote, secondary, and unconscious meaning is present not only in meaning dependent on context, but also in meaning that is autonomous with respect to a given communicative situation. Implicit meaning is also present in meaning fixed by tradition. In any case, 'initial meaning' and 'additional meaning' are active in *langue* and *parole*, in 'meaning' and 'theme' (Bakhtin-Voloshinov), in the 'immediate interpretant,' 'dynamical interpretant' and 'final interpretant' (Peirce).

The view put forward by Rossi-Landi in the second phase of his writings is that common speech may be interpreted in terms of work through the categories of the economic sciences and in the framework of a general theory of sign production.

10. Meaning and univocality

In her paper of 1896 'Meaning and Metaphor', Welby criticizes the concept of 'plain meaning', underlining the need from both a pedagogic and theoretical perspective to recognize the symbolic character of language, to acknowledge the widespread – though often unconscious – use of analogies and metaphors, and therefore to examine the relationship between symbolic systems and what they symbolize:

[...] we might begin by learning better what part symbolism plays in the rituals of expression, and ask ourselves what else is language itself but symbolism, and what it symbolizes. We should then examine anew the relations of the 'symbolic' to the 'real'; of image, figure, metaphor, to what we call literal or actual. For this concerns us all. Imagery runs in and out, so to speak, from the 'symbolic' to the 'real' world and back again. (Welby 1893b: 511, now in Petrilli 2009: 422)

Welby theorized the polyvalent and changing character of meaning and critiqued the myth of '*plain, common-sense meaning*', of '*plain and obvious meaning*', which she considered a fallacy. The text must be freed from the prejudice of interpretation understood

restrictively in terms of decodification processes. Welby underlined the first importance of the question ‘what do we really mean?’ which is intended as an invitation to clarify meaning and appreciate the significance, import and ultimate sense of expression. At the same time, she also criticized the tendency to reductionism and oversimplification, and therefore the fallacy that a text may evolve into a single reading, therefore into an absolute and definitive interpretant valid for all times, which is the sense of her critique of plain meaning (cf. Welby 1893b: 513, now in Petrilli 2009: 421-430; Welby 1983 [1903]: 143; see also the introductions by S. Petrilli to Welby 1985b, 2007; and Petrilli 1998b, 2012a: 191-230).

Paradoxically, ‘clear’, ‘plain’, and ‘convincing’ discourse is easily obscure and perverse discourse, dominated by processes of oversimplification and mystification. This is even true of the expressions themselves ‘plain meaning’, ‘common sense’, ‘common place’, when used under the banner of ‘simplification’ and ‘clearness’ to force plurivocality into the monologism of a single meaning: for example, when metaphorical meaning is exchanged for univocal, fixed and definite meaning (Welby in Petrilli 2009: 423-427). Mystifications often ensue from a lack of awareness of aspects of interpretive and signifying processes that are essential but unrecognized: for example, the role of the enthymeme, the unsaid, the implicit in discourse (which may change and develop), the fact that words and signs in general each have a signifying history of their own, the logic of otherness orienting signs, all of which can be subsumed under the concept of ‘semiotic materiality’ (cf. Petrilli 1986; 1990b; 1995a: 197-207; 1998a: 38-48, 2005a: 129-145; 2010: 137-158). Indeed, understanding and communication stand upon the unsaid, implicit meaning, upon that which is understood, upon the otherness dimension of signifying and interpretive processes.

Welby theorized a dynamical, structural and generative conception of meaning with her critique of the concept of invariable, uniform, univocal meaning, and of the description of words and locutions as though they were numbers, tags or symbols enjoying unanimous consent. The processes of metaphorization and symbolization have neither systemic nor typological boundaries. On the contrary, they invest the whole network of signs and may sometimes belong to interpretive paths which are so deeply rooted in language that they seem homologated to ‘plain meaning,’ though wrongly so (cf. Petrilli 1995a: 323-360; 2006a; 2009: 357-362). Consequently, through her reevaluation of the ‘plurivocal’ and ‘polylogic’ capacity of language – even though she does not use these terms – Welby denounces ambiguity connected with a reductive description of meaning itself³.

³ In 1892 Welby presented anonymously her pamphlet entitled *The Use of Inner and Outer in Psychology: Does the Metaphor Help or Hinder?*, at the International Congress of Experimental Psychology, where it was distributed among participants, and duly discussed. This text collects a series of excerpts from various

Welby recognized both the usefulness of definition in certain cases and its inadequacy in certain others, for example, when a question of accounting for the ambiguity of language, its capacity for otherness – which are conditions for the development of signifying behavior, for significance, for successful communication. In her search for a solution to problems of language, Welby proposed signification, her theory of meaning with her triad ‘sense’, ‘meaning’ and ‘significance’ and distinction between ‘plain meaning’, ‘actual’, ‘literal’ or ‘direct’ meaning, on the one hand, and ‘figurative meaning’, ‘indirect’ or ‘reflective’ meaning, on the other. Definition can only be useful in light of an adequate theory of meaning, though never as a remedy to problems concerning linguistic equivocation, misunderstanding. Beyond its eventual usefulness within the limits of technical language, definition eliminates the expressive plasticity or flexibility of words, their inherent vitality and therefore constitutes an inadequate response to problems language (cf. Welby 1983 [1903]: 2; Petrilli 1998b: VI.1; 2003a; 2015: 39-62).

11. Meaning and vagueness

In his reflections on the role of vagueness, Peirce asserts that communication among interlocutors is never completely definite or completely non vague, for variation is always possible and absolute precision impossible. Beyond expressing his hope that qualities of feeling among different persons may one day be compared by physiologists and no longer represent a source of *misunderstanding*, Peirce identifies a cause of misunderstanding in the intellectual purport of communication and in the diversity of experience among different persons. Communication is necessarily vague ‘because no man’s interpretation of words is based on exactly the same experience as any other man’s’ (CP 5.506). Therefore, just as we

publications in psychology and philosophy in support of her thesis that bad language use compromises clearness and precision of ideas and leads to false problems. Welby analyzes these excerpts with critical reflections on the use of figurative language, with particular reference to use of metaphor and analogy. She evidences the negative cognitive results, for example, of the mistaken use of the pairs ‘inner/outer’, ‘interior/exterior’, ‘inside/outside’, etc. as metaphors to designate the opposites ‘psycho/physical’, ‘subjective/objective’, ‘thought/thing’, ‘conscious/unconscious’.

Welby met James M. Baldwin at this congress and began her correspondence with him, which lasted until 1908. She also met Frederik van Eeden on this occasion, which proved to be an exceptionally fruitful encounter for under the influence of her ideas van Eeden gave life to the Signific Movement in the Netherlands (cf. Petrilli 1998b: VII.2).

A Selection of Passages from ‘Mind’ (January, 1876, to July, 1892), ‘Nature’ (1870, and 1888 to 1892), ‘Natural Science’ (1892), is the title of another publication by Welby, of 1893, in which she continued her critique of language, underlining its importance for successful interpersonal communication. These collections were preceded by other publications by Welby such as, *Witnesses to Ambiguity*, 1891, which is also dedicated to the critique of terminology, and the essay ‘Meaning and Metaphor’, of 1893 (now 1985b), published in *The Monist*, in which she reflects on the problem of meaning more extensively in theoretical terms. The latter was followed by another important essay, ‘Sense, Meaning and Interpretation’, of 1896 (now 1985c), published in two parts in the journal *Mind*.

lose sight of the overall sense of a painting when we concentrate on one of its details leaving aside general context, in the same way the more we attempt to be precise while ignoring the ‘plasticity’ of meaning, as Welby says, the signifying context in its globality, the more precision cannot be reached even when a question of intellectual conceptions (see Petrilli 2009: 173-193; 2015).

Vagueness as described by Peirce is oriented by the logic of otherness and enters the sphere of what we have identified as ‘semiotic materiality’. As such vagueness is the sign material that subtends communication and constitutes a condition of possibility for communication itself, an a priori condition for the formulation of the propositions we intend to communicate. From this perspective vagueness results from referring to different experiences, from organico-instinctual life to intellectual life. Considered in such terms vagueness is not the cause of *misunderstanding*, but rather, as Peirce and Welby teach us, the condition of possibility for communication, which is achieved in terms of dialogue – whether internal (within the boundaries of self) or external (with other interlocutors).

Variation in the experience of the single individual implies variation in terms of explicit interpretation, but also of implicit understanding. Therefore, dialogue and understanding as negotiated in communication strictly depend on vagueness, variation, the implicit, the unsaid.

Understanding is possible thanks to the understood, that is, the enthymeme (Bakhtin), the implicit. Even more interesting is that vagueness is structural to the very possibility of understanding, indeed the more we attempt to be precise, as Welby maintains, the less we are capable of understanding each other. To make implicit meaning or indeterminate meaning explicit and render it visible means to inaugurate new interpretive trajectories, new signifying paths and therefore to introduce new implications, new variables, a new dose of vagueness, of signifying otherness. In such a framework, communication is dialogic investigation and approximation by interlocutors, or interpretants, in relation to the referent of discourse – whether the general referent, truth, or the restricted, immediate referent. Saying, explicitation, determination, therefore, understanding, all presuppose the understood, the unspoken, implied meaning, indeterminacy and vagueness. And as Welby and Peirce teach us with the other authors mentioned in this essay, all these aspects together contribute to the generative power of our signifying universes of discourse.