

Representation, Symbol, and Semiosis: Signs of a Scholarly Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

In focusing on “semiosis,” or sign process, the journal *Signs and Society* was established to advance through multidisciplinary research the theoretical work of Peirce, the founder of “semiotics,” and Saussure, the founder of “semiology.” This essay provides a brief “representation” of the history of the collaborative relationship between the Semiosis Research Center at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies and the Department of Anthropology at Brandeis University, a relationship that is itself a kind of “symbol” entextualized in the pages of *Signs and Society*.

I am honored to represent Brandeis University’s Department of Anthropology at this gathering of scholars at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. My presence here today can also be taken as a representation of the members of the international editorial board of *Signs and Society*. And, in particular, I am pleased to be able to represent my Brandeis colleague, Professor Richard Parmentier, the editor of our journal, who sends his warmest greetings and whose words I will represent today.

It would seem that there is a lot of representation going on! In fact, representation lies at the heart of the sign processes, or “semiosis,” that are the focus of the multidisciplinary research published in *Signs and Society*. Two somewhat contradictory meanings of representation have been widely recognized: first,

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for one thing to represent another is for it to stand for or in place of something that is absent or unknowable, as a political representative does for a constituency; second, to represent can mean to *re-present*, that is, to make something present once again that was once absent, as a statue does for a deity (Leone and Parmentier 2014, S2). A third colloquial meaning that has developed in the past few decades involves the emphatic utterance of the quasi-verb *represent!* to mean that the speaker affirms his or her existential solidarity and authentic stance with respect to some issue.

It is no doubt because of these multiple meanings that a group of distinguished scholars at the University of California at Berkeley called their journal simply *Representations*. In contrast, *Signs and Society* is based on the working notion that these basic “standing for” and “re-presenting” relationships need to be placed in at least five additional contexts: the “codification” or organization of signs into complex structures; the “communication” of signs across various transmission media; the fixing or “inscription” of signs in relatively permanent textual or material forms; the modalities of “interpretation” available to or prohibited for sign interpreters; and powerful restrictive or “regimenting” forces that specify or delimit meaning-making in all of these embedded contexts. So, following the lead of your own Semiosis Research Center, the journal is devoted to the study of sign processes or semiosis in all its manifestations. But in the announcement of our intention to investigate the multilayered relationships among representation, codification, communication, interpretation, inscription, and regimentation, we are only suggesting these six levels as heuristic or even provisional guides for research.¹

It was, then, a remarkably appropriate example of semiosis when Professor Koh initially contacted Professor Parmentier—by e-mail, using the code of English—on April 26, 2012, to discuss the prospects of scholarly collaboration

1. The journal’s “mission statement” posted on its website gives a fuller account of these embedded levels: *representation*: the “standing for” relationship between two things that come to be linked as signifying sign and represented object by virtue of some typologically specifiable motivation (Saussure), ground (Peirce), or reason; *codification*: code structures, including both presupposed patterned systems of signs that feature “mutual delimitation” (Saussure) between planes of expression and content and less coherently articulated systems of indexical and iconic signs characterized by formal gaps, overlapping signals, and referential opacity; *communication*: the flow of signs across face-to-face and technologically mediated channels, from speaker to hearer or performer to audience, along with mediational relays ([Richard] Bauman) of various sorts, by means of codes that, because of differential usages and stratified manipulation, serve additionally to demarcate social categories and groups; *inscription*: the entextualization (Silverstein) of signs and sign complexes in cognitively or historically fixed or sedimented forms, as distinct from the real-time interactional flow of signs, that can potentially become the focus on subsequent communicative interactions; *interpretation*: actions that read or misread signs by users who, taking sign/object relations as meaningful, generate additional chains of signs that variably naturalize (“downshift”) or conventionalize (“upshift”) the linkage between signs and meanings; *regimentation*: power-laden social actions that restrict, forbid, or shape interpretive meaning making by explicitly or implicitly stipulating, constraining, or otherwise metasemiotically representing sign structures, text, and processes.

with Brandeis University.² We, too, had for a number of years, though in a much less formal manner, established a discussion circle we called the “Symbolic Form Study Group.” And in our sessions over the years we explored the nature of symbolic forms in fields such as linguistic anthropology, anthropological archaeology, comparative literature, classical studies, and art history with the help of a number of distinguished visitors such as Gregory Nagy, Irene Portis-Winner, and Irene Winter.

But it was not until we joined forces with Hankuk University’s Semiosis Research Center in 2012 that we all become truly “symbolic”—in the etymological sense of that word. The English word *symbol* is based on the classical Greek word *symbolon*, which literally means “thrown together.” It was originally used to describe two things, once part of a unity, broken apart, and then reassembled to constitute a unity again. Thus, the reuniting of two pieces torn from the same piece of paper or two fragments of pottery could be a “pledge,” or *symbolon*, for the persons holding them. Taken more broadly, *symbolon* came to stand for any agreement involving more than one party—thus a “conventional” arrangement as distinct from one occurring naturally. Note that the sense of symbol as a figurative, nonliteral, hidden, or mystical meaning is a later, derived, or secondary meaning.³

So in coming halfway around the world to be with you today I am not only a multiple “representation,” but, more importantly, I am one half of a symbol that has finally come back to regain its conventional unity, namely, the agreement between our two universities to produce *Signs and Society*.⁴

What are some implications of the title of our journal, *Signs and Society*? First of all, in this title we can hear distinct echoes of the famous words from the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, lecturing in Geneva at the turn of the twentieth century, that a new science is imaginable, a science that does not yet exist but whose place is already reserved, that studies signs “at the heart of

2. Kyung-Nan (Linda) Koh received her PhD in anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania; her principal advisor there was Greg Urban (a member of the journal’s founding editorial board), and she studied semiotic anthropology with Asif Agha. Urban and Parmentier both received their doctorates in anthropology from the University of Chicago, were students of Michael Silverstein, were affiliated for many years with the Center for Psychosocial Studies in Chicago, and were the cofounders and coeditors of the center’s preprint series Working Papers and Proceedings of the Center for Psychosocial Studies.

3. The story of the development of concepts of symbol and sign in classical antiquity is well told in Manetti (1993) and Struck (2004).

4. Two scholars from HUFs, Kyung-Nan (Linda) Koh and Hyug (Andy) Ahn (representing Paig-Ki Kim, one of the two directors of the Semiosis Research Center), traveled to Brandeis to draft two MOUs, one with the Department of Anthropology (cosigned by Javier Urcid) and one with the Graduate Program in Global Studies (cosigned by Richard J. Parmentier). A larger delegation from HUFs came to Brandeis for an April 2013 working symposium titled “Global Semiosis,” which coincided with a celebration for the publication of the first issue of *Signs and Society*.

society.” Saussure had in mind the relationship between various systems of codified symbols—material, gestural, pictorial, linguistic—that fuse a plane of expressive *form* with a plane of meaningful *content*. And, in a brilliant but frequently misunderstood move, Saussure showed that, rather than assuming that the signifying properties of these socially embedded codes derive essentially from human language, the more productive insight is to see in language features of these other codes, especially their “motivation.” Motivation, or more precisely “relative motivation,” describes some kind of rationale, connection, or externality (to use the economist’s term) between the expressive plane and the content plane, in other words, some “limitation on arbitrariness.”⁵ Saussure railed against the illusion perpetrated by some philosophers that an isolated word can be adequately understood as an arbitrary hook-up between a sound segment and a conceptual segment, a relationship he termed *signification*. Rather—and this brings us back to the “and Society” of our journal’s title—Saussure realized that signs never appear as isolated entities but as part of complex systems, including groupings of *co-occurring* signs, what he called “syntagms,” the sequence of dishes in a fancy meal, for example; and *virtual* associative sets, what he called “paradigms,” the classical orders in architecture, for example. Saussure labeled the positional contribution that these syntagms and paradigms make to the meaning of individual signs their “value”—a better translation would be “valence,” alluding to the technical term in chemistry. And so it is these complexes that provide the “systemic” motivation for both language and nonlinguistic signs of all kinds.

What is remarkable about language is that the arbitrariness of signification, that is, the absence of any necessary link between linguistic expression and linguistic meaning, makes possible the perfectly massive contribution of “relative,” systemic, or code-driven motivation—since nothing stands in its way—which, in turn, underpins the diachronic and cross-contextual stability of signification itself. So, for Saussure, symbolic codes are socially shared and historically transmitted, and every attempt to dislocate them from their socio-historical grounding is a methodological derailment.

5. In the wording of the *Course in General Linguistics* (Saussure [1915] 1959, 132–33), “up to this point units have appeared as values, i.e. as elements of a system, and we have given special consideration to their opposition; now we recognize the solidarities that bind them; they are associative and syntagmatic, and they are what limits arbitrariness. . . . Everything that relates to language as a system must, I am convinced, be approached from this viewpoint: the limiting of arbitrariness.” In the wording of Saussure’s notes for the third series of these lectures, “reduction in any system of *langue* of absolute arbitrariness to relative arbitrariness. This is what makes up the ‘system.’ If language were reduced to nothing more than denominating objects, all the terms in this language would be quite unrelated, would stay as separate from one another as the objects themselves” (2006, 233).

For all we can appreciate in Saussure's opening up the possibility of a "science of signs," he actually made only minor substantive contributions to its advancement. He left behind, for example, several notebooks documenting his rather bizarre investigations of the "anagrams" behind Latin poetry and mythology.⁶ More to the point, Saussure never began the hard work of classifying or typologizing the relative motivation he so prophetically proclaimed. For this we need to cross the Atlantic Ocean and bring into the discussion the American scientist and philosopher Charles S. Peirce, who called himself a "backwoodsman" in the study of signs and symbols. Peirce's largely unpublished writings on "semeiotic," that is, the science of signs, predates Saussure's speculations on "semiology" by a couple of decades. Both scholars lived relatively reclusive lives, Saussure in his family's palatial home in Geneva, and Peirce hiding from bill collectors in an enlarged farmhouse he named "Arisbe" in Milford, Pennsylvania. As a result, the founder of semiotics—to use the more modern term first proposed by the anthropologist Margaret Mead in 1962⁷—and the founder of semiology never heard of each other,⁸ although, as I will try to demonstrate, their work can be viewed as an example of unintended "complementary distribution."

Peirce's great insight was to realize that, in addition to investigating the nature of signification—signs and symbols taken in isolation—and the nature of codes—rules governing real or virtual complexes of signs—we need to add into the mix the *interpreters* of signs, not necessarily a physical person but some dynamic uptake, outcome, or effect signs have when viewed from the perspective of their processual deployment. This process he termed "semiosis," and in assuming the name "Semiosis Research Center" my colleagues at Hankuk University have fittingly honored that coinage. It was, by the way, St. Au-

6. Saussure's biographer John E. Joseph interprets Saussure's extensive (and abruptly terminated) research into Latin anagrams in terms of his rigorous scientific standards, noting that Saussure expressed a healthy skepticism to his young research assistant, "I rather feel that you will finally remain perplexed, since I do not disguise the fact that I have remained so myself—, on the most important point, namely what one is to make of the reality of the phantasmagoria of the entire affair" (2012, 555).

7. Margaret Mead, taking part in a discussion among a large group of scholars at a conference at Indiana University on paralinguistics and kinesics, said that "the study of all patterned communication in all modalities" could be termed "semiotics," a coinage that seems to have gained general approval by conference attendees—despite Thomas Sebeok's complaint that the term was "overburdened" (Sebeok et al. 1964, 275).

8. Joseph (2012, 393) speculates that Saussure "encountered Peirce's sign theory" through a distant cousin named Flournoy, who had been in correspondence with the American psychologist William James, himself a close associate of Peirce. One might continue this line of speculation with two biographical "near misses": in 1856 Saussure's father Henri de Saussure, a distinguished naturalist, visited Cambridge, Massachusetts, to meet with Louis Agassiz, a close colleague and neighbor of Peirce's father, a professor of mathematics at Harvard University; and Peirce's younger brother René de Saussure received the PhD in mathematics in 1895 at Johns Hopkins University, the institution where Peirce had taught logic in the Department of Mathematics from 1879 to 1884.

gustine, writing at the end of the fourth century, who first proposed the inclusion of the interpreter—a reader of scripture or a listener to Augustine’s sermons—in the study of signs.⁹ But Peirce thought that any account of meaning that could include *both* laboratory-based scientific research and logically precise philosophical reasoning must recognize that, for both of these truth-driven enterprises, interpreters or “interpretants,” the technical term he invented, cannot be completely free to arrive at conclusions unconnected to the path stipulated or “determined” by the deployed signs—that is, by the necessary semiosis of either experimental science or syllogistic reasoning.

So, on the assumption that everyone is a truth seeker, signs and their objects must have definable or typologizable kinds of relationships; and their interpretants must form a representation of the *same* kinds of relationships that pertain between signs and their objects. And this is where we find Peirce’s most used—and overused—distinction between sign relations based on formal resemblance or “icons,” relations based on physical contiguity or “indexes,” and relations based on arbitrary convention or “symbols”: a painted portrait, as an icon, resembles the person depicted; a stop sign, as an index, at the side of the road tells us exactly where to stop the car; and the word *semiosis*, as a symbol, only exists because a community of speakers agrees on the range of its semantic meaning.

But now notice that, by assuming a commitment to truth, Peirce has actually uncovered the logical organization of Saussure’s “motivation”! A keen scholar of classical and medieval writings on these matters, Peirce’s triple division or “trichotomy” of sign-to-object relations roughly lines up with the more standard dual division between motivated “signs”—comprising icons and indexes—and unmotivated “symbols.” Unfortunately, the word *symbole* in Saussure’s French is equivalent to Peirce’s English *sign*, and Peirce’s English term *symbol* lines up with Saussure’s French *signe*—not complementary distribution but complementary confusion!¹⁰

And here I finally come to the point of this discussion of Saussure and Peirce: in insisting on sign process or semiosis as an essentially logical affair,

9. Augustine treated the hearer of verbal messages in chap. 7, “The Force of Words,” of his treatise titled *On Dialectic*.

10. I avoid here the technical problem that Saussure’s analysis of the linguistic sign (based on the Stoic division between the linguistic expression [*semainon*] and what is meant by linguistic expression [*semainomenon*], a correlative pair *distinct* from what the sign stands for in the external world) in terms of the linkage of expressive form (“signifier”) and expressed concept (“signified”) differs significantly from Peirce’s analysis of the three “grounds” (iconic, indexical, and symbolic) of the relationship between the “representamen” (roughly, signifying form) and the “object,” whose properties “determine” the representamen (i.e., sign) as the mediator between object and interpretant. The closest approximation in Peirce’s terminology to the Saussurean “signified” would be the “immediate interpretant.”

Peirce necessarily abandoned the “and Society” dimension that was precisely the key to Saussure’s fundamental discovery of the sociohistorical grounding of symbolic codes (see Parmentier 2014). Correlatively, without the constraint of the objective determination of interpreters and their interpretants through the mediational operation of signs as determined by their objects, Saussure could not come up with an adequate account of how signs and symbols function in real-time events and interactions, a realm he dismissed as utterly irrelevant to his semiology. And this, then, is the “motivation” for our journal: the “science of signs at the heart of society” may have been proclaimed in advance and explored by a brilliant backwoodsman on both sides of the Atlantic, but the real work of scholarship lies ahead—in the pages of *Signs and Society*, the inscribed textual symbol of a collaborative relationship crossing the even wider Pacific Ocean.

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