

DISCUSSION NOTE

Is an icon iconic?

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To the memory of my wife the metaphysician

The word ICON (< L *icon*, < Gk εἰκών ‘likeness, image, portrait, similitude, semblance’) has entered the parlance of linguists and philosophers as a technical term, not to speak of anthropologists and other students of culture, especially those who have some cognizance of the theory of signs (semiotics) and of its modern founder, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). In Peirce’s sign theory an icon is a member of his most well-known trichotomy of icon/index/symbol, by which he meant to designate the mutable relations between a SIGN and its OBJECT. Peirce’s earliest published mention of this trichotomy is from 1885 (*EP* 1:225).¹

Here is how Peirce’s most astute interpreter, T. L. Short, introduces his discussion of the trichotomy after citing several of Peirce’s definitions: ‘This division is based on the relation of a sign to its object—in later formulations, to its dynamic object . . . That relation is the one we have called the sign’s “prior relation” to its object or the “ground” of its significance’ (2007:214). Apropos of the topic of the present note, Short goes on to say:

Peirce’s concept of an icon is subject to misunderstanding because that word is used today for any visual image, especially if highly conventionalized, that has a readily recognizable reference. That usage owes more to ‘iconology’ in art history and the use of ‘ikon’ in the Eastern Orthodox Church than it does to the Greek root of the word to which Peirce appealed. A conventionalized image has a reference that is essentially symbolic. (2007:229)

Then, dilating on the fact that since visual images ‘mean what they do because of a conventional rule of interpretation, they are visual symbols, not icons in Peirce’s sense’, Short comments:

More confusing still is the new journalistic practice of calling any readily recognized person, building, and so on, an ‘icon’. But that is so inexcusable and bereft of definite meaning as not to deserve further mention.² (2007:229–30)

This new journalistic buzzword meaning is actually one that has developed in the last half-century. Tracing its spread is an exercise in historical semantics that can perhaps be seen as a response to Janda and Joseph’s (2003:129ff.) call for ‘linguistic diachronicians’ to examine the present for evidence of change as it is happening ‘before our very eyes’, and to regard it as an essential part of the direction that the study of language change must take.³

Returning in that spirit to the matter at hand, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th edn., 2000) gives as its third definition of the word *icon*, ‘One who is the object of great attention and devotion; an idol’. *Webster’s Unabridged*

¹ All references to *The essential Peirce (EP)* are by volume and page number.

² Here is an example, as we see below, of the object of the philosopher’s scorn being the very stuff of the linguist’s *Fach*.

³ I have been pursuing this line of research since 1990, with present-day American English as my crucible. See the series of article in *American Speech*, for example, Shapiro 2001.

(3rd edn., 1991) gives as one of its two second definitions, ‘an object of uncritical devotion: IDOL, esp.: a traditional belief or ideal’. But neither of these definitions fits the current journalistic buzzword meaning exemplified by the following quotation (Gay 2008):⁴ ‘“Sherman George was an African-American in one of the highest positions in the mayor’s administration—he was an **icon**”, said Alderman Terry Kennedy, chairman of the Aldermanic Black Caucus’.

However, draft additions from February 2001 to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (2008) do characterize this usage accurately:

A person or thing regarded as a representative symbol, esp. of a culture or movement; a person, institution, etc., considered worthy of admiration or respect. Freq. with modifying word.

The date of the first example is given as 1952 (C. S. Holmes, in the *Pacific Spectator*): ‘“The Diamond as Big as the Ritz”, the work of a high-spirited young man turning a critical eye upon a national **icon**, satirically fabulizes the American Mr. Moneybags’.

The derived adjective, *iconic*, with or without the postposition *of*, is also used in this sense, that is, ‘designating a person or thing regarded as representative of a culture or movement; important or influential in a particular (cultural) context’ (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*: draft additions, December 2006), as in ‘The opening scene of Ingmar Bergman’s 1957 masterpiece is one of the most **iconic** images in cinema history’.

One who knows nothing of the history of *icon* in English might be tempted to say that the contemporary meaning is simply a semantic extension deriving from the word’s synonymy with *idol*—in consonance with *Webster’s Unabridged*—and leave it at that. However, a knowledge of the history of sign theory (semiotics), especially of the life and achievements of its modern founder, Charles Sanders Peirce, might prompt one to look in an earlier American work, the *Century Dictionary and Cyclopaedia*, the multivolume lexicographic marvel under the editorship of the illustrious American linguist, William Dwight Whitney, to which Peirce made numerous and major contributions.⁵ Such a look yields interesting results. Since it was Peirce, indeed, who introduced the sign-theoretic usage of the word,⁶ it is no surprise to discover him quoting himself in the *Century Dictionary* by way of exemplifying the special (third) meaning (1906:2971):

⁴ It is so common now that examples could easily be multiplied manifold.

⁵ For Peirce scholars and those interested in American intellectual history, the connection between Peirce and Whitney is an intriguing one that remains tantalizingly obscure. Stephen Alter, who has written a biography of Whitney (Alter 2005), reports (p.c.) that ‘My fairly extensive look into the Whitney correspondence turned up no (or no significant) letters from Peirce (and none were indexed in the finding aids at Yale University Library, where Whitney’s stuff is archived). And I found no Whitney letters at the Peirce Edition Project in Indianapolis, which I visited as well’. Cornelis de Waal, associate editor of the Peirce Edition Project, reported to me that he was able to locate a letter from Max Fisch (the late dean of Peirce studies) to Thomas Sebeok in which Fisch states that ‘Benjamin Peirce [Charles’s father, professor of mathematics at Harvard] knew William Dwight Whitney’s brother, Josiah [professor of geology at Harvard], quite well, but William less well. Among the visitors of his childhood home, Charles Peirce lists “the Whitneys”’. In 1869–1870, CSP and WDW were both lecturers at Harvard, on an annual appointment basis. WDW was one out of six lecturers on modern literature; CSP was one out of six lecturers on philosophy. Hence it is not unlikely that they met at the time (esp. since CSP had written a paper earlier on Shakespearian pronunciation)’.

⁶ While it is clear that Peirce was the one that first used the word as part of his sign taxonomy, the paths by which the extension occurred are not. I venture to say that the journalistic meaning was engendered by the semiotic one, most probably via (i) the propagation of Peirce’s work in Charles K. Ogden and I. A. Richards’s influential *The meaning of meaning* (1923), which included an appendix with extensive quotations from Peirce’s letters to a British writer, Victoria Lady Welby, referring to Peirce’s sign theory; their correspondence during the years 1903 to 1911 is the source of some of Peirce’s most important statements about his SEMEIOTIC, as he called it, following Locke. (Ogden became acquainted with Peirce while still a Cambridge undergraduate through his contacts with Lady Welby; see Hardwick 1977); (ii) the adoption (while mis-

[Definition] In *logic*, a sign or representation which stands for its object by virtue of a resemblance or analogy to it.

[Example] *Icons* are so completely substituted for their objects as to be hardly distinguished from them. Such are the diagrams of geometry. A diagram, indeed, so far as it has a general signification, is not a pure *icon*; but in the middle part of our reasonings we forget that abstractness in great measure, and the diagram for us is the very thing. So in contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy vanishes, and it is for the moment a pure dream—not any particular existence, and yet not general. At that moment, we are contemplating an *icon*. [Source] C. S. Peirce, Amer. Jour. Math, vii, 181⁷

Peirce's definition of *icon*—qualified by the contextual designator 'in *logic*'—is clearly meant to elucidate the special kind of sign denoted by this word IN PEIRCE'S OWN SEMIOTIC TAXONOMY, specifically the first element of the trichotomy Peirce introduced by way of characterizing the relation between the sign and its object, the second and third elements being INDEX and SYMBOL.

Peirce attempted many definitions of *icon* over the entire span of his working life. In this effort to achieve clarity, he strove to distinguish pure icons as a minority case of iconicity: 'Most icons, if not all, are *likenesses* of their objects. A photograph is an icon' (EP 2:13). But as Short points out (2007:215), 'a pure icon cannot signify an object by being similar to it. For how is that particular object picked out? Many things might be similar to the given sign, even in the same respect.' But when a pure icon is itself a sign of the QUALITATIVE POSSIBILITY THAT IT IS—a subspecies that Peirce called a QUALISIGN, for example, the color of a red fire engine (Short 2007: 216)—then whatever embodies it (the fire engine) is itself an icon, or as Peirce put it is 'iconic' (EP 2:273). Elsewhere Peirce referred to this kind of sign as a HYPOICON, which he classifies as follows:

Hypoicons may roughly [be] divided according to the mode of Firstness which they partake. Those which partake the simple qualities are *images*; those which represent the relations, mainly dyadic, or so regarded, of the parts of one thing by analogous relations in their own parts, are *diagrams*; those which represent the representative character of a representamen [= sign] by representing a parallelism in something else, are *metaphors*. (EP 2:274)

Leaving aside as ungermane what Peirce means by *Firstness* and *representamen*, this passage's final clause contains the first approach to what will turn out to be the answer to the query posed in my title. A sign (here: hypoicon) that represents 'the representative character of a [sign] by representing a parallelism in something else' is just what an icon in the contemporary journalistic sense does. An icon in the sense at issue is not pure but is the more common kind that makes reference to a set of particulars, such as THE EPITOMICAL FEATURES EMBODIED BY the fire chief of the *New York Times* story serving as my contemporary journalistic example.⁸ And as Peirce realized and stressed repeatedly, 'PARTICULARS CAN ONLY BE SIGNIFIED INDEXICALLY. A photograph is an effect of a physical process and thus it is an index of the subject photographed;

construing the theory) of Peirce's terminology by Charles Morris in his influential book, *Foundations of the theory of signs* (1938); and (iii) the appearance and widespread penetration of *The verbal icon* (1954) by the foremost theorist of the New Criticism and follower of Richards, William K. Wimsatt.

⁷ The complete bibliographic citation is as in Peirce 1885. Although the entry is unattributed, the mark in Peirce's own copy of the *Century Dictionary* clearly signifies that it is by him. I am indebted to Nathan Houser, director of the Peirce Edition Project in Indianapolis, for showing me the relevant page with Peirce's handwriting when I visited the project in January 2008.

⁸ For those readers who wish to know the dramatis personae of the story, the St. Louis mayor's name is Francis G. Slay and the fire chief's Sherman George.

only so is the image it contains an icon of that subject instead of a possibility merely' (Short 2007:215, emphasis added).

This mention of the index will be seen to be crucial to understanding what is really at stake in the contemporary extension of *icon*. Peirce defines the *index* as:

A sign . . . which refers to its object not so much because of any similarity . . . nor [by association] . . . as because it is in dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or the memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other. (CP 2.305)⁹

This characterization, together with the earlier passage (EP 2:274 = CP 2.277) that talks about the 'representative character' of a sign as 'representing a parallelism in something else' fits the new sense of *icon* perfectly. Because this subspecies of sign's specific mode of signifying focuses attention on a set of particulars that makes its object the EPITOME or archetype of whatever it exemplifies, in Peirce's terms it is a METAPHOR that relies on an index. Since metaphor in Peirce's idiosyncratic use of this well-established word would only serve to obscure matters, I conclude my analysis by recurring to Michael Cabot Haley's (1988:20) incisive terminological replacement, METAICON, to designate what Peirce really meant at 2.277. That would make our ICON not 'iconic' *sensu stricto* but rather a METAICONIC INDEX, hence METAICONICALLY INDEXICAL, thereby resolving the *quaere* of the title with the (medievalistic) 'yes and no' that answers both to its linguistic substance (the new use of the word *icon*) and to its semiotic form.¹⁰

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⁹ Citations from Peirce's *Collected papers* (CP) follow the customary practice of referring to volume and paragraph number separated by a dot. As new volumes become available, this foundational compilation is slowly being replaced by Peirce 1982–2000.

¹⁰ An interesting subsidiary question is why the word *idol* seems to have been superseded in contemporary usage by *icon*. As the mention of the former in the *Webster's Unabridged* definition (above) makes apparent, they are close in meaning if not synonymous. Perhaps a partial answer is indicated by their respective potential verbalizations and their foci. In the case of *idolize*, it is the subject who is the focus of the action, that is, the person REGARDING the object admiratively, whereas with *iconize* it is the object—that is, the person SO REGARDED. The contemporary usage reflects the second but not the first focus.

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