

Dynamic Interpretants and Grammar

Peirce's theory of the interpretant has been widely recognized as the most important part of his semeiotic. As that theory emerges from Peirce's writings ca. 1904-1909, it comprises two trichotomies of interpretants: the immediate/dynamic/final and the emotional/energetic/logical. These two divisions intersect, yielding nine types. Moreover, Peirce divides logical interpretants into ultimate and (what can be called) non-ultimate; this division then bisects each of the immediate logical, dynamic logical, and final logical interpretants. Ultimate logical interpretants are habits or habit-changes, whereas non-ultimate logical interpretants are verbal. There are thus twelve types of interpretant in all that figure prominently in the more mature version of semeiotic that Peirce elaborated in his later years (cf. Short 1981, 1982).

Peirce's theory is also marked by a triadic conception of sign. In the sense that sign, object, and interpretant are what they are only through the relations they contract amongst each other, they are essentially triadic (although each element in and of itself can be less than triadic). A sign may or may not be triadically produced, but as soon as there is a goal relative to which sign-action occurs, it must be triadic, i.e., necessarily involve the third member of the triad, the interpretant.

The triadic character of a sign is thus inalienable from an encompassing goal-directed process in which interpretants of the sign may be formed and by which it may be interpreted as signifying an object. Peirce calls this process of interpretation *semeiosis*, which he construes as having two aspects, sign-action and sign-interpretation. From the perspective of the sign, *semeiosis* is to be understood as sign-action, or the functioning of the sign. From the perspective of the interpretant, it is to be understood as sign-interpretation, or the drawing of inferences from signs. Given that it is a particular kind of goal-directedness that defines the nature of the sign (i.e., for each sign there must be at least a potential goal of interpretation), the basic concept of Peirce's

theory of signs is not sign but semeiosis, specifically in its aspect of sign-interpretation. From this it follows that semeiosis -- sign-interpretation -- is teleological.

Peirce was keenly interested in language and grammar but cannot be considered a linguist in the modern sense. Therefore, even when he talks about words or meaning in explicating the consequences of his theory of signs and interpretants, Peirce does not delve into grammatical structure in the round, i.e., including phonology, morphology, and syntax, not just semantics and etymology. It is not surprising, therefore, that he left the task of applying and extending his theory to fields like linguistics to future generations of investigators.

I would like to argue that what is most important in Peirce's sign theory is (1) that all semeiosis is teleological; and (2) that the entelechy of a sign is its interpretant. From this it follows, I believe, that as far as linguistic meaning is concerned, change itself is an ontological component of meaning. The qualification of meaning as linguistic (rather than all possible kinds) is necessary because the ontological character of change with respect to sign structure applies only to legisigns (to which species of sign all language signs belong). Every other sign, including any replica of a legisign, is incapable of a growth of meaning (albeit our comprehension of its significance may continue to grow). For only legisigns are *used* and used repeatedly, so that one result of earlier uses can be a change in the rule by which later replicas (uses) will be interpreted.

From the perspective of linguistic theory in its semeiotic orientation, a particularly interesting point is the role of dynamic interpretants in grammar. It will be remembered that Peirce defined this species of interpretant (in a letter to Lady Welby from 14 March 1909) as "that which is experienced in each act of Interpretation and is different from that of any other." While the two other members of this trichotomy of interpretants are necessarily unique for each sign (and potential), the dynamic interpretant is actual and repeatable. Certain signs can come to acquire a host of dynamic interpretants, all differing from each other (in conformity with Peirce's definition) in some particular respect(s).

A point which has not been brought out in exegeses of Peirce's semeiotic heretofore is *the cumulation of dynamic interpretants over time as the process of semeiosis tends toward final interpretants*. Teleology in semeiosis is especially important in the development of human language, as the dynamic interpretants cumulate teleologically into final interpretants. This process is analogous to that of conceptual change in science (for instance), where it can be identified as growth of knowledge. The cumulation is teleological because each step is taken with the ideal last step or final interpretant as a goal. The changes articulated by successive interpretations as far as language change is concerned are changes in meanings -- the immediate interpretants -- of linguistic signs. But symbols, the chief species of legisigns, grow not only conceptually but formally as well, and it is in this respect that the study of grammatical structure has something to teach us about the ramifications of Peirce's theory of signs.

The difficulty of relating the phenomena of grammar to the general theory of signs and to semeiosis in specifically Peircean terms has above all to do with the complicated distinction between type and token or legisign and replica. A legisign signifies only through its replicas, and it is legitimate to ask whether legisigns are really signs and whether they have interpretants. Associated with the legisign *that* is a rule for interpreting its replicas. The rule does not specify the interpretant, but it tells us how to form it: "look at where the speaker/writer is looking or pointing (etc.)." Associated with the legisign *red* is a rule that specifies what the interpretants of its replicas are to be. (Ambiguity aside, *red* always means 'red', whereas *that* refers to different things in different cases.) But these rules are not the interpretants of either the legisigns or their replicas. If grasping these rules is interpreting the legisigns, then stating the rule in thought or in speech is a dynamic verbal (i.e., non-ultimate) interpretant, while adopting the rule as a habit of interpreting replicas of the legisign is a dynamic ultimate interpretant.

Now with respect to repeated replication of the same legisign, we might expect that the rule -- for its interpretation -- would remain constant. Thus, the immediate interpretant of each replica of the word *red* would be the same, and of each replica of the word *that* the

immediate interpretant would be different but formed in the same way. But the dynamic interpretants of these replicas will often embody further information, and this can affect the rule by which later replicas of the same legisign will be interpreted. Therefore, over time the rule for the interpretation of replicas of one and the same legisign might not remain constant. This sort of change is more likely to occur with common nouns than with pronouns. *Salt*, *beat*, *love*, and *liberty* as items of the English lexicon do not now mean exactly what they meant in 1500. With the historical continuum of English vocabulary in mind, past dynamic interpretants influence what will be future immediate interpretants of replicas of the same legisign.

If we wish to speak of interpretants of the legisign itself (and not its replicas), we might say that our experience in replicating and interpreting replicas of the legisign results in a new and better understanding of the meaning of the legisign – that is, a new grasp of the rule by which its replicas are to be interpreted. But this is also a change in that rule; for legisigns are such that their significance is determined by how their interpreters are disposed to interpret them. The “meaning” that is better understood, then, is not the immediate interpretant of the legisign – since that is what is changing – but is its final interpretant. If there is, for example, an ideally adequate concept of heat, then that would be the final interpretant of the legisign *heat* (as well as its linguistic equivalent in other languages). That would be the meaning of *heat* to which the series of dynamic interpretants of its replicas would eventually lead us. This example is what I mean by the *cumulation* of dynamic interpretants by the final interpretant, as far as the content of the word is concerned. And this is probably what Peirce had in mind when he spoke of symbols “growing”. This kind of conceptual growth as revealed in words is so important, I think, that it ought to be made central in our understanding of semeiotic.

Linguistic change is the end-directed evolution of legisigns or of a system of legisigns. In the case of conceptual change, it is the end-directed evolution of the rules of interpretation of symbols, occasionally accompanied by changes in the symbols themselves. (Conceptual change, then, determines linguistic change, but in general, this is not necessary to linguistic change.) Replication is the end-directed use of previously developed legisigns.

Dynamic interpretants are divided by Peirce into three types, emotional, energetic, and logical. If dynamic interpretants are the "actual semiotic effect of a sign" (Savan 1976: 40), then the emotional dynamic interpretant is the qualitative semeiotic effect of a sign, the energetic dynamic interpretant is an action that interprets a sign, and the logical dynamic interpretant "is the thought, concept, or general understanding actually produced by a sign" (Savan 1976:44). Logical interpretants are general rules that are not verbal but are rather a habit of action that may be expressed verbally. While being general, a logical interpretant can still be an "actual semiotic effect" because it "is a dynamic interpretant insofar as the rule or habit is instantiated in a particular set of actions. These particular sets of actions are energetic interpretants; but as exemplifying an indefinitely repeatable habit, they also replicate logical interpretants" (Savan 1976: 45).

A description of this sort does not imply the reduction of logical interpretants to some finite set of energetic interpretants. Since no law or habit is real that does not govern actual events, a logical interpretant has instantiations that occur in real time. These occurrences may represent the acquisition, modification (strengthening or weakening), or contravention of a habit as results of sign-action. When the habit changes in these ways, the habit-change (as Peirce called it, e.g., at 5.476) is the dynamic logical interpretant. "It is not *actions governed by* the habit but the *actual formation of* (or other changes in) the habit that is the dynamic yet logical interpretant" (Short 1986: 105).

In the remainder of this paper I would like to illustrate how the dynamic actualizations of the logical interpretant contribute teleologically to the formation of a habit or habit-change. I will limit myself to the examination and interpretation of one variable syntactic rule in the present-day grammar of American English. By analyzing a change in progress from the area of syntax I also mean to extend our understanding of dynamic interpretants, since up to now analysis of linguistic data accompanying the exegesis of Peirce's semeiotic has focused exclusively on word meanings and conceptual changes, not on their collocations in sentences.

Increasingly in contemporary speech and writing one finds the adjective *different* (and the adverb *differently*) taking the complement

than instead of the normative *from*, e.g., *Peirce is different than Wittgenstein*, etc. In colloquial American English the construction with *from* appears to be diminishing in frequency, although there are certainly still many speakers (myself included) who never use *than* instead of *from* after *different(ly)*.

I think that an explanation of this change in syntax can begin with a consideration of the two semantic relations involved in the concept of *difference* – distinction and comparison – together with the condition of their being ranked hierarchically vis-à-vis each other within the semantic syntagm (complex unit) that comprises this concept and its realizations. (Note, incidentally, that the semantic asymmetry that emanates from the ranking of the relations in a linguistic syntagm is not the same thing as asymmetric relations in logic.)

What we have here, I believe, is an alternative ranking of the two relations embodied in the concepts of distinction and comparison. These two hierarchies reflect two possible emphases, which can be called hypotaxis and parataxis. The normative construction *different from* can be analyzed as a syntactic diagram (in the Peircean sense) of a hypotactic emphasis in the ranking of the two relevant components: distinction is ranked higher than comparison (i.e., the latter is dampened or bracketed in the syntagm). This ranking emphasizes the *asymmetrical* aspect of the terms juxtaposed or combined in the syntagm. The non-normative construction *different than*, on the other hand, can be analyzed as a syntactic diagram of a paratactic emphasis in the hierarchy: comparison is ranked higher than distinction (it is distinction that is now dampened or bracketed rather than comparison). This second ranking emphasizes the *symmetrical* aspect, that the terms *are* juxtaposed in the syntagm. Cf. the use of *different* predicatively (*A is so different!*) or appositively (*A is a different product!* – i.e., ‘distinctive’) in advertising lingo (but not only).

From the point of view of linguistic structure, then, one could conclude from my analysis that the ranking difference (alternative hierarchies) in the semantic syntagm associated with the concept and word *different* is manifested syntactically as a difference in complements: *from* means difference or non-equivalence, and *than* means comparison or equivalence of the terms on either side of the construc-

tion. Notionally, one could interpret this change as a shift away from the understanding (inherently, in the grammar) of *different* as embodying contradictory relations, to that of its embodying contrary relations (gradience).

An analysis that trades in competing semantic hierarchies may not seem to constitute an explanation of the change from one syntactic pattern to another, but this is not strictly so. The nature of grammar is such that what appears in speech or is expressed can always be traced to underlying grammatical relations – which are semantic in their essence – as its cause. But in the syntactic change discussed above, one unsatisfied with this type of intrinsic explanation might wish to speculate about causes inherent in the larger communicative situation. Although hard evidence is unavailable, perhaps the change has its transcendent explanation in the larger tendency within contemporary American culture to neutralize social hierarchies, i.e., to scant hypotaxis in favor of parataxis. With the encompassing social structure and its flux as a reference point, the change in grammar would find its place as a piece of worldmaking.

It might also appear that the syntactic change I have discussed as an illustration of the cumulation of dynamic interpretants is not truly teleological. A change in the grammar of contemporary American English is, to be sure, in the process of being consummated, but can we discern a real tendency toward a final goal? Another way of stating this doubt is to ask: when are changes in meaning merely changes, and when do they represent developments toward truth? A thorough answer would require a separate treatment; suffice it here to note that a definitive answer can only be established *retrospectively*. But Peirce's treatment of the difference between ultimate and final interpretants (inconsistent as it may be, cf. 5.491 and 8.314) may be seen to contain the germ of an adequate response if we understand ultimacy of interpretation to pertain to meaning and finality to truth. This point would be in alignment with Peirce's conception of pragmatism as a theory of meaning. Within the restricted scope of grammar, however, we need to go no further than to assert the semantic syntagm as the goal of the syntactic rule. Like any other facet of linguistic expression, syntax (in the traditional sense of rection) makes reference to semantic

relations; more specifically, syntactic constructions are diagrams whose objects are semantic syntagms. In the case of syntactic change, the most we can say of competing variants is that the victorious one emerges as more generally meaningful but *not* thereby truer.

Grammatical changes in progress that go beyond the narrow focus of the lexicon furnish new and important support for Peirce's general conception of semeiosis as essentially teleological and self-corrective. Self-correctibility presupposes some point at which the interpretant, or the sign as interpreted in a given interpretant, can be put to the test. Competing syntactic variants in a synchronic grammar represent dynamic logical interpretants that have been cast in the form of habits (of expectation and action). In their openness to testing and their cumulative tendency towards a final goal (the final interpretant), these linguistic signs fulfill Peirce's definition of habit as "the real and living logical conclusion" (5.491).

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