

From Parmentier, Richard J. *Signs in Society: Studies in Semiotic Anthropology, Advances in Semiotics*.
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The chapter on signs is a revision of Rick's earlier chapter, in a book you may already have:
Parmentier, Richard J. "Signs' Place in Medias Res: Peirce's Concept of Semiotic Mediation." In *Semiotic Mediation: Sociocultural and Psychological Perspectives*, edited by Elizabeth Mertz and Richard J Parmentier, 23-48. Orlando: Academic Press, 1985.

Thirdness as Mediation

Over the next forty-odd years Peirce modified this terminology frequently, substituting for the category of Thirdness or Representation labels such as Mediation, Branching, Synthetic Consciousness, Theory, Process, Law, Reason, Transuasion, Transaction, Betweenness, Continuity, and Regularity. There is a general tendency, however, for him to prefer Mediation for the most general characteristic of Thirdness in writings after the early 1870s, that is, after he fully integrated the "logic of relations" into his philosophy (CP 1.560-67; Murphey 1961:150-52; cf. Rosensohn 1974). But the common element tying together Peirce's various views is the fundamental idea that anything that either comes between two things in order to link them together, transfers a characteristic feature from one thing over to another, or synthesizes elements from disparate realms of reality must exist at a higher logical and ontological level than the initial two things. And it is this insight that led him to claim that there is more to reality than brute existence (Secondness) and qualitative possibility (Firstness). In fact, the genuine reality of Thirds or triads, including prototypically fully symbolic representations with their three references, implies that they are not reducible to either Seconds or Firsts, although they require these lower-ranking categories as much as they determine them. Peirce summarizes his view as of 1872-73 as follows: "A representation generally... is something which brings one thing into relation with another... A representation is in fact nothing but a something which has a third through an other" (quoted in Kloesel 1983: 115).

Having identified Thirdness on the basis of the triple references of a truly symbolic representation, Peirce generalized this highest level category to realms of experience not obviously thought of as semiotic. As early as 1875 the connection between Thirdness and a variety of processes of mediation is apparent, as in the fragment titled "Third":

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By the third, I mean the medium or connecting bond between the absolute first and last. The beginning is first, the end second, the middle third. The end is second, the means third. The thread of life is a third; the fate that snips it, its second. A fork in a road is a third, it supposes three ways; a straight road, considered merely as a connection between two places is second, but so far as it implies passing through intermediate places it is third. Position is first, velocity or the relation of two successive positions second, acceleration or the relation of three successive positions third. But velocity in so far as it is continuous also involves a third. Continuity represents Thirdness almost to perfection.

Every process comes under that head. Moderation is a kind of Thirdness. The positive degree of an adjective is first, the superlative second, the comparative third. All exaggerated language, "supreme," "utter," "matchless," "root and branch," is the furniture of minds which think of seconds and forget thirds. Action is second, but conduct is third. Law as an active force is second, but order and legislation are third. Sympathy, flesh and blood, that by which I feel my neighbor's feelings, is third. (CP 1.337, c.1875)

Two themes emerge from this fragment: first, Thirdness as pertaining to a middle position or term in a

system, and second, Thirdness as pertaining to a rational or normative principle that regulates objects, perceptions, and events. Peirce's fundamental insight here is the linkage between what can be called the "cohesive principle" of Thirdness and the "regulative principle" of Thirdness—and this in turn suggests the continuing influence of Kant on Peirce's thought, since Kant stressed both the synthetic and the regulative functions of pure reason. There is, unfortunately, no clue in the fragment how Peirce would express the sign relation in terms of Thirdness as mediation; fortunately, he returned to this question in several manuscripts written after the late 1870s.

The explicit connection between Thirdness, mediation, and the elements of the sign relation occurs in an undated manuscript titled "The Categories," in which Peirce applies the logic of relations to distinguish systems with one object, systems with two objects in dual relation, and systems with three objects associated in pairs but in such a way that the "triad is something more than a congeries of pairs" (MS 717 = NEM 4.307, c.1893). A road that branches into two roads cannot be reduced to the sum of the two road segments, since the presence of the fork introduces a qualitatively new alignment whereby a traveler can pass along the main road, proceed along either fork, and return from one fork across the juncture to the other segment without ever traversing the undivided portion of the main road. Similarly, if A gives B something C, this cannot be reduced to the dyadic fact of A's giving up C and B's receiving C, for the process of giving is not two linked acts but a single act, as can be easily seen in the example Peirce gives in which A lays something down and then an hour later B comes by and picks it up, a sequence utterly devoid of triadic relations. Peirce then generalizes this analysis of triads to constitute the highest "formal ideal" or category:

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It will, at any rate, be found a most helpful maxim, in making philosophical analyses to consider, first, single objects, then pairs, last triads.

We have already applied this maxim in Article 1, where Cunning is that skill that resides only in the single persons, Wisdom is that which can be stated to others, Theory is that which can be fortified by means (observe that a means, or medium, is a third) of a reason.

Art. 4. That above maxim crystallizes itself in the statement that there are three grand elementary formal ideas, as follows:

I. The First, or Original, expressed by the root AR. The plough goes first.

II. The Second, or Opponent, expressed by the root AN, as in Latin in, our other, and also more strongly, but with an idea of success in opposition, in AP, whence ob, apt, opus, opes, optimus, copy.

III. The Third, or Branching, or Mediation expressed by such roots as PAR, TAR, MA. These three ideas may be called the Categories. (NEM 4.308)

In another manuscript Peirce adds a brief comment on the notion of branching:

Namely, he must recognize, first, a mode of being in itself, corresponding to any quality; secondly, a mode of being constituted by opposition, corresponding to any object; and thirdly, a mode of being of which a branching line is an analogue, and which is of the general nature of a mean function corresponding to the sign. (MS 7. 13)

He then goes on to address the sign relation as one of the "easiest" ideas of philosophical relevance in which this third category of branching or mediation is predominant. I have already cited the crucial passage from this manuscript, but it is important to recall that at this point in the development of Peirce's thinking the third is not the more familiar representamen, object, and interpretant, but rather object, meaning, and interpretant:

A sign stands for something to the idea which it produces, or modifies. Or, it is a vehicle conveying into the mind something from without. That for which it stands is called its Object; that which it conveys, its Meaning; and the idea to which it gives rise, its

Interpretant. (MS 717 = NEM 4.309)

Clearly, the sign itself is conceived of as a nodal point analogous to the fork in the road, where the three termini of object, meaning, and interpretant (parallel to the three references or correlates of the sign from the 1860s: object, ground, and mediating representation) come together or, more accurately, are bound together. From the earlier notion that the interpretant functions as a synthetic power in uniting in a further representation of the sign both a meaning and an object (a logos and a correlate, in the earlier vocabulary), Peirce here focuses on the mediating role of the sign itself as constituting an irreducible triad.

A crucial modification in this model of Thirdness, mediation, and sign occurs about 1885 in a manuscript titled "One, Two, Three: Fundamental Categories of Thought and of Nature" (MS 901 = CP 1.369-72, 1.376-78) and in

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a published article, "On the Algebra of Logic: A Contribution to the Philosophy of Notation" (CP 3.359-403). In the manuscript Peirce stresses the synthetic function of consciousness as the key to the ability of the mind to learn, make inferences, and cognize relations of more than dual character. This consciousness of synthetic facts is clearly present in cognition through symbols, for in this class of signs there is a triadic system of elements parallel to the three termini of a forked road and to the three terms of the relationship of giving:

We have seen that the mere coexistence of two singular facts constitutes a degenerate form of dual fact; and in like manner there are two orders of degeneracy in plural facts, for either they may consist in a mere synthesis of facts of which the highest is dual, or they may consist in a mere synthesis of singular facts. This explains why there should be three classes of signs; for there is a triple connection of sign, thing signified, cognition produced in the mind. There may be a mere relation of reason between the sign and the thing signified; in that case the sign is an icon. Or there may be a direct physical connection; in that case, the sign is an index. Or there may be a relation which consists in the fact that the mind associates the sign with its object; in that case the sign is a name. (CP 1.372, c.1885)

It is important to note that in place of the three references or correlates of the sign Peirce has substituted the triad of sign, thing signified, and cognition produced in a mind. In this semiotic model it is the sign relation itself rather than one element taken alone that reveals a triadic, synthetic, and mediational quality:

It seems, then, that the true categories of consciousness are: first, feeling, the consciousness which can be included with an instant of time, passive consciousness of quality, without recognition or analysis; second, consciousness of an interruption into the field of consciousness, sense of resistance, of an external fact, of another something; third, synthetic consciousness, binding time together, sense of learning, thought.

If we accept these [as] the fundamental elementary modes of consciousness, they afford a psychological explanation of the three logical conceptions of quality, relation, and synthesis or mediation. The conception of quality, which is absolutely simple in itself and yet viewed in its relations is seen to be full of variety, would arise whenever feeling or the singular consciousness becomes prominent. The conception of relation comes from the dual consciousness or sense of action and reaction. The conception of mediation springs out of the plural consciousness or sense of learning. (CP 1.377-78, c.1885; emphasis added)⁵

The "plural" character of mediation, Thirdness, and sign relation, and Peirce means by plural more than dual, is the test of "genuine" as opposed to "degenerate" triads.

In the paper "On the Algebra of Logic" Peirce notes that the triple relation of sign, object, and cognition in the mind is not equally genuine for the three

classes of signs. Taken as the "conjoint relation" of sign, thing signified, and mind, the sign relation can be degenerate in two degrees: (1) if the sign has a genuine dual relation with its object apart from the mental association supplied by the mind, then the sign resembles a natural sign or physical symptom and is labeled an index; (2) if the sign has a degenerate dual relation with its object apart from any function of the mind, then

the sign consists of mere resemblance between sign and object and is labeled an icon (CP 3.361, 1885). There are, obviously, two other dual relations, sign-mind and object-mind, which could possibly be either genuine or degenerate, but, as Peirce notes, without the presence of the sign and object dyad (in either degenerate or genuine status) there would be no question of a semiotic relation, since this would be the case of the mind thinking of both object and sign separately. Since plural relations have two degrees of degeneracy (index and icon) and since a dual relation can have only one degree of degeneracy (as in the combination of two independent facts about two subjects), the resulting possibilities form a system depicted in Figure 2.3.6 Peirce finds these two degrees of degeneracy in many forms of experience:

Among thirds, there are two degrees of degeneracy. The first is where there is in fact itself no Thirdness or mediation, but where there is true duality; the second degree is where there is not even true Secondness in the fact itself. Consider, first, the thirds degenerate in the first degree. A pin fastens two things together by sticking through one and also through the other; either might be annihilated, and the pin would continue to stick through the one which remained. (CP 1.366, c.1890)

We now come to thirds degenerate in the second degree. The dramatist Marlowe had something of that character of diction in which Shakespeare and Bacon agree. This is a trivial example; but the mode of relation is important. ... In portraiture, photographs mediate between the original and the likeness. In science, a diagram or analogue of the observed fact leads on to a further analogy. (CP 1.367. c.1890)

The stress on the essentially triadic or plural character of genuine Thirdness might seem to contradict Peirce's original definition of the categories as quality, relation, and representation, for triadic relations are clearly "relations" of some kind. In substituting a logic of relations for a logic grounded on propositional predication in the 1880s and 1890s, Peirce was able to realize that not all relations are dual and that the notion of mediation better expresses the reality of relations between a triad of elements. As he wrote in 1898:

I did not then [in 1867] know enough about language to see that to attempt to make the word representation serve for an idea so much more general than any it habitually carried, was injurious. The word mediation would be better.

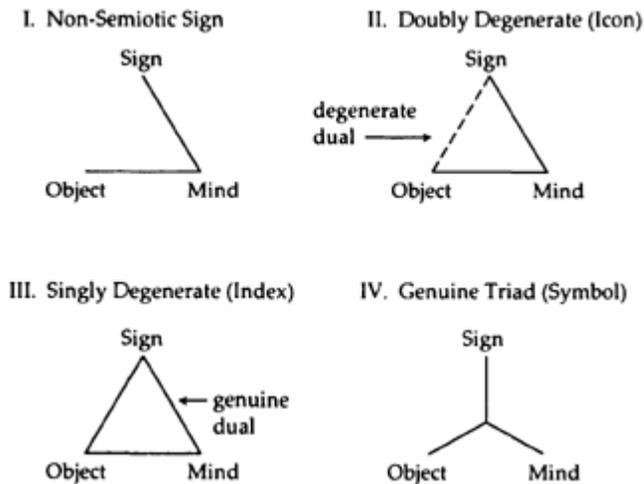


Figure 2.3. Semiotic degeneracy

Quality, reaction, and mediation will do. (CP 4.3, 1898; cf. MS 339, 1906, August 30)

Scholars disagree about the significance of this terminological shift (Murphey 1961; Rosensohn 1974:12-13): in the 1867 system the three categories were quality, relation, and representation, while in the 1898 paper Peirce prefers quality, reaction, and mediation. At least one significant implication of this terminological shift is that Peirce now comes to see representation as one species within the genus of mediation. In other words, the phenomenon of "standing for" is one variety of the broader phenomenon of "standing between." Thus, by 1890 Peirce defines his three categories as follows: First is being simply in itself; Second is that which is by force of something else; and "the Third is that which is what it is owing to things between which it mediates and which it brings into relation to each other" (CP 1.356, c. 1890; emphasis added). This new definition of the Third as mediation occurs frequently in Peirce's work in the 1890s. In "A Guess at the Riddle" he links Thirdness, representation, and mediation:

The third is that which bridges over the chasm between the absolute first and last, and brings them into relationship.... We have seen that it is the immediate consciousness that is preeminently first, the external dead thing that is preeminently second. In like manner, it is evidently the representation mediating between these two that is preeminently third. (CP 1.359-61, c.1890)

Similarly in a paper published in 1891 Peirce (189 1:163) defines Third in terms of mediation or that "whereby a first and a second are brought into relation" and then generalizes this point to comprehend a range of sciences and disciplines:

First is the conception of being or existing independent of anything else. Second is a conception of being relative to, the conception of reaction with, something else. Third is the conception of mediation, whereby a first and second are brought into relation.... The origin of things, considered not as leading to anything, but in itself, contains the idea of First, the end of things that of Second, the process mediating between them that of Third.... The idea of the Many, because variety is arbitrariness and arbitrariness is repudiation of any Secondness, has for its principal component the conception of First. In psychology Feeling is First, Sense of reaction Second, General conception Third, or mediation. In biology, the idea of arbitrary sporting is First, heredity is Second, the process whereby the accidental characters become fixed is Third. Change is First, Law is Second, and tendency to take habits is Third. Mind is First, Matter is Second, Evolution is Third. (CP 6.32, 1891; emphasis added)

A second implication of this new terminology is that the concept of relation is freed from the limitations of Secondness and can be applied as well to Thirdness. The discovery of relations of greater logical complexity than dual or dyadic relations enabled Peirce to combine his earlier concern with propositional representation with a greater sensitivity to the Thirdness inherent in certain social acts, such as giving, concluding of a contract, and forming behavioral habits. A legal contract, to take one example, cannot be accounted for merely by the combination of two dyadic relations, the first being A's signature on document C and the second being B's signature on document C. The essence of the contract lies in the "intent" of the contract, which stipulates certain conditional rules governing the future behavior of A and B (CP 1.475, c.1896). Thus the act of making a contract cannot be reduced to the composition of the component dyads, and yet the function of Thirdness inherent in the contract itself is to bring these two dyads into a relationship binding for the future. In 1902 Peirce returned to this connection among Thirdness, intention, and mediation:

In all action governed by reason such genuine triplicity will be found; while purely mechanical actions take place between pairs of particles. A man gives a brooch to his wife. The merely mechanical part of this act consists in his laying the brooch down while uttering certain sounds, and her taking it up. There is no genuine triplicity here; but there is no giving, either. The giving consists in his agreeing that a certain intellectual principle shall govern the relations of the brooch to his wife. The merchant in the Arabian Nights threw away a datestone which struck the eye of a Jinnee. This was purely mechanical, and there was no genuine triplicity. The throwing and the striking were independent of one another. But had he aimed at the Jinnee's eye, there would have been more than merely throwing away the stone. There would have been genuine triplicity, the stone being not merely thrown, but thrown at the eye. Here, intention, the mind's action, would have come in. Intellectual triplicity, or Mediation, is my third category. (CP 2.86, 1902; cf. MS 462.68-70, 1903)7

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It is the intentional character of "throwing at," of "giving to," that constitutes these acts as examples of genuine Thirdness; the linkage of two dyads creates something that has reality only by virtue of the "bringing together" or mediation of component elements.

A few years after writing the passage just cited, Peirce took a further step in his generalization of Thirdness by combining his earlier insights into the nature of symbolic representation and his new discoveries about triadic relations. Put simply, Peirce claimed that Thirdness is that which brings together or mediates Firstness and Secondness. In 1902 the claim was that mediation is a modification of Firstness and Secondness by Thirdness (CP 2.92), and in 1903 again Thirdness is defined as the "mediation between Secondness and Firstness" (CP 5.121). And finally in 1904 Peirce stated explicitly: "A Third is something which brings a First into relation to a Second" (SS 31) and then glossed the sign relation in identical language:

In its genuine form, Thirdness is the triadic relation existing between a sign, its object, and the interpreting thought, itself a sign, considered as constituting the mode of being a sign. A sign mediates between the interpretant sign and its object.... A Third is something which brings a First into relation to a Second. A sign is a sort of Third. (SS 31, 1904)

It would seem from this that Peirce is stressing the middle position of the sign vehicle or representamen rather than the function of mediate representation as exemplified in the work of the interpretant, which, as we have seen, characterized his earlier position.⁸ Throughout the first decade of the century Peirce consistently held two doctrines about Thirdness and signs: first, this function of "bringing together" is grounded on a rational, intellectual, and law-like regularity that provides the common feature of natural as well as cognitive processes; and second, the sign itself is the middle, medium, means, or mediation that links object and interpretant in a communication system (SS 32, 1904).