The Traffic Sign as A Sign:
Silent Speech Acts

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ABSTRACT
This essay has a five-fold purpose: (1) To define the term ‘sign’ and its referents; (2) to comment on semiosis and representation; (3) to discuss visual signs; (4) to use selectively traffic signs (regulatory, warning) to exemplify how these metal objects placed on highways provide motorists with visual guidance on traffic rules and traffic advisories; and (5) to show how traffic signs constitute a silent visual expression of Searle’s directive and representative (assertive) illocutionary acts.

KEYWORDS
Directives, Illocutionary Act, Meaning, Representation, Representatives, Semiosis, Sign, Traffic Sign, Visual Sign

INTRODUCTION
This essay reviews two meanings of the term sign. The first is its semiotic sense from the perspective of two of its most prominent theoreticians: (1) The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913); and (2) the US philosopher, logician, mathematician, and scientist Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). Second, it offers a discussion of semiosis, the process by which humans produce and comprehend signs. Third, it discusses the meaning of visual sign. Fourth, it examines two manifestations of the traffic sign (regulatory, warning) as an expression of indirect communication through a mute illocutionary act. Finally, it points out that certain traffic signs are visual manifestations of two of Searle’s (1968, 1969, 1976) illocutionary acts (representatives [assertives], directives).

SIGNS
The concept “sign” has multiple referents. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Morris, 1979, p. 1204) provides nine separate definitions. Only the first and third are of interest for this article, and they are reproduced here.

1. Something that suggests the presence or existence of a fact, condition, or quality not immediately evident; an indication: “Her silence is ... is an indication that she has a weapon” (J. P. Donleavy).
2. A board, poster, or placard displayed in a public place to advertise or convey information or a direction: a stop sign.

The first definition approximates the classic definition of the semiotic sign. The semiotic sign has at least two versions. The first, or the Saussurean sign, is dyadic. The Latin expression for this sign is aliquid stat pro alio (‘something stands for something’). In this instance, Danesi and Perron (1999: 72) provide this explanation:

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Saussure defined the sign as something perceivable (i.e., made up of sounds, letters, etc.), which he termed the signifier (= [A] part of the sign), that is used to encode a concept, which is called the signified (= [B] part of the sign). He named the relation between the two signification (= [A ☐ B]).

The Peircean sign, however, is triadic. In this regard, Danesi and Perron (1999, p. 73) point out that: Peirce called the perceivable part of the sign a representamen (literally “something that does the representing”) and the concept that it encodes the object (literally “something cast outside for observation”). He termed the meaning that someone gets from the sign the interpretant. This is itself a sign (or more accurately a signified in Saussurean terms) in that it entails knowing what a sign means (stands for) in personal, social and context-specific ways.

Figure 1 illustrates the triadic formulation of the Peircean sign (Danesi 2004, p. 26).

With respect to the Peircean sign, Deely (2009, p. 43) notes:

We need a formula for sign in general that remains triadic, as is Augustine’s original proposal, yet one that is capable of covering the involvement of psychological states in semiosis as well as that of sensible material structures involved in signifying. Aliquid alicui stat pro alio [’something stands to someone for another’] is the version of the classic formula that I would propose in order to take account of the involvement of signification with irreducibly three terms, yet without precluding psychological structures (verba interiora [’inner words’]), on the one hand, and without prejudging whether the ‘significate outcome’ need be an organism, either. Thus a sign is anything that stands for another than itself to yet some third: aliquid alicui stans pro alio [’something standing to someone for another’].

Petrilli (2011, p. 295) reasserts this significant difference between the dyadic (Saussure) and triadic (Peirce) nature of the sign when she refers to Deely’s essay in The American Journal of Semiotics (Deely 2004, pp. 30-31; Nuessel 2011, pp. 268-269; Sebeok 1994, p. 11) in which Deely argues for a tripartite Peircean conceptualization of the sign rather than a dyadic one.
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