Representation and Reference According to Peirce

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates Peirce’s semiotic solutions to the alleged problem of the inscrutability of reference (Peirce’s object) and examines Peirce’s terminology in the context of the notions of representation and reference. It elaborates on the distinction between representation of the object in the sign and the determination of the sign by its object, expounds the differences between the positivist view of the referent and the Peircean object of the sign, and describes the consequences of the distinction between the immediate and the dynamical objects. The paper provides examples of signs with imaginary, fictional, or mythological objects.

Keywords: Dynamical Object, Immediate Object, Mental Representation, Peirce, Refer, Reference, Referent, Representation, Representationism

INTRODUCTION

Reference is not a term that belongs to Charles S. Peirce’s semiotic vocabulary, whereas representation is one of his most frequently used key concepts. Nevertheless, in introductions and general surveys of semiotics, Peirce’s concept of the object of the sign has often been associated with the concept of reference as used in 20th century logical semantics in the tradition of Frege, Russell, Carnap, and Quine (in contrast to sense). Therefore, a closer look at the similarities and differences between these two terms seems worthwhile. Likewise, Peirce’s key concept representation deserves to be compared to the way the term representation is used by cognitive scientists.

Against the background of 20th century dualist models of reference, Peirce’s triadic semiotics is not only a counterpoint to the paradigms still prevailing in the cognitive sciences, but it also offers a number of solutions to certain aporias in dualist approaches to representation and reference. The confrontation of the key terms of representation and reference of positivist semantics with Peirce’s semiotics is not the only purpose of this paper. It has another focus on the modes of reference of fictional and imaginary objects, a topic which testifies to one of the aporias of positivist semantics due to its inability to deal with things which do not exist.

THE REFERENT VS. THE OBJECT OF THE SIGN

The distinction drawn by 20th century logical semanticians between sense and reference has led to aporias when expressions such as unicorn, round square, not, what, or the first woman who landed on the moon are concerned...
(cf. Kempson, 1977, pp. 13-14). Since such expressions do not refer to anything existent, they are usually said to have meaning or sense, but no reference, to signify, but not to denote. This solution implies a split theory of semantics according to which there are expressions with, and expressions without, a fully developed semantics, that is, expressions with both sense and reference, such as house or horse, expressions with sense but without reference, such as unicorn or not, and finally expressions with reference but without sense, such as proper names designating individuals.

Peirce’s theory of signs is utterly incompatible with such a dualistic theory of semantics split into two mutually independent domains, one being external to the human mind, the other being mental and hence internal to it. Not reference and sense are the correlates of the sign, but the object and the interpretant of the sign, and all signs have an object and an interpretant, according to Peirce. All words are signs which represent an object and determine an interpretant, even the conjunction and Savan (1994a, p. 189), for example, describes the object of this sign as our experience of how two or more entities are combined to form a group, a set, or otherwise a whole, but since the object of the sign need not be a material thing, we should add that the more abstract idea of a symmetrical conjunction is one of the objects of this sign.

A sign without either an object or an interpretant would be a contradiction in terms. In contrast to the referent or denotatum of logical semantics, which is usually defined as an individual or class of existents, Peirce’s object of the sign may also be a feeling, experience, cognition, a thought, an imagination, or even a fictional event. Unlike the sense or meaning of a word, the interpretant is not necessarily a mental concept, a thought, or an idea corresponding to the sign; it can be again a feeling, an action, or even be a material thing. For example, the cake baked after a cooking recipe is among the interpretants of the recipe, practically interpreted by the cook.

As anticipated above, reference, referent, or referential object, key terms in 20th century logical or referential semantics for the object to which a word or sign refers (cf. Nöth, 2000, pp. 139, 148, 152, 163), are concepts which Peirce does not use in this sense (cf. Savan, 1994a, pp. 187-189, 194b), although the concept of denotation, often a synonym of referent in logical semantics, occurs rather frequently. Peirce never uses the term referent. Occasionally, he uses the term reference in the sense of the three sign correlates of the sign. According to this usage, a sign does not have one, but three references, as Peirce writes in 1868:

Now a sign has, as such, three references: first, it is a sign to some thought which interprets it; second, it is a sign for some object to which in that thought it is equivalent; third, it is a sign, in some respect or quality, which brings it into connection with its object (Peirce, 1931-1958, para. 5.283, 1898)

Although Peirce does not use the term reference in its 20th century sense, questions of the relationship between the sign and the world to which it refers are, of course, omnipresent, but instead of referent, the correlate of the sign in the world to which it refers or better corresponds is called the object of the sign (Santaella, 1988, 1990, 1994; Joswick, 1996; Pepe, 1996).

According to Peirce, the sign does not really refer to its object. Instead, the sign represents its object. Only genuinely indexical signs refer in the sense that they indicate their object, since only their objects are “existent individuals (whether things or facts)” (Peirce, 1931-1958, para. 2.283, 1902); other indices, symbols, and icons do not. The object of the sign may also be something “believed formerly to have existed or expected to exist,” or “something of a general nature” (Peirce, 1931-1958, para. 2.232, 1910). It is certainly not a “thing.” Instead, it is that information, knowledge, or experience which an observer of the sign must have in order to be able to interpret the sign. Peirce had adopted the term object from 13th century scholastic terminology, where objectum meant “a creation of the mind in its reaction with a more or less real something […] upon which cognition is
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