

Peirce's Final Account of Signs and The Philosophy of Language

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Abstract

In this paper I examine parallels between C.S. Peirce's most mature account of signs and contemporary philosophy of language. I do this by first introducing a summary of Peirce's final account of Signs. I then use that account of signs to reconstruct Peircian answers to two puzzles of reference: The Problem of Cognitive Significance, or Frege's Puzzle; and The Same-Saying Phenomenon for Indexicals. Finally, a comparison of these Peircian answers with both Fregean and Direct Referentialist approaches to the puzzles highlights interesting parallels and important differences between Peirce's final account of signs, and the concepts used in analytic philosophy of language.

Keywords: Peirce, Signs, Philosophy of Language, Frege, Cognitive Significance

Introduction

A long standing interest in Peirce scholarship is the connection between Peirce's work and that carried out in contemporary analytic philosophy. We are often interested in whether Peirce exercises any influence over contemporary philosophy¹, the extent to which he pre-empts current ideas, and how Peircian concepts compare and contrast with their analytic counterparts. This is to be expected, since, as is frequently noted, Peirce is often concerned with the questions which occupy analytic philosophy: the nature of truth, science, knowledge, logic and meaning, etc.² The parallels between his pragmatism and the verificationist beginnings of analytic philosophy are well noted,³ and his place in the history of formal and mathematical logic well explored.⁴ However, one area where more comparison and examination is called for is the relationship between Peirce's semiotic and the philosophy of language. As Helmut Pape points out, "an analytic philosopher, when reading Peirce, might ask, where does the concept of reference fit into the framework of Peirce's semiotic?" (Pape 1991, 144). The chief concern of this paper is to address such questions as this by examining the connections between Peircian concepts and their analytic counterparts in the philosophy of language.

Anyone familiar with the literature and major currents of Peirce scholarship will be aware that some good research on the connection between Peirce and the philosophy of language already exists. Looking at the best and most relevant papers of the last two decades or so reveals Risto Hilpinen's (1992) and (1995) examinations of the relationship between Peirce's semiotic and the work of such analytic luminaries as Frege, Russell, Kripke, Kaplan, and David Lewis. Or Pape's (1982) and (1991) comparisons with Russell, and Casteñeda. Or Thibaud's (1997) mention of Peirce in relation to Quine, Frege, Russell, Church, and the Early Wittgenstein. Or Boersema's (2002) examination of Peirce's work in relation to causal theories of reference, particularly Kripke's. All of which raises the question, why is any further exploration or examination required? What could justify further comparison of Peirce's semiotic and analytic philosophy of language?

In short, the answer is that, though worthwhile and useful, current work does not make full use of Peirce's semiotic, or pay enough attention to the various stages in its development. Hilpinen uses the sign/object/interpretant and icon/index/symbol

divisions, and although he mentions the immediate/dynamic object distinction, this is unused. Pape goes no further than the icon/index/symbol trichotomy, although he makes disconnected mention of the immediate object in his (1991). Boersema uses the basic sign structure and notes Peirce's use of the dynamic object. Thibaud uses the basic sign structure, the icon/index/symbol division, notes the division of objects, and briefly mentions the logical interpretant, but, again, gives no sense of how these concepts are organized in Peirce's semiotic and from which stage in its development they come. What this means is that current comparisons, though useful and insightful, are limited; they use a scant and disconnected selection of Peirce's semiotic concepts and so cannot offer as useful or insightful an examination as they might otherwise have done. In essence, the complaint here echoes Houser's (1992) criticism of Hilpinen's (1992). Houser states that:

Hilpinen's abbreviated account [of Peirce's semiotic] is inadequate not because it necessarily leads to out and out mistakes (although perhaps in a sense it does), but because it does not accommodate certain important distinctions which must, therefore, either be ignored or, at best explained cryptically. (Houser 1992, 490)

I think this is applicable to all present attempts at comparing Peirce's semiotic with analytic work. Indeed, as Houser goes on to point out (1992, 499) the most worthwhile comparisons will need to use Peirce's most complex theory of signs: the final 1906-1910 typology. I would add to this that since the abbreviated accounts of semiotic currently used also fail to treat the connection between various semiotic concepts rigorously enough - they do not pay close enough attention to how the various concepts hang together at various stages of Peirce's development of semiotic - a worthwhile comparison might attend to this defect too. What this means, then, is that a comparison between Peirce's *final account* of signs and the work of contemporary philosophy of language simply does not exist. This is why I contend that a further exploration in this area is now needed.

In this paper, then, I offer such a comparison. This, of course, involves summarizing Peirce's final account of signs, and how its various concepts hang together (section 1). Although a comparison with analytic concepts might seem to lift off from there, I propose to identify appropriate counterparts by looking at two of the many puzzles which have occupied contemporary philosophers of language (section 2) and how, by using Peirce's semiotic, we might answer those puzzles (section 3). From there, we can draw comparisons between Peirce and the work of contemporary philosophers by noting how their respective concepts function in answering the puzzles (section 4). Let us begin, then, by introducing Peirce's final account of signs.

The Final Typology (1906–10)

In one of his many definitions of a sign, Peirce writes:

I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the later is thereby mediately determined by the former. (EP2.478)

This is the Peircian sign at its simplest: a sign, an object, and an interpretant. To keep matters simple, the sign is whatever signifies, for example, a written word or utterance, the object, is whatever is signified, for example, the object to which the

written or uttered word attaches, and the interpretant is whatever understanding we have of that object via the sign/object relation. This basic structure remained broadly consistent throughout Peirce's many accounts of signs. However, during the last part of his life, particularly between 1906 and 1910, Peirce made considerable additions, suggesting that any sign will have not one, but *two objects*, and not one, but *three interpretants*.⁵ Whilst the cause of this development is open to speculation, I endorse Ransdell's (1977) and Short's (2004), suggestion that they stem from Peirce's growing appreciation of the connections between the semiotic process and the process of inquiry. According to such a view, Peirce came to see sign theory more clearly as part of the logic of scientific discovery, and central to his account of inquiry. In particular, it led him to see sign chains (like inquiry) as tending towards a definite but idealized end.

The Dynamic and Immediate Objects

The first addition, the division of objects, is essentially a distinction between the object of the sign as we understand it at some given point in the semiotic process, and the object of the sign as it stands at the idealized end of that process. A neat way of capturing this distinction is as the different objects corresponding to the "two answers to the question: what object does this sign refer to? One is the answer that could be given when the sign was used; and the other is the one we could give when our scientific knowledge is complete" (Hookway 1985, 139). Peirce calls the former the *immediate object*, and the later the *dynamic object*.

Examining these two objects further, the dynamic object is, in some respects, the object that underlies a sign-chain. Ransdell (1977, 169) describes the dynamic object as the "object as it really is", and Hookway (1985, 139) as "the object as it is known to be [at the end of inquiry]". The aim, or teleological end, of a sign-chain, then, is to deliver a full understanding of an object thereby assimilating it into our system of signs. An example, from Liszka (1996, 23), captures Peirce's idea quite clearly. A petroleum tank half full with fuel has a variety of signs for this half-full state: a fuel gauge attached to the tank, or the distinctive sound when we strike it and so on. Despite the variety of available signs, however, only one object underlies them, namely, the actual fuel-level of the tank. This is the dynamic object.

The immediate object, in contrast, is described by Ransdell (1977, 169), as "what we, at any time, suppose the object to be", and by Hookway (1985, 139) as "the object at the time it is first used and interpreted". The immediate object, then, is not some extra signified object distinct from the dynamic object. Rather, it is an informationally incomplete facsimile of the dynamic object generated at some interim stage in a sign-chain. To return to Liszka's example, whilst the tone emitted by striking the tank might tell us that the tank is not full, it would not tell us the precise level of fuel either. Consequently, the immediate object, that is, what our impressions suggest the dynamic object to be, is a less-than-full-tank.

From what we have said thus far, it should be clear that the immediate and dynamic objects are closely connected: the dynamic object is the teleological end that drives the semiotic process, and the immediate object is what our impression at some point in the process suggests that object to be. As Ransdell says:

[T]he immediate object is the object as it appears at any point in the inquiry or semiotic process. The [dynamic] object, however, is the object as it really is. [...] In other words, the immediate object is simply what we at any time suppose the [dynamic] object to be. (Ransdell 1977, 169)

The Immediate, Dynamic, and Final Interpretants

According to the later developments, as a sign-chain progresses there are different interpretants playing different but significant roles. Peirce identifies three different ways in which we grasp a sign's standing for its object. He calls these the *immediate*, *dynamic*, and *final interpretants*, and describes them thus:

The [Dynamic] Interpretant is whatever interpretation any mind actually makes of a sign. [...] The Final Interpretant does not consist in the way in which any mind does act but in the way in which every mind *would* act. That is, it consists in a truth which might be expressed in a conditional proposition of this type: "If so and so were to happen to any mind this sign would determine that mind to such and such conduct." [...] The Immediate Interpretant consists in the Quality or the Impression that a sign is fit to produce, not to any actual reaction. [...] (CP 8.315, 1909)

A useful way of understanding Peirce's ideas here is to understand that Peirce saw the division of interpretants as reflecting the Three Grades of Clarity introduced in his "How To Make Our Ideas Clear" (W3. 257-275 (1878)). According to this paper, conceptual clarity requires, quotidian familiarity with that concept, the ability to offer some general definition of it, and knowing what effects to expect from holding that concept to be true. Peirce notes the connections himself thus:

In the Second Part of my ["How To Make Our Ideas Clear"], I made three grades of clearness of Interpretation. The first was such Familiarity as gave a person familiarity with a sign and readiness in using it or interpreting it. [...] The second was Logical Analysis [and is equivalent to] Lady Welby's Sense. The third was Pragmatistic Analysis [and is] identified with the Final Interpretant. (CP8.185, 1909)

Here, then, the first grade of clarity is identified with the dynamic interpretant, the second grade with the immediate interpretant, and the third grade with the final interpretant.

As its identification with the second grade of clarity suggests, the immediate interpretant is a general, definitional, understanding of the sign. In one example, where the dynamic object is stormy weather, Peirce describes the immediate interpretant as "the schema in [our] imagination, i.e. the vague Image of what there is in common to the different images of a stormy day" (CP 8.314 (1907)). The immediate interpretant, then, is something like our grasp of the syntax of the sign, and general features of its meaning. Indeed, Peirce treats the immediate interpretant as "all that is explicit in the sign apart from its context and circumstances of utterance" (CP 5.473 (1907)).

The dynamic interpretant, on the other hand, is our understanding of the sign at some actual instance in the semiotic process. Peirce describes the dynamic interpretant as the "effect actually produced on the mind" (CP 8.343 (1908)), or as the "actual effect which the sign, as a sign, really determines" (CP 4.536 (1906)). The dynamic interpretant, then, is the understanding we reach, or which the sign determines, at a particular semiotic stage. Additionally, there is a connection between the dynamic interpretant and the immediate object which it is important to make clear.

Since the dynamic interpretant is the understanding we actually reach at some point in the sign chain, it provides an incomplete understanding of the dynamic object. More important, though, is that the immediate object of some stage in a sign chain consists of the dynamic interpretants from earlier stages. As Ransdell (1977,

169) puts it, the “immediate object is, in other words, the funded result of all interpretation prior to the interpretation of the given sign”. The dynamic interpretant then, is the actual interpretation or understanding we make at some point in the semiotic process, and, along with other previous dynamic interpretants, helps to compose the immediate object of the sign.

Peirce describes the final interpretant as, “that which would finally be decided to be the true interpretation if consideration of the matter were carried so far that an ultimate opinion were reached” (CP 8.184 (1909)), or as the “effect that would be produced on the mind by the sign after sufficient development of thought” (CP 8.343 (1908)). The final interpretant, then, is what our understanding of the dynamic object would be at the end of inquiry, that is, if we were to reach a full and true understanding of the dynamic object. Peirce’s notion of inquiry is clearly central here. As Hookway puts it, the final interpretant is the understanding:

which would be reached if a process of enriching the interpretant through scientific enquiry were to proceed indefinitely. It incorporates a complete and true conception of the objects of the sign; it is the interpretant we should all agree on in the long run. (Hookway 1985, 139).

It should be clear from such descriptions that the final interpretant is connected to other elements, in particular the dynamic object and dynamic interpretant. First, it is the point where our grasp of the dynamic object would be complete and, according to Ransdell (1977, 169-170), is where the immediate object and the dynamic object coincide. Second, it functions as a normative standard by which we may judge our actual interpretative responses to the sign. As David Savan puts it, “Peirce’s intention was to identify the third type of interpretant as providing a norm or standard by which particular stages (Dynamical Interpretants) of an historical process may be judged.” (Savan 1988, 62).

In summary, then, the elements of the sign and signification in Peirce’s final account of signs⁶ are as follows:

1. The Sign.
2. The Dynamic object.
(The real object as it is known at the end of inquiry).
3. The Immediate object.
(The object suggested by current understanding, and generated by previous dynamic interpretants).
4. The Immediate Interpretant.
(Our general understanding of the form, or syntax, of the sign).
5. The Dynamic Interpretant.
(The actual understanding of the dynamic object at some interim stage in the semiotic chain/process).
6. The Final Interpretant.
(The understanding of the dynamic object at the end of inquiry).

This, then, is the account and the concepts that we shall be using in the rest of this paper.

Two Well Known Puzzles of Reference

The method by which we shall compare the concepts from Peirce’s final account with analytic counterparts is by outlining two puzzles⁷ that have occupied contemporary

philosophers of language. Then, by generating Peircian answers to those puzzles, we can compare those answers with the tools used by analytic philosophers to solve these problems. The first puzzle we shall look at, then, is what is frequently known as *Frege's Puzzle*, or *The Problem of Cognitive Significance*.

Given two assumptions, first, that the meaning of a sentence depends upon the meaning and arrangement of its parts, and second, that the meanings of those parts are just the things to which they refer, we find tensions with pairs of sentences such as these:

- 1) Hesperus is Hesperus
- 2) Hesperus is Phosphorus

By our two assumptions, these sentences should have the same meaning: their respective parts have the same meaning (both use “is”, and “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” both refer to Venus), and those parts are arranged in the same way. However, this seems to be in tension with a difference in the respective *informativeness* of 1) and 2). Discovering 1) barely seems to be a discovery at all, yet 2) might be considered an addition to knowledge, or of some cognitive significance. How, then, are we to explain this? How are we to account for the difference between 1) and 2) despite their having the same semantic components arranged in the same way? We shall look at answers to these questions shortly.

The second puzzle is similarly well known and concerns what we might call the Same-Saying Phenomenon. S and T's respective utterances of “I am thirsty”, in a trivial respect, say the same thing in that S and T utter the same string of words. Crucially, though, in an important respect, S and T say something different: S says that she, S, is thirsty, whereas T says that she, T, is thirsty. Similarly, S's utterance of “I am thirsty” and T's utterance of “you are thirsty”, to S, are trivially different – they both declare different strings of words – but importantly similar in that both say that S is thirsty. How should we go about explaining S and T's ability to say the same thing with different words and different things with the same words? Again, we shall look at answers to these questions shortly.

Peirce's Answer to the Puzzles

Looking again at the problem of cognitive significance, the two sentences at stake are:

- 1) Hesperus is Hesperus
- And
- 2) Hesperus is Phosphorus

To explain the cognitive significance of 2) over 1), we are looking for significant differences between the two terms used in 2), after all, it is because no differences exist between the two terms used in 1) that it is cognitively insignificant. What tools does the final account of signs outlined above offer us for explaining why 2) is informative?

The dynamic objects of “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” are the same, namely Venus. Similarly, the final interpretants are just our full or complete understanding that the dynamic object of both these signs is Venus. Consequently, these features do not explain the cognitive significance of 2). However, there is scope for explaining the differences between the two singular terms used in 2) in terms of immediate objects, and immediate and dynamic interpretants.

The differences in the two terms' immediate interpretants are that, although they are both names, they are not the same name. Consequently, 1) and 2) differ at the level of the immediate interpretant: 1) uses two occurrences of the same name, 2) uses one occurrence each of two different names. However, this difference may not account for cognitive significance. The difference in the immediate interpretants noted here is similar to Frege's (1879) attempt at explaining the difference between 1) and 2) in terms of the signs used rather than the objects denoted. The claim is that at, a meta-linguistic level, 1) says that the sign "Hesperus" represents the same object as the sign "Hesperus", whilst 2) says that the sign "Hesperus" represents the same object as the sign "Phosphorus": clearly more informative than 1). However, Frege rejected this *name-view* because the statements under scrutiny do not seem to be about the relations between names: 2) seems to be informative on astronomical rather than linguistic grounds. However, with the Peircian apparatus we have at our disposal here, we can accommodate the view that, at least partially, 1) and 2) are separable at the meta-linguistic level without being committed to the idea that this provides grounds for explaining the cognitive significance of 2) over 1). Rather, we can maintain that differences in dynamic interpretants and immediate objects account for cognitive significance.

The differences between the dynamic interpretants and immediate objects of "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus" come from the understanding we reach in particular interpretative instances, and the corresponding impression of the dynamic object that arises. So, when we find the use of "Hesperus" in 2) we come to understand that 2) concerns, amongst other things, the object which we refer to as "Hesperus". The immediate object that results will be just the impression of the dynamic object that this, along with preceding dynamic interpretants, affords us. For example, assuming we look at Venus first thing in the early morning and again first thing at night, the dynamic interpretant for "Hesperus" will yield an immediate object something like "the-last-star-visible-at-sunrise". And the immediate object for "Phosphorus" will be something like "the-first-star-visible-after-sunset". The difference here between "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus", then, is that (differences in immediate interpretant aside) they generate different immediate objects or impressions of their dynamic objects.

There is also an interesting extension of this strategy for dealing with such puzzles when they arise with demonstratives. Imagine that you and I are watching cars enter a mountain tunnel at one end, and exit at the other a few seconds later⁸. I utter, "that car is that car", whilst identifying a distinctive red car as it enters the tunnel with the first that-phrase, and the same distinctive red car as it exits the tunnel with the second that-phrase. I take myself to be making an informative statement, but for this to be so, my two uses of "that car" must differ in some way. Otherwise, I am making the rather uninformative claim that the distinctive red car is self-identical.

As with the "Hesperus"/"Phosphorus" case, the dynamic object and final interpretants are the same – my first use of "that car" ("that car"₁) and my second use of "that car" ("that car"₂) denote the same object. Unlike the "Hesperus"/"Phosphorus" case, however, the immediate interpretants of both signs in this case are the same, namely, that the sign is a complex demonstrative composed of the demonstrative "that" and the noun "car". We must make the distinction between "that car"₁ and "that car"₂, then, at the level of dynamic interpretants and their corresponding immediate objects. The dynamic interpretant of "that car"₁ is your understanding that I am demonstrating a red car entering the tunnel, and the corresponding immediate object is the-red-car-entering-the-tunnel. The dynamic

interpretant for “that car”₂ is your understanding that I am demonstrating a red car leaving the tunnel, and the corresponding immediate object is the-red-car-leaving-the-tunnel. The cognitive significance, or informativeness, of “that car is that car”, then, comes from the different dynamic interpretants and immediate objects that correspond to each that-phrase.

Turning to the same-saying puzzle, the final account of signs seems to explain the ability to say the same thing with different words, and different things with the same words in a quite straightforward manner. S’s and T’s respective utterances of, “I am thirsty”, differ at the level of dynamic objects and final interpretants but coincide at the level of immediate interpretants. The dynamic objects, and consequently our complete grasp of those objects, in these two utterances clearly differ: one is S and the other is T. But of course, the immediate interpretants are the same: in both cases, the sign is a use of the first person pronoun by some subject to predicate thirstiness of themselves. Correspondingly, S’s utterance of, “I am thirsty”, and T’s utterance of, “you are thirsty” to S coincide at the level of dynamic objects and final interpretants but differ at the level of immediate interpretants. The dynamic object (and so final interpretant) in both cases is S. However, the grammatical differences between the two utterances mean they have different immediate interpretants.

With these responses in hand, then, we can compare Peirce’s concepts from the final account with their analytic counterparts.

Comparing Concepts

Handling the puzzles with Peirce’s final account presents some obvious parallels with contemporary approaches. For instance, in both puzzles the dynamic object acts as the object to which reference is made. The obvious analogies here are with Frege’s *Bedeutung*, or with direct-reference theorists’ notion of referent or denoted object. Frege, for instance, takes a sign’s *Bedeutung* to be the object for which it stands; similarly, for Peirce, the dynamic object is the *real* object signified by the sign. There are, of course, contrasts too. As Hilpinen notes (1992, 473), for Frege, the reference of a sentence is a truth-value, however, it isn’t clear that Peirce would treat truth-values as dynamic objects for sentences. Rather, the dynamic object of a sentence like “I am thirsty” would be a “state of things”. Peirce says, “A state of things is an abstract constituent part of reality, of such a nature that a proposition is needed to represent it” (CP 5.549 (1906))⁹. This feature, then, is reasonably straightforward.

Less straight forward, however, is the immediate object. Recall that the immediate object is the object as it is suggested by previous interpretation, that is, as some partial picture of the dynamic object at some interim stage of inquiry. The role of the immediate object in Peirce’s semiotic is to provide a picture of progress; it tells us how far the semiotic process has captured the dynamic object. Moreover, looking at the puzzles, the immediate object, (and its related notion of dynamic interpretant) looked like a Peircian candidate for cognitive significance. These notions of partial illumination, or partial presentation, and candidacy for explaining cognitive significance clearly invite comparison with Frege’s *Sinn*, or concept of sense. And, indeed, there are some striking similarities between the two concepts.

Fregean sense is well known, but briefly, Frege’s candidate for cognitive significance is not the *Bedeutung* or reference, but the mode by which the referent is presented to us. Sense, as a mode of presentation, accounts for the informativeness of 2) over 1), since discovering 2) is to discover that two different senses correspond to the same referent. The reason this works, of course, is that sense offers us is only a partial, or incomplete take on the object. This makes sense and the immediate object

look like bedfellows. And indeed, many of the key theses that hold of Fregean Sense seem to hold of the Peircian Immediate Object. For instance, for Frege, one referent may have many senses and each sense at most one referent. Something similar seems to hold between the immediate and dynamic objects. Consider that each dynamic object generates a sign-chain, culminating in a final interpretant. Each stage in that chain contains an immediate object, or partial reflection of the dynamic object. So, for any dynamic object there are potentially many immediate objects. And since each immediate object is generated from particular dynamic interpretants of a particular dynamic object, each immediate object is connected to a unique dynamic object. Similarly, where Frege thinks that we can have signs with sense but no reference (1892, 28), there is suspicion amongst Peirce scholars that sign-chains without dynamic objects might offer a Peircian account of empty reference or reference to fictives¹⁰.

There are, however, some important differences. First, senses are not accumulative in the same way that immediate objects are. That is, we can see how one immediate object builds upon the next as a semiotic chain tends towards a final end; any connection between senses with the same reference is not like this. For example, if we think of the-last-star-visible-at-sunrise as the immediate object of “Hesperus”, we can think of that immediate object as “built up” from such previous dynamic interpretants as, our understanding that the dynamic object is visible to the naked eye, that it is visible at sunrise, that it is (putatively) a star, that its light is the last to be drowned out by daylight, etc., etc.¹¹ Immediate objects, then, are accumulative and inferential, and are connected to each other by more than simply sharing a dynamic object; they represent different stages of understanding in the same information-gathering process. Senses do not work like this: they are simply different modes of presentation for the same referent.

Second, whilst sense may determine reference,¹² immediate objects do not determine dynamic objects. The sense of a sign contains a means of identifying the object to which it refers. So, for instance, if one sense of “Hesperus” is “the last visible star before sunrise”, this can function as a criterion that any object must satisfy in order to count as the referent of “Hesperus”. Immediate objects in their relation to dynamic objects, however, do not behave in this way. Rather, immediate objects are the sum of our understanding of dynamic objects. This does not look like determination or a criterion of identity.

These comparisons are interesting, I think, since the connections between Peirce’s semiotic and Frege’s notions of sense and reference have intrigued Peirce scholars but are difficult to work out, especially without a full range of semiotic concepts in play.¹³ It is clear, however, from looking at the responses to the problem of cognitive significance, that Frege’s sense and Peirce’s immediate object are bedfellows. This is due, primarily, to their both representing a partial grasp or incomplete presentation of their referents. However, what sets them apart is that, for Frege, sense is a means for apprehending a referent, but for Peirce an immediate object is the extent of our apprehension of the referent. A Fregean sense is, in Michael Dummett’s words, “a mode by which reference is apprehended” (Dummett 1981, 634). A Peircian immediate object is *just* our apprehension of the referent so far.

Turning to the immediate interpretant, we find other interesting potential comparisons with analytic philosophy of language. Recall that the immediate interpretant is the general understanding of the sign: it is a grasp of the syntax and general meaning for signs of this type. In the puzzles above, it enabled us to note a difference between signs in the question of cognitive significance (although it wasn’t

a good candidate for cognitive significance). And it helped to explain same-saying – two utterances of, “I am thirsty”, by two different people share immediate interpretants, but not final interpretants, and, “I am thirsty”, and “you are thirsty”, said by and to the same person share final interpretants, but not immediate interpretants.

A clear analogue from contemporary philosophy of language is David Kaplan’s notion of character. Famously, in his account of meaning for indexical expressions (1989a, 1989b) Kaplan distinguishes two types of meaning for words like “I”, “here” “you”, and so on. This is his celebrated distinction between *character* and *content*. At one level, Kaplan claims, indexical words have the same meaning every time they are used; this meaning is retained across uses and is akin to a use-rule. This constant type of meaning Kaplan calls *character*. At another level, however, words such as “I”, “here” etc., are sensitive to particular instances of use and so vary in meaning. This level of meaning Kaplan calls *content*. What is more, Kaplan takes these two kinds of meaning to be related – characters, when applied to contexts determine contents. So, apply the character for “I”, something akin to “The utterer of “I””, to a context and the utterer of “I” in that context will be determined as content.¹⁴ In terms of same-saying, when S and T both say, “I am thirsty”, their utterances share characters, but differ in content. And when S says, “I am thirsty” and T says to S, “you are thirsty”, their utterances share content but differ in character. Put in this way, character looks rather like the immediate interpretant. Indeed, David Braun’s description of character as “a meaning that the *expression* has “independently of context”” (Braun 1996, 147), and Peirce’s description of the immediate interpretant as “all that is explicit in the sign itself apart from its context and circumstances of utterance” (CP 5.473 (1907)), makes the comparison all the more compelling. However, there are some important qualifications to make.

First, Kaplan’s notion of character is often described, formally, as a function rather than as a linguistic rule: character takes context as an argument and yields content as value. It is not clear that the immediate interpretant is, or could be, a function in anything like this sense. Peirce’s more formal understanding of the immediate interpretant is as a schema.¹⁵ What Peirce seems to have in mind with such a move is the Kantian notion of general rules or laws formed from the “productive imagination”. Through the abstraction of commonalities from a multitude of similar cases, we derive a general law or type-rule. It is possible, of course, that the way in which we are supposed to use this schema when we come across new signs is to use it like a function anyway, i.e. by effectively taking the schema to a context and filling out general concepts with particular instances thereby yielding something with a definite value, but it is not clear that this is what Peirce has in mind. If there are similarities with Kaplanian character, then, it is with Kaplan’s informal construal of character as a linguistic rule rather than as a function. However, there are other potential difficulties for any such comparison.

Kaplan takes himself to be providing an account of meaning for *expressions* (i.e. *types* of potential utterance) rather than *utterances* (i.e. *tokens* of the type). There are certain elements in Peirce’s characterization of the immediate interpretant however, which suggest he is not providing an expression theory. Consider, for example, the following description from David Savan:

The [immediate interpretant] is that explicit content of the sign which “would enable a person to say whether or not the sign was applicable to anything concerning which that person had sufficient acquaintance”. (Savan 1988, 53)¹⁶

There is clearly some allusion here to the fact that the immediate interpretant is not just a general type-meaning, like character, but involves some application of that type meaning to a particular token, i.e. a token with which we have “sufficient acquaintance”. The immediate interpretant, then, despite looking like character, is perhaps best seen as part of an utterance theory rather than an expression theory. This is interesting for the following reason.

Recent work by John Perry (2001) draws a distinction between general meaning for *types*, which he simply calls *meaning* and identifies with Kaplanian character, and the instantiation of that general type-meaning in specific *tokens* devoid of actual contextual facts, which he calls *indexical content*. Perry’s distinction is heavily theory laden, but the best way to understand it is through the following example from Perry:

Imagine seeing a token, or hearing a token without being in a position to perceive the existential facts or context. For example, you find a note that says, “I plan to kill him tomorrow”. You don’t know who wrote it, in reference to whom and when. You have the token, but not the context. So you grasp [...] the indexical meaning. (Perry 2001, 73)

This is worth noting because what Perry takes himself to be describing here is an interim level of meaning between meaning for general expressions, (character, linguistic meaning etc.) and content; he is, in short, providing an account of “dry” meaning for actual utterances. There are remarkable similarities between the example that Perry uses, and the following example given by David Savan:

Walking along the street, I come upon the chalked scrawl on a pavement, “I love you”. Here the [immediate interpretant] is not only that one individual loves another, but also that whoever inscribed “I” loves someone who is being addressed. Still, it is not part of the [immediate interpretant] that the lover in this case is a child living in this particular neighborhood, etc. (Savan 1988, 54)

Additionally, Perry’s description of indexical content as a kind of “dry” meaning for utterances of a general type is taken directly from Arthur Burks’ (1949) paper “Icon, Index and Symbol”, which is meant to be a development of Peirce’s semiotic ideas.¹⁷

What, then, are we to make of all this? Is the immediate interpretant an account of meaning for expressions, and so broadly comparable with character, or is it an account of meaning for utterances, and so broadly comparable with Perry’s indexical meaning? I think the matter is not clear. However, the role played by the immediate interpretant in Peircian answers to puzzles such as same-saying clearly suggests it is a concept of the same ilk as character or indexical meaning.

Turning, briefly, to the dynamic interpretant, I think that this concept has the least clear connection or comparison with contemporary analytic concepts. But of course, this is to be expected – the dynamic interpretant is bound up with semiosis and the process of inquiry. The dynamic interpretant comes from Peirce’s treatment of semiotic as *goal-directed*. The objective behind semiosis is to gain a state of perfect knowledge about the referent. Furthermore, reaching our semiotic goal is unlikely to be instantaneous, indeed, if inquiry is the model, it will only be an idealized end. The dynamic interpretant, then, as its connection with the immediate object suggests, represents our position or stage in the semiotic process.

There are, as I have suggested, no obvious or distinctive parallels, so I shall not dwell too long on the dynamic interpretant, except to make the following brief points. First, comparisons so far have dwelt squarely on semantic concepts. It may be that the

dynamic interpretant is the place in Peirce's semiotic where we find we are able to handle the more pragmatic elements of language, the features that arise from instances of communication, for instance, implicatures. Second, there is a move in some quarters of the philosophy of language, driven mainly by work in linguistics, from what some have called "*static*" conceptions of semantics, that is, semantics concerned with specifying truth-conditions, to *dynamic semantics*, that is, semantics which make "crucial use of the way in which the epistemic state of an agent changes as the interpretation process proceeds." (Beaver (1997), 30). As Frank Veltman puts it:

The slogan 'You know the meaning of a sentence if you know the conditions under which it is true' is replaced by this one: 'You know the meaning of a sentence if you know the change it brings about in the information state of anyone who accepts the news conveyed by it'. (Veltman 1996, 221)

How Peirce's dynamic interpretant would fit in here is not altogether clear. However, its role in reflecting our changing and developing understanding during the semiotic process sounds strikingly in line with the driving aims of dynamic semantics. Such comparisons may turn out to be unhelpful in understanding the connections between Peirce and contemporary work, but all the same, if such a "dynamic" sensibility exists in Peirce's final semiotic, and I think it does, it may go some way to explaining why there are such persistent difficulties in comparing Peirce's work with the "static" semantics of analytic mainstays like Frege, Russell, Kripke et. al.

Turning to the final interpretant, recall that, as we detailed it above, it is "that which would finally be decided to be the true interpretation" (CP 8.184 (1909)), and which "incorporates a complete and true conception of the [dynamic] objects of the sign" (Hookway 1985, 139). Given that this complete and true understanding of the dynamic object makes the final interpretant central to the content of the sign, in as much as, the meaning of a sign is manifest in that complete or final interpretation, we can begin to see some possible comparisons. In particular, the idea that the final interpretant is a bearer of truth which, if Savan's claim about its status as a normative exemplar is to be upheld, underlies all our actual dynamic interpretants, it invites comparison with contemporary notions of the proposition, or propositional content. Indeed, this seems to be further endorsed by looking at the role played by the final interpretant in answering the puzzles above: it plays a similar role to propositional content, or the-what-is-said element, of contemporary accounts.

Consider again Kaplan's character/content division as a response to the same-saying puzzle. Judging by the parallels with our Peircian answer, if the immediate interpretant corresponds to something like character, then the final interpretant presumably corresponds to something like content – they seem to serve similar roles. There are, however, some important questions to ask in making any kind of comparison between the final interpretant and propositional content.

To begin with there are different candidate explanations of propositional content: those that tend to take objects or referents to be constituents of the proposition, and those that think there is some intermediary between propositional content and objects. For instance, a referentialist, like Kaplan, treats the contents of singular terms as individuals, the contents of predicates as properties, and the contents of sentences as structured propositions, that is, as propositions composed of *the* individual referents and properties that form the content of its component parts. Someone like Frege, on the other hand, thinks propositional content is object-independent and that singular terms, predicates and sentences all have senses. In the case of sentences, the content, or sense, is a "thought" (or *Fregean proposition*) composed of the senses of its

composite parts. There are, then, a range of questions we can ask about the relation between these ideas and Peirce's final interpretant. First, given the nature of most contemporary accounts of propositions, can we assume that the final interpretant just is Peirce's version of the proposition – is the final interpretant anything like contemporary notions of propositional content? Second, assuming it is, what kind of contemporary account is it closest to?

The first question is, I think, fraught with difficulty, primarily because it is hard to know if Peirce really thinks of final interpretants as propositions, and if so, how this relates to other things he says about propositions. There is some evidence to support treating final interpretants as propositions (with propositional components). For instance, Peirce says that the final interpretant “consists in a truth which might be expressed in a conditional *proposition*” (CP 8.315 (1909)) (Italics mine).¹⁸ This suggests that, for Peirce, there is some connection between final interpretants and propositions. Additionally, there is evidence that Peirce's ideas about the nature of propositions are of the right stripe to support treating final interpretants that way:

I [...] use the term proposition to denote that meaning of a sentence which not only remains the same in whatever language it is expressed, but is also the same whether it is believed, or doubted, asserted [...] commanded [...] or put as a question [...] (L 75.396, 1902)¹⁹

Some peculiarities aside, this notion of the proposition sounds familiar to contemporary ears, and seems to describe the role played by the final interpretant in the same-saying puzzle, namely, to denote the fixed element of meaning. The use transcendent element of meaning, the proposition, is simply what someone like Kaplan would call content, what Frege would call “a thought”, and what Peirce calls a final interpretant. Perhaps, then, final interpretants are propositions.

However, when we begin to examine other things that Peirce says about propositions, difficulties arise. First, we know that on most contemporary accounts, propositions are compositional: they contain the content of their individual parts as constituents. Peirce seems to think of propositions as, in some sense compositional, in that they are composed of individual signs for their subjects and predicates²⁰. However, this is problematic since he further qualifies the predicate of the proposition as its interpretant²¹. This seems to be at loggerheads with treating final interpretants as the analogue of Kaplanian propositions or Fregean Thoughts since, if propositions are signs composed of subject and predicate, and the predicate acts as interpretant, then propositions seem to *contain* interpretants as constituents. However, if the final interpretant is a proposition, then we are saying that final interpretants (as propositions) *contain* interpretants, that is, that propositions contain propositions as constituents: this is clearly odd. There certainly seem to be some tensions here. On the one hand, Peirce's description of propositions as denoting the fixed meaning of sentences seems to accord neatly with the behavior of the final interpretant in the puzzle cases. But on the other, treating the final interpretant as a proposition seems to conflict with other things that Peirce says about the structure of interpretants. Perhaps, then, whatever Peirce thought of final interpretants, it is not clear that he thought of them as candidates for propositional content.

There is, however, what I think is a ready diagnosis for the conflict between identifying final interpretants with propositions and what Peirce says of their structure: the problem stems from the change in views from the 1903 account to the account we are interested in, the 1906-1910 account. For instance, the claim that propositions contain interpretants (which seems to entail the claim that propositions

contain propositions) stems, initially, from Peirce's 1903 identification of the proposition with the dicentric-symbolic-legisign. Of course, by the time we start dealing with the division of objects and interpretants this definition is no longer apt, and signs are not some combination of three semiotic trichotomies (as the dicentric-symbolic-legisign is), but rather a combination of ten.²² This is not to say that there are no post 1906 textual conflicts, there are. But, the final account is notoriously patchy and incomplete, and I suspect Peirce was still using some of the ideas and terminology of his 1903 account. To use Murphey's metaphor (1961, 3-4), if the 1906-1910 semiotic is one of the last of room alterations made in Peirce's mansion, he did not manage to dispose of all the 1903 décor.²³ If this is correct, and the conflict arising from Peirce's comments on the structure of propositions can be explained away, then our grounds for treating the final interpretant as Peirce's version of the proposition is simply that final interpretants behave just as Peirce thinks propositions should – as invariant meanings. These grounds are certainly not conclusive, but they do offer the beginnings of an answer to how final interpretants and propositions are related.

Assuming, then, that we may well have grounds for treating final interpretants as Peirce's version of propositions, which type of contemporary account is its closet analogue?²⁴ Particularly useful for answering this question, I think, is a comparison of the answers to the same-saying phenomenon we looked at earlier. As we noted, for a referentialists like Kaplan, where S says, "I am thirsty", and T says to S, "You are thirsty", these two sentences both express the same proposition since their propositions both have the same constituents (in the same relation to each other), that is, they both express <S, being-thirsty>. For Frege, however, these two sentences express *different* propositions because a Fregean proposition (or "Thought") is the sense of a sentence composed of the senses of its constituents. Clearly, "I" and "You" have different senses and so make different contributions to their relative "Thoughts". And with different constituents, two Fregean propositions are different. Turning to Peirce's account, the final interpretant of S's utterance of, "I am thirsty" is our complete grasp that S is thirsty, and the final interpretant of T's utterance to S of, "You are thirsty" is our complete grasp that S is thirsty. Clearly, then, the referentialist account and Peirce's are closer here than Peirce and Frege's; Frege generates two propositions in the same-saying puzzle where referentialist and Peircian accounts generate only one. I think, however, we cannot conclude too much from this. The final interpretant as a complete and total understanding, a God's eye comprehension of objects, as it were, clearly has plenty that it is not in common with referentialist notions where the objects themselves are loaded directly into the proposition. More work certainly needs to be done here.

Concluding Comments

This, then, is a first and tentative attempt at offering a comparison between Peirce's final account of signs and some corresponding concepts in contemporary analytic philosophy of language. The dynamic object looks very like Peirce's version of *reference* or *denoted object*. The immediate object seems to bear comparison with Frege's sense: despite certain important differences, it plays a similar role in answering puzzles and explaining putatively problematic phenomena. The immediate interpretant looks rather like a Peircian analogue of the dry, lexical or linguistic meaning that many words have, and which analytic philosophers have tried to capture by positing *characters* or *indexical meanings*: again, it would seem to play a similar role in solving problem cases. Dynamic interpretants, as we saw, are more

problematic to find contemporary analogues for. However, they allow us to conjecture that Peirce's view of meaning in the final account of signs is "dynamic" rather than "static". And the final interpretant seems to function rather like analytic notions of the proposition, that is, it provides a final, truthful meaning for the sign which underlies or grounds any individual dynamic interpretant. These comparisons are, I hope useful in that they address the kinds of curiosity we harbor about Peirce's relation to contemporary analytic philosophy. And what I hope is obvious is that, whilst these concepts bear strong similarities to many contemporary concepts, they are also intriguingly different.

To conclude, then, it may be worth raising the further question of how seriously we should take such comparisons. Is this just a piece of Peircian esoterica? Are the similarities far less important than the differences? For what its worth, I think the answer is that we should take them seriously: Peirce's division of objects captures similar insights to Frege's sense/reference distinction, and the division of interpretants captures the Critical Referentialist insight that signs have various levels of meaning. More important though, I think these are insights which contemporary philosophers of language might well make use of. And I think they are useful to contemporary philosophers of language precisely because of the differences. What is interesting and useful about the concepts in Peirce's final account of signs is that they are designed to capture the ongoing process of building information about the objects to which we refer, our changing epistemic status towards the objects of signs, the variations that exist in different approaches to the same object. If we are to find a place for these concepts in a contemporary arena (and I think we can), then, we must show caution: divorcing these concepts from their background, the things that make them different, may well divest them of what makes them so distinctive and interesting.²⁵

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NOTES

¹ See, for example, Hardwick (1979).

² For example, Hookway says, “[Peirce] can seem to be one of the most modern and contemporary of philosophers. [...] [W]e are likely to feel that many of his problems are close to the issues that are philosophically pressing today.” (Hookway 1985, 1). This is echoed by Nubiola (2005, 119).

³ See, for instance, Gruender (1983), Misak (1991), and Soames (forthcoming)

⁴ See for instance, Quine (1995) or Putnam (1982).

⁵ Of course, Peirce was experimenting with these concepts before the 1906-1910 period. For instance, we find reference to the division of objects as early as 1896 (CP 4.356), and mention of multiple interpretants as early as 1902 (CP 2.294). However, these various strands are not brought together into a coherent account of signs until the period 1906-1910 when Peirce’s correspondence with Lady Victoria Welby was at its height.

⁶ There are, of course, many other features of Peirce’s final account of signs that are not included here. For instance, the sixty-classes of signs, the various other types of interpretant that Peirce mentions. There are two reasons why I have omitted them: first, these elements and how to interpret them are more controversial than the structure of the sign in the final account; second, the structure of the sign and its various elements are clearly more important to explaining how Peirce thinks signs signify than an examination of the kind of signs that Peirce thinks would make up an exhaustive list.

⁷ There are many puzzles and problem cases used to motivate contemporary analytic accounts of language, but the two used here are chosen because they invite comparison with two main threads in analytic philosophy of language, descriptivist (or Fregean) accounts, and referentialist (or Millian) accounts, which handle these problems in various ways and with varying fortunes. See Perry (2001, 1-8), for a neat summary of these problems and in whose favor they lean.

⁸ See Loeffler (2002) for an example of this puzzle.

⁹ However, see Peirce’s claim at (CP 4.539 (1906)) that “the Object of every true Proposition [...] if we name it [at] all, we call by the somewhat misleading title of “The Truth”, for what looks like a Fregean line.

¹⁰ For examples, see Hilpinen (1992), 479-81, Hilpinen (1995), 288-90, Houser (1992), 497-8, Pape (1991).

¹¹ What seems obvious here, but for which I can find little clear or obvious textual support, is that immediate objects must be derived from preceding dynamic interpretants through inference, most likely abduction. And again, I take this to be further reflection of Peirce’s growing interest in making his accounts of pragmatism, inquiry, science, and semiotic run together.

¹² See, for instance, Dummett (1981, 97-100) for discussion.

¹³ Nathan Houser speculates that whilst Frege's sense might be identified with Peirce's interpretant, and Frege's reference with Peirce's dynamic object, there are also grounds for treating sense as allied to the immediate object. "Peirce's and Frege's conceptions of "sense" were significantly different and while we might relate Peirce's sense to immediate objects, it might be more appropriate to relate Frege's sense to Peirce's interpretants" (1992, 498-9). To my mind, Houser is by the far the most insightful commentator on the connection between Peirce and Frege, but the problem here is that the immediate object is, in a clear sense, generated from (dynamic) interpretants. If Fregean sense is better equated with the Peircian interpretant, we need to know which one, since at least one kind of interpretant coincides to some extent with the immediate object. Again, this shows the need to use the final account.

¹⁴ More properly, contexts are defined as sets of co-ordinates which include, at least, an agent, a time, a location and a world. The character for "I" is "the agent of the context", "here" is "the location of the context" and so on. Applying the character of "I" to some context <a,t,l,w> will determine a, from that context as content.

¹⁵ See CP 8.314 (1907).

¹⁶ This paragraph is quoted from (Savan 1988), but is itself quoted from Peirce's correspondence with Victoria Lady Welby.

¹⁷ See Atkin (forthcoming) for more on the connections between Peirce, Perry, and Burks' accounts of meaning.

¹⁸ I take it that Peirce's use of the term "conditional" here reflects his notion of inquiry.

¹⁹ Although this passage from Peirce's 1902 Carnegie Institute application precedes the final account of signs, I include it because this feature of his ideas on propositions remains reasonably constant.

²⁰ See, for instance, CP 5.553 (1906).

²¹ For example, "the interpretant of a proposition is its predicate; its object is the thing denoted by its subject or subjects" (CP 5.473 (1907)).

²² See Peirce's 1908 letters to Lady Welby (*Essential Peirce*: Volume 2 483-491) for the ten trichotomies of signs, from which the projected sixty-six classes of sign should be formed.

²³ There is some awareness of the difficulties and schisms between later and earlier accounts that render much of Peirce's account of propositions, at best, horribly unclear. Short (1982), for instance, notices these difficulties in Peirce's account of the proposition and suggests that the best conclusion we can draw is that "propositions *qua* propositions are not signs, albeit their instances or expressions are" (Short 1982, 27). If Short is right, we might identify the final interpretant with what he is calling here, the proposition *qua* proposition, but this is not without its difficulties.

²⁴ Whilst there may be many grounds for comparison between Peirce's concept and various contemporary accounts, here I shall use only the proposed solutions to the puzzles cases. Moreover, I shall only attempt to place Peirce's concept in relation to a broadly referentialist account, and Frege's account.

²⁵ Many thanks to Chris Hookway, Jenny Saul, Bob Stern, and Graham Bird, all of whom commented on, or gave advice and encouragement with this material.