

## SEMIOTICS IN SOME RECENT LINGUISTIC APPROACHES

Mira Kovatcheva  
St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia

**Abstract:** *The question whether anything outside the analysis of form and structure should be called linguistics is one of the contentious issues in recent years. The popularity of the more encompassing semiotic tradition launched by Peirce is on the rise and flourishing outside linguistics “proper”. Sociolinguistic research based on indexicality is one example. There is also the promising synthesis of cognitive linguistics and semiotics. The Peircean framework is also compatible with achievements in biology, cognitive science, neuroscience, experimental psychology, philosophy of mind etc. However, it is noteworthy that a great number of Peirce’s ideas keep cropping up in various linguistic guises without any recognition of their ancestry. Blending Theory looks like the perfect example of this kind of innovative approach. While the rebirth of Peircean ideas is evidence for their vitality, it seems appropriate to adopt semiotics in linguistics overtly.*

**Keywords:** *Peirce, indexicality, cognitive linguistics, Blending Theory*

The topic announced in the heading is suitable for a lifetime project. The aim of this short note, however, is just to raise awareness of a presumed conceptual crisis in contemporary linguistics. The present inordinate expansion of its subject matter, accompanied by inevitable descriptive and theoretical fragmentariness, is considered a symptom of an ailing discipline (e.g. (Zlatev 2010, 439; Kravchenko 2011, 353). Actually, whether linguistics is a science is one of the debatable issues.

It is a commonplace that language is one of the most complex attributes of our humanness. It is my belief that, no matter how limited in scope a research projects is, it should be underscored by a clear position on the major aspects of language outside the narrow problem

under investigation. Unfortunately, one often meets with flagrant contradictions, veiled by pseudoscientific vocabulary. This is particularly true of studies based on particular approaches relying too much on the so-called ‘argument from authority’. Trusting ‘names’ in the field is quite risky, if you don’t know the history of the particular approach and you haven’t looked into possible objections to it by other ‘names’.

The suggestion that linguists also keep abreast with influential approaches in the natural sciences should not sound too far-fetched. The inherent interdisciplinarity of doing linguistics requires it. Thus, the Systems Approach has been adopted by a number of cognitive linguists such as Joan Bybee, Mark Turner and Seana Coulson but may remain undetected by unprepared readers. It is true that the average linguist is not qualified to judge matters pertaining to psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, sociology, evolution, Artificial Intelligence, etc. What they can do, though, is follow review articles in these fields. My experience has shown that checking the background of authors is a good indicator of the trustworthiness of their approach. So, for instance, among the well-known writers on matters linguistic, George Lakoff and Gilles Fauconnier are psychologists by training, Deirdre Wilson was trained as a philosopher and linguist, Mark Turner studied maths and literature, Stephen Levinson started as a social anthropologist, Charles S. Peirce was a chemist, logician and philosopher. A careful reading of their works reveals particular biases and limitations when it comes to linguistic form and meaning.

Incidentally, the question whether anything outside the analysis of form and structure should be called linguistics is one of the contentious issues in recent years. Of course, the idea that the object of linguistics should be strictly limited and thus extracted from the totality of human activities performed through language is inherited from Saussure. In the understanding of lay people, both in the English-speaking world and in this country, a linguist is an educator, and many act as such under the guise of theoreticians. Note the reference to self-advertising in the following summary of the circumstances behind the present fragmentariness in theoretical linguistics: “Nowadays, the circumstances of university employment create strong motives to devise novel theories and use the techniques of public relations to insist that their theories are important

and correct, almost irrespective of their true worth.” (Sampson 2017, 14). According to Agha (2007, 219) – a sociolinguist and semiotician – the resulting ‘self-minoritizing’ of subfields, seen as an ailment, needs to be understood and cured.

I have come to the conclusion that semiotics as the study of meaning-making is the approach that grounds all aspects of language most convincingly. My main argument, following extensive research on the topic, is that Peircean semiotics is the brand that offers most cogent solutions to a number of problems (see also Durst-Andersen 2008). However, it needs to be developed in harmony with the advancements in different areas of the humanities and the natural sciences alike. Ways to make linguistics verifiable can hopefully be found when language behaviour (or “*linguaging*”) is investigated as part of the adaptation of humans to their lifeworld.

In addition, and more interestingly, I would like to give an example of how, in a number of avowedly new frameworks of analysis, ideas and even vocabulary repeat what was said by Peirce more than 100 years ago. This seems to be a good enough validation of Peirce’s overall philosophy and should encourage a better acquaintance with his treatment of signs.

Saussure and Peirce were contemporaries but their respective frameworks, called semiology and semiotics, show no indication of any mutual influence. The well-known difference is that the Saussurean sign is defined in dyadic terms (signifier-signified), while for Peirce the triadic relation (Representamen – Object – Interpretant) bears great significance in his overall philosophy. The literature on the views of both thinkers is huge and there is no need to repeat the many interpretations here. I will focus instead on the fact that, while Saussure’s analytical approach to a static closed structure (*langue*) precludes any further development of his views, Peirce’s broader and more elaborate system has inspired hundreds of scholars. The different degree to which semiology and semiotics influenced the study of language derives naturally from the fact that Saussure was a linguist and Peirce was a scientist. However, the difference also has to do with the much more complex network of terms in the case of semiotics. Among the more popular of Peirce’s ideas is the process of semiosis itself – the ‘growth’ of the sign that allows permutations of one type of sign into another. In recent years,

this aspect of Peirce's philosophy informs discussions of evolution and biology. Facts seem to support his vision.

It is noteworthy that neither Saussure nor Peirce ever published a book. This was certainly not due to any intellectual deficiencies. There is evidence to believe that both thinkers' high responsibility in the face of the complexity of their subject matter stymied such an endeavor (cf. Saussure's confession in a letter to Meillet: "I have no dearer wish than not to have to concern myself with language in general" [see Agha 2007b]). As for Peirce, he seemed to have realized that his ideal to provide a consistent description of semiotics based on logic alone was unattainable. Clearly, the recruitment of *habit* and *experience* in the explanation of the Interpretant are psychological phenomena. Peirce actually tried to keep the discussion of phenomenology separate but a number of modern approaches to knowledge imply that phenomenology can quite aptly be applied to the study of language (Zlatev 2010; Galagher 2017).

Some of Peirce's distinctions have been generally accepted. 'Type' and 'token' correspond respectively to his original terms 'Sinsign' and 'Legisign'. Best known is the trichotomy Icon-Index-Symbol, which Roman Jakobson borrowed from Peirce to enrich the Saussurean paradigm (Jakobson 1960, 1971). Most conspicuously, linguists of different convictions accept that human language is a 'symbolic structure'. But does 'symbol' say enough? Here are two typical definitions by cognitive linguists:

Let us first define a symbol as *the pairing between a semantic structure and a phonological structure*, such that one is able to evoke the other. (Langacker 2008, 5)

...a lexical concept, made up of parameters, is the semantic pole of a linguistic unit, where a *linguistic unit is a symbolic assembly of form and (schematic) meaning*. In addition, lexical concepts facilitate access to nonlinguistic concepts, which... are labeled cognitive models. (Evans 2015, 283, highlighting MK)

Despite reference to dynamicity and *construal* of meaning or *access* to non-linguistic processes, in the experiential approaches, Relevance Theory and Blending Theory, the treatment of the language sign

basically corresponds to the signifier-signified type. However, since Cognitive Linguistics acknowledges the centrality of discourse (*parole*), it is possible to interpret “the pairing” in Langacker’s definition as denoting a process, cf. “A linguistic unit is thus a multifaceted cognitive *routine* which can be activated and carried out when occasion arises (like the ability to shoot a free throw or to sign one’s name)” (Langacker 2001, 146). What transpires from the comparison between a symbol and a linguistic unit is that speaking as a sensori-motor activity is very different from a list of abstract entities, used to analyze texts. Thus, although Langacker doesn’t devote much space to semiotics, the use of a term like *routine* echoes Peirce’s *habit*.

A more significant comment in the context of the present discussion is that, according to Peirce, the above-mentioned ‘nonlinguistic concepts’ are also signs. In particular, the frequently used metaphorical description of the link between form and meaning as ‘access’ is clearly an instantiation of Secondness in Peirce’s ontology of relations, or an indexical type of sign. It should be kept in mind that indexical, as well as iconic relations, are present in all signs. The crucial tenet in Peirce’s understanding of the sign, however, is that the sign is not simply compositional – its three relational aspects need to be present jointly and simultaneously. The dynamic interactions between them are viewed as ‘translations’ of one sign by another as the Interpreter is a sign in itself. A fitting visual representation shows how each apex of the triad is separately *opposed to the relation* between the other two just as it is *participating in a relation* with one or the other of the remaining apexes:

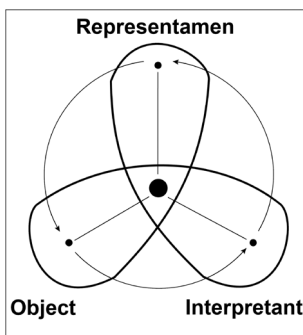


Fig. 1 (after Merrel online)

In order to understand the design of Peirce's ten classes of signs, three questions might be formulated:

(i) "What is the relation of the Representamen with itself?",  
1<sup>st</sup> trichotomy:

Qualisign, Sinsign, Legisign

(ii) "What is the relation between the Representamen and its Object?",  
2<sup>nd</sup> trichotomy: Icon, Index, Symbol

(iii) "What is the relation between the Representamen and its Object for its Interpretant?", 3<sup>rd</sup> trichotomy: Rheme, Dicent, Argument (Queiroz 2012)

A number of familiar notions from contemporary linguistics can be traced back to Peirce. The dynamic triadic model of the sign shows that he was aware of the significance of salience, relevance and perspective. Notions such as dialogicity or ground are not alien to Peirce. Semiotics doesn't set semantics and pragmatics against each other just as it is in Cognitive Linguistics. Peircean signs are not confined by the boundaries of the individual mind. Beside dialogicity (which can also refer to a dialogue with oneself<sup>1</sup>), the distinction between Immediate Object, Dynamic Object, Final O takes into account the cultural and socio-historical aspect of semiosis. Noteworthy is also the possibility to incorporate various contexts in the sign Interpretant which is compatible with the now popular view that context is not some kind of additional background for meaning.

The combination of the 3 triads of signs produces the simpler classification<sup>2</sup> of 10 types (e.g. Queiros 2012) such as Rhematic Indexical Legisign, Symbolic Dicent Legisign, etc. The fact that only 3 of the types are symbols is food for thought. All three are Legisigns, (Rhemes, Dicents, Arguments, or roughly concepts, predicates, arguments in logical terms), which ties in with their conventionality and law-like regularity. Quite obviously *symbolic structure* in contemporary linguistics does not correspond to Peirce's conception of 'symbol'. Crucially, though, Peirce tells us that iconic and indexical relations are present in any sign.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. modern associations with M. Bakhtin.

<sup>2</sup> In comparison with the one containing 66 types, which apparently was never finalized.

The indeterminacy of listed word meanings, polysemy and semantic change are a problem for the form-meaning version of the symbol. Potentially, the insights from Peirce's distinction of sign types could be used to highlight the relation between words and word **uses**. In a cognitive analysis, a particularly revealing characterization of icons, indexes and symbols is the link of their Ground with time (past, present and future respectively). Below are tentative and much simplified examples of how a single word, 'listed' in the lexicon (a type), develops into different sign tokens<sup>3</sup>:

1. The word *разбойник* – a Rheme or an 'open' predicate – has as its Immediate Object of 'who destroys (something)'. Indexical relations point to the verb *разбиа* – a Dicent iconically linked to the Index 'animate agent'. Iconic relations connect the 'what is destroyed' with a person or location, thus the institutionalized meaning of *разбойник* has as its Dynamic Object of 'a violent person who robs somebody or burglarizes a place'. Another layer of iconic relations (metaphor), also involving a generalization (Sinsign becoming a Legisign), leads to the meaning 'highwayman, bandit'. If I call my cat *Разбойник!*, this would be a Dicent Symbol (a full-fledged predication) involving an Iconic Legisign (metaphor). If I call out to him *Разбойнико!*, this would be an Indexical Dicent Legisign, because it points to the previous metaphor.

2. The comment *Very LA!*, implying the appearance or behavior of a person, doesn't look like a particularly well-formed English phrase – being an abbreviation of a proper noun, *LA* should not be able to combine with an adverb of degree. A number of inferences (i.e. Symbolic Argument Legisigns) indexically connect *LA* with Los Angelis, also indexically connect Los Angelis with the people there and the way they dress and behave (metonymy). The metonymy makes it possible for a noun to function as an adjective<sup>4</sup> (roughly meaning 'typical of'),

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<sup>3</sup>This happens in spontaneous spoken language, also referred to as *linguaging* by a growing number of linguists. Written language has entirely different characteristics, supported by different cognitive mechanisms. For example, the plausibility of mental representations is only associated with written or conscious language activity (Love 2004).

<sup>4</sup>No doubt, the difference between parts of speech and grammatical functions can be described in terms of sign types.

hence the adverb of degree. The whole expression is a Dicot on a subsentential level, the 'Subject' indexing an attentionally structured perceptual image.

3. Although translation is considered a different activity, in Peircean semiotics, it can be viewed as a special case of the general and never-ending translation of signs, except that the two signs belong to different socio-historical products. The next example happens to show a non-institutionalized result of the semiotic process which is otherwise perfectly legitimate. The phrase *a pathetic kind of guy* was translated on TV as *емоционален човек*. The translator was obviously 'linguaging', as opposed to using his conscious knowledge of representations (see note 3). In the context, *pathetic* was used pejoratively as 'arousing pity'. The translator perceived the adjective as an index to the Greek noun *pathos*, which is borrowed in Bulgarian with the meaning of 'emotion'. The translation is thus the result of inference which follows the normativity of the target language. The 18c. semantic change in the English adjective from 'affecting the emotions' to 'arousing pity' (Online Etymology) did not take place in Bulgarian. The new meaning indexes the particularly English attribute of self-restraint known as 'stiff upper lip' (i.e. showing emotion arouses pity and disdain). In other words, Peirce's sign types take into account affective meaning as well.

In general, the centrality of the indexical relation in cognition follows from its indispensability in the individual's interaction with the environment. Reference is by far not the only instance of indexicality in language and communication. However, not many linguists use Peirce's framework even if they discuss similar matters in practice. Thus, what is to my mind one of the most revealing processes in semantic variation and change, does come under the name of indexicality but is not referred to as semiotic growth. I have in mind Silverstein's description of synchronic semantic drift from a normative meaning  $n$  to  $n+1$  (the so-called 'indexical order', Silverstein 2003; the term appears with original argumentation and reference to Peirce also in Agha 2006 and Ковачева 2016).

The undercurrent theme of the present note is that, even if not explicitly stated, Peirce's ideas find their way in various disguise in different research fields concerned with cognition, philosophy of



mind, evolution (hence biology and neuroscience) etc. In many cases the developments are reached independently and with reliance on empirical data which speaks in favour of their feasibility. If observed facts determine or predict similar interpretation, there is reason to call the operation scientific. Obviously, language is inseparable from thinking and cognition in general, from psychology and neuroscience, from theories of mind and sociality, from evolution and history of culture. More than 100 years after his death, Peirce's philosophy proves compatible with major achievements in these fields and this explains the resurgent interest to it.

For lack of space, I will only mention some of the relevant notions in some recent approaches, ultimately applicable to the study of language as well:

Complex adaptive systems (especially the reference to emergence and stable states in memory, consciousness, social relations, evolution)

- Embodiment
- Enaction
- Extended knowledge
- Situated knowledge (connected to the ecological niche)
- Distributed knowledge
- Semiosphere and semiotic causality

The unifying thread behind the above approaches is the focus on body-mind-world as an indelible unit of analysis<sup>5</sup>. A very broad and possibly naïve – but not arbitrary – analogy can be drawn between the latter and the triad Interpreter – Representamen – Object (following the respective order). Ecologically informed research pays particular attention to the interfaces in the threefold relation, involving the “hard problem” of continuity between the physical and the mental. Cf.:

Human evolution unfolded through a rather distinctive, dynamically constructed ecological niche. The human niche ... is also defined by semiotically structured and structuring embodied cognitive interfaces, connecting the individual organism with the wider environment. The embodied dimensions of niche-population co-evolution have long involved semiotic system construction, which I hypothesize to be an

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<sup>5</sup> See Zaslowski, Arminjon (2017).

evolutionarily primitive aspect of learning and higher-level cognitive integration and attention in the great apes and humans alike (Stutz 2014).

In some cases, researchers propose a synthesis between Peirce's views and those of other thinkers. Such is the case with phenomenology. Galagher (2017) points out the affinity between Peirce's understanding and that of Husserl. He also expresses his belief in "naturalizing" phenomenology in the sense of making it a legitimate part of approaches to the humanities that are usually associated with the natural sciences. The implementation of the principles and theories listed above in the creation of Artificial Intelligence products is one more argument for treating linguistics as a science. It is important to add at this point that converging evidence from the same areas seem to confirm the derived nature of language in listings and texts (*langue* and *langage*) as opposed to language in the process of 'linguaging' (*parole*; see Ковачева 2019).

Semiotics of the Peircean brand is a good ally in interdisciplinary approaches. For example, the neurological and psychological underpinnings of linguistic activities as presented in the research program of the experimental psychologist Lawrence Barsalou (cf. Barsalou 2009 among numerous others) quite clearly do not fit into a definition of symbol only as a form-meaning unity. At the same time, Barsalou's trademark term *simulation* shares many characteristics with the Interpretant (embodied, enacted, situated, distributed).

Not all cognitive scientists share the same interpretation of Peirce's rarified ontology. For instance, autonomy of even the most primitive organism is a prerequisite for semiosis for the biosemioticians, while Zlatev believes that there are no sign relations before the emergence of consciousness (Zlatev 2009). In search of a satisfying answer to the difficult problem of continuity in the development of cognition, it is not rare for Western authors to go back to Vygotsky's conception of the interlocked stadial development of language and thinking and even to Pavlov's conditioning. The link to semiotics in the first case is the dynamic view of the concept (a sign in constant 'motion' from past experience to future goals) and in the second case it is the unconscious nature of sign habits.

Finally, I would like to adduce a specific example of a recent linguistic approach which combines a fair number of the essential aspects of the relation between language and cognition mentioned so far without having anything to say about semiotics. I have in mind Blending Theory, more appropriately called Conceptual Integration. The founders of the approach Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner mention the word *sign* in their programmatic work 7 times in 440 pages but only in its everyday usage, e.g. ‘sign of anger’ (Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 300). My point is that, even if the authors do not subscribe to any particular semiotic framework except the superficial adherence to the ‘symbolic’ nature of language, many of the elements of their rather convoluted theory can directly or indirectly be linked to a Peircean kind of approach. The authors’ densely metaphorical language creates a certain wooliness, especially in Turner’s publications. A summary of the main tenets of the theory is represented by the famous diagram of *mental spaces* and their own definition: “Conceptual blending is a basic mental operation that leads to new meaning, global insight, and conceptual compressions<sup>6</sup> useful for memory and manipulation of otherwise diffuse ranges of meaning” (Fauconnier and Turner 2003).

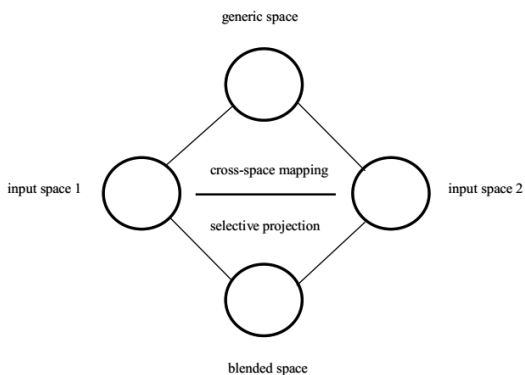


Fig. 2

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<sup>6</sup> “Conceptual compression” can only be a metaphor since mental entities cannot be compressed. A case in point is *Very LA!* The succinct form is not the same as a narrower concept. If anything, it looks more like an expansion of indexical relations (see 2 above).

Some brief illustrations can be: a) *lava* as a metaphor for hot food, b) *fake gun* as an instance of giving a name to a single concept, and c) *Tom sneezed the napkin off the table* as syntactic coercion (using an intransitive verb as a transitive one). For (a) Input 1 contains features of food, Input 2 – features of lava, the generic space contains the overlapping features unconstrained by specific bearers, and, in the blended space, they are projected so Input 2 “gives structure” to the blend. For (b) Input 1 contains features of guns, Input 2 contains features of fake things. In the generic space, something more than abstraction happens: emergent features may result from the interaction (note that a *fake gun* is neither a fake thing, nor is it a gun). Still, Input 2 “gives structure” to the blend. For (c) Input 1 contains the pattern NP-VP-NP-PP as in *Tom pushed the napkin off the table*. Input 2 contains *Tom sneezed* and unintegrated causative structures expressing motion (Fauconnier and Turner 1998). It is not very clear what the generic space contains but, presumably, the causative relation from Input 2 is projected in the blend.

These examples show that the operation is absolutely unfalsifiable and could be just a snapshot of the author’s phenomenological experiences *post factum*. It is not clear whether the mental spaces contain concepts, words, features or even a mixture of all. There is no room for more criticisms of Blending Theory but see Ritchie (2004), Gibbs (2000) among others. My topmost objection to the approach is that the diagram becomes the explanation, cf. e.g. “character is clarified by **transporting it across frames** to locate the shared generic” (Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 252, emphasis MK). This change-of-place phrasing is supposed to explain the analogy between a politician in France and whatever the character of Nixon stands for in: *In France Watergate wouldn’t have hurt Nixon*.

Granted, Fauconnier and Turner incorporate many fruitful ideas from a range of research fields, be it in a rather idiosyncratic way, cf.: “[Blending Theory] is not enough of a theory yet and [some] are cautiously awaiting the moment when blending becomes so rich theoretically that it will start creating problems for itself” (Dancygier 2006, 5). It is a pity they very rarely acknowledge any intellectual debt. For the present purposes, I will quote a few descriptions which I believe repeat insights from the semiotic paradigm:

- The “blending” leading to negation as in *There is no milk in the refrigerator* is said to contain “implicit counterfactual spaces from stable inputs” (Fauconnier, Turner 2002 ,87, 396). This echoes the **indexical order**  $n+1$  “mirror networks” or “shared frames” (ibid., p. 253). The relation can be described as **iconic**.
- In nouns like *diplomat, prostitute* “characters and frames interlock” (ibid., p. 122). This is a way of saying that character **indexes** frame “cascade of blends” (ibid., p. 393). This repeats almost literally Peirce’s translation of one sign into another *ad infinitum*.

In general, if we accept, along with Ritchie (2004), that the generic space is not necessary, the diagram of Blending Theory can be seen as a triad of the Peircean kind: Input 1 as Object, Input 2 as Interpretant, and the blended space (said to **represent** the blend) as the Representamen. Finally, the authors’ enigmatic catchphrase “we live in the blend” is not original at all – to start with, we live in language. In Peirce’s understanding, we as selves are signs.

Blending theory inspired many upwardly moving young linguists<sup>7</sup> because it is easy to emulate by unleashing one’s fantasy. It is not necessary to have read and processed literature on embodiment, enactment, extended and situated knowledge, Complex Adaptive Systems and emergence, evolution, philosophy of mind, etc. However, language cannot be analyzed in terms of reduction and linear causation. Thus, the message in this short note is that the semiotic tradition launched by Peirce is fertile ground for developments in biology, cognitive science, neuroscience, experimental psychology, philosophy of mind, etc. Adopting it overtly in linguistics, too, would diminish the observed fragmentariness. Admittedly, such an endeavor would require quite a bit of effort.

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<sup>7</sup> I do not mean to denigrate some genuinely creative efforts by established authors like Seana Coulson or Barbara Dancygier.

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**II.**  
**TRANSITIONS, TRANSGRESSIONS**  
**AND PERFORMANCE**



