

WHY DID PEIRCE TERRORIZE BENVENISTE?

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I always wondered why Émile Benveniste panicked when he talked about C.S. Peirce at the very beginning of his paper on 'The semiology of language'.

In spite of the usual reserve of the scholar, he could not completely hide the fascination as well as the horror induced in him by Peirce's statements on language, mostly because Peirce approaches the question of language through the question of the sign, instead of approaching it through the question of the system.

Of course, if I say that I always wondered...it implies that I am no longer wondering.

And what I bring here my answer to my question.

But first we have to read this passage of 'The semiology of language' which has always puzzled me and which, in a different way now, still does. The complete translation of this essay appears elsewhere in this volume.

Since that time when those two antithetical geniuses, Peirce and Saussure, almost simultaneously, in total ignorance of one another, conceived of the possibility of a science of signs and worked at establishing it, an important problem has arisen which has not as yet found a precise formulation. In the midst of the conclusion that reigns in this field, this problem has not even been clearly stated. What is the place of language among the system of signs?

Peirce devoted his entire life to the further elaboration of concepts based on the term *semiotic*, returning to the designation Σήμειωτική, which John Locke had applied to a science of signs and significations derived from logic, which was itself conceived of as a linguistic science. The enormous quantity of his notes bears witness to an obstinate effort to analyze logical, mathematical, physical, and even psychological and religious notions within the framework of semiotics. This study, pursued throughout his life, involved an ever more complex apparatus of definitions aimed at distributing the whole of the real, the conceptual, and the experiential into various categories of signs. In order to construct this 'universal algebra of relations' Peirce proposed a tripartite division of signs into **ICONS**, **INDEXES**, and **SYMBOLS**: today this is nearly all we retain of the immense logical architecture that the division subtends.

As for language, Peirce made no precise of specific formulations. For him, language was both everywhere and nowhere at all. He was never concerned with the workings of language, if he ever paid attention to them. Language for him is reduced to its components, words, and those are surely signs. Yet, they are not derived from a distinct category of 'symbols': certain ones, for example, demonstrative pronouns, are 'indexes', and therefore are classified with their corresponding gestures, the gesture of pointing, for example. Consequently Peirce did not recognize the fact that such a gesture is universally

understood, whereas the demonstrative is part of a special system, the idiom. Moreover, the same word can appear as several varieties of ‘signs’, such as the **QUALISIGN**, the **SINSIGN**, or the **LEGISIGN**. We do not see, therefore, the operative utility of similar distinctions, nor to what extent they would help the linguist construct a semiology of language as a system. The difficulty that prevents any specific application of Peirce’s concepts (except for the well-known but much too general tripartite framework), is that the sign is definitely posited as the basis of the entire universe, and functions simultaneously as the principle of definition for each element, and as the principle of explanation for the entire ensemble, be it abstract or concrete. Man himself is a sign: his thought is a sign, his emotions are signs. But finally, since these signs are all signs for each other, for what could they be a sign that is not a sign itself? Where could we find a fixed point to anchor the first signifying relationship? The semiotic edifice that Peirce constructs is not self-inclusive in its definition. In order to keep the notion of sign from disappearing completely amidst this proliferation ad infinitum, we must recognize a difference, somewhere in this universe, between sign and signified. Therefore, each sign must be included and articulated within a system of signs. Therein lies the condition for **SIGNIFICANCE**. It will follow, to counter Peirce, that all signs cannot function identically, nor belong to one system alone. We will have to establish several systems of signs, and among these systems make explicit a relationship on difference and analogy.

I’ll stop here, for when Èmile Benveniste arrives at this point in his questioning of Peirce, he nearly falls into a maelstrom of signs and into a world which would only have been the ‘Empire of Signs’. At this very moment, he raises Saussure as a linguistic crucifix, Saussure who is always nearby to protect us against the Devil.

Nevertheless I am still convinced that in spite of his explicit fears, Èmile Benveniste has been (or was) fascinated by C.S. Peirce. Let us go back to what he says about him and interpret it:

Peirce was a genius, and even more an antithetical genius, of Benveniste’s ego ideal Ferdinand de Saussure.

Peirce was a powerful and productive genius—witness the following phrase: ‘The enormous quantity of his notes bears witness to an obstinate effort to...’.

Peirce was a universal genius, who could get hold of everything in his constant semiotic analysis: notions of logic, mathematics, physics, and also religion and psychology. Peirce was a creator who produced an immense logical architecture on the foundation of a universal algebra of relations.

Peirce was an insolent genius who could not care less about la langue, which for Benveniste and most of those for whom he wrote was l’Objet par excellence’.
Peirce was a perverse genius who could be completely indifferent to what is universally accepted.

Peirce was a schizophrenic genius, because he produced throughout his life a whole system of concepts, which, according to Benveniste, cannot be specifically applied to anything at all, and which are therefore totally useless and nonconsumable. It is at this very moment that fascination is replaced by horror and panic, and Benveniste asks: but what can the possible use be of this immense logical architecture?

As Benveniste points out, it is quite true that there is absolutely no place in this immense logical architecture for the sacred notion of difference. This very notion prevents us from thinking we are God, or talking black into white or, as we say in French, ‘*de prendre des vessies pour des lanternes*’, or to confuse the sign with the signified, I would rather say to confuse the sign with the referent: the sign conceals itself out in an infinite and incessant multiplication, pluralization, and, at the same time—and this is much more dangerous—signs, reality, and the real are unified in the vertiginous and annihilating maelstrom of a universal semiotic system.

At this point, Benveniste’s panic is so intense that he cannot simply ask: ‘In such a system, how could I be a linguist?’

Benveniste’s panic is rather the result of a conjunction between the mysterious (*unheimlich*) fascination which this immense logical architecture has induced in him and the question he has to face when confronted with such an architecture: ‘Where is the cornerstone where the very first relation of sign is anchored?’ (*Où se trouve le point où amarrer la première relation du signe?*)

This is a very fundamental issue indeed, because his whole being, in terms of a talking being, is then in question.

It is also the very first question, the primordial question that all of us had to answer in a way which has determined our being-in-the-world.

It is the answer to this question that I will now try to analyze with you. But to do so, we have to make a detour through psychoanalysis.

Once again, we have to go back to two very essential concepts in Freud’s theory on language: negation (*Verneinung*) and foreclosure (*Verwerfung*). Both concepts have something to do with a certain access to a certain type of language, or to certain functions of language.

In a very short text entitled *Negation* published in 1925, Freud described the birth of intelligence and the access to language as a process which takes place in two steps, two dissymmetrical moments.

By language, Freud means the system of signs assuming a symbolic function, that is, representing an object necessarily excluded from language itself.

The first moment is an affirmation (*Bejahung*), which is considered by Freud as an equivalent of the tendency to unify characteristics of Eros. This tendency functions in the attributive judgment as an introjection.

The second moment is a negation (*Verneinung*), which is not strictly speaking the substitute for or the equivalent of the destructive drives or, as I would prefer to call them, the death drives, but which is a consequence of an expulsion out of the ego due to the death drives.

In the act of judgment, in the intellectual function of judging, this expulsion is absolutely necessary to create the distance between the act of thinking, or we should rather say language, and the object which is represented by the language for the subject. In other words, negation is the moment which is absolute necessary for the appearance of the representative function of language. In still other words, negation is the mythical prerequisite for the appearance of language described by Saussure. But everyone knows now that language as such does not exist independently of the method and of the theory which have been used to isolate it as a specific object, and the very object of a new science: linguistics. When we speak, in linguistic terms, of language (*la langue*) we do not speak in fact of a real and concrete object-in-the-world, but rather of a whole scientific corpus, which is precisely Saussurian linguistics. We may say, therefore, that negation is the necessary foundation of all Saussurian linguistics and, if we say so, negation becomes a major concept in such a system of linguistics, even if we cannot find it in Saussure's writings.

But such reasoning leads us to link, to tie together, the Freudian-discourse and the Saussurian discourse, and to put the linguistic conception of sign at the very core of psychoanalytic theory.

This is an extremely simplified view of how we, supposedly normal (i.e. neurotic) people, have had access to language.

--But we are not alone; there are the Others.

--What Others?

--The Psychotics!

What does Freud say about psychosis? He says, again in the short text entitled *Negation*:

The negativism which is displayed by some psychotics is probably to be regarded as a sign of a defusion of instincts that has taken place through a withdrawal of the libidinal components.

But we have seen that in the acquisition of language, the libidinal components (Eros) were considered as unifying in the act of introjecting. The libidinal components are necessary to the very first step of the acquisition of language, a step which is an affirmation (*Bejahung*).

Then, in the psychotic process, this very first moment is lacking if, as Freud says, the psychotic process is characterized by a defusion of instincts and a withdrawal of the libidinal components.

This absence of *Bejahung*, this non-*Bejahung* is named by Freud *Verwerfung*, foreclosure in English.

To say that the foreclosure (*Verwerfung*) is a non-*Bejahung*, an absence of affirmation, is something very different from saying that foreclosure, or *Verwerfung*, would be an '*Ausstossung aus dem Ich*' (an expulsion out of the Ego), as some readers of Freud's *Negation* (among them Jean Hyppolite) might have thought. A *Verwerfung*, a foreclosure is not an expulsion.

We have talked about the *Bejahung* as being an affirmation. But what is the object of this *Bejahung*, of this affirmation?

Freud repeats it everywhere, the primal affirmation, the *Bejahung*, is the affirmation of castration.

Whatever the affirmation of castration becomes afterwards, later in the development of the child, this affirmation is considered in psychoanalytic theory as being essential and necessary in order for the child to have access to language within its representative function.

But what is castration?

It has nothing to do with the imbecilic story that every child supposedly builds when he/she is confronted with the difference between the sexes; that is, if the little girl is deprived of a penis, it is because it has been severed....

Castration is a signified articulated by everything that comes from the social environment of the child: education, prohibition, threats, stories, images, fairy tales, and so on... a signified that gives meaning to the anxiety of the child.

This anxiety, during the preoedipal period, is something completely alien to castration anxiety (as Melancholy Klein observed), a signified that also gives a meaning, but later, to the difference between the sexes.

Such a castration, which is to be understood as a threat and/or as an anxiety to which this threat has given a meaning, introduces the child into the symbolic and, at the very same time, severs him from the real, which is what remains outside of symbolization.

The relationship of the child to the real will be mediated by reality. Reality is what has been symbolized out of the real.

When the *Bejahung* (affirmation of castration) is lacking, when there is no introjection of castration, then we are in the field of foreclosure, of *Verwerfung*.

It is precisely what has not been taken in—as we say ‘I won’t take it’—that is expelled, that is rejected into the real where it will reappear as an hallucination. One can find a good example of such a rejection in the Wolf Man, when the Wolf Man, as a child, hallucinates about a bleeding tree or a cut finger.

The foreclosure is a nonsymbolization of this very first signifier. It would be obvious in the incapacity of a child to symbolize the absence and the return of his mother with a small object, a spool, which he throws over the edge of his bed to make it disappear, accompanying the disappearance with a sad o-o-o- (*Fort*, which means *gone* in German) and the reappearance of this spool with a joyful a-a-a- (*da*, here). Everyone knows this example of symbolization, given by Freud in ‘Beyond the pleasure principle’.

For the psychotic, there is no separation between the real and language, between the object and its symbol, or its sign. There is in fact no reality. In a way, the psychotic floats through a universe without difference, a universe where each sign is sign of another sign infinitely, but where no sign has been anchored to a thing which would not be a sign.

There is something which does *not* happen in the field of psychosis, in the field of foreclosure.

The object is never expelled from the semiotic world of the subject. This semiotic world in fact is always already present. The child has always produced signs, long before he uses such signs as signs of something else. A child, when he is 7 or 8 months, produces, during the babbling period, all the phonetic units that are going to be used later as signs of something else. At a very early stage, they are only signs and they constitute with all sorts of other signs the whole world of the child.

No Saussurian linguistics can be used to describe such signs, which are not signs of something else but signs of other signs. And this is probably why Saussurian linguistics always failed when confronted with the language of the psychotic. But if all linguistic systems are at this point useless, Peirce’s conception of signs appears like the very conception of the psychotic sign.

Let us have a quick look at the definition of sign as given by Peirce.

A Sign is anything which is related to a second thing, its *Object*, in respect to a quality, in such a way as to bring a third thing, its *Interpretant* into relation to the same *Object*, and in such a way as to bring a Fourth into relation to that object in the same form *ad infinitum*.

A sign is fundamentally a ternary structure constituted by a representamen, an interpretant, and an object. But as anything related to a second and a third is a sign, the interpretant can become the representamen of another sign, as well as the object, and so

on ad infinitum. What is said in this definition is that there is no limit between the world of things and the world of signs, because anything can be a sign.

In such a perspective, there is a fundamental *indistinction* between what is called a sign and the thing that such a sign could replace, because the thing can also be sign. Such a language is not grounded on castration, which is to be understood as the necessary separation between a world of signs and a world of things, so that the elements of the first can represent the elements of the second for the subject of language.

We can now come back to Benveniste and agree with him when he says that in such a perspective, man is a sign, every thought of him is a sign, every emotion is a sign.

This may be Peirce's conception of language, but this is also the language of the psychotic, not only his language but also his whole universe. All his signs being signs of each other, there is nothing for him, including himself, that would not be a sign. What Benveniste was afraid of, and he had many reasons to be, is precisely what every neurotic fears most: psychosis.

Is there a way to anchor the very first relation of sign?

Yes, answers Freud in Saussure's stead, through *negation*. And by saying so, Freud promotes, without even being aware of it, a linguistic system based on the arbitrariness of sign. The sign has no relation or effect whatever with the thing it is standing for and on the difference between signifier and signified.

In a very special way, one might say that psychoanalytic theory is the theory of the genesis within, and of the effects on the subject, of the Saussurian linguistic theory.

If I oversimplify, I can say that negation severs the Peircian sign from its object, and thus transforms the relationship between the representamen and the interpretant into the difference between the signifier and the signified, thus reducing a system which is fundamentally ternary into a binary one. (see Figure 1).

This whole process, which leads to a linearization and binarization of the semiotic function, probably happens on two levels: historical and individual.

If linguistics has a function, it is to bring all semiotic functions under the law of phonocentrism, as described by Jacques Derrida in his *Grammatology*.

Figure 1.(3 drawings)

I

1) a triangle labeled 'Peirce sign'; with the letters **R**_____ **O** at the base and the letter **I** at the apex of the triangle These letters **I, R, O** stand for Interpretant, Representamen, and Object, respectively.

2) Same triangle, but with a line parallel to side **I-R** cutting through it.

This triangle is labeled underneath: Primary severance

Bejahung

Affirmation of castration

Negation

Expulsion of the object

3) A diagonal line: label at top of this diagonal line **I-->Sd**

label at bottom of this diagonal line **R-->Sr**

Symbolic/Real

This diagonal line is the same diagonal line that cut through the triangle described in 2).

So, in other words, there are 3 triangles next to each other.

1st triangle: is just a plain or shall I say, plane triangle, labeled **I, R, O**, with **I** as the apex, **R-O** is the base of the triangle.

2nd triangle: has a diagonal line, parallel to **I-R** cutting through it.

3rd triangle: In the third diagram, the triangle is invisible, only the diagonal line remains. It is parallel to side **I-R** of the triangle; a diagonal line, just by itself.

RKnote: the 2nd triangle diagram illustrates the effect of the separation of O (object) from its Representamen(Sign) and its Interpretant(Meaning)

The immediate consequence of such a process is the exclusion

- (1) of plurality and spatiality in discourse
- (2) of psychosis

from a field where the realization of both could be possible. The question is not how to cure a psychotic, i.e., to oblige him to accept, to introject castration.

The question is how to create a space, an opening in the social field, so that psychotics and their language can complexify themselves and live their own experience.

The question is what should we have done to calm Benveniste down?

Appendix: Discussion, with François Peraldi, Umberto Eco and Sylvère Lotringer.

Eco: The Peircian model, according to your analysis, takes into account the possibility both of psychoses and of normality operating in a triangle.

Peraldi: No, Peirce's conceptive sign cannot be used (I think Benveniste was quite right here) to study the representative function of language as it is understood in Saussurian linguistics. We should rather go back to a whole literary production which cannot be reduced. There is a parallel production of completely heterogeneous discourse; in its more imperialistic attempts, linguistics has tried to explain every kind of linguistic manifestation. It failed. What is the use of Peirce's theory of the sign? It should be applied to all sorts of things: and we are only beginning to find the fields in which it could be applied.

Eco: One of the problems of Peircian semiotics is that it risks remaining on the Saussurian level. Apparently, in Peirce's semiosis, we never arrive at the 'object', even if Peirce says that the object as state of affairs, as reality, motivates the production of the sign.

Peraldi: But he maintains also that often the object can become the representamen of another sign. The fundamental difference between the world of things and the world of signs is not taken into consideration by Peirce.

Eco: That is my objection. The object can become another sign, but insofar as an object becomes another sign, it takes the place of an interpretant. Peirce was very conscious of the fact that if semiosis kept going ad infinitum it could not stop. Therefore, he elaborated the notion of habit. More 'normal' (in the sense of good health), it means that continual semiosis sending us back from sign to sign produces a certain capability to make an intervention upon the words, upon the objects, and to transform them. Peirce's notion of the interpretant is a continual referral from sign to sign, from drawing to other languages to literary quotation. But this jump from label to label produces the capability to isolate an apple, to pick it up, and to eat it. Temporarily speaking, semiosis does not stop: it continuously generates, like branches of itself, ways of touching the word. This element should not be excluded in an illustration of Peirce's notion of language.

Peraldi: I have a way of looking at it which is very partial; I for one would have been embarrassed to take into consideration 'habit'. I need it, as does Benveniste, as a pretext to try to find an answer to that problem which I think we are confronting in psychosis: a semiotic universe which seems to have invaded the whole world of the psychotic.

Eco: There was in Peirce an element of realism and pragmatism, continually dialectic against his idealism with the notion of semiosis. He never found the right balance, otherwise he would have written the book that he never wrote. Probably, Peirce was psychotic...

Eco: I would like now to try to say something about the strange *méfiance* that Benveniste surely had in the face of Peircian semiotics. I would like to compare two texts of Benveniste, one published in *Semiotica* (1,1969), the other published in *Diogène*, on the problems of language. Benveniste tries to demonstrate in the *Semiotica* article that Peirce did not distinguish well between the possible semiotics of language, of *la langue*, and other semiotic phenomena. In a sense, Benveniste was wrong: not only because in Peirce,

there is a strong distinction between iconic/symbolic, but also, as Jakobson has recently demonstrated, Peirce paid great attention to the phenomenological problems and made frequent references to the way in which the structure of Indo-European language determined ways of thinking, to the criticism of the subject, to popular predicate structure—a lot of remarks that were not structuralistic in the Saussurian sense but that were aiming to describe the function of language, while compiling a logical analysis of language. Benveniste was not convinced that Peirce offered a satisfactory picture which distinguished the proper place of verbal language from the other ‘languages’. One of Benveniste’s arguments in his article is that verbal language is approachable as a structure, as a social code; he was practically elaborating the notion the Russian semioticians have called Primary Modeling System, upon which all the other possible modeling systems depend. In order to stress this particular quality of verbal language, he spoke of images, painting, and noted articulatory units as in language. But moreover, and he was right, he continued that we cannot find in images units which have a meaning independent of their contextualization. In an image, everything is relational; every picture posits its own code, its system of relations, and only in that system of relations does every element acquire a precise system of meaning.

One of the main features of Benveniste’s attitude towards language which is very well represented by the *Diogène* article is the notion that codes exist and are very well structured. But language begins to become interesting when I appropriate, when I make an act of appropriation of language through the use of shifters, through the use of pronouns—‘I’ and ‘you’. More than other linguists, Benveniste has insisted on these vital processual *actes de parole*, in which what was abstractly structural becomes circumstantially correlational. This is exactly the moment in which language in usage becomes more similar to a painting than to an abstract structure; every phrase, every utterance, acquires its precise meaning when correlated to the author (‘I’ and ‘you’). Benveniste has insisted very lucidly on this point, which is nothing else but the problem of indexicality of language. In the *Semiotica* article, you have correctly remarked that Benveniste was wrong concerning Peirce’s ability to show the difference between the index and the demonstrative pronoun, the notion of generating the sentence and so on. Yet, Benveniste demonstrates how the strictly coded and arbitrary shifters, revitalized in the act of *parole*, become more similar to a pointing finger. In addition, Benveniste elaborates the notion of linguistic time, the continuum. It is possible to reread part of Benveniste’s thought as a reassertion by one who has just understood what Peirce said. Maybe from a psychoanalytical point of view, it would be useful to find out why he was so Peircian and denied that Peirce had said the things *he* was repeating.

Peraldi: I think one should do what Bachelard suggested: the continual application of psychoanalysis. When applied to this attitude of Benveniste, it could perhaps show some kind of contradiction in Benveniste himself, at first related to a whole structural binary way of things but then very much tempted by Peirce’s approach. Yet, he never goes as far as Peirce, never leaves the security of a linguist’s interest in the system rather than the sign.

Eco: It would be interesting to see how much time Benveniste really reflects Peirce, because the problem is also that Benveniste did not know Peirce very well; he was basing

his knowledge on scattered information. He compared what he knew about Peirce, which was very uneven and unshaped, to his profound knowledge of the mainstream structural linguistics.

Lotringer: Since you, Peraldi are an analyst, working in the field of psychiatry, what could be the application of psychoanalytical theory to a historical examination of the situation. Because Lacan started with Saussure instead of Peirce, this implies a certain relationship with linguistics.

Peraldi: When you are confronted with psychotic people, you have a chance: either to consider them as nonneurotic with the need of becoming so, that is, to consider them as handicapped by not having theoretically accepted castration and so force them into castration, oblige them to get into castration by any means, any kind of therapy: or starting from a psychotic point of view, starting from the production of signs whose functioning would be different than the Saussurian sign, considering everything as sign, it would be possible for the psychotic to develop his way of being into a semiotic world. This becomes a completely different problem with their being in the world. There would be the possibility for a psychotic to become completely a psychotic, not an autistic, but to complexify his own way of producing things and to group his desires together in a certain way. The work would then not be that of force on the part of the psychiatrist, but would be directed towards the people within the environment, to oblige them to accept the psychotic as he is.

Lotringer: Psychoanalysis as such cannot take into account this kind of functioning other than in a negative way. I recall the description of schizophrenia by Freud wherein there is confusion between language and object—an absence of difference between object and things. Could we reformulate the problem to take psychosis into account? Would you have to substitute...

Peraldi: No, there is no need for substitution. Psychoanalysis tells us exactly what it can do with neurosis, but it also tells us what should not be done with psychotics. It tells the contrary of what it suggests we could do. It is a negative theory/practice.

Lotringer: Do you think ‘polymorphous perversion’ applies here, that is, starting with multiplicity rather than repression?

Peraldi: Yes.

Eco: Would you see then some relation between this notion of unlimited semiosis and the *machine désirante*?

Peraldi: Yes, definitely.

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working on coordinating Lacan's theory of the unconscious with the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce.