Icons of symbols – sign theory and the sources of perspectivization in discourse

Arie Verhagen
Leiden University Centre for Linguistics

One major innovation in sign theory introduced by C.S. Peirce (cf. Peirce 2020) was the concept of an "interpretant" – the effect produced in someone's mind by a sign, without which it would not be a sign. It effectively made sign theory a part of (in modern terms) cognitive science. While Peirce developed several versions of theories about the relationships between signifiers, their objects (what they stand for), and interpretants, the idea that a sign consists in an irreducible set of relationships between these three phenomena, has been stable. While the element "interpretant" was conceived by Peirce as mental, internal to a human subject, the elements "object" and "signifier" were considered to be part of external reality. The difference between the sign types Index, Icon, and Symbol was analyzed in terms of different relationships between objects and signifiers, viz. contingency, resemblance, and (habitual) interpretability, respectively.

Keller's (1998) version of sign theory also treats signs as involving a triadic relationship, but only one of the three elements, the signifier, is external. For Keller, a sign is an observable phenomenon that people use to infer something unobservable (cf. Peirce's interpretant) on the basis of certain cognitive resources. Thus, his typology of signs is somewhat different (though not completely) from Peirce's, as being based on different methods of interpreting signs. Keller distinguishes Symptom, Icon, and Symbol, as based on the use of causal (world) knowledge, associative capacities, and knowledge of rules (cultural conventions), respectively.

In this talk, I will argue that Keller's (more) pragmatic approach constitutes a considerable advance in sign theory, especially with some further refinements. Not only is it simpler and more compatible with (cognitive) linguistic insights, it naturally incorporates the idea that multiple methods of interpretation can be operative in the use of a sign. This provides a basis for incorporating a theory of language change into the general theory of signs (Keller's own research program), but in fact also for incorporating theories of perspective taking in discourse ("polyphony", "speech/thought representation) into this theory. The latter point will be elaborated in some detail in the second half of this talk (based on Clark 2016; cf. Verhagen 2021, lecture 9).

References
Clark, Herbert H. (2016). Depicting as a method of communication. *Psychological Review* 123: 324 347.
Keller, Rudi (1998). *A Theory of Linguistic Signs*. Oxford, etc.: Oxford University Press.
Peirce, Charles S. (2020). *Selected Writings on Semiotics 1894-1912*. Edited by Francesco Bellucci. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter Mouton.
Verhagen, Arie (2021). *Ten Lectures on Cognitive Evolutionary Linguistics*. Boston/Leiden: Brill.