

Common Grounds and Shared Purposes: On Some Pragmatic Ingredients of Communication

Fundamentos Comuns e Propósitos Compartilhados: Sobre Alguns Ingredientes Pragmáticos da Comunicação

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Abstract: This article explores a set of key conceptions involved in Charles S. Peirce's account of communication, building on the hypothesis that his semiotic can beneficially be approached from a communicational or rhetorical point of view. Setting out from Peirce's claim that philosophy should not begin with abstract ideas, but rather with the complex but familiar semiotic setting of ordinary dialogue, the notion of common ground is first explicated in terms of experience and knowledge shared by intelligences engaged in communication. The experiential aspect of communication is further spelled out by a discussion of Peirce's claim that the object of the sign is apprehended through collateral experience or observation that can be indicated rather than through description or other strictly semiotic means. Furthermore, it is shown that the common ground, although a prerequisite for communication in the Peircean framework, does not amount to a demand for identity of experiences; true communicational exchange and development requires experiential divergences.

In the third part of the article, the outlined reconstruction is augmented by an examination of how objects are identified within more specific universes of discourse. The main contention defended is that this is only possible in a purposive context and that some degree of shared purpose is necessary for meaningful communicational interaction. Finally, the role of irreducible indeterminacy in communication is scrutinised, the principal upshot being that vagueness can be beneficial as well as detrimental for our attempts to understand each other and the world; its value depends on in what universe of discourse we operate and for what pragmatic purposes communication and thought is undertaken.

Keywords: Communication. Peirce. Semiotic. Common ground. Collateral experience. Collateral observation. Universe of discourse. Indeterminacy. Vagueness. Purpose. Determination.

Resumo: *Este artigo explora um grupo de concepções-chave implicadas na interpretação da comunicação feita por Charles S. Peirce, com base na hipótese de que sua semiótica pode ser abordada com benefícios de um ponto de vista retórico ou comunicativo. Partindo da afirmação de Peirce de que*

a filosofia não deve começar com idéias abstratas, mas, antes, com a complexa, mas familiar circunstância semiótica do diálogo ordinário, a noção de fundamento comum é explicada primeiro em termos de experiência e conhecimento compartilhado por inteligências envolvidas na comunicação. O aspecto empírico da comunicação é então explicitado por meio da discussão da afirmação peirciana de que o objeto do signo é apreendido por experiências colaterais ou por observação, que podem ser indicadas, em vez de por meio de uma descrição ou outros meios estritamente semióticos. Além disso, é mostrado que o fundamento comum, embora seja um pré-requisito para a comunicação dentro do quadro referencial peirciano, isso não significa uma exigência de que as experiências sejam idênticas – a verdadeira troca comunicativa e o verdadeiro desenvolvimento exigem divergências empíricas.

Na terceira parte do artigo, a reconstrução esboçada é ampliada por um exame de como os objetos são identificados dentro de universos de discurso mais específicos. O principal argumento defendido é o de que isso é possível somente num contexto proposital e que algum grau de propósitos compartilhados é necessário para a interação comunicativa com significado. Finalmente, o papel da indeterminação irreduzível na comunicação é examinado em pormenor, com resultado principal de que a vagueza pode ser benéfica ou não para nossas tentativas de nos entendermos uns aos outros e ao mundo; seu valor depende de em qual universo de discurso operamos e para quais propósitos pragmáticos são empreendidos a comunicação e o pensamento.

Palavras-chave: *Comunicação. Peirce. Semiótica. Fundamento comum. Experiência colateral. Observação colateral. Universo de discurso. Indeterminação. Vagueza. Propósito. Determinação.*

Introduction

With the ongoing growth of interest in pragmatist philosophy, both in its classical shapes and in its later incarnation as neo-pragmatism, increasing attention is being paid to the possible contribution of pragmatism to the study of communicational processes and cultures (see, e.g., HARDT 1992; LANGSDORF & SMITH 1995a; PERRY 2001). Yet, the conceptions of communication inherent in or implied by pragmatist thought have partly been buried under other concerns and have not been sufficiently examined. As Lenore Langsdorf and Andrew R. Smith (1995b) observe, “pragmatism to some extent assumes, and to some extent proposes, a philosophy of communication that has scarcely been articulated” (p. 4).

This claim may raise a few eyebrows. After all, do we not have ample evidence of pragmatism’s attention to the philosophical study of communication in C. S. Peirce’s and Charles Morris’s theories of signs, G. H. Mead’s dialogic conception of the self, and Richard Rorty’s conversationalism? And is not John Dewey, who famously proclaimed that communication is “the most wonderful” of all affairs (DEWEY 1925), a pivotal figure in communication and cultural studies (see, e.g., CAREY 1989)?

No doubt. But the influence has been restricted, if not blocked, by the lack of articulation to which Langsdorf and Smith refer. Not only have the resources offered by the pragmatist tradition been used only partially in studies of communicational processes – in philosophy as well as in other disciplines – but insufficient notice has been

taken of the more elementary question of the conception of communication involved in pragmatist thought. For instance, surprisingly little notice has been taken of the communicational underpinnings of the union of semiotic (*semeiotic*) and pragmatism in Peirce's thought. Perhaps one could point an accusing finger at Rorty and his disciples, whose brand of linguistic anti-representationalism has glossed over this aspect of classical pragmatism, preferring a rhetorical stance to more systematic investigations of rhetorical questions; but, in fairness, followers of Peirce have rarely followed the indicated path either (notable exceptions include COLAPIETRO 1995; 2004; LISZKA 2000; RANSDELL 1977).

In previous efforts (BERGMAN 2000; 2003; 2004; 2005), I have attempted to show how Peirce's later conception of the sign is located in a communicational setting, arguing that the semiotic conceptions of object and interpretant can beneficially be treated as fallible abstractions culled from our everyday experience of the ordinary dialogical functions of utterer and interpreter. This, I believe, goes to the very roots of Peircean semiotics, embedding the theory a more robust pragmatist setting of communicational practices. Yet, this context is often neglected by semioticians who prefer to approach the matter in a strictly hierarchical fashion, laying out a systematic grammar or syntax of signs with little attention paid to the rhetorical (or critical, for that matter) aspect of the study. This is not to denigrate such work in a wholesale fashion; in fact, the formal-grammatical approach is defensible and even recommendable for many purposes. The danger, however, is that an unqualified acceptance of the priority of grammar can lead to a drift toward semiotic formalism, in which the concrete roots and also the pragmatic consequences and applications of the theory are ignored in favour of in-depth analyses of structures that drift uncomfortably close to sterilized glass-bead games. While the classifications and typologies that typically result from such studies may prove to be useful, I believe it is wise to take seriously Peirce's decree that philosophy ought not to start out from pure ideas, "vagabond thoughts that tramp the public roads without any human habitation", but should begin with the familiar and complex ideas inherent in human dialogue (CP¹ 8.112 [c. 1900]).

In this article, I will in broad strokes explore a set of key ideas that naturally emerge from ordinary communicational interaction according to Peirce. The main focus is on the connections between the notions of common ground, collateral experience and universes of discourse. However, my central contention is that these conceptions are communicationally meaningful and efficient only in a setting provided by shared purposes that reduce semiotic indeterminacy to a sufficient degree. Indeed, the generalisation of this point of view leads to a view of semiosis as purposive – not necessarily in a strong teleological sense, but in a pragmatic acceptance intimately connected to interpretative activity.

¹ References to Peirce's writings are indicated using standard abbreviations (see the bibliography).

Familiar Experiences

Since Peirce states that the starting-point of philosophy ought to be facts and features familiar from everyday life, we may begin our discussion by a closer look at the kind of phenomena he thinks ought to constitute the primary source of our inquiry. Following up on his criticism of the absolute idealists, Peirce asserts the following:

We are familiar with the phenomenon of a man's expressing an opinion, sometimes decidedly, often otherwise. Perhaps it will be a mere suggestion, a mere question. Any such suggestion that may be expressed and understood relates to some common experience of the interlocutors, or, if there is a misunderstanding, they may think they refer to some common experience when, in fact, they refer to quite different experiences. A man reasoning with himself is liable to just such a misunderstanding. About this common experience the speaker has something to suggest which is supposed to be new to his auditor. (CP 8.112 [c. 1900])

At first blush, this may seem almost trivial; but on closer inspection, we find that there are at least four central theses implied by this potent fragment. First of all, Peirce declares that every communicational interaction, whether assertive or interrogative, involves a relation to something shared by both parties; "two men cannot converse without some common ground of experiences undergone by both concerning which they speak" (MS 1135:7 [c.1897]). In other words, communication would seem to require at least some joint point of reference. Of course, this provokes a series of further questions, which can only partly be addressed here. For instance, what does *one* experience mean in this context? How is the common point of reference practically established in communication?

Secondly, Peirce suggests that misunderstanding is at bottom an affair of divergent points of reference. The parties believe that each is referring to the same experiences as the other, while in fact talking of different things. This may appear to be a rather uncontroversial claim, but the demand for referential identity can open up the gates for certain kinds of scepticism, even nihilism (cf. JOHANSEN 1993). Setting out from the fact that the experiences of two people never are absolutely identical, one could claim that communication is actually an illusion. What we perceive as a communicational exchange, where the object of discussion is clearly apprehended by all those involved, is in fact a collection of distinct individual interpretations coloured by experiential backgrounds.

Thirdly, Peirce indicates that the dialogue under scrutiny should not be taken in a narrow sense. Like Plato, he views reasoning and thought in general as a kind of internal communication, more specifically as a dialogue between different temporal phases of the self (see, e.g., CP 5.506 [c. 1905]; EP 2:402 [1907]; EP 2:428-429 [1907]; EP 2:447 [1908]; CP 5.546 [c. 1908]). However, Peirce takes this viewpoint one step further when he suggests that not only is the self not a centre of a monologic consciousness, but that the dialogic self is subjected to the very same dangers of experientially funded misunderstanding as individuals in communicational interaction.² This loaded claim would merit a far more detailed study than can be attempted here, but we will return to it briefly toward the end of the discussion.

² This view of the self as communicative is a natural consequence of Peirce's anti-Cartesianism, the basic outlook of which he presents in the so-called cognition series of 1868-9.

Finally, Peirce notes that the utterer presents new information in a paradigmatic communicational act. This does not require much comment here; suffice it to say that the claim is not as innocuous as it might appear. The requirement of newness may be problematical, not to speak of the difficulties associated with linear and intentionalistic communication models. Obviously, the contention would need to be explicated in numerous ways in a sophisticated analysis, e.g. in the terms of a Gricean scrutiny of communicational intentions (cf. PIETARINEN 2004), or perhaps more generally using a framework similar to Roman Jakobson's (1960) model of communicational functions. However, for present purposes, these questions can simply be put aside.

Let us instead turn our attention to the question of the common experience that allegedly grounds or sets the scene for meaningful interaction between human beings. Obviously, this requires some level of understanding of what is meant by "experience" in this context. Clearly, we are not dealing with simple experiences in the sense of classical empiricism. At the very least, it is obvious that Peirce does not mean to base philosophy (or any other kind of science) on simple sense experiences or impressions (see, e.g., CP 2.141 [c. 1902]). In fact, he states that experience should not be understood as an initial condition; the "very etymology of the word tells that [it] comes *ex perito*, 'out of practice'" (MS 681:3 [1913]).³

The issue at hand is complicated by the fact that Peirce appears to apply the term "experience" in a variety of senses. Fortunately, the situation may be clarified by use of William Haas's (1964, pp. 29-30) identification of two principal uses of "experience" in Peirce's philosophy. In the broad application, "experience" is simply anything that can be said to be experienced, whether feeling, effort, resistance, thought, or something else. But in the narrow sense, it is strictly connected to the second category, and does therefore not include intellectual phenomena. Effort and resistance is the paradigm of secondness; hence, Peirce often tends to characterise experience as austere distinct from feeling and purposeful thought (SS 25-26 [1904]). In its narrowest sense, experience denotes something occurring here and now – more or less equivalent to what Peirce in other contexts calls "percept" (see, e.g., CP 7.619 [c. 1903]). It is something that is *had*, but which never can be reached in its purity in intellectual reflection. We could designate this sense of experience *singular experience*.

However, Haas claims that the broad use "seems to place no limitations at all on the concept of experience" (HAAS 1964, pp. 29-30). This is not entirely accurate, and may betray a too narrow conception of the categories; while it is true that there are no ontological limits to experience in the broad sense, it is nonetheless something that is forced upon a human being. Haas fails to see that Peirce's definition of "experience" as "the cognitive resultant" of life (CP 2.84 [c. 1902]) also connects experience with secondness through the idea of determination.

Experience is that determination of belief and cognition generally which the course of life has forced upon a man. One may lie about it; but one cannot escape the fact that some things *are* forced upon his cognition. (CP 2.138 [c. 1902])

³ I am not competent to judge whether Peirce's etymological analysis is correct; it does not affect the philosophical purport of the claim, however.

However, as a significant part of cognition, experience cannot be purely singular; it includes interpretations.

...experience can only mean the total cognitive result of living, and includes interpretations quite as truly as it does the matter of sense. Even more truly, since this matter of sense is a hypothetical something which we never can seize as such, free from all interpretative working over. (CP 7.538)

Such experiential interpretations are beyond our conscious control as they occur, yet they can be analysed as semiotic and controllable after the fact. In other words, we are not simply fed atomic experiences, from which we then build reasonable conceptions by secondary processes of interpretation; rather, there are interpretations we cannot avoid making in the course of life. We look around and see things such as tables, computers, and other people. At first, these experiences seem to be simply given; and so they are, at the very moment of their occurrence, as things that are undeniably there in spite of our will. This actuality of singular experience – that something is experienced here and now, without apparent reason – cannot be explained away rationally. The fact that the percept possesses a cognitive history does not affect its phenomenological appearance as purest secondness. It is only upon later semiotic and psychological inspection that the inferential character of the percepts can become known; indeed, it is then seen that we do not properly speaking *know* anything about the percept except as a part of a sign relation. But at that moment we are strictly speaking not dealing with a percept anymore, but a *percipuum*, a percept interpreted (cf. CP 7.643 [c. 1903]). As definite and lacking generality, percepts as such do not constitute experience in a cognitively meaningful sense; but in the *perceptual judgments* we cannot help making, general conceptions pour in on us “through every avenue of sense” (PPM 224 [1903]). This forms the basic characteristic of life that Peirce identifies as “common sense experience”.

While experience in the narrow sense is strictly particular, a hard and isolated fact of secondness, experience in a broad sense is always connected to a complex network of interwoven sign structures and processes of abduction. Furthermore, although experience is, from one point of view, the cognitive possession of an individual human being, an inquiring intelligence naturally identifies him- or herself with a community in sentiment. Consequently, Peirce contends that experience is felt to be social in a truly significant sense.

The course of life has developed certain compulsions of thought which we speak of collectively as Experience. Moreover, the inquirer more or less vaguely identifies himself in sentiment with a Community of which he is a member, and which includes, for example, besides his momentary self, his self of ten years hence; and he speaks of the resultant cognitive compulsions of the course of life of that community as Our Experience.⁴ (CP 8.101 [1900]; cf. MS 299:7-8 [c. 1905])

⁴ It would be easy to criticise Peirce’s notion of “everyman’s hourly experience” (NEM 4:228 [1905-6]) on the ground that this communal “everyman” is a mere abstraction, a disembodied and sexless fiction. Peirce would probably not be stirred by such arguments; if experience were completely individual, then there could be no inquiry in the proper sense. Although the success of science is not a *proof* that we share at least some experiences, it gives sufficient support to the hypothesis to render it a rational hope. On the other

Experience of such communal nature enables an epistemic base for communicational interaction. Peirce argues that communication of any piece of information requires at least some fund of common familiar knowledge, “where the word ‘familiar’ refers less to how well the object is known than to the manner of the knowing” (MS 614:1 [1908]). In this, case, “familiarity” refers to the fact that the knower knows that he or she knows, and that that knowledge is distinguishable from other things; while common familiar knowledge entails that each of the involved parties knows that every other familiarly knows it, and furthermore knows that every knower has a familiar knowledge of the relevant kind. This nested epistemic compound is potentially infinite, which means that it is not necessarily actualised in the action of knowing. As Peirce notes, “two endless series of knowings are involved; but knowing is not an action but a habit, which may remain passive for an indefinite time” (MS 614:2 [1908]). This is a position that is consistent with his brand of pragmatism, in which the reality of dormant habits and future possibilities is affirmed alongside concrete actions.

We have thus arrived at the following claim: the course of life forces certain experiences upon us – experiences that are not only cognitively complex and inherently interpretative but also naturally taken to be the common property of a community of intelligences. Furthermore, among these experiences we find the cause for a kind of epistemic basis for communication in the form habits of knowledge that may be actualised as conscious knowings.

This brings us to the question of the actual contents of the common ground. No exhaustive inventory needs to be given here – such a list is hardly feasible in view of the vagueness and infinity of the fund of knowledge in question – but it supposedly includes the mutual recognition of certain capacities and tendencies. For instance, a participant in ordinary communication virtually or actually acknowledges that the others are capable of mastering certain uses of signs (usually including grammatically advanced kinds such as natural languages), and that they are beings capable of learning from experience and as such of the same general type as he or she is. This also implies knowledge – or perhaps more correctly, an experiential grasp – of the distinction between reality and unreality.

This might seem to take us close to something that could be characterised as a principle of communicational charity. However, this would be reading too much into Peirce’s claim at the current stage. As such, the common ground thesis says nothing about how we should interpret new claims and arguments nor about the assumed coherence of a speaker as an assumption needed to optimise interpretation (cf. DAVIDSON 1973; GRANDY 1973; QUINE 1960; WARMBROD 1991; WILSON 1959); it merely asserts that there needs to be some shared basis of knowledge for communication to be feasible at all. Moreover, we should be careful not to overly rationalise Peirce’s position; we are not dealing with a strong transcendental argument that moves from the fact of communication to necessary presuppositions. Rather, the claim is that there is a more primitive aspect in life, generally identified as experience, which tends to force us into a certain pattern of common-sense beliefs. Arguably, such vague beliefs, which are typically taken for granted and are for the time being (albeit not absolutely) beyond

hand, Peirce does at times indicate that common experience is something that requires a certain level of maturity in the individual (see, e.g., MS 1334:24 [1905]; MS 655:8 [1910]).

criticism, arise naturally from practices in which we try to make our way in the world. The underlying habits may to a limited extent be conceptually clarified and ultimately criticised by rational argument; but the beliefs involved cannot be rendered more indubitable by supra-experiential means.

Collateral Observations

The conception of common ground examined thus far may be taken as a minimal pragmatic prerequisite – or better, ingredient – of communication. It is closely connected to the social sentiment that affirms the communality of experience, quite apart from the support of philosophical argument. As such the common ground is indefinite; if articulated, it will result in vague statements to the effect that people need to have sufficiently similar experiences in order to be able to communicate. It says very little, if anything, about the particular experiential requirements of more specific lines of communication.

Given the framework of Peirce's semiotic, communication must naturally be viewed as a sign process, in which the involved parties (whether persons or phases of the self) refer to certain subject matters, theoretically conceptualised as objects. Such objects have two sides: the *immediate*, which may be described as internal to the sign relation, and the *dynamical*, which is in a pregnant sense outside of the sign, but still capable of determining or delimiting it. Now, Peirce argues that the dynamical object cannot be expressed by the sign; it can only be indicated, so that the interpreter can find it out by *collateral experience* (EP 2:498 [1909]). Mere signs will be inefficient, if the required experiential background or proficiency is missing.

...I point my finger to what I mean, but I can't make my companion know what I mean, if he can't see it, or if seeing it, it does not, to his mind, separate itself from the surrounding objects in the field of vision. It is useless to attempt to discuss the genuineness and possession of a personality beneath the histrionic presentation of Theodore Roosevelt with a person who recently has come from Mars and never heard of Theodore before. (EP 2:498 [1909])

Of course, it is unlikely that an alien from Mars would understand English; but Peirce argues that a mere acquaintance with a system of signs, which certainly is a condition for grasping signification, is not sufficient (EP 2:494 [1909]). In order to grasp what the sign denotes – what it is really about – collateral experience or observation is needed.

One of the facts on which Peirce bases his argument for collateral experience is that no *description*, in itself, suffices to indicate the object of a communicational exchange. If person *A* says "George Bush is a fool" to person *B*, the sentence will be close to senseless unless *B* has some previous experience of the objects involved. That is, if *B* does not know who George Bush is, or has blissfully escaped contact with fools, the objects of the sentence will not be sufficiently fixed to function determinatively in the semiotic process.⁵ If *B* asks "Who?", *A* can try to specify the reference by offering a

⁵ Of course, *B* can misunderstand the sentence in various ways, in spite of possessing sufficient experiential background. There are presumably many men named George Bush in the world; if the reporters and cameras do not lie, there are at least two. As such, the sentence does not specify which one of the men is indicated. *A* may intend to refer to

description along the lines of “The acting president of the United States”; but then again, the understanding of that phrase depends on experience of such objects as presidents and the United States. The explications can be made more and more elaborate, but unless *A* somehow manages to refer to an object of *B*'s experience, no communication can take place. According to Peirce, such a reference cannot be achieved with pure descriptions. In other words, any assertion requires *indices* backed by collateral experience as well as icons and symbols.

...looking at the matter from the rhetorical point of view, every assertion must be an assertion about something, and there must be something to indicate what it is about. This subject must be something which speaker and listener both know by experience; or else, the assertion must show the hearer by what process he can gain experience of the subject of the assertion. No description whatever can suffice to show what the subject is, unless the assertion is absolutely empty. For example, the assertion “all red cows are red”, if it be intended to say something about *real* cows is perfectly empty and means nothing. An uncultivated person, who only understands assertions as referring to real things, will call it nonsense. It only gains a meaning when it is understood as meaning that the *term*, or *Begriff*, “red cows” involves their being red. The subject of the assertion is in that case the logical world of terms or concepts; and this world cannot be differentiated from every world of fact and of fiction by any general description [...] There ought [...] to be three parts in every assertion, namely, a sign of the occasion of the compulsion, a sign of the compelled idea, and a sign which shall be evidence to the listener of the compulsion affecting the speaker in so far as he identifies himself with the scientific intelligence generally. (MS 805:19-20)

Indices are indispensable as contextualisers of communication; they are signs that in some sense indicate, denote or call attention to their objects, without thereby giving any substantial information about them. They may be broadly divided into two classes: (1) *reagents* or indices proper, e.g. the environment of the interlocutors or something attracting attention in that environment, such as a pointing finger, and (2) *designations* or sub-indices, conventional but non-descriptive signs that draw the interpreter's attention to certain existents, like proper names or pronouns do.⁶ Both of these require collateral experience or acquaintance; “as a designation can denote nothing unless the interpreting mind is already acquainted with the thing it denotes, so a reagent can indicate nothing unless the mind is already acquainted with its connection with the phenomenon it indicates” (CP 8.368 n. 23).

The requirement of collateral observation needs some illustration; an example adopted from Peirce (cf. CP 2.357 [1902]) may help to clarify the point. Suppose, for instance, that someone comes into a room where we are sitting and shouts “Fire!” In itself, the word in question is hardly informative; we might look up “fire” in a dictionary,

George W. Bush, acting president of the USA, and *B* may possess the required collateral experience of the object in question. Nonetheless, *B* may for some reason think first of the acting president's father.

⁶ Besides these, Peirce also speaks of *precepts*, symbolic signs that describe what an interpreter must do in order to come into possession of an index of the object, and which in doing so also provide the object with a designation (see, e.g., CP 2.357 [1902]; EP 2:286 [1903]).

but that would merely give us a description of how it might be applied (cf. MS 452:12 [1903]). If that were all we had to go on, we might calmly ask for more information. However, if we note that the utterer's tone is panicky, and that his or her expression is worried, we will probably start to look for a way out. Add a smell of smoke to the environment, and there should be no doubt about the object of the sign – although we actually know very little about the object, and the whole thing *might* be a rather puerile prank. There are many indices at play in such a situation: the tone and the expression, for instance, but also less obvious contextual elements, such as the setting in which we are located. Furthermore, some wild interpretations, which the signs alone would render possible, are excluded by common sense.

...if somebody rushes into the room and says, "There is a great fire!" we know he is talking about the neighbourhood and not about the world of the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*. It is the circumstances under which the proposition is uttered or written which indicate that environment as that which is referred to. But they do so not simply as index of the environment, but as evidence of an intentional relation of the speech to its object, which relation it could not have if it were not intended for a sign. (CP 2.357 [1902]; cf. EP 2:407 [1907])

Now, a critic of the Peircean point of view may concede that collateral experience is indeed a prerequisite in semiotic situations involving such incomplete signs as a one-word exclamation like "Fire!" Still, he or she might opine that it does not apply to a proper assertion. Peirce would deny this; one element of assertion, at least, consists in the application of a description to something well-known and well understood between the asserter and the auditor (MS 452:13 [1903]). That which is thus described cannot be known merely through the description, but must be something with which the parties are familiar by other means. Furthermore, the *character of assertion* – the positive affirmation that entails a certain commitment – is not given in the form of the signs. Again, using an example from Peirce, consider a statement such as "Thomas Studley is energetic", found written or printed on a piece of paper. If the interpreter is not familiar with Mr. Studley, no knowledge is conveyed, apart from the rather useless piece of information that somebody, presumably a man named Thomas Studley, is energetic. He might be real; but he might also be the product of a literary imagination, or even a random fabrication produced by a computer programmed to construct grammatically correct sentences of English. However, if the note states that "George W. Bush is energetic",⁷ then the proposition will probably be meaningful for the interpreter; it is at any rate a proposition to which he or she may consent or dissent. Yet, this does *not* make it an assertion in the full sense; it is possible that the person who wrote it was just practicing his or her handwriting, without intending to be held responsible for what the words could be taken to affirm (MS 452:14 [1903]); or it might be another output of the machine. Thus, some collateral experience is required to make the words into an assertion for us, and some more to establish them as an actually intended assertion. True, there may be signs that indicate that a certain statement is to be taken as an act of assertion – for instance, a signature under a declaration – but the point is that no *descriptive* signs

⁷ In Peirce's example, the energetic president is Theodore Roosevelt.

will ever suffice to signal the character of true assertion, if they are completely severed from collateral factors. More generally, we may say that recognition of communicational mood requires collateral observation.

This contention could be supported by a line of reasoning from a different philosophical setting. Arguing against the view that there are conventions governing assertion, Donald Davidson uses an example that has a familiar ring to it.

Imagine this: the actor is acting out a scene in which there is supposed to be a fire. (Albee's *Tiny Alice*, for example.) It is his role to imitate as persuasively as he can a man who is trying to warn others of the fire. "Fire!" he screams. And perhaps he adds, at the behest of the author, "I mean it! Look at the smoke!" etc. And now a real fire breaks out, and the actor tries vainly to warn the real audience. "Fire!" he screams, "I mean it! Look at the smoke!" etc. If only he had Frege's assertion sign.⁸

It should be obvious that the assertion sign would do no good, for the actor would have used it in the first place, when he was only acting. Similar reasoning should convince us that it is no help to say that the stage, or the proscenium arch, creates a conventional setting which negates the convention of assertion. For if that were so, the acting convention could be put into symbols also; and of course no actor or director would use it. The plight of the actor is always with us. (DAVIDSON 2001, p. 269-70)

Albeit approaching the matter from a different angle, Peirce could agree with Davidson; the *thrust* of assertion cannot be expressed in symbols. However, Peirce would add that other signs are involved in indicating that the assertion is the kind of semiotic act it is, most prominently relatively genuine indices pertaining to circumstances of utterance, tones, expressions, etc. – all factors connecting directly to collateral experience. As Peirce notes, languages do not seem to have a sign to show that the real world is spoken of, but "that is not necessary, since tones and looks are amply sufficient to show when the speaker is in earnest" (MS 804:22). In view of Davidson's example, we should probably say that they are *usually* adequate; the actor might be very talented, and we all know that there are accomplished liars.

Instead of shared conventions, Davidson attributes the success of communication primarily to personal intentions made public. However, while the Peircean point of view concurs with Davidson's contention that the plight of the actor is always with us, Peirce would nonetheless not abandon the idea that communication requires a kind of common ground; indeed, as we have seen, he maintains that no human being can communicate the smallest item of information to another unless they have a fund of common familiar knowledge.

⁸ Frege tried to rectify the deficiency of our linguistic apparatus by introducing an explicit assertion sign, the turnstile "+". As Davidson (2001) wryly notes, Frege may have been operating according to a sound principle – if there is a conventional feature of language, it can be made manifest with a symbol – but "before Frege invented the assertion sign he ought to have asked himself why no such sign existed before" (p. 269).

No object can be denoted or indicated unless it is put into relation to an object of the common ground (SS 197 [1906]).⁹ However, the mere possession of shared knowledge, built on common experience, is not sufficient for communicational development. To provide new information concerning a specific object in communication, the utterer must indexically connect his or her experience of it with the experience shared by utterer and interpreter.

I have defined an index or indication as a sign by virtue of physical connection. Experiential connection would be more explicit; for I mean by physical connection that the sign occurs in our experience in relation to the when and where of the object it represents. The phrase “our experience” is significant. Experience is the course of life, so far as we attend to it. “Our experience”, I say, because unless two persons had some experience in common, they could not communicate, at all. If their experience were identical, they could furnish one another no information. But to the experience both have in common, the several experiences of the two connect other occurrences; and so we have shares in a collective experience. An index connects a new experience with former experience. (MS 797:10)

Thus, we find that Peirce not only affirms the need for shared experience, but also the need for experiential divergence. Quite simply, if a common ground would suffice, communication would be reduced to social maintenance, a routine function wholly lacking in creativity. Consequently, differences of experience are not only tolerated; they are crucial for cognitive development, the kind of interaction that results in new, social knowledge.

Vague Communications

Up to this point, we have talked about the common ground as a unity without partitions. However, this is only the case in the vague sense of *some* common experience being required. In fact, the shared fund of experience is mostly so vast and heterogeneous that it needs to be delimited in view of the purposes of the transaction. Again, indices are essential; they are needed to specify in what *universe of discourse* communication takes place. That is, they indicate in what specific domain the objects referred to are to be found; or, to express the point differently, what kind of experience is required for the proper grasping of the objects. In an entry in *The Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* Peirce and Christine Ladd-Franklin state the matter as follows:

In every proposition the circumstances of its enunciation show that it refers to some collection of individuals or of possibilities, which cannot be adequately described, but can only be indicated as something familiar to both speaker and

⁹ In his semiotic, Peirce also speaks of the *commens*, a common mind in possession of shared experience. The aim of communication is a determination (conceptualised as *the communicational interpretant*) of the commens, that is, enriched shared understanding concerning some subject matter.

auditor. At one time it may be the physical universe, at another it may be the imaginary “world” of some play or novel, at another a range of possibilities. (CP 2.536 [1902]; cf. CP 2.357 [1902])¹⁰

In other words, there is no semiotic *property* that would distinguish the various universes from each other; not even the basic distinction between fact and fiction is given in the signs (see CP 2.337 [c. 1895]). Instead, a variety of means are used to indicate what universe is meant; “often, it is the tone of the discourse which gives us to understand whether what is said is to be taken as history, physical possibility, or fiction” (NEM 4:367). In other cases, certain phrases, such as “the fact is” or “once upon a time”, afford a clue. Of course, such phrases partake of the nature of conventional signs; but insofar as they refer us to some living experience or to something with which we are familiar by action and reaction, they signify their object predominantly in an indexical way, or by existential connection (NEM 4:367).

In other words, a universe of discourse can be said to be a partial narrowing of the semiotic cosmos, or perhaps the identification of one possible world among many. Such a universe forms the space in which actual utterance, interpretation, and communication can take place; as Vincent Colapietro (1989) observes, the “specification of the object of any sort of semiosis must [...] always be determined in reference to the context in which the process of semiosis is occurring” (p. 11). The rules of interpretation will be different for different universes of discourse.

One of the implications of this reconstruction of the idea of universes of discourse is that the identification of objects occurs within a certain semiotic space relative to certain purposes. To make heads or tails of ordinary communicational acts, an interpreter must be able to grasp what universe of discourse is at issue, and how to demarcate or specify objects adequately within its domain. Signs characteristically leave a certain leeway of interpretation – not only in the development of interpretant-effects, but also with regard to referential delimitation. Indeed, signs typically designate a more or less indefinite universe, within which objects might be experienced, rather than explicitly indicating the object of the sign. On their own, signs are not capable of properly fixing the reference of discourse purporting to relate information concerning some world.¹¹

¹⁰ Peirce adopted the term “universe of discourse” from Augustus De Morgan, the pioneer of the logic of relations. In Peirce’s writings, “universe of discourse” is a technical term that occurs mostly in connection with the system of existential graphs. However, it seems to allow for a broader application as well.

¹¹ Here, the “world” should be understood broadly, that is, as encompassing anything – whether “fictive” or “real” – that requires some experiential connection, however indirect or distant. Arguably, if this line of thought is pursued to the end, we will be left with nothing but certain mathematical universes that might be excluded from this “world”. I say “might”, because in actually working with such mathematical domains, finite minds will no doubt employ at least some signs of experiential purport, albeit the connection of such semiotic units to experience may be very remote and wholly irrelevant for the pursuits of the mathematician. Furthermore, there is an attenuated sense in which even the most abstract mathematics can be said to include a kind of experience in the form of resistance. Once the mathematical world is created, it will not allow of just any kind of transformations – or, more specifically, the operations will have consequences of a certain kind rather than of another.

Nor can collateral observation ever bring forth a perfectly particular positive *object*, determinate in every conceivable respect; singular experience is never adequate by itself. Thus, there will always be a certain degree of indeterminacy or latitude in semiosis, because human beings cannot escape the use of signs to some kind of “hard core” of pure objective perception. That would be like attempting to get to the onion *per se* by peeling off layer after layer (MS L387 [1905]; MS 1334:44 [1905]).

The determination of the object is basically a process in which the references of a sign are made sufficiently clear for communicational purposes. That is, this type of determination consists primarily in specifying the immediate object in various ways, so that it can act as a basis for semiotic interaction. In other words, in the case of communicational indeterminacy, the referential objects need to be made suitably determinate, so that the object can function dynamically as a determinant of semiosis. This may sound as a violation of Peircean dogma, given that Peirce unremittingly stresses that signs are determined by objects, and not *vice versa*; however, we are talking of two logically distinct kinds of determination here. We could, therefore, move beyond Peirce and differentiate two modes of determination: *communicational determination*, in which indices or other means are used to decrease the indeterminacy of a communicational situation, and *objective determination*, in which the object acts as a delimiter of interpretation.

Although this distinction between two kinds of determination cannot be found as such in Peirce’s writings, it seems to be compatible with his semiotic and his theory of indeterminacy. A few words of caution are in order, however. The fact that deliberate communicational determination is often needed for *efficient* objective determination does not imply that the latter is straightforwardly caused by the former. In fact, from a Peircean point of view it would be more appropriate to say that the determinative power of the object is what makes communicational determination possible at all. As noted, one of Peirce’s central points is that communicational exchange is only possible if the object is already at least to some extent known by both utterer and interpreter. The basic acquaintance with the object cannot be had by mere descriptions or other purely intra-semiotic means; according to Peirce, it requires some collateral observation of the object. This collateral experience is logically prior to the sign, albeit the sign may be encountered in real life before its object has been adequately determined. Think here of the first time a certain name, such as “George W. Bush”, is heard or read.

Still, mere objective determination is rarely, if ever, sufficient. The object of a certain communicational exchange cannot be adequately identified without a purposive context or setting, which limits the scope of the sign; the sign must be understood as functioning within a certain intended universe of discourse.

This claim can be clarified with the help of another illustration adopted from Peirce (EP 2:393 [1906]). In his example, two Englishmen meet in a railway carriage and engage in conversation. One of the men mentions Charles the Second, and the other has no problem in identifying what subject (i.e., object) is meant, as he is in possession of the required collateral experience. The immediate object, which is grasped almost automatically and without reflection, is the *English* Charles the Second. When this preliminary communicational identification is made, the object becomes an actual determinant of the ensuing conversational exchange. Yet, the success of this determination does not mean that the object of the discussion has been rendered perfectly determinate in every respect. For instance, the Englishmen have not specified what precise tempo-

ral Charles is meant; one could argue that Charles was a different man on different days, a view not wholly implausible if Peirce's conception of the temporality of the dialogical self is taken seriously. However, according to Peirce, the Englishmen have no interest in such details. What renders the determination of the subject a success, in spite of the countless specifications that could be added, is the purposive context provided by the discussion. As Peirce puts it, "the two Englishmen have no purpose of splitting hairs in their talk; the latitude of interpretation which constitutes the indeterminacy of a sign must be understood as a latitude which might affect the achievement of a purpose" (EP 2:393 [c. 1906]). Obviously, the situation would have been different if one of the travellers would have lacked the needed collateral experience. In that case, the utterer of the sign would have been forced to try to find suitable signs, with which to specify the object meant, using the shared experience available as a starting-point. If no suitable experiential factors can be found, then the undertaking would be hopeless, rather like trying to discuss the wisdom of George W. Bush with a being that has just arrived from Alpha Centauri (cf. EP 2:498 [1909]).

A sign, which in certain contexts might be highly indeterminate and almost incomprehensible, can under other circumstances leave no uncertainty as to its object. Considered in isolation, the sign "the president" in the proposition "the president is a fool" is a highly indefinite sign. However, collateral factors typically render the sign less indefinite, or determinate enough to be considered as decidedly identifying an object in a certain universe of discourse and relative to a certain communicational purpose. In fact, the indeterminacy or determinacy of a sign can meaningfully be discussed only relative to such contexts. Jarrett Brock explains this succinctly:

It is important to note that Peirce's concepts of indeterminacy and determinacy were initially defined and interpreted relative to a given universe of discourse (in the sense of De Morgan) and a given state of information. This relativity is presupposed by the later pragmatic analysis of indeterminacy and determinacy. According to this analysis, a term is indeterminate if it allows a *latitude of interpretation or further determination* relative to the purpose(s) of a given discourse or inquiry and is determinate if it does not. Thus a term may be said to be relatively determinate or relatively indeterminate or absolutely so. A term is absolutely determinate or indeterminate if it has the requisite properties relative to all universes of discourse, all states of information, and all purposes of discourse or inquiry. (BROCK 1981, p. 133-4)

It is highly questionable whether any sign can ever be said to be absolutely determinate; but relatively determinate signs are commonplace. The degree of specification required depends on our aims in communication. If the goal is to convey some piece of knowledge about some object, for example to tell a foreigner that the acting president of Finland is a woman, then it is clear that a certain amount of precision is needed. If somebody simply states "the president is a woman", without further designation, the attempted communication can be an abject failure.

However, we may then ask whether such an elimination of indeterminacy is always a laudable goal, and to what degree it can be achieved. If we consider the first question from a Peircean point of view, then we will have to answer in the negative; Peirce often claims that *generalisation* is the principal aim of our intellectual activities. In other words, certain semiotic activities – science in particular – aim at producing, or perhaps more accurately discovering, general signs; that is, signs that are indeterminate

in a special sense. The explanation for this somewhat strange conclusion is to be found in Peirce's scholastic realism; general signs are needed to represent adequately the general and real laws of the world (cf. TIERCELIN 1992). This is, in part at least, what Peirce seems to mean by his famous but cryptic statement that the "universe is perfused with signs" (EP 2:394 [c. 1906]).

Generality, then, is not to be construed as a defect in a sign, although it may be so viewed in some specific situation; overtly general signs are often useless, and generalisations can be exploited. However, is not the case of vagueness different? It would seem that this mode of indeterminacy is simply a semiotic imperfection, which ought to be eliminated as far as possible. Certainly, the intuition of many philosophers and rhetoricians – including Peirce on occasion – has been to proclaim such indefiniteness¹² as a main barrier to efficient and transparent communication. That is, the fact that people's experiences and conceptions of objects differ is often taken to be a primary cause of communicational confusions; and no doubt, it is. In one manuscript, Peirce explicitly states that insofar as a proposition is indefinite, the information it conveys is flawed (MS 530:14 [c. 1903]; cf. NEM 4.262).

However, as Peirce at other at times realises with admirable clarity, it would be utterly detrimental to try to specify the object in minute detail in many communicational interactions. The idea that indefiniteness could be completely eradicated is simply not feasible; no cognition and no sign is ever absolutely precise (CP 4.543 [1906]; cf. CP 5.506 [c. 1905]; CP 8.208 [c. 1905]). At least, this is true of communication, which in the Peircean scheme will also include thought.

No communication of one person to another can be entirely definite, i.e., non-vague. We may reasonably hope that physiologists will some day find some means of comparing the qualities of one person's feelings with those of another, so that it would not be fair to insist upon their present incomparability as an inevitable source of misunderstanding. Besides, it does not affect the intellectual purport of communications. But wherever degree or any other possibility of continuous variation subsists, absolute precision is impossible. Much else must be vague, because no man's interpretation of words is based on exactly the same experience as any other man's. Even in our most intellectual conceptions, the more we strive to be precise, the more unattainable precision seems. It should never be forgotten that our own thinking is carried on as a dialogue, and though mostly in a lesser degree, is subject to almost every imperfection of language. (CP 5.506 [c. 1905])

Does not then the pervasiveness of indefiniteness lead to scepticism regarding the possibility of communication? After all, granted that all signs are to some degree indefinite, does it not then follow that the shared identification of objects is uncertain at best? This would in fact be a crushing result, *if* absolute precision were required. Peirce sometimes speaks in such a manner, e.g. when he says that the object referred to must be singular,

¹² I use "indefiniteness" indiscriminately as a synonym for "vagueness" here, although it would be possible to make a meaningful distinction between the concepts (see BERGMAN 2004). For current communicational purposes, the distinction would be needlessly specific.

but on closer inspection it becomes clear that he must mean that the object need only be sufficiently determinate to be considered singular in view of certain purposes.¹³

Moreover, Peirce suggests that a perfectly determinate sign is not only a practical impossibility, but of no use for reasoning and semiotic development. Such a sign would be totally isolated, a Leibnitzian monad (CP 4.583 [1906]; cf. CP 4.551 [1906]); therefore, it would not be able to be integrated in the wider semiotic and pragmatic webs, within which it could be meaningful and effective.

Is indefiniteness then simply a necessary evil, of which we never can rid ourselves, but which still ought to be combated on all fronts with improvements of our semiotic practices? Phyllis Chiasson (2001) has claimed that this is precisely the point of Peirce's logic of vagueness. This seems to be partly right; Peirce certainly advocates critical self-control in certain areas of life. However, he also suggests that vagueness may play a more positive role; it is a kind of initial state, from which new developments may be born (cf. CP 6.348 [c. 1909]). Brock sees similar implications in the Peircean account of indefiniteness. We should not complain about the fact that our symbols are never completely determined, because if they were, there would be no semiotic growth and change; as Brock boldly states, "vagueness is the mother of invention" (BROCK 1981, p. 136).

Furthermore, if we take a closer look at Peirce's view of the role of indefiniteness in life, we will see that it is a key feature in the so-called common-sense beliefs. The most distinctive character of the so-called critical common-sensist lies in the insistence that those beliefs, which we cannot doubt nor criticise, are invariably indefinite (EP 2:350 [1905]; CP 5.505 [c. 1905]). According to Peirce, an attempt to wipe our set of ideas *completely* clean from such beliefs would inevitably fail, and the effort might even be damaging. As he notes, a suitable line of deliberation, aided by imagination, will always lead to the doubt of any given broad proposition, if it is defined with precision (CP 5.507 [c. 1905]). However, such an endeavour can leave a certain indefinite remainder, which survives the criticism. It is only natural, then, to ask whether this residue could not also be eliminated; but the question is reasonable only if one stands aloof from the actual situation, viewing it in a detached manner, as one might observe a painting by Monet (CP 5.508 [c.1905]). In the end, one will be forced to admit that it is not because the attempt to render the indefinite proposition precise has not been rigorous enough that the indefiniteness persists; it is because the common-sense belief is intrinsically indefinite and *valuable as such*.

¹³ In one passage (MS 530:17 [c. 1903]), Peirce states that every proposition must refer to something singular, and that indefiniteness ensues only when the utterer speaks of an object with which the interpreter is not familiar. This would limit indefiniteness to the actual interaction between utterer and interpreter; but as has been noted, a sign that is sufficiently determinate to serve certain communicative purposes is inevitably vague in countless other respects. It seems, then, that Peirce's requirement of singularity must be tempered; the subject needs to be singular only in respect to a certain discursive context and to certain purposes. The requirement of a perfectly singular reference would in effect make communication impossible; the communicational process could never properly begin, because the parties would be involved in a virtually never-ending process of referential determination. The most important function of communication, that of exchange and development of experience and information, does not require such precision.

Peirce gives a clarifying example of such a functional indefinite belief: our belief in the order of nature. On a common sense level, most of us, if not all, believe that there is at least some order in nature, although we may be incapable of specifying what exactly constitutes the order or how it is built up. In fact, if we try to define precisely what we mean by the belief, doubts are almost certainly encountered. This has been the fate of many philosophers, who have considered the question of natural order. Yet, even if such analyses cause us to doubt the precisely defined belief, the indefinite core of the common-sense belief will remain - who could genuinely believe that there is *no* order at all in nature (CP 5.508 [c. 1905])?

Peirce's point is that there are certain signs, for instance vernacular words, which cannot be rendered absolutely precise without losing something significant in the process. If a logician attempts to achieve conceptual clarity by substituting definite definitions for such words, the results are almost certain to be disappointing; the originals alone answer the principal purposes (CP 6.494 [c. 1906]). Criticism and precision have their limits; human beings "who are given to defining too much inevitably run themselves into confusion in dealing with the vague concepts of common sense" (CP 6.496 [c. 1906]).

Summing up, we may state that vagueness is a vital feature of purposive communication, something that cannot completely be removed from the picture, even in logical inquiry; "vagueness [...] is no more to be done away with in the world of logic than friction in mechanics" (CP 5.512 [c. 1905]). This does not mean that Peirce would advocate scepticism regarding the possibilities of intelligent criticism of indefinite semiotic practices. There certainly are situations where vagueness is a defect, for instance in many ordinary acts of assertion, such as the public statements of certain politicians. The wise Peircean caveat simply concerns the intellectualistic illusion that indefiniteness is *merely* a hindrance, which could somehow be eradicated by logical analysis or formalisation. Not only is relative vagueness needed in order to enable communicational exchange regarding objects of which the parties have divergent experiences; it underlies the entire enterprise of communication and inquiry, because the common ground of any practice is inevitably vague.

Concluding Remark

This discussion of some of the central ideas involved in Peirce's account of communication has indicated how the conceptions of common ground, collateral experience, universe of discourse, and vagueness bond with each other. Most importantly, the proposed approach enables us to account for the role of purpose in communication in a way that is neither voluntaristic nor narrowly deterministic, and furthermore to do this in a manner that does not violate the central principles of Peircean sign theory. True, this is just a vague outline that leaves numerous questions unanswered and copious details to be filled in; but in the main, I believe that the direction indicated here is one that can invigorate Peircean pragmatism through the systematic restoration of rhetoric and one that is capable of providing valuable insights into communicational processes. At the very least, I hope that this article has sufficiently delimited a universe of discourse that can act as a basis for future inquiries and communicational exchanges.

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Common Grounds and Shared Purposes

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Artigo recebido em 9/1/07 e aprovado em 13/5/07.