

THE SEMIOTIC MEANINGS OF NAMES

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INTRODUCTION

The meanings of names have often been discussed in terms of denotative versus connotative meanings, or of distinctions between the proprial and lexical uses of words. I will not review these discussions except in a tangential way. I hope instead to illustrate the ways in which names always have semiotic meanings, even in multiple ways at the same time. Semiotics is the study of how *signs* (e.g., words, word parts, road signs, emblems, or simply gestures) are interpreted and of the possible relationships between *signs* and their referents (including concepts, images, and qualities as well as tangible denotata). I begin with the simple assumption that names are just a type of *sign*, and I hope to show how semiotics may be considered a fundamental and useful approach to name meanings and to all types of name study — personal names, place names, commercial names, or literary names. For the sake of brevity, I shall try to describe semiotic theory as simply as possible.

In his formulation of semiotic theory over a century ago, C. S. Peirce describes a *sign* as “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign” (Peirce, 1955, p. 99). That is to say, reference is a cognitive function in the mind of an interpreter wherein a *sign* evokes pre-existent images. It is always, and in a very literal sense, a re-presentation of something in the human mind, i.e., images from previous experience that may include previous analogies and sets of relationships. There is no communication, interpretation, or conceptual understanding of any sort that is not dependent on previous experience and traceable in brain activity. Furthermore, Peirce’s concept of a “more developed sign” means that an act of interpretation may posit not only a relationship between *signs* and referents, but

also between the *signs* themselves. Thus, the grammatical status of *signs* (e.g., lexical or proprial) is one of the relationships posited in an act of interpretation.

According to Peirce, the interpretations of references need to be understood in terms of three fundamental modes of associative relationships often described by previous philosophers (e.g., Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel): 1) similarity (a singular identity), 2) contiguity/correlation (one-to-one correspondence between *signs* and referents), and/or 3) arbitrary convention (a correspondence between previously posited relationships). He also uses the terms *icon*, *index*, and *symbol* to describe the formal relationships between *signs* and the things referred to in an act of reference.

If a *sign* is interpreted as “like that thing and used as a sign of it” (Peirce, 1955, p. 102), it is functioning *iconically*. It is seen to represent something else on the basis of similarity, as a photo or map resembles that to which it refers. A photo of my granddaughters who live far away reminds me of them. Security forces use camouflage with the hope that they will be interpreted as a continued part of the environment. If a bird looks at a moth that is colored the same as the bark of the tree on which it sits, the bird will interpret the moth as a piece of bark, and the moth will be safe. By resembling something, an *icon* brings that something to mind in the form of an idea.

NAMES AS ICONS

The interpretation of names is always partly *iconic*. That is to say, emotive associations are, at least subliminally, evoked by the phonological and orthographic presentations of names and of language in general. Sense data in the form of physical utterances and graphic representations of language may be interpreted, positively or negatively, as mimetic of, and therefore evocative of, the entity designated. If we ask Mary and John Smith why they named their child Jacob, they might give no reason other than, “It sounds good.” Several researchers (e.g., Barry, 1995; Lieberman, 2000; Whissell, 2001) have shown distinctive phonological patterns for masculine and feminine names. Thus, prosody is an important influence in the naming of children, and changes in name forms reveal changes in taste, in the choices of sound associations and of social values. To assert gender neutrality, which nowadays is sometimes the goal of parents in baby naming, names with presumed masculine sounds are used for women, feminine sounds are used for men, and new coinages reflect the images and attitudes of popular culture. My own research (Smith, 1998, 1999, 2007) has also shown that some phonological patterns are particularly favorable for political candidates. That is to say, the phonology of personal names, especially their rhythms, evokes emo-

tive values with referents in meaningful ways, in much the same way as the prosody of a poem affects its interpretation.

In a similar way, the shapes of letters may also associate emotive values with a referent on the basis of similarity. Such associations are especially obvious in the design of commercial names. The letters of *Exxon*, for example, slant forward and combine with the sounds of the word to suggest acceleration. The lettering of *Coca Cola* is rounded to suggest bubbles and flowing liquid. Likewise, the illuminated texts of medieval Europe strove to associate language itself, or at least literacy, with the intricacies of the word of God. Thus, visually as well as aurally, the *iconic* associations evoked by names, subtle and fundamentally emotive in nature, should be seen as an important aspect of meaning and interpretation.

NAMES AS INDICES

At the same time, if a *sign* “refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object” (Peirce, 1955, p. 102), it is functioning *indexically*. The relationship is *causal*, and the *indexical* interpretation posits a strict one-to-one relationship between the *sign* and something else, as smoke indicates fire, a thermometer indicates temperature, or the alarm call of an animal indicates a predator. An *index* is fundamentally different from the thing to which it refers, but “it necessarily has some Quality in common with the object” (Peirce, 1955, p. 102). An *indexical* interpretation is more complex than an *iconic* interpretation because it infers a connection between two *iconic* recognitions, the *sign* and its referent. If the bird sees any movement by the moth, it will interpret the movement as a *sign* for food, and the moth will be eaten.

All names function *indexically* in precisely this way. As J. S. Mill argued in 1843 (Mill, 1973), the word *dog* refers to a set of attributes shared by all examples within the class of things so named, but names (proper nouns), such as *Fido*, do not carry a defined meaning because they refer to one specific thing within a class. Like demonstratives, their function is essentially grammatical, they point to something, and their designations signal fixed relationships. They are, as S. Kripke notes, “rigid” rather than contingent designations (1980, p. 48).

The most common and basic interpretation of names is simply *indexical*, much like the interpretation of a finger pointing to an object. Family names are illustrative. The name *Smith* usually says nothing about me insofar as it is interpreted just as a fixed designation. It is a mere label to designate me among a group of people, such as those presenting papers at a conference, and that certainly is the way my name, or any name, is primarily interpreted. If a mother uses the wrong name for one of her children, a quick correction emphasizes the

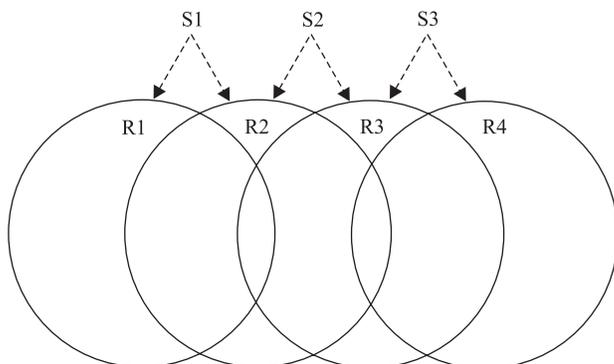
one-to-one relationship between the name and its referent. Of course, there is more meaning associated with the *Smith* name, or with any other personal name, than is explained in a purely *indexical* interpretation. There are also *iconic* and *symbolic* interpretations at the same time. But before I get into such complexities, I would like to comment on geographic names.

Indexical interpretations are the basis of competing claims for official names of geographic features. Although ethnic and political groups may advocate conflicting claims for many reasons (phonological, morphological, semantic), the official adoption of a name assumes a use of the name as a fixed designation on a map printed by the government for a particular use. All variants need to be recorded for showing historical contact between ethnic and language groups, but official recognition assumes a one-to-one correlation between the name and the feature.

Usually governments are thereby committed to a policy of one, and only one, *official* name for each feature, or to dual names if there are two official languages. The usual complimentary policy is to base *official* names on dominant local usage. Controversy is unavoidable, but such policies contribute significantly to human communication, cooperation, and commerce. For example, the U. S. and Canada share an interior waterway in the Pacific Northwest. In 2009 an agreement was negotiated to use a single name for this waterway, *Salish Sea*. It was one of several names in casual use at the time, but this name was a bit more common than others and had historical precedent in tribal languages. With approval by regional and national authorities, the standard name has gained dominant use and has facilitated commercial navigators, recreational users, tourism, and especially the ecological studies by scientists. The utility of such standardization of *indexical* references is obvious.

NAMES AS SYMBOLS

As described by Peirce, a *symbolic* interpretation is logarithmically more complex than an *indexical* interpretation because it posits a meaning within a “set of indices” (Peirce, 1955, p. 113), i.e., in the relationship of two or more *indexical* references. That is to say, if a *sign* can be interpreted as referring to two or more referents simultaneously, as commonly happens in human communication, such as a name referring to a person and an occupation, the interpretation posits that the qualities signified by the sign in its designation of each referent are shared in some way, much as attributes are shared between two elements in the meaning of a metaphor (Black, 1962, p. 38–47). The *sign*, therefore, refers to the shared qualities in a general sense, in addition to the qualities evoked in each *indexical* reference *per se*.



A diagram of symbolic meaning, in which hypothetical sign, S1, S2, and S3, refer to two hypothetical referents. The circles represent a variable range of attributes of the referents R1, R2, R3, and R4. The referents are thereby seen in terms of one another, and the meaning is relational rather than causal

At the same time, other *signs* may refer to each of the referents in combination with additional referents. Thus, *sign 1*, *sign 2*, *sign 3*, etc. will be related in terms of the shared qualities to which they refer. *Symbolic* interpretation may be described as a nexus of *indices*, and the meaning generated thereby is *relational* rather than *causal* in nature, an idea that “lives in the minds of those who use it” (Peirce, 1955, p. 114) rather than “any particular thing.” Symbolic meaning is arbitrary, and the relationships among *signs* convey meaning in terms of grammar, prior definitions, and social agreement, i.e., “by virtue of a law” (p. 102).

Interpretations may be *symbolic* and *indexical* simultaneously, but the distinction is important. Birds can be taught to peck for food at the command of an *indexical* sign, possibly a word, but they cannot (we assume) put words into new relationships with one another to express general ideas (i.e., shared qualities). *Indexical* interpretations require a tight correlation of time and space between a sign and its referent, and birds are stuck with one-to-one interpretations. *Symbolic* references, by contrast, are reflected in the relationships among *indices* (words or word parts to nearby words and/or other secondary entities). Because of combinatorial rules (phonological, morphological, and syntactical), *symbolic* references imply that many things are related by a few shared attributes, i.e., simply by the rules of language, if by nothing else. Because any *index* can be associated with many others, *symbolic* references can project an indefinite array of implicit generalities, which are often presumed to be knowledge.

Of course, presumed knowledge can be pure fantasy; shared qualities might correlate very little, or not at all, in physical reality. Thus, we see many words, such as *unicorn*, *griffin*, and *vampire*, which are created, etymologically, from word parts.

Peirce describes the realm of *symbolic* reference as “the possibly imaginary universe” (Peirce, 1955, p. 103), and wild differences in interpretation are easily seen in artistic expression, political discourse, as well as the interpretations of names.

At the same time, the *symbolic* use of language is a great aid to both memory and meaning. All things can be analyzed *indexically*, in terms of one-to-one relationships, as computer languages do, but humans have difficulty remembering such relationships in long series. They have greater difficulty, for example, in remembering names interpreted *indexically*, i.e., as simple labels and “rigid designators,” than if the same words are contextualized and interpreted in grammatical combinations. That is to say, people cannot remember proper names nearly so well as they can infer what words might follow other words in any given sentence. Thus, the human mind yearns for and thrives on *symbolic* linkage and interpretations, i.e., seeing two or more *indexical* references in one *sign*, and language is often *symbolic* insofar as it implies a system of higher order relationships based on *indexical* associations that are presumably related.

A simple illustration of *symbolic* interpretation may be seen in personal names. We may hypothesize, for example, that the name *Smith* originally referred to two things: 1) one of my ancestors, and 2) his occupation. When the name was actually used to refer to my ancestor (which I shall call the *immediate referent*), it also evoked a reference to the occupation (which I shall call the *secondary referent*). The meaning was *symbolic* insofar as the *sign* pointed to qualities or attributes that were presumably shared between the two *indexical* referents. Of course, the sharing of qualities was both partial and slightly different in the minds of individual interpreters. Furthermore, it is the qualities of the *secondary referent* that are more clearly carried over in terms of meaning to the *immediate referent*. Thus, the presumed “meaning” of a name is usually discussed in terms of the *secondary referent*, and the study of onomastics is generally an investigation of *secondary referents*. However, it is worth noting that both *indexical* referents, my ancestor and the occupation, were interpreted in a more meaningful way than one thing referred to by the *sign* interpreted as a single *indexical* reference, i.e., as a simple label.

Symbolic references are especially important in literature. In Shakespeare’s time, the name Othello was pronounced O-TELL-O. The first time the name occurs in the play, a Venetian senator asks the central character to explain his courtship of Desdemona: “But, Othello, speak. / Did you by indirect and forced courses / Subdue and poison this young maid’s affections?” (Shakespeare, 1997, 1.3., 110–112). We then hear that he won her affections by telling her “the story of my life” (1.3., 129). The name not only refers to the character on stage, but also requests significant action and refers to storytelling as the basis of true love. It is thus richly *symbolic* and thematically evocative.

In our study of *signs*, it is important to note the variability of interpretations. Recent research shows how the brain processes words in varied patterns depending on where it is stored in the brain. As a word, a name exists somewhere in the brains of potential interpreters alongside many other words and images imprinted there from previous experience — conversations, podcasts, movies, and other media. Using MRIs and charting blood flow, scientists have recently found that word recognition is distributed in clusters across the cerebral cortex and in a hundred different areas that span both hemispheres of the brain (Huth et al., 2016). Furthermore, the clusters represent types of meaning. Words associated with people are generally clustered in one area of the brain, words associated with places are clustered in another, and the different areas vary from person to person. Interpretations are therefore colored by other words and images in the same brain area, and the types of coloring vary from person to person. These variations may sometimes affect our judgments about *secondary* referents.

In place names, we certainly want to know where and what the feature is, but we also need to know what else the name refers to as a *secondary referent*, and, of course, we often need to decide which *secondary* referent seems *symbolically* appropriate. A current proposal in the State of Washington illustrates the importance of assessing *secondary* references and associative meanings. There is a group of features near the Columbia River currently named *Jim Crow Creek*, *Jim Crow Hill*, and *Jim Crow Point*. In two respected books on Washington State place names (Meany, 1923; Hitchman, 1985), the explanation is given that numerous crows nested in this area. However, there is now a proponent who claims that these names are derogatory and should be replaced by *Saules*, the name of an African American pioneer, James D. Saules, who lived nearby in a cabin for a time. Therefore, government authorities must decide if the *secondary* referent should be to the presumed nesting of crows, or to Mr. Saules. The current names appear to be a case of derogatory naming at an earlier time. The phrase “Jim Crow” is a shortened form of “Jump Jim Crow”, which was a song and dance act of the early 19th century performed by a white actor, Thomas D. Rice, in blackface as a satirical caricature of African Americans. As a result, the simple phrase “Jim Crow” became a pejorative designation of African Americans. Thus, laws passed by southern legislatures later in the 19th century were referred to as “Jim Crow laws” and meant “Negro laws” in a simple, literal sense. So also *Jim Crow Creek* most likely referred to Mr. Saules, who lived there at the time of naming, because he was African American. It appears to have been a simple case of descriptive association. In deciding this case the U. S. Board will be choosing the *symbolically* appropriate *secondary referent*, i.e., the legal name of Mr. Saules or his ethnic heritage. It is a choice that may be understood and described, as I have tried to show, in these basic terms of semiotic theory.

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SUMMARY

THE SEMIOTIC MEANINGS OF NAMES

Semiotics is the study of how *signs* are interpreted as references, and names are an obvious type of *sign*. Semiotics may therefore be considered a useful approach to all types of name study — whether personal names, place names, commercial names, or literary names. As described by C. S. Peirce, an act of reference consists of a *sign* (e.g., a word, word part, road sign, emblem, or simply a finger) and a *referent* (e.g., an object, conceptual model, or analytic definition). Furthermore, all acts of reference reflect one or more of three basic types of relationships: 1) similarity, 2) one-to-one correspondence, and/or 3) arbitrary convention. If a *sign* is interpreted as similar to a *referent*, it functions *iconically*. If it is interpreted as a designation or as caused by the *referent*, it functions *indexically*. If it is interpreted as referring to two or more *indexical* referents, it evokes related qualities and thereby functions *symbolically*. The primary interpretation of names is *indexical*. However, the purpose of this paper is to show how names, as signs, are also interpreted *iconically* and *symbolically*, even at the same time. Different types of names will be used to illustrate these semiotic functions.