

ROAD SIGNS REVISITED

by
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Few who have followed Per Aage Brandt's lectures during a certain trajectory of his career will have missed his preoccupation with road signs – a preoccupation not pertaining to the particular meaning of single signs, however, but rather to the more general issue of how it is possible that a lone-standing sign with no apparent sender is able to make claims, perform speech-acts and direct traffic, all with reference to validity in a certain zone in the neighborhood of the sign. 'Parking prohibited' – yes, but how do we know it is prohibited here and now, and not somewhere else, not in general, not later, and not in some fictitious world?

Some obvious structures are not included in this puzzlement. Road signs indirectly refer to political power – their stylized design, with a few selected colors in light-reflecting painting, characterizes them as signals that have been put up by authorities referring, in the last resort, to the Weberian monopoly of violence of the area, and stating that you may be liable to punishment by those powers if you do not obey the sign. Even so, it is not this external network of social power structures reaching all the way down to road signs which constitutes the enigma.

What is it, then? Recently, while working on a book titled *Natural Propositions*, attempting to reconstruct Charles Peirce's doctrine of propositions – the so-called 'Dicisigns' –, it occurred to me that Peirce, without mentioning road signs, had stumbled upon the very same conundrum as did Brandt.

In a small note, Peirce is considering – not a road sign, but a sign over a door:

A sign over a door: "No admittance, except on business." is a general proposition, but it relates to that door which may have no qualities different from these of some other door in some other planet or in some other tridimensional space of which there may be any number scattered through a quinquidimensional continuum without anywhere touching one another. But the hanging of the sign over this door indicates that this is the one referred to. The indescribable but designatable object to which a proposition refers always has connected with it a variety of possibilities, often an endless variety. In the example we have taken, these possibilities are all the actions that can have a relation to that door. The proposition declares that among all these actions there is not to be found any permitted passage through the door except on business.¹

The conceptual apparatus behind this musing is Peirce's doctrine of propositions. According to that, propositions are signs which are connected twice to the same object, once by means of a subject index S, once by means of a predicate icon P. The latter gives the proposition its general character, while the former can *not* be described. As Peirce says in the beginning of the text quoted:

Every proposition has three elements. 1st an indication of the universe to which it relates, 2nd its general terms, 3rd connection of the terms. [...] Every proposition relates to something which can only be printed out or designated but cannot be specified in general terms. (ibid.)

This, of course, has its roots in Kant's evergreen insistence that existence is not a predicate – here, in the insistence that the indication

of an object can not be undertaken by mere description. The object of the proposition may be indicated by non-general means only; in Peirce's Dicisign doctrine, this also holds for propositions using pictures, diagrams, gestures, etc. A painting with a legend, thus, is a prototypical Dicisign example – the painting constituting the P part, and the legend ('Louis XIV') the indescribable S part. But the S part always presupposes some degree of preliminary 'collateral knowledge' about the object referred to by the S. If you have no idea at all who or what 'Louis XIV' refers to, you cannot grasp the painting+legend proposition that Louis XIV looks like the person presented on the canvas. The subject of the proposition points out an object – by means of a pointing gesture, an arrow, a proper name, a pronoun, a time- or place-adverb, a quantifier or any other means which is able to select objects in a Universe of Discourse. That Universe is most often implicitly agreed upon by the interlocutors. In the door sign example, it will be the Universe of behaviors relative to the door – among which, then, one is pointed out as not permitted. This is not strange. But how, again, does the sign point out the door merely by hanging there?

In his doctrine of Dicisigns (cf. Stjernfelt (in press)), Peirce argues that the apparently simple S-P structure of propositions hides several layers of complexity. One addresses the unity of the proposition: how is it possible that the proposition constitutes a unity claiming a truth – a truth that could not result from the mere sum of S and P? Peirce argues that the predicative part of the Dicisign not only contains the apparent predicate describing the object, but that the latter is nested within a more general predicate constituting an icon of *the sign itself*. The sign is not only saying 'S is P', it is saying something which may be paraphrased like this: 'This is a sign whose S is *really* indexically connected with an object O, and this implies that this object can be described in the following way: P'. This is what makes the Dicisign able to take on a *truth value* (depending upon whether it *really* is so connected, and whether P is *really* a

fitting description of the object). As it appears, this interpretation corresponds to an early version of 'justified true belief'.

But how does the sign express this complicated structure? It does so by indexically connecting the tokens 'S' and 'P' in the sign – and this indexical connection, again, functions as an icon of the similar indexical connection of the object O and the property referred to by P. If the S of the proposition were light-years away from the P, we would have no idea (except if we were provided with careful constructions as to how to connect them) that 'S' and 'P', when co-localized, constitute a proposition.

Peirce claims that this extremely simple syntax – a syntax of co-localization – works for all propositions; and unlike the Frege-Russell tradition, in which propositions are seen as basically linguistic, Peircean propositions cover a far wider field, including diagrams, pictures, gestures etc., used for truth claims and other speech acts. In some sense, this simple co-localization is the mother of all syntax; all later, more sophisticated syntactical refinements are further articulations of this extremely basic principle: the very *co-localization* of S and P is what expresses the claim that the object referred to has the property described. So, in the door sign case, it is the fact that *the sign is immediately above the door* which makes that door (and none other) the relevant object of the S term implied by the sign 'No admittance except on business'. And, to return to road signs: it is their *position* that constitutes the implicit S-term of the Dicisigns they marshal, co-localizing their predicative meaning with their surroundings.

Of course, we knew all along that a 'Parking Prohibited' sign always involves an implicit 'here, now' and that it rules out parking behavior only in the area around the sign (typically along a road); in case of doubt, an additional sign often further specifies the area by means of distance indications, arrows, etc. But Peirce's analysis of Dicisigns in general takes this to be a special case of a pre-linguistic syntax of co-localization governing the simplest propositions, in-

cluding paintings equipped with a legend, or locations of animal *Umwelten* marked by biological pheromones.

I am not sure whether this Peircean observation is extremely trivial or awesomely deep. In some sense, I tend to think it is both.

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References

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Notes

- 1 The note stems from lecture notes for logic courses at the Johns Hopkins University, 1883 (personal communication, A. de Tienne). Published under the title of "On Propositions", in *Writings* (C. Kloesel et al., eds), 1989, Vol. 4: 402-403.

