

维尔比夫人的表意学



On Victoria Welby: Signfics and Language

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Abstract: As a method for the analysis of sign activity beyond logico-gnoseological boundaries, signfics transcends pure descriptivism and evidences the relation of signs to values. Meaning is engendered in expression and communicative interaction, and involves the value of the semantic and linguistic orders, meaning as *signification* as well as ethic; the aesthetic and pragmatic value, meaning as *sense* and *significance*. Beyond meaning and language understood in strictly gnoseological terms, signfics is committed to interrogating sense, to the problem of significance, and to evidencing the import of meaning producing processes for human behaviour. Other expressions used by Welby to qualify her signfics include “philosophy of interpretation”, “philosophy of translation” and “philosophy of significance”. These and other aspects of Victoria Welby’s theory of meaning or signfics are the object of investigation in the present paper.

Keywords: communication, interpretation, meaning, semioethics, sense, significance, value

维多利亚·维尔比：表意学与语言

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摘要：表意学作为一种超越逻辑—认识论的边界的符号活动分析方法，

超越了单纯的描述主义，证明了符号与价值的关系。意义是在表达和传播互动中产生的，它作为表意的意义，涉及符义和语言秩序的价值；作为感觉和意味的意义，涉及伦理、审美和符号价值。超越在严格的认识论方面研究意义和语言，表意学致力于质疑感觉，研究表意问题，并证明意义生产过程对人类行为的含义。韦尔比还用“解释哲学”“翻译哲学”“意味哲学”等词语来界定其表意学。维多利亚·维尔比的意义理论或表意学理论的这些方面和其他方面都是本文研究的对象。

关键词：传播，解释，意义，符号伦理学，感觉，意味，价值

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I . Introducing Welby and Her Significs

i . What is Significs?

The expression “significs” was introduced by Victoria Lady Welby (1837–1912) for her special approach to the study of sign and meaning towards the end of the 19th century. With significs Welby thematized the capacity for questioning as the pathway to understanding, the humanization of experience, and responsible action. Researching at a time when evolutionary theory had unexpectedly overturned the conception of life and, together, humankind’s place in the world, Welby indicated cultural revolution as a long-term project for social change.

She investigated the relations between sign, sense and value, between critical linguistic consciousness and ethical-pragmatic engagement. A method for the analysis of sign activity beyond logico-gnoseological boundaries in fact, significs transcends pure descriptivism and evidences the relation of signs to values. Meaning is engendered (and not merely transmitted) in expression and communicative interaction, in dynamical processes of becoming, and as such not only involves the value of the semantic and linguistic orders, meaning as signification (to say it with Charles Morris, 1964), but also the value of the ethic, aesthetic and pragmatic order, meaning as sense and significance. Beyond the study of meaning and language understood in strictly gnoseological terms,

□ 符号与传媒 (19)

significs is committed to interrogating sense, to the problem of significance, and to evidencing the import of meaning producing processes for human behaviour. Other expressions used by Welby to qualify her significs include “philosophy of interpretation”, “philosophy of translation” and “philosophy of significance” (Welby, 1983[1903], p. 89, p. 161; Petrilli, 2009, pp. 273–275).

Welby took her distance from the traditional terms of philological-historical semantics, for example as developed by Michel Bréal (Petrilli, 2009, pp. 253–300). Nor did she limit her attention to what is generally known as speech act theory or text linguistics. Instead, she focused on the generative nature of signifying processes and on their capacity for development and transformation as a condition of human experiential, cognitive and expressive capacities. Even more characteristically, she thematized the development of values as a structural aspect in the development of signifying processes.

The “significal method” arises from the association of the study of signs and meaning to the study of values. The conjunction between signs and values is not only the object of study of significs, but also provides its perspective. As such, significs is applicable to everyday life as much as to the intellectual, to the ethical and emotional spheres of sign activity, and therefore to problems of meaning, language, communication and value in the broadest sense possible.

Welby responded critically to prejudicial and stereotypical discourse of her time, the Victorian Age, and to the tendency to submit unquestioningly to the strongholds of truth, morality and justice—whether the Church and its so-called “Ecclesiasts”, or secular power represented by Queen Victoria (her godmother). She served at the Queen’s court as Maid of Honour for two years, after her mother’s death in the Syrian desert, on the last of their numerous travels across unknown lands. Rather than a conventional education, Welby’s books were the world and the inspiring life she led in unusual, often difficult, circumstances. She soon determined that authority should be interrogated; social practice should be significant for the sake of the community as much as of the single individual; human behavior endowed at all moments with sense and purport; and that signifying, expressive and communicative practices called for interpretation, critique and responsibility.

After investigating problems of interpretation relatively to the Sacred

Scriptures, Welby's interest in ethical-theological discourse focused more closely on linguistic-philosophical problems and found expression in a series of essays published towards the end of the 19th century. These include "Meaning and Metaphor" (*The Monist*, 1893) and "Sense, Meaning, and Interpretation" (*Mind*, 1896), a book of reflections, *Grains of Sense* (1897), and her monographs, *What Is Meaning? Studies in the Development of Significance* (1903) and *Significs and Language. The Articulate Form of Our Expressive and Interpretative Resources* (1911a). Editorial events that had contributed to the revival of significs today included republication of these works. *What Is Meaning?* was repropounded in 1983 and the volume *Significs and Language*, containing Welby's 1911 monograph together with a significant selection from her other writings, published and unpublished, in 1985. In those same years an anthology of writings by Welby appeared in Italian translation, *Significato, metafora, interpretazione* (Welby, 1985b), followed by another two, *Senso, significazione, significatività* (2007) and *Interpretare, comprendere, comunicare* (Welby, 2010). The first monograph ever on Welby appeared in 1998, *Victoria Welby. Significs e filosofia del linguaggio*, by S. Petrilli.

A large collection of papers by Welby has now been made available in the volume *Signifying and Understanding. Reading the Works of Victoria Welby and the Signific Movement* (see Petrilli, 2009). This volume presents papers from the *Welby Collection* at the York University Archives, Toronto (Canada), together with a selection of texts published during her lifetime. However, a significant part of Welby's work is still hosted yet unpublished in the archives. A large corpus of other printed matter by Welby or relating to her is available in the Welby library housed in the London University Library, London (UK). In addition to writings by Welby and her correspondence with preeminent figures of the time, *Signifying and Understanding* also includes a complete description of the materials available at the *Welby Archives* in York and three updated bibliographies listing all her writings as well as writings on Welby, her significs, as well as on the Signific Movement in the Netherlands and its developments. This movement was originally inspired by Welby through mediation of the Dutch poet and psychiatrist F. van Eeden (1860–1932), and flourished across the first half of the 20th century (cf.

Schmitz, 1990; Heijerman-Schmitz, 1991). *Signifying and Understanding* also features an anthology of writings by first generation signifiers like Frederik van Eeden, Gerrit Mannoury, L. E. J. Brouwer and David Vuysje.

After her death, more than as an intellectual in her own right, Welby's name continued circulating among the international community of researchers thanks, above all, to her correspondence with Charles S. Peirce (see Hardwick, 1977). She was in the habit of discussing her ideas and to this end entertained epistolary exchanges with numerous personalities of the day. Welby's main work is *What Is Meaning?*, positively reviewed for *The Nation* by Charles Peirce, founder of American pragmatism and father of modern semiotics—Welby, the founding mother. This review begins the Welby-Peirce correspondence, representing just one instance of a fascinating corpus of exchanges entertained by Welby with numerous major figures including, in addition to Peirce, Bertrand Russell, James M. Baldwin, Henry Spencer, Thomas A. Huxley, Herbert G. Wells, Max Muller, Benjamin Jowett, Frederik Pollock, George F. Stout, Leslie Stephens, Ferdinand C. S. Schiller, Charles K. Ogden, Henry and William James, Mary Everest Boole, Julia Wedgwood, H. G. Wells, Michel Bréal, André Lalande, Henri Bergson, Henri Poincaré, Rudolph Carnap, Otto Neurath, Harald Höffding, Ferdinand Tönnies, Frederick van Eeden, Giovanni Vailati, Mario Calderoni and many others. Part of this correspondence was edited and published by Welby's daughter Mrs. Henry (Nina) Cust, in two volumes, *Echoes of Larger Life*, 1929, which collected letters written between 1879 to 1891, whilst *Other Dimensions*, 1931, covered the years from 1898 to 1911. Other selections with various interlocutors have also been made available in *Signifying and Understanding* (Petrilli, 2009). We could claim that developments on signifiers are not necessarily attached to any individual name, but one who deserves special mention is Charles K. Ogden, a promising proselyte of signifiers, who discovered Welby and her signifiers as a young university student at Cambridge, and whose research was significantly influenced by her, even though he mentioned her but briefly in his epochal book with Ivor A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, 1923. Ogden promoted signifiers as a university student during the years 1910–1911, had met Welby personally at

that time and was dedicated to spreading her ideas. Through Welby, Vailati introduced Peirce to Italy. Through van Eeden, significs spawned the Signific Movement in Netherlands, flourishing across the first half of the 20th century. Despite this important network of relations, used for the formulation, circulation and discussion of ideas, Welby's correspondence is mostly unpublished. What remains of her unpublished papers, including correspondence—saved from the 1938 fire that ravaged Denton Manor, her homestead in Grantham, Lincolnshire (England)—is entrusted to the York University Archives (Canada). Again, a substantial selection of her published and unpublished writings is available in the volume *Signifying and Understanding. Reading the Works of Victoria Welby and the Significs Movement* (Petrilli, 2009).

ii . Some Central Themes

With “significs”, Welby underlined how the problem of meaning was not circumscribed to a discipline, subject matter, or specialized role, whether scholar, scientist, artist, professional of some sort, but also concerned the ordinary person in everyday life: What does it signify for me, for us? What is the sense, the value of a given experience? What are its implications now or in time, past and future?

Significs studies meaning in all its forms, relations and practical implications, in language as in all human expression, action and creation. Significs is a philosophy of significance, interpretation and translation, which emphasize three distinct but interrelated dimensions of “significating” processes, a synthesis applicable to science and philosophy.

Welby's studies on meaning ensued from her initial concern with religious, moral and theological issues. She addressed problems of interpretation relative to the Sacred Scriptures. Her interest in ethical-theological discourse translated into social and pedagogical interests and merged with her linguistic and philosophical studies. She examined language and meaning thanks to her early awareness of the inadequacies of religious discourse, cast in outmoded linguistic forms. Pervasive linguistic confusion stemmed from a misconception of language as a system of fixed meanings.

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This could only be resolved by recognizing the live nature of language, which flourished and changed with developments in knowledge and experience. She promoted the critique of language and together the need for education committed to the development of critical linguistic consciousness. The interpretive function is an a priori condition for relations among human beings and with the world at large.

A tendency to triadism in human thought is described by Welby which recurs in her theory of meaning: she distinguished between “sense” (organic response to environment and expressive element in experience), “meaning” (intention, purpose), and “significance” (consequence and implication of some event or experience). Correlate triads include, for reference: “verbal”, “volitional”, “moral”; psychic processes: “instinct”, “perception”, “conception”; knowledge and experience: “consciousness”, “intellect”, “reason”; consciousness: “planetary”, “solar”, “cosmic”. Peirce associated Welby’s meaning triad to his distinction between “immediate”, “dynamical” and “final interpretant”.

Education is a central concern in signfics. Welby in fact promoted a “significant education”, systematic training in critical and creative reflection from early school-days, in identifying problems and asking questions—answers being a platform for new questions: to develop an inquiring spirit is more significant than providing ready-made answers, the dynamic reality of the question sweeps the mind forward to new and wider horizons. Signfics implies education for meaning and value, development of expression and interpretation, enhancement of significance. It teaches us to make distinctions, detect confusions, establish connections and associations, and link all parts of growing experience, to apply the principle of translation.

The figurative dimension of meaning implies the capacity for establishing associations, comparisons, parallels among different spheres of experience, different sign systems, and calls for a critique of imagery. For Welby, “ambiguity” and “plasticity” of language are signifying resources. She interrogated definition as a solution, which she considered illusory, distinguishing between “rigid” and “plastic definition”. She described two types of ambiguity: polysemy, plurivocality, polylogism, a positive attribute

constitutive of the word and condition for expression and understanding; obscurity, expressive inadequacy, cause of confusion and equivocation. She critiques the fallacy of literal, univocal, “plain meaning” and the correlate concept of “hard dry facts”.

Welby’s philosophy of translation is based on her theory of meaning and interpretation. Prefiguring 20th century translation theory, translation not only occurs among different languages, but within the same language and among different sign systems, verbal and nonverbal. Breaking new ground, she describes translation as a cognitive-interpretive method. Sign processes translate across systemic and typological boundaries as the condition for the acquisition of knowledge, experience and practical skills. Significs evidences the relation between significance, interpretation and translation, and therefore between translation and the ethical dimension of otherness-driven signifying processes, resulting in the enhancement of significance. The search for sense involves relating knowledge and meaning to self and translating into the pragmatic terms of action. Translating also means to “moralize” and “humanize” the capacity for interpretation and relation.

Welby introduces the original concept of “mother-sense” (“primal-sense”, “original-sense”, “racial-sense”, “native-sense”). Mother-sense is an inheritance common to humanity, without gender limitations. It is the generating matrix of the human capacity for signification, experience, expression, knowledge, consciousness and worldview, for interpretation and creativity. The faculty of critique and rational construction, the rationalizing intellect presupposes mother-sense, its condition of possibility. Welby distinguishes between “mother-sense” and “father-reason”, i. e. “sense” and “intellect”, two modalities in sense-generation, in modeling sense, though strictly interrelated in relations of complementarity: neither logic of reason, nor sense of logic, nor well-reasoned logic, nor logical sensing, but reason-becoming and sense-becoming, beyond bivalent logic. Sexual identity is ambiguous, consonant with Peirce’s “logic of vagueness”. Mother-sense recovers the relation between “intuitive knowledge” and “rational knowledge”. Critique is a condition for healthy communication, but to flourish must recover the connection with mother-sense.

Mother-sense and otherness are central in Welby's description of subjectivity and its dialogic nature. She distinguishes between "self" and "Ident". The subject's identity is multiplex and emerges in the dialogic relation among its parts. The "I" or "Ident" develops with the self, in a relation where multiple selves model the different and interconnected faces of the "Ident". Ident is associated with mother-sense; self is one of its possible representations. The vocation of identity is otherness. As centrifugal material, dialogical and intercorporeal interrelatedness in becoming, the Ident transcends centripetal forces polarized in the self, yet necessary for it to subsist as self, as "ephemeron". As the knower, the Ident is unknowable. The Ident is an orientation toward the self insofar as it is other. As such it continuously supersedes the limits of the world-as-it-is and of the already-given subject that inhabits it. The more self-reflective behavior is multifaceted, the greater its capacity for critique and metadiscursivity.

iii . Implications for the Ethics of Communication

"Significs" is rich in implications for the ethics of communication (Arnett, Holba, Mancino, 2018). In dialogue with the Peircean tradition in sign and language studies, with Charles Morris' focus on the relation of signs to values, with Thomas Sebeok's global semiotics and developments in biosemiotics, with Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism and Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of otherness, with Adam Schaff's, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi's, and Augusto Ponzio's studies on signs and ideology, the implications of significs have been developed with "semioethics" (Petrilli & Ponzio, 2003; Petrilli, 2014).

Welby concerned with the entire signifying universe, with a special interest in signifying processes in the human world, particularly in verbal expression, but without falling into the trap of anthropocentric oversimplification. She in fact focused on verbal expression, the language of the "man of the street" as well as of the intellectual, but with reference to the larger context, what we may also call the great "biosemiosphere", in which language is engendered. However, she knew that to deal with her special interest area adequately, it was necessary to understand its connections to

larger context: consequently, she extended her gaze to ever larger totalities, beyond the verbal to the nonverbal, beyond the human to the nonhuman, beyond the organic to the inorganic. From this point of view, Welby may be considered as prefiguring contemporary global semiotics and developments in the direction of biosemiotics as conceived by Thomas Sebeok who enquires into the connection between semiosis and life and asks the question, “Semiosis and Semiotics: What Lies in Their Future?” (in Sebeok, 1991, pp. 97–99). Moreover, given its special focus on significance in human behaviour, Welby’s signifi­cations may be read as proposing a new form of humanism, by contrast with semiotic analyses conducted exclusively in abstract gnoseological terms.

With its focus on the relation between sign, value and behaviour, in particular the sign’s ultimate value, or significance, on the connection therefore between sign and value in all its aspects-pragmatic, social, ethic, aesthetic, etc., signifi­cations is particularly concerned with the effects and implications of the conjunction between signs and values for human behaviour.

The special slant in Welby’s studies on signs and meaning in the direction of the relation to values and the broad scope of her special perspective enables us to read “signifi­cations” as a prefiguration of “semioethics”. This expression was introduced by myself with Augusto Ponzio as the title of our monograph in Italian, *Semioetica*, 2003 (now forthcoming in English translation), and as the title of an essay commissioned to us by Paul Cobley for *The Routledge Dictionary of Semiotics*, 2010.

In so far as it is focused on the pragmat­ical-ethical implications of human signifying processes, signifi­cations is a major source of inspiration at the origin of “semioethics” with which it overlaps. As emerges from Welby’s own words as reported above, attention on the interpretive-translational dimension of sign activity and the connection with values is programmatic for signifi­cations from its very inception.

“Semioethics” is a neologism which has its origins in the early 1980s with “ethosemiotics” and subsequently “tel(e)osemiotics” to name an approach or attitude we deem necessary today more than ever before in the context of globalization and global communication. Semioethics is not intended as a discipline in its own right, but as a perspective, an orientation in the study of

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signs. By “semioethics” we understand the propensity in studies on signs, semiotics, to recover the ancient vocation of the latter as “semeiotics” (or symptomatology), which focuses on symptoms. A major issue for semioethics is “care for life” in a global perspective (see Sebeok, 2001) according to which semiosis and life converge (see Ponzio & Petrilli, 2005, p. 562). This global perspective is made ever more urgent by growing interference in planetary communication between the historical-social and biological spheres, between the cultural and natural spheres, between the semiosphere (Lotman) and the biosphere.

The semioethic approach to communication underlines the importance of listening to the other, of difference, of caring for the other, of dialogue, of recognition of otherness as the basis of communication. Value theory is essential for communication ethics. Whether a question of individual or community, of interpersonal relations or relations through social media characteristic of the global world today, communication is oriented by values, ideologies and social planning. Rather than alienation with respect to the social relations of communication, whether in the private or public sphere, healthy communication requires critique, creativity, consciousness of the values informing human action and signifying behavior. The communication globe is not adequately understood in descriptive terms alone. To evidence the relation between communication, values and human action is to expand strictly epistemological-cognitive boundaries of signs and meaning into the ethical-pragmatic, where signs and values are thematized in their interrelatedness. The implications are extraordinary: the other cannot be evaded and indifference is neither wise nor desirable. Communication ethics calls for critical thinking, responsible action, and responsiveness to the other, for the betterment of human understanding and life.

II . Language, Meaning and Subjectivity

i . On Signifying and Understanding

Welby analysed meaning according to three different levels or classes of expression value: “sense”, “meaning” and “significance” which were co-

present and interact to varying degrees in the live processes of signification and interpretation among speakers. She developed her meaning triad from different points of view with corresponding terminology: to the triad “sense”, “meaning”, “significance”, there corresponds the distinction between “signification”, “intention” and “ideal value”. Moreover, the reference of sense is “sensal” or “instinctive”; the reference of meaning is “volitional”; and the reference of “significance” is “moral”. Other triads include the distinction between “instinct”, “perception” and “conception” for different levels in human psychic process; “planetary”, “solar” and “cosmical” for different types of experience, knowledge and consciousness. (Petrilli, 2009, pp. 20–24; see the dictionary entry “Significs”, by Welby, Stout & Baldwin, now in Petrilli, 2009, pp. 195–196; Welby, 1983 [1903], pp. 46–47, now in Petrilli, 2009, pp. 265–266).

The meaning of the term “sense” is ambivalent. It is also used to indicate the overall import of an expression, its signifying value. But as one of the three apexes in her meaning triad, “sense” denotes the most primitive level of prerational life, the level of initial stages of perception, of immediate response to the environment and practical use of signs. As such, it indicates a necessary condition for all experience. “Meaning” concerns rational life, the intentional and volitional aspects of signification. “Significance” implies “sense” in the restricted sense, though not necessarily meaning, and is also indicated with the term “sense” understood broadly. “Significance” concerns the sign’s import and ultimate value, its overall bearing, relevance and import for each one of us. It denotes expression value in terms of the condition of being significant, of signifying implication, of participative involvement, which ultimately also involves the question of responsibility.

Welby continued to specify her triadic model for the analysis of meaning throughout her writings to her 1911 encyclopaedia entry, “Significs”, where she further gave the following definitions: “Sense” refers to “the organic response to environment” and “essentially expressive element in all experience”; “Meaning” is purposive and refers to the specific sense which a word “is intended to convey”; “Significance”, which includes sense and meaning and transcends them, refers to “the far-reaching consequence,

implication, ultimate result or outcome of some event or experience” (Hardwick, 1977[1911], p. 169; now in Petrilli, 2009, pp. 345–350). Triadism is a pivotal characteristic of Welby’s thinking (see her unpublished essay in 1886, “Threefold Laws”, now in Petrilli, 2009, pp. 331–340; for a more complete picture of triadic correspondences in Welby’s writings on signification, see the table of triads presented by H. Walter Schmitz in his 1985 volume, *Signification and Language*, now in Petrilli, 2009, pp. 948–949).

According to Charles S. Peirce, Welby’s meaning triad coincides with his own tripartition of the interpretant into “immediate interpretant”, “dynamical interpretant” and “final interpretant”. In his own words from a letter to her in 14 March 1909:

Let us see how well we do agree. The greatest discrepancy appears to lie in my Dynamical Interpretant as compared with your “Meaning”. If I understand the latter, it consists in the effect upon the mind of the Interpreter that the utterer (whether vocally or by writing) of the sign intends to produce. My Dynamical Interpretant consists in direct effect actually produced by a Sign upon an Interpreter of it. They agree in being effects of the Sign upon an individual mind, I think, or upon a number of actual individual minds by independent action upon each. My Final Interpretant is, I believe, exactly the same as your Significance; namely, the effect the Sign would produce upon any mind upon which circumstances should permit it to work out its full effect. My Immediate Interpretant is, I think, very nearly, if not quite, the same as your “sense”; for I understand the former to be the total unanalyzed effect that the Sign is calculated to produce; and I have been accustomed to identify this with the effect the sign first produces or may produce upon a mind, without any reflection upon it. I am not aware that you have ever attempted to define your term “sense”; but I gather from reading over what you say that it is the first effect that a sign would have upon a mind well-qualified to comprehend it. Since you say that it is Sensal and has no Volitional element, I suppose it is of the nature of an “impression”. It is thus, as far as I can see, exactly my Immediate Interpretant. (Hardwick, 1977, pp. 109–110)

As we understand from Peirce’s observations above, his “immediate

interpretant” concerns meaning as it is ordinarily and customarily used by the interpreter and as such it more or less corresponds to Welby’s “sense”, the interpreter’s immediate response to signs. A discrepancy is identified between Peirce’s “dynamical interpretant” and Welby’s “meaning”. The “dynamical interpretant” concerns meaning in a given context, specifically the effect of the sign on the interpreter. From this point of view, Peirce’s “dynamical interpretant” can be correlated with Welby’s “meaning”. But while Peirce refers to the actual effect produced by the sign, Welby, instead, underlines the intended effect, which is the effect the utterer intends to produce, but which is not necessarily the effect achieved. However, Peirce’s “final interpretant” and Welby’s “significance” are described as corresponding exactly insofar as they both indicate interpretive potential at the highest degrees of significance and understanding (Petrilli, 2009, pp. 288–294). Moreover, Peirce considered such convergences between his own triad and Welby’s as an indication of their validity.

Welby studied the nature of significance in all its forms and relations evidencing the close relation between the generation of signifying processes in human experience and the production of values. From this point of view, the notion of significance can be associated with Charles Morris’ conception of “significance” as developed in his 1964 monograph, *Signification and Significance*. Furthermore, Welby thematized the interpretive function as the condition for signifying processes, hence for communication, expression and understanding. The connection between signs and values enhances the human capacity to establish relations with the world, the self and others.

This connection also orients translation processes from one sphere of knowledge into another and from one sphere of action into another, from one pragmatic interpretant into another, which is inevitably an ethical-pragmatic interpretant or, if we prefer, a semioethical interpretant. Sense, meaning and significance are enhanced through ongoing translation processes.

Welby’s theory of sign and meaning conceptualizes ongoing translative processes beyond limits and boundaries as ultimately imposed by identity logic and official discourse. In this sense her translational theory of meaning can be described as a theory of the “transcendent”. In this connection, another

interesting definition of “significs” is formulated by Welby in *Significs and Language* (1911), which reads as follows: “the study of the nature of significance in all its forms and relations, and thus of its working in every possible sphere of human interest and purpose” (Welby, 1985a [1911], p. vii). Welby was concerned with the practical bearing of sense, meaning and significance “not only on language but on every possible form of human expression in action, invention, and creation” (Welby, 1985a [1911], p. ix). Furthermore, as she had already specified in *What Is Meaning?*, the “philosophy of significance” significs involves the “philosophy of interpretation, of translation, and thereby of a mode of synthesis accepted and worked with by science and philosophy alike” (Welby, 1983 [1903], p. 161).

The problem of sign and meaning provides a unifying perspective on the kaleidoscopic plurality of experience and communication. This means to study the processes through which signs and meaning are produced. To study such processes involves analysing the conditions of possibility that enable their articulations and transformations. Such processes unfold on a synchronic and diachronic axis, and relate to verbal and nonverbal sign activity, to linguistic and non-linguistic semiosis in general.

This is the perspective adopted by Welby and her significs. She researched the signifying processes of ordinary life and ordinary language, of the sciences, of the human potential for interpretation and expression, and of the manifold expressions of human sign activity at large. Perception, experience and cognition are mediated by signs, such that the relation between speaking subjects and their world is indirect and approximate insofar as it is a sign-mediated relation in ongoing interpretive processes. Further, given that our relation to so-called “objective” reality is a sign-mediated relation in which are generated the signifying processes of expression, interpretation, communication, all of us—everyday humans and intellectuals—are potential “significians”. Together we produce signifying processes and, in turn, we evolve in signifying processes that go to form the anthroposemiotic sign network.

ii . Significs, Language and Consciousness

To carry out research on language adequately, verbal language, the main

working instrument at our disposal must be in good working order. Consequently, for Welby the problem of reflecting on language and meaning in general immediately takes on a dual orientation. It concerns not only the object of research, but also the very possibility of articulating discourse. Welby was faced with the problem of constructing a vocabulary in which to formulate her ideas adequately. She soon realized that a fundamental problem in reflection on language and meaning concerned language itself, the medium through which reflection took place. She described the linguistic apparatus at her disposal as antiquated and rhetorical, subject to those same limits she wished to overcome and to those same defects she aimed to correct.

In her effort to invent a new terminological apparatus Welby offered alternatives to terms sanctioned by use. She introduced the term “sensal” to underline the expression value of words, by contrast with “verbal” for reference to the specifically linguistic or verbal aspect of signs, whether graphic and phonic. The term “interpretation” appeared in the title of her 1896 essay, “Sense, Meaning and Interpretation” (in Petrilli, 2009, pp. 430–449) and was initially proposed to designate a particular phase in the signifying process. Subsequently, on realizing that it designated an activity present throughout all phases of signifying processes, the term “interpretation” was replaced with “significance”; this was an example of how Welby’s terminological quest was motivated by concrete problems of expression. Unlike “semantics”, “semasiology” and “semiotics”, the word “significs” was completely free from technical associations. As such, it appeared suitable to Welby as the name of a new science which intended to focus on the connection between sign and sense, meaning and value (pragmatic, social, aesthetic and ethical), as she explained in a letter to the German philosopher and sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, winner of the “Welby Prize” in 1896 for the best essay on significant questions (Petrilli, 2009, pp. 192–194, pp. 235–248).

Other neologisms related to “significs” include the noun “significian” for the person who practices significs and the adjective “significal”. The verb “to signify” indicates the generation of meaning at maximum degrees of signifying value and “to signalize” more specifically the act of investing a sign with a given meaning. In her 1896 essay Welby also proposed the terms “sensifics”

with the corresponding verb “to sensify”. These were subsequently abandoned as being too closely related to the world of the senses. But even when Welby used terms that were readily available, including those forming her meaning triad, “sense”, “meaning” and “significance” (1983, [1903], pp. 5–6), she did so in the context of an impressively articulate theoretical apparatus that clarified the sense of her special use of these terms.

Welby introduced images from the organic world to denounce the “maladies of language” and “linguistic pathology”, largely caused by the use of verbal expression that was inadequate or antiquated, featuring metaphors and analogies that were outdated and simply incorrect. On the level of logical procedure, the poor use of language and expression is inseparable from the engendering of false problems, misunderstanding, and confused reasoning (Ponzio, 2006). The human understanding of differences and commonalities among signs, senses and meanings also requires improving. In Welby’s view, this state of affairs calls for the development of a “critical linguistic consciousness” and appropriate “linguistic therapy”. But a correct diagnosis of “linguistic pathology” requires an adequate theory of signs and meaning (Petrilli, 2009, Ch. 4). Significs takes on the dual task of theoretical analysis and therapeutic remedy, as it attempts to offer practical suggestions for the solution to problems of signification.

As part of her commitment to logical, expressive, behavioural, ethical and aesthetic regeneration, she advocated the need to develop a “linguistic conscience” against a “bad use of language” which inevitably involved poor reasoning, bad use of logic and incoherent argumentation. The very need to coin the term “significs”—a term difficult to translate into other languages, as discussed in her correspondence, for example, with Michel Bréal or André Lalande regarding French and Giovanni Vailati for Italian (Petrilli, 2009, pp. 302–310, pp. 407–418)—was a clear indication in itself of the existence of terminological obstacles to development in philosophical-linguistic analysis. Welby’s condition was typical of a thinker living in a revolutionary era characterized by the transformation and innovation of knowledge: she was faced with the task of communicating new ideas which involved renewing the language through which she was communicating.

Welby was sensitive to problems of everyday language and in proposing the term “significs” kept account of the everyday expression “What does it signify?” with its focus on ultimate value and significance beyond semantic meaning. But Welby’s commitment to the term “significs” risked appearing as the expression of a whimsical desire for novelty, given that such terms as “semiotics” and “semantics” were already available. Charles S. Peirce and Giovanni Vailati were among those who did not initially understand her proposal, maintaining that the introduction of a new term could be avoided. Yet she quickly converted them to her view by demonstrating that terminological availability was in fact only apparent, for none of the words in use adequately accounted for her own special approach to signs and meaning. Though she proposed a neologism for the study of language, Welby did not fall into the trap of technicalism, just as, despite her constant efforts to render expression as precise as possible, her aim was not to (fallaciously) eliminate the ambiguity of words. Ambiguity understood in the sense of polysemy played a fundamental role in language and communication, which was something Welby recognized and thematized distinguishing ambiguity from confusion and bad language usage. She aimed to describe aspects of the problem of language, expression and signifying processes at large which had not yet been contemplated or which had been mostly left aside by traditional approaches. More precisely, she proposed to reconsider the same problems in a completely different light, from a different perspective: the significal.

Significs is also described by Welby as “a method of mental training” which concentrates intellectual activities on “meaning”, the main value and condition for all forms of study and knowledge (Welby, 1983 [1903], p. 83). Again, significs is “a method of observation, a mode of experiment” which “includes the inductive and deductive methods in one process” (Welby, 1983 [1903], p. 161). This is what Vailati baptized the “hypothetical-deductive method” and Peirce the “abductive” or “retroductive method”. The scope and reference of significs is universal. From this point of view, it emerges as a transdisciplinary method and not as a “supplanting system”. Most significantly: “The principle involved forms a natural self-acting critique of every system in turn, including the common-sense ideal” (Welby 1983 [1903],

p. 162), therefore signification is also metadisciplinary.

iii . Common Speech and Common Sense

Welby criticized attempts at overcoming obstacles to mutual understanding by neutralizing linguistic diversity through recourse to a universal language. Whether this involves imposing the primacy of one natural language over another, or constructing an artificial language, this solution to the problems of language and communication is nothing less than delusory. She recognizes that the great variety of languages, dialects, jargons, slangs, etc. favours the development of our linguistic-cognitive resources. Examples are provided by popular culture and the popular instinct of the “man in the street”, described as unconsciously philosophical and a model to apply in the study of language related issues. Welby underlines the “significant” import of popular idiom, especially as it finds expression in everyday language and in folklore: “[...] both slang and popular talk, if intelligently regarded and appraised, are reservoirs from which valuable new currents might be drawn into the main stream of language—rather armouries from which its existing powers could be continuously re-equipped and reinforced” (Welby, 1985a [1911], pp. 38–39). Distinction and diversity among languages enhances signifying, interpretive and communicative practice. In contrast, the imposition of an artificial universal language leads to levelling the multiplicity of our cultural, linguistic and psychological patrimony, of possible worldviews and logics. According to Welby, difference (linguistic and non-linguistic) is not the cause of division and silence, but, on the contrary, favours the possibility of interconnection and signifying continuity. Differences engender other differences as part of a detotalizing totality in continuous evolution. (1983, [1903], p. 212)

In Welby’s terminology, “common meaning” is an expression that contains both the idea of universal validity and of the specificity of signifying processes. Like Rossi-Landi (1961) and his concept of “common speech” (*parlare comune*), for Welby too such expressions as “common language”, “common speech”, “common meaning” and “common sense” are not limited to “ordinary language” or “everyday language” in the terms theorized by the

English analytical philosophers. “Everyday language” is just one aspect of linguistic expression. Taken globally, considering the different languages that make a historical-natural language and the multiplicity of historical-natural languages over the globe, difference in linguistic expression overall is subtended by a universal patrimony specific to humanity indicated with such expressions as those listed above. In Welby’s theory of language and meaning, these expressions indicate, precisely, common signifying material operative in the great multiplicity of languages and jargons forming a single natural language, as much as across the great variety of different non-verbal languages and cultures populating the sign universe. Such material constitutes the “foundation of all sectorial differences of speech”, of “mere technical or secondary meanings”, as Welby said in a letter to Thomas H. Huxley dating back approximately to the years 1882–1885 (in Cust, 1929, p. 102).

The expressions “common meaning”, “common sense” and “common speech” denote a sort of a priori in a Kantian sense, a level of reference common to all languages—a set of operations that constitute the repeatable and constant material forming the conditions for human expressivity. To such common material may be traced analogical and homological similarities in human biological and social structures which interconnect different human communities beyond historical-cultural differences. This common patrimony of communicative techniques allows translation from one universe of discourse to another, indeed is a condition for translational processes across different languages, whether internal or external. As Rossi-Landi argues, we must focus on underlying processes and identify the universal empirical procedures operated by speakers in all languages (when translating interlinguistically for example, but also when teaching, learning, or simply conversing in the same language) (Rossi-Landi, 1961, p. 204 ff.).

The expressions above, “common speech”, “common language”, “common meaning” and “common sense”, do not neglect the great multiplicity of different languages forming the cultural patrimony of humanity; they do not eliminate plurilingualism and polylogism by tracing them back monologically to a mythical original language, an *Ursprache*, to the universal linguistic structures of some *Logos*, or to biological laws that govern and unify all

human languages. To recognize commonality or an underlying unity does not imply reconducting difference to identity. On the contrary, Welby, with Rossi-Landi after her, recognized the plurilinguistic and pluridiscursive value of language and distanced herself from monologizing temptations. These are inherent, for example, in Noam Chomsky's linguistic theory, which fails to explain the communicative function of language or its social and intersubjective dimensions. The notion of common speech, as clarified by Rossi-Landi, does not contradict to plurilingualism and plurivocality, i. e. the simultaneous presence of multiple languages and multiple voices (Rossi-Landi, 1992, pp. 134–136). On the contrary, it alludes to the similarity in functions carried out by different languages which, in their diversity, satisfy similar needs of expression and communication. Therefore, common speech serves to explain difference, variability and multiplicity among languages in terms of the needs of different traditions of experience and expressivity, which develop different means, solutions and resources to satisfy expressive and communicative demands common to all human societies.

Antonio Gramsci is another noteworthy figure who gave special attention to the question of what he too denominated “common sense”. Most significantly, the syntagm “common sense” is present in the opening pages of his *Quaderno 1* (Gramsci, 1975a), included in the list of “Main Topics”, dated 8 February 1929. Like Welby, Gramsci too had a dual attitude toward “common sense”: he both criticized the concept recovered it and renewed it (Sobrero, 1976). He criticized common sense when it implied imprecise and incoherent beliefs and outdated worldviews that had sedimented in languages and cultural systems. But there also exists a “broad region” of “common sense” (*senso comune*), of “good sense” (*buon senso*) which subtends our conception of life and morals and involves all social classes; “common sense” thus understood refers to the ideas, senses and values commonly accepted by all social strata, unwarily and uncritically (Gramsci, 1975a, *Quaderno 1*, pp. 65, 75–76). This is a recurrent theme in Gramsci's 1949 monograph, *Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura* (Gramsci, 1971a). Such “philosophy without philosophers”, that is, what Gramsci also calls “low philosophy”, an “inconsequent, incoherent, disruptive philosophy” (1975a,

Quaderno 8, p. 173) is the form in which “high philosophy”—which responds to the interests of the ruling class—variously circulates among the masses (an important contribution on this point is Gramsci’s monograph, *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce*, first published in 1948, see Gramsci, 1975b):

Every social stratum has its own “common sense” which is at the bottom of the most widespread conception of life and morals. Every philosophical trend leaves a sedimentation of “common sense”: this is the document of its historical effectiveness. Common sense is not something rigid and static; rather, it changes continuously, enriched by new scientific notions and philosophical opinions which have entered into common usage.

“Common sense” is the folklore of “philosophy” and stands midway between “folklore” proper (that is, as it is understood) and the philosophy, the science, the economy of the scientists. “Common sense” creates the folklore of the future, that is, a more or less stiffened phase of a given time and place. (Gramsci, 1975a, *Quaderno 1*, p. 65, p. 76)

In order to create a new political and cultural hegemony, a task Gramsci assigns to the party (“The Modern Prince”, *Note sul Machiavelli*, 1971), common sense among the masses must necessarily be replaced with an organic conception of the world (cf. Boothman, 2008). To this end, the production of hegemony is not only a question of demystifying backward beliefs upheld by common sense, but also of identifying any spontaneous and progressive tendencies in it. Gramsci held that in order to affect common sense it would be necessary to place oneself “in the sphere itself of common sense”, “detaching oneself sufficiently to allow for a mocking smile, but not contempt or haughty superiority”. Taken into common sense is not an “enemy to defeat”; instead, a “dialectical” relation—in my terminology, a “dialogical” relation—should be established with it (cf. Gramsci, 1975a, *Quaderno 1*, p. 65, p. 75–76).

Although Gramsci did not distinguish often between “common sense” and “good sense” (he recurrently said “common sense”, that is, “good sense”), all the same he sometimes spoke of “good sense” in terms of protection against the excesses of insane intellectualism and also as the reasonable part of common sense. Gramsci observed that Manzoni, in his *Promessi Sposi* (Ch.

XXXII), distinguished between “common sense” and “good sense” à propos the deadly plague of 1576 and the plague-spreaders. As Gramsci observes:

Speaking about the fact that there were indeed people who did not believe in plague-spreaders, but that could not support their opinion against widespread popular opinion, Manzoni adds: “There must have been a secret outlet of the truth, a domestic confidence: good sense was there; but it remained hidden, for fear of common sense”. (1975a, *Quaderno 10*, II, p. 48)

To critique and surmount deep-rooted “common sense”, exploiting its “good sense” as well, is the necessary condition for dissemination among the masses of a new and more unitary and coherent conception of the world, of a new common sense (Gramsci, 1988, p.188). This involves organizing the system of superstitious and folkloristic philosophical conceptions typical of the masses into a new national popular philosophy, to the end of spreading a new culture, one that is organic and in keeping with the ideology of a new “social block”, shared therefore by all strata of society. Common sense in Gramsci is closely connected with the problem of ideology.

Rossi-Landi referred to Gramsci in several passages throughout his writings. One particularly important passage relevant to our present discourse is from his 1978 monograph *Ideologia*, in a chapter titled “Ideology and Social Practice”. After dedicating the first three paragraphs to the introduction of ideology into the problematic of social reproduction, to social reproduction as the arché or beginning of all things, and to the articulations of social reproduction, Rossi-Landi dedicated the fourth paragraph to the question of sign systems, ideologies and production of consensus, and he referred to Gramsci. He observed that Gramsci, even if in “pre-semiotic” terms, had already identified the role carried out by sign systems in the social reproduction system and, precisely, in the relation between co-called “structure” and “superstructure” (Rossi-Landi, 1978, p. 111). This paragraph concludes with the statement that in Gramsci’s view, the most important goal for the “New Prince” (reference here is to the Machiavellian-Gramscian conception of the “Prince”: the “New Prince” is the party) is to reorganize verbal and nonverbal sign systems for the sake of revolutionizing social

teleology. Let me add that this means to reorganize “common sense”, with its “common places” and its “good sense”, as a function of new social planning. According to Rossi-Landi, Gramsci knew that to develop and impose a new ideology and, consequently, to permeate the dominant mode of production with new ideological values, to permeate culture with new ideological values was only possible through sign systems. These are described as the mediating level between the two levels of modes of production and ideological institutions.

iv. Vagueness and Misunderstanding

The only important alternative to pragmatism, at least the version criticized by Peirce, is traditional logic. The latter contends that thought has no meaning except itself and that substance is a category, an irregular pluralism of functions (CP 5.500). Logicians have elaborated a great many different categories, but they all agree that those concepts which are categories are all simple, and that they are the only simple concepts. The fact that something may be true of one category that is not true of another does not imply that these differences constitute the identifiable specificity of that concept: “Each is other than each of the rest but this difference is unspecifiable and thus indefinite. At the same time there is nothing indefinite in the concepts themselves”. (CP 5.501) Peirce proceeds to establish a relation of affinity between differences connected to concepts and different qualities of feeling. The differences are perceived, just as we perceive different fragrances of different flowers, but the different qualities which may be predicated of each fragrance do not at all constitute the fragrance; they are not part of the fragrances themselves. As to their relations, nothing can be predicated except that each one is other than every other. Therefore, those relations are indefinite; but there is no indefiniteness about the feelings involved. On Peirce’s account, concepts as analyzed by the logicians are no more than another kind of quality of feeling. Though the logician would never admit this on the grounds that concepts are general while feelings are not, s/he cannot demonstrate this position. Instead, Peirce maintains the following:

[Concepts and feelings] are different no doubt; but the difference is

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altogether indefinite. It is precisely like the difference between smells and colours. It must be so, because at the very outset they defined concepts as qualities of feeling, not in these very words of course, but in the very meaning of these words when they said that concepts possess, as immediate objects, all the characters that they possess at all, each in itself, regardless of anything else. (CP 5. 501)

Proponents of individualism would agree, Peirce argues, that reality and existence are coextensive; in other words, that reality and existence are either alike true or alike false with regard to every subject; they have the same meaning, or *Inhalt*. Many logicians would refuse such a position as a *reductio ad absurdum* of individualism, the two meanings to their mind clearly not being the same: “[R]eality means a certain kind of non-dependence upon thought, and so is a cognitionary character, while existence means reaction with the environment, and so is a dynamic character.” (CP 5. 503) A misunderstanding characteristic of individualists is their belief that all other human beings are individualists as well, including the scholastic realists whom they thought believed that “universals exist”. In reality, many great thinkers of the past did not believe that “generals” exist, but regarded them as “modes of determination of individuals” and such modes were recognized as being of the nature of thought. According to Peirce, the metaphysical side of pragmatism attempts to solve the problem by accepting the existence of “real generals” and by seeking to answer the question: “In what way can a general be unaffected by any thought about it?” (CP 5. 503).

Another misapprehension clarified by Peirce is this: for the pragmatist, the import, or adequate, ultimate interpretant—Peirce says exactly the “ultimate interpretation”—of a concept is contained in a “habit of conduct” or “general moral determination of whatever procedure there may come to be” (CP 5. 504). The import of any word (except perhaps a pronoun) is not limited to what is in the utterer’s mind actualiter, that is, at the moment; but, on the contrary, it is “what is in the mind, perhaps not even habitualiter, but simply virtualiter, which constitutes the import” (CP 5. 504). Every animal has habits and thus has innate ones. Insofar as an animal has cognitive powers, it must also have “in posse innate cognitive habits”, this being Peirce’s interpretation

of innate ideas. Pragmaticists share these positions with a critical philosophy of common sense and they should not be considered as individualists, neither of the metaphysical nor of the epistemological type.

In line with critical common sense, Peirce maintains that all beliefs are vague. He even goes so far as to claim that the more they are indubitable, the vaguer they are. He goes on to discuss the misunderstood importance of vagueness, even in mathematical thought. Vagueness is no less than constitutive of belief, inherent to it and to the propositions that express it. It is the “antithetical analogue of generality”:

A sign is objectively general, in so far as, leaving its effective interpretation indeterminate, it surrenders to the interpreter the right of completing the determination for himself. “Man is mortal”. “What man?”, “Any man you like”. A sign is objectively vague, in so far as, leaving its interpretation more or less indeterminate, it reserves for some other possible sign or experience the function of completing the determination. “This month”, says the almanac-oracle, “a great event is to happen”. “What event?” “Oh, we shall see. The almanac doesn’t tell that”. The general might be defined as that to which the principle of excluded middle does not apply. A triangle in general is not isosceles nor equilateral; nor is a triangle in general scalene. The vague might be defined as that to which the principle of contradiction does not apply. For it is false neither that an animal (in a vague sense) is male, nor that an animal is female. (CP 5. 505)

Generality and vagueness do not coincide. Indeed, they oppose each other, though on a formal level they are seen to be on a par. A sign cannot be at once vague and general in the same respect, as Peirce said, “since insofar as the right of determination is not distinctly extended to the interpreter it remains the right of the utterer” (CP 5. 506). Furthermore, only if a sign is not indeterminate can it avoid being vague or general, but “no sign can ever be absolutely and completely indeterminate”(CP 5. 506).

In the light of his logic of relations, no proposition has a single subject, but rather has different levels of reference. On this aspect, Peirce refers to an article by himself published in *The Open Court* in 1892, “The Reader is Introduced to Relatives” (CP 3. 415 – 3. 424). Even if only implicitly, all

propositions necessarily refer to the truth, “the universe of all universes”. Therefore they refer to the same determinately singular subject, understood both by the utterer and the interpreter, and assumed by all to be real. At a more restricted immediate level, all propositions refer to a non general subject.

In his paper “Consequences of Critical Common-Sensism” (CP 5. 502 – 537), Peirce reflected further on the role of vagueness. Communication among interlocutors is never completely definite, never completely non-vague, for where the possibility of variation exists absolute precision is impossible. Beyond expressing his hope that qualities of feeling among different persons might one day be compared by physiologists and thereby no longer represented a source of misunderstanding, Peirce identified a cause of misunderstanding in the intention itself of intellectual precision and in the very commitment to explanation and specification, on the one hand, and in the diversity of experience among different persons, which was as calling for an uneliminable situation of dialogue both with others and with self, on the other hand. From this point of view, misunderstanding is inevitable, indeed, we might add, the very condition for understanding. Communication is necessarily vague because no man’s interpretation of words is based on exactly the same experience as any other men’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)

Therefore, just as when we look closely at the detail of a painting we lose sight of its overall sense, the more we attempt to be precise, the more unattainable precision seems, even when we are dealing with intellectual conceptions. Vagueness is the common matter that subtends communication and constitutes a condition of possibility of communication itself; it is an a priori condition for the formulation of the propositions to be communicated. Such vagueness is strictly dependent upon reference to the different experiences of each one of us, from organic-instinctual life to intellectual life. Thus understood, more than postulating vagueness as the cause of

misunderstanding, Peirce like Welby recognized it as the condition of possibility of communication, thanks to which it was possible to formulate or actualize the propositions that form our communicative exchanges. Moreover, communication is achieved in terms of dialogue, whether interior dialogue or dialogue with other interlocutors external to oneself. Variability in the experience of the individual implies variability at the level of explicit interpretation and also at the level of implicit understanding.

Therefore dialogue and understanding, as negotiated in communication, are strictly dependent upon vagueness, variability, the implicit and the unsaid. Understanding is possible thanks to the understood, and as such is always vague. The risk is that the more we attempt to be precise, the less we understand each other. To explicate the indeterminate and render it comprehensible means to undertake new interpretive/translative courses, new signifying paths, and thus to introduce new implications, new variables, and hence a new degree of vagueness. Ultimately, communication is dialogic investigation and approximation by interlocutors with respect to the referent of discourse—both the general referent, truth, and the immediate, special referent. Speaking, saying, explication, determination, understanding—all these stand firmly rooted in the understood, the unspoken, the unsaid, in implied meaning (Petrilli, 1998a, pp. 95–105; 2013, pp. 186–88).

Expression and communication are achieved thanks to the relation among signs, or, better, among interpretants. And given the close association of interpretation to translation (as evidenced in particular by Roman Jakobson 1959), to the point that under certain aspects these terms overlap and may be considered synonymous, the relation among interpretants is a translational relation (see also Petrilli, 2014a, Chs. 10, 11, 15). Meaning is achieved through processes of transferral and transvaluation in the interaction, to varying degrees of dialogic responsiveness, among signs. And as we have also aimed to evidence in this chapter, indeterminacy, ambiguity and vagueness are necessary conditions for continuity of such interpretive/translative processes in human semiosis.

V . Significs, Semiotics, Semioethics

Reading the works of scholars of the sign like Welby and Peirce provides

us with theoretical instruments for a more adequate understanding of social symptoms and critique of the world today, of the world-as-it-is. This world (our own), the world shaped and connoted in the era of globalization and global communication, is oriented by the logic of identity and characterized by the representation of difference based on this type of logic. “Identity” is understood here as closed and egocentric identity and difference based on identity logic thus understood is identity-difference (Petrilli, 2013, pp. 190–195). Difference orientated by the logic of closed identity leads to the construction of worlds and worldviews based on separation and dominion among identity-differences—whether these concern gender, ethnic group, ideology, religion, etc. Identity logic thus describes subtends “the globalization of indifference” and inevitably results in the need to defend the interests of identities, to the point even of accepting the logic of war.

Instead, from the perspective of signification or semioethics (Petrilli & Ponzio 2003, 2005), difference is thematized in terms of otherness logic and dialogism and emerges as otherness-difference. Such logic involves the capacity for unity on the basis of intercorporeal dialogue and co-participation, even when encounter involves discord. Global hospitality, peace and freedom call for the relation of involvement with the other which cannot be achieved on the basis of closed identities, barriers and alibis. Instead, what is required is the relation of responsibility for the other, or dialogic responsiveness towards the other, to echo Mikhail Bakhtin, across boundaries and relative alibis. In this framework, commitment to human rights means commitment to the rights of the other.

Signification is the name of that discipline or theoretical orientation in the study of signs and language that encourages one to ask questions like: “What does it signify?” “What does it mean?” “In what sense?” It is not surprising that the expression “signification” should have been introduced (in 1894 ca.) by a woman—Victoria Welby precisely. Nor is it surprising that she never entered the Pantheon or genealogical tree of the “Fathers” of the language and sign sciences, despite her connections with scholars like Charles S. Peirce, Bertrand Russell, Charles K. Ogden, George F. Stout, John M. Baldwin, Ferdinand S. Schiller, Ferdinand Tönnies, Frederik van Eeden, and many more.

“What does it signify?” “In what sense?” “Why?” are questions Welby induced one to ask in the face of any form of expression, verbal and nonverbal, piece of human behaviour or social practice. “The most wonderful of all words is the ‘Why’. It is ours wherewith to press into and probe, to conquer and govern the very centres of mental life” (Welby, 23 August 1911, now in Petrilli, 2009a, p. 514). As a signfician, she focused on the relation of signs to values, ultimately on the relation of signs to life. She thematized the need for critical awareness and interpretation to enhance the value of the single individual, the potential for significance, and to safeguard human dignity under all aspects (Petrilli & Ponzio, 2005, Ch. 2; Petrilli, 2009, Ch. 4).

The logic of significs is associated with a new form of humanism, the “humanism of otherness” (Levinas, 1961, 1972) by contrast with the “humanism of identity”. It is also associated with “dialogism”, “intercorporeal dialogism” (Bakhtin, 1981). In this framework, responsibility is connected with the other, with the capacity for responsiveness which, in turn, is connected with gift-giving logic, the capacity for creative love, care for the other, and construction of new worlds. Welby’s special approach to signs and language favours reflects upon issues relating to human rights, responsibility, freedom, hospitality and listening. Welby predicated love and care for the other, compassion, justice, and patience—all guiding values for healthy social practice. She identified gift logic as a constitutive component in the relation among signs, in the generation of signifying practices, in the construction of subjectivity. Otherness and excess, overflow and transcendence with respect to identity logic are determining factors in the dynamics of interpretive processes and expressive systems, including the verbal, which is all one with the dynamics of the development of subjectivity, interpersonal relations and experience of the world.

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