Sign, Meaning, and Understanding in Victoria Welby and Charles S. Peirce

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ABSTRACT
Like Peirce, recognized as the "father-founder" of modern semiotics, Welby too, although just recently (despite her influence on important contemporary scholars), is acclaimed as the "mother-founder," thus entering the pantheon of the "fathers" of language and sign sciences. These great figures share a common approach to sign and language as exponents of what today is recognized as the major tradition in semiotic studies, "interpretation semiotics." Meaning, understanding, signs, signifiers, utterers, and listeners are described as evolving in live communication, as part of signifying processes in becoming. Signs develop in ongoing interpretive/ translative processes with other signs, signifiers, and signifying processes. Signs are interrelated with values, consequently sense and significance emerge as major investigation areas for studies on meaning. Moreover, both Welby and Peirce evidence the public, social, and intersubjective dimensions of signifying and understanding, and hence also the importance of intercorporeality, dialogism, otherness, ambiguity for healthy communication, and interpersonal relations.

The English philosopher Victoria Welby (1837–1912) introduced the term *significs* for her special approach to the study of sign and meaning toward the end of the nineteenth century. Significs transcends pure descriptivism and presents itself as a method for the analysis of signs beyond logico-epistemological boundaries, most importantly it thematizes the relation of signs to values—ethical, aesthetic, and pragmatic (Petrilli 2010, chap. 2). Significs investigates the ethical-pragmatic and axiological dimensions of signification. Beyond the study of meaning and language understood in strictly gnoseological terms, in fact, significs is concerned with the problem of significance,

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with the import of meaning and meaning producing processes for human behavior. Welby also broadly described her significs as a "philosophy of interpretation," a "philosophy of translation," and a "philosophy of significance" (Welby [1903] 1983, 89, 161; Petrilli 2009, 273–75).

Welby took her distance from the traditional terms of philological-historical semantics as developed by, for example, Michel Bréal (Petrilli 2009, 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" actually 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, ethical, and emotional spheres of sign activity—and therefore to problems of meaning, language, communication, and value in the broadest sense possible.

Welby analyses meaning according to three different levels or classes of expression value: "sense," "meaning," and "significance," which are copresent 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," and "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; and "planetary," "solar," and "cosmic" for different types of experience, knowledge, and consciousness (Welby [1903] 1983, 46–47, in Petrilli 2009, 265–66; Petrilli 2009, 20–24; see the dictionary entry "Significs" by Welby, George F. Stout, and James M. Baldwin reprinted in Petrilli 2009, 195–96).

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, volitional aspects of signification. "Significance" implies "sense" in the restricted sense,

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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 continues to specify her triadic model for the analysis of meaning throughout her writings through to her 1911 encyclopedia entry "Significs" (in Petrilli 2009, 345–50), where she further gives 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" (Petrilli 2009, 345–50). Triadism is a pivotal characteristic of Welby's thinking (see her unpublished essay of 1886, "Threefold Laws," in Petrilli [2009], 331–40).[1] 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 Welby of March 14, 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 de-

1. For a more complete picture of triadic correspondences in Welby's writings on significs, see the table of triads presented by H. Walter Schmitz in the volume *Significs and Language* (see Welby [1911] 1985; the table is now available in Petrilli 2009, 948–49).

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fine 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, 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"; both are contextual and contiguous. 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 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, 288–94). Moreover, Peirce considered such convergences between his own triad and Welby's as an indication of their validity.

Welby studies 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, Welby's notion of "significance" can be associated with Charles Morris's conception of "significance" (1964). Furthermore, Welby thematizes 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 to 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

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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 that formulated by Welby in *Significs and Language*, 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" ([1911] 1985, 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 (ix). Furthermore, as she had already specified in *What Is Meaning?*, as 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" ([1903] 1983, 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 analyzing 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 nonlinguistic 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 multiform 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 involving the signifying processes of expression, interpretation, communication, all of us—everyday human and intellectual—are potential "significians." Together we produce signifying processes and, in turn, we evolve in signifying processes that go to form the anthroposemiotic sign network.

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 toward the end of the nineteenth century. These include the essays "Meaning and Metaphor" (originally published in *The Monist* in 1893 [Petrilli 2009, 421–30]) and "Sense, Meaning, and Interpretation" (originally published in two parts in the journal *Mind* in 1896 [Petrilli 2009, 430–49]); a book of reflections, *Grains of Sense* (1897); and her monographs *What Is Meaning?* ([1903]

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1983) and *Significs and Language* ([1911] 1985). The republication of these works has, along with other publications, contributed to the current revival of significs. *What Is Meaning?* was republished in 1983 by Achim Eschbach in the series "Foundations of Semiotics," with John Benjamins, and the volume *Significs and Language*, containing Welby's 1911 monograph expanded with the addition of a selection from her writings, both published and unpublished, appeared in a volume of 1985, edited by H. Walter Schmitz in the same book series. In those same years an anthology of writings by Welby appeared in Italian translation, *Significato, metafora, interpretazione* (Welby 1985), followed by another two, *Senso, significazione, significatività* (2007) and *Interpretare, comprendere, comunicare* (Welby 2010). The first monograph ever on Welby appeared in 1998, *Su Victoria Welby: Significs e filosofia del linguaggio* (Petrilli 1998a).

A large collection of papers by Welby was made available in the volume *Signifying and Understanding: Reading the Works of Victoria Welby and the Signific Movement* (Petrilli 2009). This volume presents papers from the Welby Collection at the York University Archives (Toronto), together with a selection of texts published during Welby's lifetime (Petrilli 2009, app. 2). However, a significant part of Welby's work housed in the archives remains unpublished. 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. 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, and 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 twentieth century (cf. Schmitz 1990; Heijerman and Schmitz 1991). *Signifying and Understanding* also features an anthology of writings by first generation significians like Frederik van Eeden, Gerrit Mannoury, L. E. J. Brouwer, and David Vuysje. The most recent large-scale editorial initiative for the promotion of Welby's research and writing and of the movement it inspired is publication of "On and Beyond Significs: Centennial Issue for Victoria Welby" (Nuessel et al. 2013).

After her death, more than as an intellectual in her own right, Welby's name continued circulating among the international community of researchers, thanks

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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—including, in addition to Peirce, Bertrand Russell, James M. Baldwin, Henry Spencer, Thomas A. Huxley, Herbert G. Wells, Max Müller, Benjamin Jowett, Frederik Pollock, George F. Stout, Ferdinand C. S. Schiller, Charles K. Ogden, Henry James, William James, Mary Everest Boole, Julia Wedgwood, Michel Bréal, André Lalande, Henri Bergson, Henri Poincaré, Rudolph Carnap, Otto Neurath, Harald Höffding, Ferdinand Tönnies, Frederik van Eeden, Giovanni Vailati, Mario Calderoni, and many others. Part of this correspondence was edited and published by Welby's daughter in two volumes, *Echoes of Larger Life* (1929), which collects letters written between 1879 and 1891, and *Other Dimensions* (1931), covering the years from 1898 to 1911. Other selections with various interlocutors have also been made available in *Signifying and Understanding*. We could claim that developments on significs are not necessarily attached to any individual name. One that deserves special mention is Charles K. Ogden, who discovered Welby and her significs as a young university student at Cambridge and whose research was significantly influenced by her even though he only briefly mentions her in his epochal book *The Meaning of Meaning* (Ogden and Richards [1923] 1989). Ogden promoted significs as a university student during the years 1910–11; he had met Welby personally at that time and was dedicated to spreading her ideas.

Welby was 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 was 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 the 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 inquires into the connection between semiosis and life and asks the question "Semiosis and Semiotics, What Lies in Their Future?" ([1991] 1998, 97–99). Moreover, given its

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special focus on significance in human behavior, Welby's significs may be read as proposing a new form of humanism, in contrast with semiotic analyses conducted exclusively in abstract gnoseological terms.

With its focus on the relation between sign, value, and behavior—in particular the sign's ultimate value, or significance, on the connection and between sign and value in all its aspects (pragmatic, social, ethic, aesthetic, etc.)—significs is particularly concerned with the effects and implications of the conjunction between signs and values for human behavior. And insofar as it is focused on the pragmatical-ethical implications of human signifying processes, significs is a major source of inspiration at the origin of "semioethics" with which it overlaps (see below). 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 significs from its very inception.

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 "significs" as a prefiguration of "semioethics." This expression was introduced by Augusto Ponzio and me as the title of the monograph *Semioetica* (see Petrilli and Ponzio 2003; now forthcoming in English translation), and as the title of an essay commissioned by Paul Cobley for *The Routledge Dictionary of Semiotics* (Petrilli and Ponzio 2010). "Semioethics" is a neologism that 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 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 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 Petrilli and Ponzio 2005, 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.

Significs and Language: Beyond Meaning in Semantics

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 gen-

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eral 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 adequately formulate her ideas. She soon realized that a fundamental problem in reflection on language and meaning concerns language itself, the medium through which reflection takes 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, in contrast to *verbal* for reference to the specifically linguistic or verbal aspect of signs, whether graphic and phonic. The term *interpretation* appears in the title of her 1896 essay "Sense, Meaning and Interpretation" (in Petrilli 2009, 430–49) 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 is 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 that 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 of 1896 for the best essay on significal questions (Petrilli 2009, 192–94, 235–48).

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 had also proposed the term *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* ([1903] 1983, 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 introduces images from the organic world to denounce the "maladies of language" and "linguistic pathology," largely caused by the use of verbal expression that is inadequate or antiquated, featuring metaphors and analogies

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that are 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. The human understanding of differences and commonalities among signs, senses, and meanings must also be improved. 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, chap. 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, behavioral, 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 *significs*, a term difficult to translate into other languages (as discussed in her correspondence with, e.g., Michel Bréal and André Lalande regarding French, and Giovanni Vailati for Italian [Petrilli 2009, 302–10, 407–18]), 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 plays a fundamental role in language and communication, which is something Welby recognized and thematized dis-

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tinguishing ambiguity from confusion and bad language usage. She aimed to describe aspects of the problem of language, expression, and signifying processes at large that had not yet been contemplated or that 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" that concentrates intellectual activities on "meaning," the main value and condition for all forms of study and knowledge ([1903] 1983, 83). Again, significs is "a method of observation, a mode of experiment" that "includes the inductive and deductive methods in one process" (161). This is what Vailati baptized as 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 [1903] 1983, 162), therefore significs is also metadisciplinary.

Expressive Ambiguity and the Critique of Definition

Welby distinguishes between two types of ambiguity: (1) ambiguity in the sense of polysemy constitutive of the word, a positive attribute connected to a multiform and dialogic view of reality and, as such, a necessary condition for expressivity and understanding; (2) ambiguity as obscurity, expressive inadequacy that is the cause of confusion and equivocation and provokes "paralysis of thought." Welby denounces such negative effects with innumerable examples throughout her writings ([1911] 1985, xiii, 37–38). Her characteristic recourse to organic analogies to talk about language serves to evince such characteristics as "plasticity," "expressive ambiguity," and "adaptability" as distinctive features of verbal expression. For example, Welby establishes an analogy between context and environment and consequently between the mutually adaptive mechanism that regulates the relationship between word and context, on the one hand, and between organism and environment, on the other: "If we enthrone one queen-word instead of another in the midst of a hive of working context-words, these will behave very differently. They will expel or kill or naturalize it" ([1903] 1983, 40, and note). The word, like the organism, adapts to its surroundings which it modifies and, conversely, the context influences and somehow modifies these.

In the 1893 essay "Meaning and Metaphor," Welby criticizes the concept of "plain meaning" from a pedagogic and theoretical perspective, underlining the

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need to recognize the symbolic character of language, the widespread (though often unconscious) use of analogies and metaphors and the relationship between symbolic systems and what they symbolize, the pervasiveness of imagery in so-called literal or actual language, which she uses as an argument against the fallacious tendency to establish a net distinction between literal language and metaphorical language: "we might begin by learning better what part symbolism plays in the rituals of expression, and ask ourselves what else is language itself but symbolism, and what it symbolizes. We should then examine anew the relations of the 'symbolic' to the 'real'; of image, figure, metaphor, to what we call literal or actual. For this concerns us all. Imagery runs in and out, so to speak, from the symbolic to the real world and back again" (Petrilli 2009, 422).

The infinite possibilities of expression and signification are actualized by signs as their meanings are gradually specified in live communicative contexts. And though not necessarily in the same terms, Welby recognizes symbolicity, indexicality, and iconicity as interacting dimensions constitutive of signifying processes to varying degrees.

Welby elaborates a dynamical, structural, and generative theory of signs and meaning, where polyvalency, changeability, and vagueness are thematized as distinctive features. She criticizes the myth of "plain meaning," also denominated as commonsense, clear, and obvious meaning. In other words, she criticizes the myth of language described in terms of invariability, uniformity, and univocality, and the tendency to define words and locutions as though they were numbers, tags, or symbols enjoying unanimous consent (Petrilli 2009, 421–30, 430–49). The text must be freed from the prejudice of interpretation reduced to decodification. It is important to specify meaning and thereby evince the overall significance, import, and ultimate value of a given utterance, as when we ask the question, "What do we really mean?"; but, to specify and clarify does not imply to accept the concept of "plain meaning," which Welby considers a mere fallacy when it involves reductionism and oversimplification. As an example, she indicates the widespread belief that a text can evolve into a single reading, into an absolute and definitive interpretant valid for all times ([1903] 1983, 143; Petrilli 2009, 22–23, 423). Broadly, the point addressed by Welby with her concept of "plain meaning" can be compared to the critique elaborated by Antonio Gramsci in relation to the concept of "common sense" (cf. Gramsci 1971a, 1971b).

Welby appreciates the "plurivocal" and "polylogic" capacity of language and at once signals reductive interpretations of the concept of ambiguity. Plas-

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ticity and ambiguity are qualities that render the sign adaptive to new contexts, to changing habits of behavior. Such qualities are a condition for progress in knowledge, for the development of verbal and nonverbal expression, for signifying processes at large and their potential for allusive reference ([1911] 1985, ccxli, ccliv). Ambiguity is an essential aspect of interpersonal relationships where successful communication emerges from interaction between the codified aspects of language and creative, responsive understanding which cannot be reduced to the processes of decodification (Petrilli 2012, chaps. 1, 4, 5). Welby shared her appreciation of ambiguity and polysemy with her contemporary, Giovanni Vailati. Subsequently, other authors who were to work along similar lines include Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, Adam Schaff, and Mikhail Bakhtin.

"Clear" and "convincing" discourse often implies mystifying oversimplication, which, paradoxically, engenders obscure and "perverse" discourse. The concepts of "plain meaning," "common sense," and "commonplace" are often misused in this sense. When applied under the mask of "simplification" and "clearness," these terms reduce potential polylogism to the condition of monologism, as in the case of the metaphorical stratification of sense exchanged for univocal, literal meaning. Mystifications of this sort often ensue from lack of awareness of the semiotic materiality of the sign, of its vocation for otherness, of its sociohistorical consistency. The importance of the role of the enthymeme, of the unsaid, and the implicit in discourse is often neglected—the fact that words and signs in general are impregnated with senses engendered in a signifying history of their own. Understanding and communication rest on the unsaid, the unspoken, implicit meaning, on that which is understood.

On a diachronic axis, the meanings and values of words and utterances, whether implicit or explicit, may accumulate, overlap, change, disappear even, or develop. On a synchronic axis, the unique experience of the single speaker influences the modality of perception and interpretation. Different factors are at work to condition meaning value in a structure that is never identical to itself. These factors include the specific historical-social-cultural context, communicative context, linguistic usage, inferential procedure, psychological and emotional factors, memory, attention, intention, the capacity for making associations, allusions, and assumptions, enthymemes, memory, circumstance, linguistic usage, the tendency to symbolize or picture, the a priori conditions of language, and so on. Welby thematized dialectic complementarity and interdependency between the forces of indeterminacy and determinacy, vagueness and exactitude, plurivocality and monologicality, between the centrifugal forces

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and the centripetal forces operative in language, ultimately, in our own terminology, between the logic of alterity and the logic of identity. The genetically and structurally dynamical character of language, its inherent potential for creativity and innovation, and the action of such variables as those just listed—all these aspects invalidate recourse to definition as an absolute and definitive remedy for the mystifications of language.

Welby focuses on a series of specifically linguistic issues, such as the role of definition in the determination of meaning, the relationship between literal meaning and metaphorical meaning, the role of metaphor, analogy, and homology in the enhancement of expressive potential. Expressive precision can be attained by exploiting different linguistic resources—for example, by distinguishing between the different meanings of words that seem to be similar but in fact are not, and by identifying similarity among words that seem to have different meanings but do not. However, Welby claims that to be a significian does not mean to be a "precisionist" in the sense of working for the "mechanical exactitude in language" (see the Welby files titled "Significs [1903–1910]" and "Mother-Sense [1904–1910]" in Petrilli 2009, esp. 249, 270, 336, 576, 705, 808). On the contrary, meaning is inherently ambiguous and to neglect this particular quality can lead to monological signifying practices that lay the conditions for the tyranny of dogma and orthodoxy. At a metadiscursive level, though ready to propose new terms for the study of language and meaning, Welby kept her distances from the temptations of technicalism. She believed that elimination of ambiguity and polysemy from the utterance was a fallacy, but she was committed nevertheless to making her expressions as precise as possible. The following passage on the meaning of the words "fact" and "idea" is an interesting example:

> Taking both words in the generally accepted English sense what in the last resort is the difference between Fact and Idea? What is that essential meaning of both which, if changed, will necessitate a new word to express what we are losing? Surely there can be no doubt of the answer. If we can say of any supposed fact that it is false: unreal from one point of view, untrue from another (these again never to be confounded), it ceases to be fact. No fact can be either unreal or untrue, only our idea of it. Otherwise we may as well say at once that the real may be the delusive, or the true may be the deceptive. Of course the "real" tends to become illusory to us, and the true deceptive, owing to the inadequacy of our inferences, which is again due to our little-developed interpretive power.

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> But this must become more adequate when we have learnt to make sense, meaning, and significance our central concern, and have developed our sensifying and signifying faculties. ([1903] 1983, 40–41)

Linguistic consciousness implies development of the critical and interpretive capacity and rejection of such tendencies as dogmatism, pedantry, and anarchy in linguistic usage, logical inference, and sign behavior in general.

Liberation of language from the so-called linguistic traps that impede its development and articulation is a condition for mastery over one's surroundings. In this framework, Welby recognized the usefulness of definition, though not in an absolute sense. Definition serves limited but specific purposes and special interests. What is most worth expressing and interpreting in terms of "significance" most often escapes definition ([1903] 1983, 10). Definition does not account for the ambiguity of language understood as a condition for successful communication. And when resorting to definition to solve problems of meaning and expression, the greatest good arises in the process of working toward that definition rather than in its actual formulation, as the English philosopher Henry Sidgwick observes in his epistolary exchanges with Welby.[2] Welby distinguished between "rigid definition" and "plastic primary definition" ([1911] 1985; 1985; 2007; 2010). The former is always secondary because of its tendency to freeze meaning and render it static in the orientation toward a single, univocal meaning. By contrast, "plastic primary definition" keeps account of the live character of language and therefore of its capacity for adaptation to new signifying contexts. Welby discusses the problem of definition in her correspondence with Giovanni Vailati, who took a similar view. Rather than limit definition to single words, he underlined its usefulness in determining the meaning of propositions. The meaning of single words is often only determined in relation to other words, in the linguistic context, in the context of the proposition itself. To exemplify his view, Vailati indicated such terms as *to be*, *to act*, *to produce*, *to represent*, *to manifest*, and so on. The meaning of the linguistic context itself is also determined in its relation to the single words forming that context (Vailati to Welby, July 12, 1898, in Vailati 1971, 140–42; Welby to Vailati, February 27, 1907, in Petrilli 2009, 415). Only in a correct theoretical framework can definition be implemented, though never as a remedy to the problems of linguistic equivocation. Without denying its value for technical language, definition tends to eliminate the expressive plasticity of words, responding inappro-

2. Their correspondence is preserved in the Welby Collection, York University Achives, box 14; see Petrilli 2009, app. 3).

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priately to their inherent liveliness with lifelessness and inertia (Welby [1903] 1983, 2; Petrilli 2009, 379–84).

To solve problems of language, rather than resort to definition we need an adequate theory of sign and meaning. We know that Welby thematizes a tripartite division of meaning into "sense," "meaning," and "significance"; other important distinctions include that between "plain," "actual" or "literal," "direct" meaning, on the one hand, and "figurative," "indirect," or "reflective" meaning, on the other. Signifying processes do not respond to the binary view that distinguishes between the two poles of "metaphorical, indirect or reflective meaning," on one hand, and "literal, direct or actual meaning," on the other. Indeed, the term *literal* is considered by Welby to be more figurative and more ambiguous than the term *metaphorical* itself (Petrilli 2009, 422). Instead, she hypothesizes a third region of meaning constitutive of signifying practices, a "third value" of meaning—neither entirely literal nor entirely figurative—in which the "metaphorical" and the "literal" combine to varying degrees (Welby [1903] 1983, 139, 292; a similar approach is elaborated by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi [1985] 2006, 115–20, though independent of Welby). The "third value" or "third region" of meaning hypothesizes a contact zone where boundaries are not defined and interpretive processes are generated in the interaction among signs. Metaphorical meaning cannot be reduced to ornamentality, nor is it exclusive to the language of literature or to the artistic vision in general. On the contrary, metaphorical procedure is structural to the development of knowledge and to signifying processes at large. This indeterminate, third value, or third region of meaning runs through the whole of language, including ordinary language, where the actual and the symbolic, the real and the ideal, the direct and the reflective intermingle, as in a painting. The same utterance can translate across different regions of meaning—actual and direct, symbolical, figurative, or some combination, thereby revealing its ambiguous nature and capacity for adaptation and transformation as requested by the live processes of communication.

The influence of metaphorical meaning is active even when we are not aware of it. The processes of metaphorization and symbolization neither have systemic nor typological boundaries. On the contrary, they permeate the sign network in its complexity where there exist metaphorical signifying paths that are already traced and that are so deeply rooted in the language and consciousness of utterers and interpreters that their meaning seems simple, fixed, and definite, like "plain meaning." But there are also metaphorical signifying paths that are immediately recognizable as such owing to their inventiveness, creativity, and capacity for innovation. These are engendered by relating in-

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terpretants in the sign network that may even be distant from each other, thereby producing signifying processes that are completely new, unexpected, unpredictable, even surprising. Though we may choose programmatically between the "literal" and the "metaphorical," in reality this is no more than a pseudo-choice, one which harbors the danger of ensuing in artificial exaggeration in one sense or in the other (Petrilli 2006; 2012, chap. 7).

Analogy and metaphor operate implicitly and unconsciously in everyday language as well as in scientific-philosophical language. For this reason, Welby believes that the study of such meaning production devices must be systematically introduced into educational programmes, with continuous testing on a practical level, according to the criteria of effectiveness on interlocutors in communication. A "significal education," the acquisition of a "significal method," is required from the very first years of schooling, as she writes to Charles K. Ogden in a letter dated March 24, 1911:[3]

> The work wanted must begin in the nursery and elementary school; the instinct of clarity in speech now burdened beneath a load of mere helpless convention perpetually defeating expression must be fostered and stimulated. When the generation now represented by my grandchildren marry their children must have their racial sense brought out and worked upon—with significal discrimination! While the elements of reading and writing are taught as now but not as obeying the same rigid (not logical) laws. Then the first school will appeal to this, their desire to express as to know and infer will always be stimulated and ordered: then gradually their anarchic or dogmatic tendencies will be raised into interpretive ones. I think it ought not to be difficult to awaken us. We are even now always being startled by what turns out to be the too-too of a tin-trumpet. But to be able to say what we ought to mean and to act upon our true conception of a subject—that is the aim. (Petrilli 2009, 774)

To this end both Welby and Vailati (who fully subscribed to the orientation of her studies) insisted on the need for critique of imagery and analogy and on the need to create habits of analysis, classification, and verification of expressive devices in general, particularly when a question of verbal signs (the sign par excellence). Such habits, she argues, should be instilled from infancy.

3. The main part of their correspondence is now available in Petrilli (2009).

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As a defense against linguistic anarchy, Vailati, too, underlined the need for critical reflection on language to begin in childhood. He advocated developing the habit of reflecting on "*questioni di parole*" or, as Welby says, "verbal questions," in their radical interconnection with the processes of argumentation and knowledge acquisition. Vailati says as much in a letter to Welby dated July 12, 1898: "I believe the exposition and classification of verbal fallacies and, above all, their *caricatures* (in *jeux de mots*), to be one of most effectual pedagogic contrivances for creating the habit of perceiving the ambiguities of language. It is a remedy somewhat analogous to that resorted to by Lacedaemons, who, in order to keep alive in their sons the horror to intoxication, compelled them to assist to the *dégoutants* deeds and sayings of the ebrious Ilots" (Vailati 1971, 141).

Vailati, like Welby, advocates the need for a "critique of language," for awareness of the complex nature of the meaning of words, the unconscious use of which often gives rise to misunderstanding and linguistic traps. At the same time, he turns his attention, again like Welby, to the expressive potential and practical functioning of ordinary language. For Vailati, rather than focus on the construction of an artificial language in the effort to solve problems of ambiguity and misunderstanding, the task of language analysis and philosophical speculation is to enhance and renew common language, revitalizing its connection with life in all its aspects and at all levels, from everyday ordinary language to the higher spheres of artistic, scientific, and professional language.

Welby analyzes verbal expression not only in order to describe it, but to explain it, with the ultimate aim of transforming, regenerating, and subjecting it to conscious and critical implementation in signifying practice. Given its natural inclination for investigation and inquiry and its curiosity and capacity for questioning, the child is the supreme critic and a model. Welby contrasts the provocation of questions to the monologizing constriction of the order of discourse, emphasizing the importance of confrontation and comparison among different points of view, the condition of dialogic interrelatedness.

Language and logic, linguistic signs and inferential processes are interconnected by relations of mutual interdependency, such that the bad use of language involves the bad use of logic. On promoting the need for "language study," Welby underlines the inevitable connection between language, thought, action, and values. Faulty conceptualization, false problems—for example, the fallacious contrast between "free will" and "determinism," "freedom" and "necessity"—are largely the result of language problems and bad linguistic usage.

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Vailati (who was one of Welby's most devoted readers) shares the aims of her research, as he illustrates in a letter to her dated March 19, 1903. He lists three points on which they agree strongly:

> 1) Your insisting on the need for a critique of imagery, for a testing of analogies and metaphors (especially when "unconsciously" or semi-unconsciously" used, as it is always the case in the *current* and *vulgar* ones).
> 2) Your warning against the tendency of pedantry and school-learning to discourage the development of linguistic resources, by the inhibitions of those spontaneous variations that are the necessary condition of organic growth.
> 3) Your valuation of the practical and speculative importance of raising language from the irrational and instinctive to the rational and volitional plane; in which it is considered as a means or contrivance for the performance of determined functions (representative, inferential, communicational, etc.) and for the attainment of given ends. (Vailati 1971, 144)

As Welby recognizes in a letter of February 27, 1907 (Vailati 1971), Vailati shared a common interest in the relation between language and thought, in problems specifically related to the human capacity for linguistic expressivity, meaning and argumentation. His 1905 article "I tropi della logica" centers on the problem of the use of metaphors taken from the physical world and is directly inspired by Welby's monograph *What Is Meaning?* In "Alcune osservazioni" on the role of analogy and confrontation in the development of knowledge, first published in 1899 (in Vailati 1987), Vailati deals with questions similar to those proposed by Welby in her 1896 essay "Sense, Meaning and Interpretation." He theorizes the method of comparison and confrontation among different sign systems, the sciences that study them and their respective languages. Such a method is fundamental to highlight convergences and divergences among different disciplines and areas of knowledge and culture. In another 1905 essay (in Vailati 1987), "La ricerca dell'impossibile," Vailati compares the formulas of moral discourse with those of geometry and in a later essay, "La grammatica dell'algebra" (1908, in Vailati 1987), he compares verbal language and the language of algebra. The method developed by Vailati is comparable to Welby's interpretive-translative method and fits in well with the project for significs. They both thematize the need to bring the unconscious use of logical-linguistic mechanisms to consciousness in the effort to overcome the inadequacies of our inferences and interpretive capacity. The

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"sensifying and signifying faculties" must be improved by bettering our understanding of the problems of meaning, as Welby never tired of repeating.

"Universal Language," "Common Speech," and "Common Sense"

Welby criticizes 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, and so on, favors 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 "significal" 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 [1911] 1985, 38–39). Distinction and diversity among languages enhances signifying, interpretive, and communicative practice. In contrast, the imposition of an artificial universal language leads to leveling the multiplicity of our cultural, linguistic and psychological patrimony, of possible worldviews and logics. According to Welby difference (linguistic and nonlinguistic) is not the cause of division and silence, but, on the contrary, favors the possibility of interconnection and signifying continuity. Differences engender other differences as part of a detotalizing totality in continuous evolution ([1903] 1983, 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. Similarly to Rossi-Landi and his concept of *parlare comune* (common speech), Welby does not connect expressions like "common language," "common speech," and "common meaning" to "ordinary language" or "everyday language" as theorized by the English analytical philosophers (see Rossi-Landi 1961). "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 "common language," "common speech," and "common sense."

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In Welby's theory of language and meaning such 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 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 says in a letter to Thomas H. Huxley estimated to date from the years 1882–85 (Cust 1929, 102).

The expressions "common meaning," "common sense" and "common speech" denote an a priori in the Kantian sense, a level of reference common to all languages and to all human beings—that is, a set of operations that constitute 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 that interconnect different human communities beyond historical-cultural differences. This common patrimony of communicative techniques allows for 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 interlinguistcally, for example, but also when teaching, learning, or simply conversing in the same language; 1961, 204–25).

The afore mentioned expressions "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 tracing difference back to the monologism of identity. On the contrary, Welby, as Rossi-Landi after her, recognized the plurilinguistic and pluridiscursive value of language and distanced herself from monologizing temptations.[4] The notion of common speech, as clarified by Rossi-Landi, does not contradict plurilingualism and plurivocality, that is, the simultaneous presence of multiple languages and multiple voices (1992, 134–36). 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

4. These are inherent in, e.g., Noam Chomsky's linguistic theory, which fails to explain the communicative function of language or its social and intersubjective dimensions.

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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 [1975] 2001), included in the list of "main topics," dated February 8, 1929. Like Welby, Gramsci also has a dual attitude toward "common sense": he criticizes the concept but also recovers it and renews it (Sobrero 1976). He criticizes common sense when it implies imprecise and incoherent beliefs and outdated worldviews that have sedimented in languages and cultural systems. But there also exists a "broad region" of "common sense" (*senso comune*), of "good sense" (*buon senso*) that 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, unwaringly and uncritically (Gramsci [1975] 2001, *Quaderno* 1, 65, 75–76). This is a recurrent theme in Gramsci's 1949 monograph *Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura* (1971a). Such "philosophy without philosophers," what Gramsci also calls "low philosophy," an "inconsequent, incoherent, disruptive philosophy" ([1975] 2001, *Quaderno* 8, 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 1975):

> 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 [1975] 2001, *Quaderno* 1, 65, 76)

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In order to create a new political and cultural hegemony, a task Gramsci assigns to the party (what he calls "The Modern Prince"; cf. Gramsci 1971c), common sense among the masses must necessarily be replaced with an organic conception of the world (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 eventually identifying any spontaneous, progressive ideological tendencies in it. Gramsci holds that in order to affect common sense it will 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 in toto common sense is not an "enemy to defeat"; instead, a "dialectical" relation—in my terminology, a "dialogical" relation—should be established with it (Gramsci [1975] 2001, *Quaderno* 1, 65, 75–76).

Although Gramsci did not distinguish often between "common sense" and "good sense" (he recurrently says "common sense," i.e., "good sense"), all the same he sometimes speaks of "good sense" in terms of protection against the excesses of inane intellectualism and also as the reasonable part of common sense. Gramsci observes that Manzoni, in his *Promessi Sposi* (chap. 32), distinguishes between "common sense" and "good sense" with regard to 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." ([1975] 2001, *Quaderno* 10, 48, 1334–38; see also 949).

To critique and surmount deep-rooted "common sense," exploiting its "good sense" as well, is the necessary condition for diffusion among the masses of a new, more unitary, and more coherent conception of the world, of a new common sense (Gramsci 1988, 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 refers to Gramsci in several passages throughout his writings. One particularly relevant passage 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 re-

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production," to social reproduction as the *arché* or beginning of all things, and to the articulations of social reproduction, Rossi-Landi dedicates the fourth to the question of sign systems, ideologies, and production of consensus and refers to Gramsci. He observes that Gramsci, even if in "presemiotic" terms, had already identified the role carried out by sign systems in the social reproduction system and, precisely, in the relation between so-called structure and superstructure (Rossi-Landi [1978] 1990, 60–71). This paragraph concludes with the statement that in Gramsci's view, the most important goal for the "New Prince" is to reorganize verbal and nonverbal sign systems for the sake of revolutionizing social teleology.[5] 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 (see Gramsci 1971a, 1971b, 1971c). These are described as the *mediating* level between the two levels of modes of production and ideological institutions.

Critical Common Sensism and Pragmaticisim

Technical terminology to be considered scientifically adequate should begin, according to both Welby and Peirce, with a critical reading of common experience, common sense, and common speech—here now understood in the reductive sense of everyday language and meaning—given their pervasive and often unconscious presence in technical language itself; for example, in the expressions of temporal-spatial relations (see Peirce's letter to Welby dated December 16, 1904, in Hardwick 1977, 48). Any kind of research, including the philosophical, must elaborate a "technical nomenclature" whose every term has a single definite meaning that is universally accepted among the experts of the subject. According to Peirce's "ethics of terminology (*CP* 2.219–2.226), a scientifically valid nomenclature, which breaks with individual habits and preferences and satisfies the requisite of unanimity among specialists, must be supported by moral principles and inspire a sense of decency and respect. The introduction of a new conception in philosophy calls for the invention of appropriate terms to express it. These should always be used by the scientific community according to their original meanings, whereas new technical terms that denote the same things and are considered in the same relations should not. Peirce expresses himself

5. Reference here is to the Machiavellian-Gramscian conception of the "Prince"; as anticipated above, the "New Prince" is the Party.

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clearly on this point, as in his 1905 article "What Pragmatism Is" (*CP* 5.411–5.437; the first of three articles on pragmatism published in *The Monist*) and particularly in the paragraph "Philosophical nomenclature" (*CP* 5.413).

By comparison with the other sciences, philosophy is a rather peculiar case, insofar as it presents the need for popular words in popular senses, not as part of its own terminological apparatus, but as its objects of study. Philosophical language, therefore, requires special terminology—think of that supplied by Aristotle, the scholastics, or Kant—which takes its distance from the "common speech" of everyday language and is distinct from it. "It is good economy for philosophy," Peirce says: "to provide itself with a vocabulary so outlandish that loose thinkers shall not be tempted to borrow its words. . . . The first rule of good taste in writing is to use words whose meanings will not be misunderstood; and if a reader does not know the meaning of the words, it is infinitely better that he should know that he does not know it. This is particularly true in logic, which wholly consists, one might almost say, in exactitude of thought" (*CP* 2.223). In Peirce's view, Kant, a "confused pragmaticist," made the mistake of not using the adjectives *objective* and *subjective* in a sufficiently specialized sense, thus causing them to lose their usefulness in philosophy altogether. On the basis of such premises, Peirce, in his essay on "The Ethics of Terminology," lists seven rules for the formation of a desirable philosophical terminology and system of logical symbols (*CP* 2.223–26).

According to Peirce's critical common-sensism, no person is endowed with an infallible introspective power, not even when it comes to the secrets of one's own heart, no flawless means of knowing just what one believes or doubts. But he also maintains that there exist indubitable beliefs that are more or less constant. Such beliefs partake of the nature of instincts, intended in a broad sense. They concern matters that come within the reach of primitive mankind and are very vague (e.g., fire burns). A philosopher should regard an important proposition as indubitable only after having systematically endeavored to attain doubts about it, remembering that genuine doubt does not ensue from a mere effort of will, but must be the expression of experience. An indubitable proposition can be false, but insofar as we do not doubt a proposition, we must regard it as perfectly true, perfectly certain. While recognizing that there exist propositions that are each individually perfectly certain, we must also admit the possibility that one or more of them may be false (*CP* 5.498). In any case, doubt as theorized by the critical common-sensist is not doubt as envisaged by the Oxonian intellectual, that is, doubt for its own sake or for the sheer pleasure of argumentation. The clever pragmaticist does not love the illusory power of brute force,

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but rather the creative power of reasonableness, which subdues all other forms of power and rules over them in the name of knowledge and love. As a supporter of reasonableness, the pragmaticist invests doubt, understood as the power of critical interrogation, though not amiable, with high moral value.

Aspects of critical common sensism are relevant to the pragmaticist insofar as they evince the conditional character of belief, "that the substance of what he thinks lies in a conditional resolve," and the need for the quest for truth as the only way to satisfy the wishes of the heart (*CP* 5.499). The pragmaticist is open-minded and free of prejudice and, as such, is the most open to conviction and the most careful to distinguish between truth and falsity, probability and improbability. The pragmaticist inquires into the relationship between inferences and the facts from which they derive and establishes a relation of affinity between thought and action in general. Beginning with the assumption that action in general is guided mostly by instinct, pragmaticism establishes that belief, too, is a question of instinct and desire (*CP* 5.499). And while it is true that, with the evolution of the species, instincts are constrained by the various degrees of self-control, they are not dominated completely. Therefore, given the familiarity and quasi-invariability of irresistible and instinctual desire, the inevitable interconnection between pragmaticism and critical common sensism should not be doubted.

Vagueness, Communication, and Understanding

The only important alternative to pragmaticism, 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 that 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 that 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 in-

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definite; 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, she cannot demonstrate this position. Instead, Peirce maintains that concepts and feelings "are different no doubt; but the difference is 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: "*reality* 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 pragmaticism 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 pragmaticist, 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, italics in original). 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 in-

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nate 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 par. A sign cannot be at once vague and general in the same respect, as Peirce says, "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 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 one of his articles, published in *The Open Court* in 1892, "The Reader is Introduced to Relatives" (*CP* 3.415–24). 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

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interpreter, and assumed by all to be real. At a more restricted immediate level, all propositions refer to a nongeneral subject.

In his essay "Consequences of Critical Common-Sensism" (*CP* 5.502–37), Peirce reflects further on the role of vagueness. Communication among interlocutors is never completely definite, never completely nonvague, for where the possibility of variation exists absolute precision is impossible. Beyond expressing his hope that qualities of feeling among different persons may one day be compared by physiologists and thereby no longer represent a source of misunderstanding, Peirce identifies 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 is such to call for an uneliminable situation of dialogue both with others and with self, on the other. 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 man's. Even in our most intellectual conceptions, the more we strive to be precise, the more unattainable precision seems. It should never be forgotten that our own thinking is carried on as a dialogue, and though mostly in a lesser degree is subject to almost every imperfection of language" (*CP* 5.506). 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 recognizes it as the condition of possibility of communication, thanks to which it is 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. Un-

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derstanding 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 and 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 1998b, 95–105; 2013, 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] 1971), 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 2014, chaps. 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 show in this essay, indeterminacy, ambiguity, and vagueness are necessary conditions for continuity of such interpretive and translative processes in human semiosis.

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