

CLEARING THE MISTS OF A TERMINOLOGICAL MYTHOLOGY CONCERNING PEIRCE

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I remember still vividly Max Fisch addressing what Short (2007, opening sentence) calls “the wrong crowd” — i.e., those, commonly called “semioticians”, foolish enough to be actively engaged in the study of the action of signs rather than in the ‘development’ (I should rather say, at this historical moment, ‘the death gasps’) of Analytic philosophy. Fisch, blindly followed by Short and many others, claimed that Peirce’s own preferred version of Locke’s Σημιώτικῆ was “semeiotic”, never “semiotics”, and pronounced “See-my-OH-tick”.¹ This claim became canonical among the Peirce scholars after Fisch, and yet it has the elements of a mythology not fully or even strongly supported by what we have from Peirce’s own hand.

1. Terms for *doctrina signorum* in the *Collected Papers*

In his *Collected Papers*, for example, we find “**Semeiotic**” in only four occurrences: from 1883 (CP 3.343), 1896 (CP 1.444), c.1906 (CP 4.9), and from 1908 (CP 8.377). Moreover, in this 1908 occurrence, Peirce indicates that “**Semeiotic**” might be preferable to the “ei” version. So, even though this “semeiotic” form has only three CP appearances (CP 2.111, from c.1902; and CP 8.378, also from 1908), if we really want to be “Peircean purists” in this matter we could argue for “Semeiotic” as preferable to the accustomed “Semeiotic” on the grounds of Peirce’s own statements. And in MS 774 (EP 2.327) we find from Peirce’s own hand the final ‘s’ variant “**Semeiotics**”.² (We shall discuss the EP entries in detail below.) By contrast with “Semeiotic”, however, we find in the CP rather “**Semiotic**” six times: three from c.1897 (CP 2.227, 2.229, and 2.44n1), two from c.1907 (both in CP 5.488, a particularly important passage we shall come back to), and one from December of 1909 (CP 8.302).

2. Terms for *doctrina signorum* in the *New Elements of Mathematics*

In her edition of Peirce’s *The New Elements of Mathematics*, Eisele (1976: III/2, 1132) notes that “Peirce uses both *semiotic* and *semeiotics* in *The Century Dictionary*”. In the Indices at the end of the four volumes (bound four in five), only the index to volume 4 has an entry for “**semiotic**”, and no entry for “semeiotic” in any of the indices. Moreover, on the page first referring us to “semiotic”, Vol. IV p. 20, Peirce goes out of his way to note that his definition of sign “no more refers to human thought” — let alone the ‘purposive

¹ See Fisch 1978: 32; Deely 2004: esp. ¶47–48.

² Interestingly, in the ©1931 editorial passages of the *Collected Papers* we also find two occurrences of “**Semeiotics**” (at CP 1.284 note †, and at CP 1.304 note *); and even two occurrences of the variant Short would have us purge from the Peircean discussion, to wit, “**Semiotics**”. The first occurrence of this *verboten* term is in the Burks bibliography in CP 8 p. 287, where entry 3 for c.1897 reads “A fragment on semiotics. [CP] 2.227-229, 2.444n1 are from it.” But, in EP 2.327, we find this final s variant, “semeiotics”, from Peirce’s own hand. The second occurrence is in the third paragraph of the Introduction (Deely 1994) to the electronic edition of CP, “*Membra Ficta Disjecta (A Disordered Array of Severed Limbs)*”.

behavior' of animals other than human — “than does the definition of a line as the place which a particle occupies, part by part, during a lapse of time”, a point repeated at the second entry in the volume on p. 54. I note also that the term “significs” occurs in the Index to vol. 3 (p. 1153), “which is what I should describe”, Peirce remarks (III/2, 844), “as the study of the relation of signs to their interpretant.”

3. Terms for *doctrina signorum* in the *Essential Peirce*

When we look to the Houser et al. edition of *The Essential Peirce*, we find in the Index to vol. I no “semeiotic” nor “semeiotic” (nor even “significs”, since EP I stops in 1893, prior to the beginning of Peirce’s correspondence with Lady Welby, from whom he will borrow the term “significs”), but only two entries pertinent to our terminological focus (p. 397). First, there is no “semeiosis” but only “**Semiosis**, xl, xxxiii”. And there is no “Semeiotic” but only “**Semiotic**, xx-xxi, xxii, xxiv, xxvii, xxx; branches of, xxxi, xxxvi-xxxix; and naturalism, xxix”. The Index for volume II (p. 580) includes **Semiosis**, but no “semeiosis”, and no “semiotics” but, surprisingly, “**Semeiotics**”, reminiscent of what we saw above (note 13) concerning “semiotics” in the CP, after which in parentheses the EP index gives both “semeiotic” and “semiotic” as equivalents, with nine subentries.

Taking these nine subentries under **Semeiotics** in turn, we find the following. **1.** *appeal for its study*, 461-462: neither of the three synonyms (“semeiotics”, “semeiotic”, “semiotic”) occurs as such. **2.** *its business as general science*, 402-403: this time we find the variant “semeiotic” marked “sēmeio-tic”, together with Peirce’s monitum (p. 403) that in the study of signs we should “seek to fit it [sign as a ‘definitum’ of the cenoscopic science] with a rational, comprehensive, scientific, structural definition” aimed “less at what the definitum conventionally does mean, than at what it were best, in reason, that it should mean.”³ **3.** *cenoscopic science of signs*, 482: here Peirce pairs “semeiotic” with the Greek *σημειωτική*, which was not the term from Locke and which in any case would better transliterate as “semeiotics” with the final “s” than as “semeiotic” without the final “s” (see Deely 2003a, 2004a, 2006c). **4.** *definition of*, 413-14: here we find decisively *semiotic* together with the aim of the cenoscopic science identified not as the being proper to signs but the action, *semiosis*, which is consequent upon that being (“agere sequitur esse”), together with the pregnant statement (crucial for understanding semiosis in nature prior to and independent of, for example, animal life) that “the occasion” on which a sign “capable of producing” an interpretant may fail to do so, as the occasion “may either be too early or too late”: whence the prospect of a “virtual semiosis”, as we shall touch on briefly below (see Sec. 13, p. 45f., below). **5.** *logic as*, xx, 327: the former page (by the volume editors) uses “semiotic”, the latter page (from Peirce) uses “semeiotics”. **6.** *Peirce’s pioneering in*, 413-14: here Peirce, in the 1907 variants of MS 318, uses simply *semiotic* to tell us what he considers himself to be pioneering, while awaiting hopefully (1908: EP 2.482) the company of “future explorers”. Since he was already surrounded by philosophers who were “pioneering” the late modern emergence of “Analytic philosophy”, *pace* Short, it verges on what Aquinas would call a truth *per se nota quoad sapientes* to remark that the “future explorers” Peirce was anticipating in his correspondence with Lady Welby (1908: CP 8.344; EP 2.482) would hardly be the Analytic philosophers of today, but rather only those who agree with Peirce in

³ See the ‘Signs as Vehicles of Semiosis’ Deely 2006: 192–199.

how semiosis is to be defined and set themselves to explore it, namely, the mainstream semioticians.⁴ **7.** *its pronunciation*, 403: where we find “sēmeio˘tic” as already discussed in entry 2. above. **8.** *proof of pragmatism based on*, xxxv–xxxvi: the editors in their remarks on these pages use none of the three synonyms as such, but only inform us (xxxvi) that Peirce’s theory of signs proves his Pragmatism,⁵ not the reverse, a very interesting and fundamental point which has a direct bearing from the first formulation of Peirce’s “new list of categories”. This point goes over Short’s head like a three-base hit.⁶ **9.** *its three branches*, 327: here, as we noted in 5. above, is where Peirce uses not “semeiotic” but “*semeiotics*” to name the science of signs.

4. “Semeiotic” claimed as ‘Peirce’s preference’, then:
a myth turned invidious, dashed by fact

So *in fact* there is no particular warrant for insisting that the doctrine of signs in Peirce ought to be referred to as “semeiotic” rather than “semiotic” (or “semeiotics”, for that matter).⁷ In fact, an actual examination of Peirce’s own usage, as above, rather clearly reveals a prevalence of **semiotic** over “semeiotic”, with strong suggestions that even “**semeiotics**” is preferable to “semeiotic”.

With Fisch, in originally creating the myth that Peirce preferred “Semeiotic”, the claim for the preference was innocuous. But as Short takes up and extends the myth, the motivation becomes invidious, aimed as it is from the start to cut Peirce off from those very “future explorers” who take up the doctrine of signs centered on semeiosis as Peirce understood it to be: the action of *signs*, not the behavior of *animals* when using signs.

To the extent that there is such a warrant in Peirce for how the doctrine of signs ought best to be named, then, “semiotic” (indeed even “semeiotics”) fits the bill even better than “semeiotic”. But for some those terms both are ‘too close for comfort’ to usages that have come to be established among semioticians. Yet symbols do indeed grow, and grow even beyond the “purposes” to which sometimes sign-users would prefer to restrict them. In this case, some at least among the “old-line”, would-be “purists” of a late 20th-century terminological myth, always ideological (and ideology has its place), now, under Short’s leadership, it would seem, prefer outright pathology in refusing to reckon the clear results of later scholarship.

⁴ See Deely 2006: Sections 6–7, and 9–13 especially.

⁵ Short continues the tradition of backgrounding the term “pragmatism” in favor of continuing to use “pragmatism” as the foreground term, despite Peirce’s late introduction of the former term to distinguish his view as incompatible with nominalism and having of its essence a reaffirmation of Scholastic realism. This practice has more sentimental than intellectual value, as it requires us to begin with what Peirce has in common with an array of thinkers from whom he essentially differs, rather than beginning simply with what sets Peirce’s view apart, namely, *pragmatism* as decisively postmodern, in contrast with pragmatism which, from James to Rorty, remains nominalistic and determinately late modern. See the “Red and Green Books” (Deely 2000 and 2000a) at <<http://www.helsinki.fi/science/commens/papers/>>. Cf. Houser 2006.

⁶ See Deely 2006: 188–190.

⁷ In fact, from the point of view of the “growth of symbols” in this area, which has been investigated with a focus both on the original term suggested by Locke (Deely 1986, 1990, 1993, 1994a, 2001a) and on the English variants in dictionaries since Locke’s proposal (Deely 2003, 2004a, 2006a), there is no reason at all why the semiotic of Peirce should not be considered under what has emerged on the postmodern side of the development of intellectual culture as, so to say, the ‘logically proper name’ for the doctrine of signs: semiotics. (And, on the difficulty in drawing a terminological distinction between “semiotic” and “semiotics” outside of the specific context of English in the more general context of the national languages today, see the remarks in Deely 1990: x–xi.)

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