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What is a Sign*

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The Way Toward a Definition

1. First of all, and above all, a sign is expected to be significant. A sign without significance is like a hollow husk. It is chaff without seed. Sign and significance are correlative terms like parent and child. Just as no one is a parent who has not begotten or borne a child so nothing which does not have significance can be a sign. On this point the English and the Latin words are self-explanatory. In English the words “sign” and “significance” contain the same root. In the Latin words “significans” – that which signifies – and “significatum” – that which is signified – the correlation is even more obvious. In German, however, there is no such ready evidence of the correlation in the terms themselves. Indeed at first blush the terms “Zeichen” and “Bedeutung” seem so unrelated that philosophers have felt themselves constrained to write volumes of explanations on the term “Bedeutung”.

But precisely because the English terms are etymologically so closely related, a word of caution may not be entirely superfluous. The terms sign and significance are not mutually interchangeable. While it is true that signs have significance, not all things that have significance are signs in the proper and practical sense of the word sign. Words, bank checks, pictures, and symbols all have significance. Words as well as bank checks “stand for” something; pictures as well as symbols “represent” something. Words, bank checks, pictures, and symbols, however are heterogeneous things: a word as a symbol is a sign pure and simple, a check is a sign, but it is also more than a sign, it is money; a picture, however, is not a sign in the proper and practical sense of the word. Only a specific difference in this definition will keep the theoretical semanticist from overhasty generalizations about such heterogeneous things as words, bank checks, pictures, symbols and etc.. A much clearer delineation of the reasons why all these things are not the same will follow later. For the present, only a working definition of sign with a less refined but nevertheless fundamental differentiation is under consideration.

2. Detectives and judges know something about significant things. In their professions they deal with mixed masses of facts presented in documents, testimony and in circumstantial evidence. By carefully sifting the raw materials they separate the significant items from the

* Dies ist die TS-Fassung zu dem handschriftlichen ‘What is a Sign?’, das im Original in Nijmegen liegt; CB hatte das handschriftliche Original an Paul Garvin ausgeliehen, worauf ein beiliegender Zettel sowie ein Briefumschlag hindeuten. Diese TS-Fassung ist möglicherweise die von Paul Garvin überarbeitete Fassung der uns im Original vorliegenden Handschrift.
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irrelevant ones. In this way, they secure a basis upon which they can build a judicial proof. Judicial proof is a complex procedure involving inductive and deductive thinking. Signs enter into this process only at certain points. Such signs are fingerprints, traces, or any sort of exceptional, observable phenomena which has been recorded. In “one of the most notable trials which has ever taken place in any part of the world”, the Bayle Murder Case in New Zealand, there were 77 witnesses and 274 exhibits. “To deal with the exhibits alone a highly elaborate cross-indexing system of reference had to be devised and carried out”.¹ Such exhibits, like all autoptic preferences, are not a separate source of proof. “When a knife is presented or a book, and the tribunal sees it, the knife is and the book is.” “The tribunal, when it perceives, merely ‘finds’, i.e. adjudges with legal finality that the knife or the book exists.”² According to Wigmore the groundwork of proofs is the testimonial and circumstantial evidence which makes sense of such exhibits. There are sound reasons for such a view. “Nevertheless”, he adds, “since the tribunal is composed of human beings who are using their perceptive sense ...” – here we continue in our own words – the tribunal should be shown everything that will prove helpful. Since all signs are perceptible things, many signs can be displayed before the court, at least in picture form. It is evident that a distinction must be made between signs and generalizations. Generalizations are used in connection with signs and have significance, but generalizations themselves are not signs. Thus the generalization that the accused regularly gets drunk on Saturdays and does violent things is in itself not a sign. Care must therefore be taken not to include generalizations among the perceptible things which function specifically as signs. To be perceptible to the senses is the second universal attribute of signs.

3. An offhand but very useful division can be made within the realm of signs. Such a division would form a third element in our working definition of signs. If signs are perceptible things then an enumeration of the senses by which they are perceived is possible. There are visible, audible, ‘smellable’, tastable and touchable things, that are significant and that are used as signs. The most numerous and the most important of these are the optic and the acoustic signs. The latter may not be true for certain animals. Ants, bees, and dogs may have a relatively larger number of non-optic and non-acoustic signs. But man’s eyes and ears are his most busy senses, registering significant impressions from far and near. Language was from the very beginning an acoustic system of signs. But the reading of eyes has encroached upon the acoustic system. Nevertheless, a substantial amount of verbal and non-verbal significant impressions are still received by the ear. Historically new are the telephone and the radio as additional sources of acoustic signs. It is most interesting to note the contest going on today between the radio and the printed page in the field of news and advertising. Acoustic signs have yielded much to optic signs on modern highways. The automobile horn is being reserved more and more for emergency situations. While odors still function as signs within the food branch of our biological interests, they probably have been on the retreat since the disappearance of a simple food gathering economy, most certainly since the decline of home cooking. Touch signs are still in evidence. Advertising experts hold “that few women can appraise any article without feeling and stroking it.” Modern touch analysis shows that furs, textiles, and many other materials are tested more accurately for significant qualities by means of the fingertips than by means of the eyes alone. There is another interesting form of testing by means of touch. In riding along in an automobile a person feels through the cushions definite road qualities. While these road and car feelings seem to be vague, they really are very accurate.

With reference to sense impressions another limitation becomes necessary in the realm of signs. All sense impressions cannot be included within the field of semantics. While it may be proper to consider any red color a sign in psychophysics, it is not proper in semantics. Red “means” a kind of wave-length in the strange and marvelous world of modern physics. The vowel *a* in father shows up in an oscillogram as a wave. The fact that all sense impressions have similar explanations does not warrant including all of them within the field of semantics. Such aided sense impressions are outside the field of semantics. They belong to psychophysics, which is a kind of microscopic analysis. Just as we cannot see microscopic things like molecules and modern atoms with the naked eye, so we do not hear the wave form of red. So far as signs (significans) are concerned there is no going beyond the senses in semantics. The semanticist is an extrovert – he looks out upon the world. In comparison to most scientists of today he is old-fashioned in his way of thinking and speaking, for he sees in “red” only red, not the wave-length phenomenon. Red and green, warm and cold, soft and hard, and such practical things as the table upon which he writes or at which he sits are all things which interest the semanticist just as they are [...]*

[a blind] man recognizes a table by actively testing it with moving fingertips; a man with unimpaired vision examines the same thing with scrutinizing eyes. When the two discuss the table’s qualities or “characteristics” an interesting situation develops. Characteristics form a basic class of signs. There will be occasion to give them further consideration in the chapter dealing with the analysis of language.

Just as red and green in themselves are not signs, so too are sense impressions or sensations in themselves not signs. It is granted that the ordinary semanticist is not in a position to define the words “in themselves”, for that would be going beyond the senses. But he must know what “perceptible characteristics” are. They are simply discriminating or distinguishing qualities of a thing. The spoken word “put” is a thing and is a sign. Surrounding it is a collection of discriminating qualities: articulation of a vowel sound / u / preceded by an initial sound and followed by a concluding sound for the symbolization of which the letters p and t are used. The reader should not consider this as pedantic exactness, for a sign must be clear and must be easily recognizable – it must have a character all its own.

4. Men sometimes feel the need to distinguish things more definitely than nature has distinguished them. California fruit growers want to distinguish their oranges and their walnuts from other oranges and other walnuts. They therefore employ certain trade”marks” by which buyers can tell that the oranges or the walnuts they are buying are oranges and walnuts from California. The term “mark” is semantically important enough to deserve a remark or an annotation. The Germanic word mark originally meant border or boundary in the sense of the limiting lines or in the sense of the territory circumscribed by those borders. Thus in German there are such territorial designations as the Mark Brandenburg or such titles as Markgraf, the lord of a mark. Later mark was associated with the general meanings: trace, outline and sign. It was used for a fixed weight and value among the Anglo-Saxons, and it was the name of a coin in Scotland. It is still the name of a German coin, although I do fear that there is very little weight or value left to it. Important about these references is the fact that the very beginning mark was an artificial thing and not a natural thing. The observant

* Die handschriftlichen Korrekturen für die vorletzte und letzte Zeile sind nicht lesbar.

person notes such modern uses of the word as trade-mark, earmark, flood-mark, high-water mark, and the newspaper headline: "Billion a Week Mark reached in Arms Output". In the last three instances mark designates a decisive point in a scale. Despite the original artificial character of mark, ancient peoples did speak of birthmarks. That should not be disturbing, for men of old were superstitious and sign-minded. They read into such markings the influence of some magical or some providential force. Today, however, the borderline between artificial sign and natural sign is no longer so clear-cut in the use of the word mark. The newspapers stated recently that "discontent with Mussolini is more marked now than ever" and that "the repulse of the Japanese marked a turning-point in this dreary (!) epoch". These uses of mark imply natural signs. At least we ardently hope they do. Mark my words in this regard.

Mark as a word is communicable. Other non-verbal marks are also communicable. A forester can cut a significant notch into a tree. Communicability, however, is not an essential quality of non-verbal signs. If non-verbal signs do have that added feature, they are so much more useful; for such communicable signs, like words, are not only known and understood within a community of users but are also easily reproduced.

5. Some afterthoughts. Let us suppose a law book in which the word "clock" is used without definition because at the time of its writing the legislators had not found it necessary to define such a common and well-known word. Let us suppose further that jurists now find a definition imperative. If a public competition were now held in which each citizen were allowed to give his definition of clock, and if I had anything to say about the winner, I would reward the prize to the one whose definition involved the *use* of clocks: "A clock shows and measures the time, or a clock keeps the time, or a clock enables one to be a timer or a timekeeper". Such definitions describe the use of a clock and cover every conceivable clock from sundials, water clocks, sand clocks, and pendulum clocks, to imaginable clocks immune to gravitation. The focal point of the definition would be that a clock shows, keeps and measures time. No difficulties would arise until someone asks: But what is time? This question can be answered only in accordance with modern ideas, like of the theory of relativity.

A similar situation is involved in the definition of the term sign. The sorts or kinds of things that are used as signs are infinite in number. The voluminous genuine Webster discloses ever so many names in English which are synonymous with sign. As long, however, as the definition of sign includes the vital words "having significance" every conceivable kind of sign is included. As with the word clock no difficulties would arise until someone poses the question: But what is significance? The answer to this question is beyond the field of semantics. Even among philosophers and psychologists there is as yet no common agreement on this point.

Some annotations on the other criteria of signs may prove advantageous. In the phrase "perceptible things" the English word "thing" covers all perceptible data. A pencil is a thing; its color, its shape, all its essential and its non-essential qualities are things. Events which occur relative to the pencil, changes which take place to it, as well as its permanent and unchanged features, are things in this sense. Thus a dust covered pencil is indicative of inactive housekeeping. The pencil lying in the same place but pointing in a different direction is indicative of something (cf. of the cream can indications, p. ...). The vigilant senses of an expert in search for circumstantial evidence subjects all relevant things to professionally rigid and specific scrutiny from every angle and viewpoint suggested by his cues. The investigator leaves no stone unturned, and as the situation may demand he permits no one to touch a

single stone. The signs employed in introspection and the symbolic symptoms in dreams and neurosis must be left to experts in those fields, although there seems to be no reason why the present analysis cannot be enlarged to cover such fields of research as well. A study of the signs in use among criminals would be a very enticing one.

Notes

- 1 The Anatomy of Murder. Famous crimes critically considered by members of the Detection Club. Mac Millan Co 1937 (p. 329).
- 2 H. Wigmore, The principles of judicial proof. Sec. ed. Boston 1931 (p. 645).