Abstract

Designed as a reflection on and extension of Tine K. Jensen’s Peirce-based ‘The Interpretation of Signs of Child Sexual Abuse’, this paper brings out features of the processes and structures of interpretation that are not foregrounded in her article: abduction as hypothesis formation and pivotal semiotic act; the consequent intimate connection, indeed continuities, between ‘high-level’ interpretation and ‘lower-level’ perception; the nature of ‘problematic situations’ that elicit the work of interpretation; the skill structure of interpretation; the differential placement of interpreters over against one another and over against the ‘cases’ they are trying to decipher; the complex constitution of the interpreter as an already pre-structured and ‘interested’ party; and the general semiotic structure of every perceptual occasion that sets inquiry and interpretation in motion.

Not only conceptual tools from Peirce’s semiotic theory are utilized, but also those from Dewey’s pragmatist theory of inquiry, Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowing, Heidegger’s analysis of the fore-structures of understanding, and Bühler’s organon model of language.

Key Words  Dewey, interpretation, Peirce, Polanyi, semiotics, signs

Robert E. Innis
University of Massachusetts Lowell, USA

The Signs of Interpretation

Tine K. Jensen (2005) has offered us a challenging and insightful analysis and exemplification of the processes involved in sign interpretation. The test case that functions as the guiding thread of her reflections—child sexual abuse—is in itself clearly of more than theoretical concern. It is a pressing societal and familial problem, which demands not just correct interpretation but efficacious intervention. All the more important, then, is a deep recognition of the attendant primacy and complex nature of the interpretation processes that precede and inform attempts to deal with such socially deviant and psychologically disruptive situations.

Jensen attempts in her paper, on the one hand, to show concretely the relevance and power of a semiotically inspired theory of interpretation to the issue of child sexual abuse and, on the other hand, to
schematize in more general fashion the central features of such a theory of interpretation. The pivot as well as the starting point of her treatment is the fusion of semiotic and hermeneutic concerns. Interpretation is in its essence the interpretation of signs, and signs, that is, sign configurations, are the embodiments of the meanings we construct and encounter in the world. Access to the world is through signs and meanings, and that means as a corollary that it involves interpretation.

The point of entry into the theoretical core of Jensen’s paper is Peirce’s triadic semiotic model of sign types. I would like to bring to the fore, as supplementation, certain aspects of Peirce’s model that are not emphasized sufficiently or clearly enough in Jensen’s treatment, insightful as it is, as well as some other conceptual and analytical tools that would enrich and thicken the discussion.

Let us start with Peirce’s schematization of signs themselves.

Sign types for Peirce, as is well known, are ultimately and most handily divided into iconic, indexical and symbolic. Each has a different ‘logical’ structure, that is, each makes its ‘object’ known in a different way. Iconic signs function through ‘resemblance’, indexical signs through ‘existential or real connection’, symbolic signs through ‘convention’. These three ways define the ‘bond’ between sign and object. Jensen is clearly aware that the ‘work’ of any sign is to give rise to an ‘interpretant’ in the mind of the interpreter, what Peirce calls the ‘proper significate effect of a sign’. This process, however, is not automatic. It is subject to the operative, thematic and pre-thematic, activity of the interpreter who is concerned to ‘read’ the signs properly. Signs can do their job without our explicitly treating them as signs. We do not only ‘grasp’ signs that we can identify, we also are ‘grasped’ by signs, even against our will and certainly without our trying to decipher them explicitly.

Corresponding to the three major sign types, then, are three major classes of interpretants, which ‘translate’ signs into a chain of equivalent signs. Iconic signs, rooted in a shared quality, are interpreted in and by an ‘affect’ or, as Peirce put it, an ‘emotion’. They move us so. Their interpretation is a mode of feeling or attunement to a distinctive quality. Indexical signs, rooted in mutual ‘action and reaction’, in a felt sense of opposition, move us so. They have an ‘energetic’ effect, generating or implementing a sense of connection, inducing action that itself imprints an effect or trace on or in the world. Symbolic signs, rooted in the arbitrariness of a shared convention or set of conventions, have as their significate effects an idea or concept (or ideational and conceptual structure). The interpretant in this case is intellectual or ‘logical’, that is, distinctively abstract.
One of the keys to understanding Peirce’s semiotic model is to avoid reifying these sign types and their corresponding interpretants. I prefer to think of them as dimensions or dimensionalities of sign configurations. To take an example from Jensen’s presentation: if a child, when presented with a bowl of yoghurt, gags, refuses to eat or even continues to eat, albeit unwillingly, and says that it would make him sick, the yoghurt, with its configuration of qualities and perceptual properties, functions as an iconic sign of semen, the gagging is an indexical sign, a reaction, released by the sight of the yoghurt and by associated experiences, and the linguistic utterance is a symbolic sign that must be understood by reliance upon a shared linguistic code. Now, it is the whole situation itself that is meaningful, not just its individual components. But for the interpreter of such a situation it is precisely because the situation is noticeably not meaningful that it needs to be interpreted. Interpretation, then, starts with our being perplexed, or with our finding ourselves in what John Dewey (1931) called a ‘problematic situation’. A problematic situation is defined by, in Dewey’s words, ‘the presence of a dominating quality’ (p. 100). It is not yet ‘resolved into determinate terms and relations’. Indeed, in a comment of general import, Dewey notes:

But something presents itself as problematic before there is recognition of what the problem is. The problem is had or experienced before it can be stated or set forth; but it is had as an immediate quality of the whole situation. The sense of something problematic, of something perplexing and to be resolved, marks the presence of something pervading all elements and considerations. Thought is the operation by which it is converted into pertinent and coherent terms. (p. 100)

Semiosis, as the interpretation of signs, takes explicit form when certain elements in a situation interrupt its transparency and thus render it problematic. It is the relative opaqueness, or the becoming opaque, of a situation that evokes the work of interpretation, which has the same ‘abductive’ structure as perception and hypothesis formation (see Innis, 1994, ch. 2). Peircean semiotics pushes the interpretation of signs both ‘down’ to the perceptual stratum and ‘up’ to the fully articulate domain, as in mathematical and scientific reasoning. Peirce, in a famous review of James Principles of Psychology (Peirce, 1958–66, 8.64–65), schematized the form of perceptual abduction as follows:

A well-recognized kind of object, M, has for its ordinary predicates P₁, P₂, P₃, etc., indistinctly recognized.

The suggesting object, S, has these same predicates, P₁, P₂, P₃, etc.

Hence, S is of the same kind M.
Peirce then comments on this schema:

This is hypothetic inference in form. The first premise is not actually thought, though it is in the mind habitually. This, of itself, would not make the inference unconscious. But it is so because it is not recognized as an inference; the conclusion is accepted without our knowing how. (8.64–65)

In the cases examined by Jensen we see this abductive process in action on existentially messy cases. The interpretation of the signs of sexual abuse is predominantly neither inductive nor deductive. The labor of abduction is needed in order for the other forms of inference to be able to help pave the road to inquiry.

But what type of work is abduction asked to do? It is first of all a process of disambiguation, a carving out of the relevant joints from the problematic situations of disturbed children and disturbed family relations. The interpretation processes that Jensen schematizes are engaged in from rather different points of view by what she calls primary ‘caregivers’ and expert or trained social workers. For the primary caregiver, that is, the suspicious parent, there is a sense or immediate consciousness of ‘something being wrong’, but it is not immediately clear that ‘sexual abuse’ is the hypothesis that arises from the ‘reading’ of the signs. Indeed, we can ask, in light of Jensen’s cases, how ‘well-recognized’ a kind of object child sexual abuse is. It is precisely the degrees of indistinctiveness of the predicates—indeed, the very recognition of the predicates—that is at issue. How does the primary caregiver ‘know’ what to look for? Why does the primary caregiver attend to the sign configuration or sign array in this way rather than another way? The theoretically trained social worker, for example, with a broad and deep acquaintance with the varieties of child sexual abuse—which may be being encountered for the first time by the suspicious parent—is in a very different situation here. It is in this context that Jensen’s emphasis on frameworks of habitual interpretation comes into play.

Peirce (1868/1992) draws attention to an aspect of this habitual process that Jensen does not really emphasize:

Just as we are able to recognize our friends by certain appearances, although we cannot possibly say what those appearances are and are quite unconscious of any process of reasoning, so in any case when the reasoning is easy and natural to us, however complex may be the premises, they sink into insignificance and oblivion proportionately to the satisfactoriness of the theory based on them. (p. 17)

The signs of child sexual abuse certainly do not present us with any friends, but they do manifest ‘certain appearances’. However, as Jensen
shows, we are often unable to specify clearly just what they are, no matter what the sign-modality is. They are, in Michael Polanyi’s formulation, ‘tacit’ or ‘unsayable’. Indeed, the process of their interpretation, which is eminently fallible, is an essentially informal process, isomorphic, I think, with the assimilation of clues in both perceptual and higher intellectual processes. In his seminal little book, *The Tacit Dimension* (1966), Polanyi foregrounded the essential lines of this process:

All thought contains components of which we are subsidiarily aware in the focal content of our thinking, and all thought dwells in its subsidiaries, as if they were parts of our body. Hence thinking is not only necessarily intentional, as Brentano has taught: it is also necessarily fraught with the roots it embodies. It has a from–to structure. (p. x)

This from–to structure is a pivot of our apprehension of signs and sign configurations. Generalizing a notion from Gestalt theory, Polanyi (1958a) notes that ‘the particulars of a pattern or tune must be apprehended jointly, for if you observe the particulars separately they form no pattern or tune’ (pp. 56–57). We apprehend particulars not ‘focally’ in themselves, but ‘subsidiarily’ in their bearing on the whole. We attend from the particulars to the whole, which is their ‘meaning’.

The signs of child sexual abuse are grasped as a kind of pattern or tune in the problematic situation. I think it is first apprehended as a kind of *physiognomy*, a *quality* or *affective tone* present in the complex field of interactions between caregiver and child. One of the chief sources of the difficulty of diagnosis, therefore, is what Polanyi calls the ‘unspecifiability’ of the particulars. In a remarkable passage that parallels Peirce’s formulation, he writes:

We may instantly recognize a familiar writing or voice, or a person’s gait, or a well-cooked omelette, while being unable to tell—except quite vaguely—by what particulars we recognize these things. The same is true of the recognition of pathological symptoms, of the diagnosis of diseases and the identification of specimens. In all these instances we learn to comprehend an entity without ever getting to know, or to know clearly, the particulars that are unspecifiable because they are unknown. (Polanyi, 1958b, p. 45)

While in this case unspecifiability is connected with vagueness (which Peirce in other circumstances connected with a kind of indeterminate richness), there is another sense of unspecifiability that has nothing to do with vagueness. Polanyi (1958b) insightfully points out that

... a particular pointing beyond itself may be fully visible or audible and yet be unspecifiable in the sense that if attention is directed on it focally—so that it is now known in itself—it ceases to function as a clue or sign and loses its meaning as such. (p. 45)
Note the assimilation here of ‘clue’ to ‘sign’. Perceptual clues have a distinctively ‘semantic’ or ‘semiotic’ function, linguistic clues likewise. We have to attend from them while we attend to what they mean. This from–to process demands skill—and it is precisely this that the primary caregiver often does not have. What the primary caregiver has, however, is a tacit knowledge of the ‘normal’ behavioral ‘tune’ of the child. The signs of sexual abuse arise as a kind of dissonance in the complex field of relationships, a departure from the expected or habituated patterns. But, if Polanyi is right, they are often not able to be articulated or explicitly identified. Something is clearly ‘out of joint’.

What if, however, one is not first noticing that something is ‘wrong’ and seeking for the hypothetical category that will synthesize the array of particulars that do not ‘make sense’? What if one already has the hypothesis of, and conceptual scheme of, ‘child sexual abuse’ and wants to apply this hypothesis to the case at hand? Polanyi (1958a) parallels a Peircean point once again:

In all applications of a formalism to experience there is an indeterminacy involved, which must be resolved by the observer on the grounds of unspecifiable criteria. Now we may say further that the process of applying a language to things is also necessarily unformalized: that it is inarticulate. Denotation, then, is an art, and whatever we say about things assumes our endorsement of our own skill in practicing this art. This personal coefficient of all affirmations [is] inherent in the use of language. (p. 81)

Who has this skill? It is clear that what Polanyi is pointing out here is what in Gadamer’s hermeneutics is called the necessity of application. The articulated symptoms of child sexual abuse are part of the already indwelt conceptual framework which one is striving to apply to the situation at hand in order to bring it under control, in every sense of that term. Is not part of the perplexity and hesitation of the caregiver to recognize, much less acknowledge, the reality of child sexual abuse in any particular case rooted in the self-appraising, even self-validating, nature of skills? The primary caregiver is certainly not ‘skilled’ in these cases, especially if confronted with them in the first instance. It is the trained social worker who has the interpretation skills to disambiguate the situation and to help the caregiver to become adept at ‘reading the signs’. The skilled social worker, then, resembles the trained diagnostician quite generally.

The ability to read signs is, then, a skill, and skills are rooted in practices and the types of embodied knowledge resident in these practices. The mother, who is quite clearly the predominant caregiver in the cases adduced by Jensen, is therefore faced with a continuing dilemma, for a number of reasons. First, there is the overarching affective bond between
her and the child (children). The various resistances to interpretations that are ‘painful, stigmatizing and represent a breach of canonical rules’ (Jensen, 2005, p. [28file]) are partially rooted in the affective matrix. Secondly, although the mother as primary caregiver may rely upon ‘culturally embedded ideas’, possession of these ideas does not equal theoretical or explicit knowledge. In fact, the expert interpreter has a very different set of such ideas primarily because he or she belongs to a distinctively shaped interpretive tradition and comes to the problematic situations with a differently configured set of fore-structures.

The reference to fore-structures here is an allusion to Heidegger’s deep insight into the circular nature of interpretation and to all the anticipatory structures that make up the circle within which the interpreter lives. Heidegger distinguishes three fore-structures, which are clearly operative in the cases mooted by Jensen. Heidegger’s triad of Vorhabe (fore-having), Vorsicht (fore-seeing), and Vorgriff (fore-conceiving) highlight the affective, perceptual and conceptual interweavings that pre-structure the interpreter’s access to the ‘reality’ of child sexual abuse. Vorhabe denotes the distinctive mode of being that constitutes the interpreter. We are, as Dewey put it, ‘had’ by the world before we ‘have’ it. Vorsicht highlights the fact that the interpreter is defined not just by a way of feeling or an affective structure, but also by perceptual habits, ways of seeing with all their gradations of relevance. Vorgriff points to the interpreter’s being informed by the conceptual and theoretical apparatus into which he or she has been initiated or acculturated. This complex network of fore-structures, remarkably enough, corresponds to the Peircean differentiation of interpretants and, looked at in one way, to the main Peircean semiotic triad.

How so? The Peircean semiotic subject, the sign-constituted interpreter, is a unity of feeling, acting and thinking. Each potential situation of child sexual abuse is accessed affectively through affective habituation and through the apprehension of a qualitative suchness (Vorhabe), through perceptual habit and action (Peirce’s sense of opposition, reaction, externality and the consequent reading of perceptual indices [Vorsicht]), and through creative or novel concept formation rooted in antecedent conceptual structures (Vorgriff). If we think of the interpreter as the ‘place’ of interpretation and of interpretation as the process of an open-ended spiral of interpretants that arise in the interpreter, often beyond his or her control, then the situation that the interpreters are perplexed by or concerned with appears as a complex configuration of differently weighted iconic, indexical and symbolic components, which are not just ‘objectively there’, but differently accessed by the interpreter.
The primary caregiver and the trained social worker, by reason of their antecedent semiotic structuring, are not ‘in’ the same situation. They are not on equal footing. The caregiver is ‘in’ a situation of potential child abuse as a participant one level lower than the expert social worker. They stand, for one thing, in differential relations of power. Being in the situation of child abuse is not an ‘objective’ circumstance for the primary caregiver. For such an ‘inquirer’ or ‘interpreter’ the situation is not a ‘case’, as it only gradually dawns on the parent what she is dealing with, namely sexual abuse, which she may or may not be looking for, while the social worker, familiar with a broad range of social occasions, has to interpret not just the signs ‘emitted’ by the child but also the interpretations of the parent, which may or not be well founded, and which are part of the situation that the social worker, as expert, is in. All the various types of hypotheses, then, which are mentioned by Jensen as possible explanations of the child’s deviant behavior—age, personality, agency, socialization, parental conflict, parental deficiency—are not equally accessed, nor could they be, by troubled caregiver and trained intervener. They are differentially related to what Jensen rightly calls ‘interpretive repertoires’ and to the metaphorical aspects of the interpretation process, which Jensen so interestingly points out. The interpretive repertoires, in Peirce’s terms, are affectively (iconically), energetically (indexically) and intellectually (symbolically) configured.

The different weightings of the urgency, emotionality and felt quality of the interpretive situation(s), which Jensen adverts to, and which are carried iconically, are crucial factors in understanding the reluctance of the primary caregiver to interpret negatively her striving to find a ‘positive’ way out of the situation, even if it means blaming herself. Is there such a reluctance on the part of the expert? The expert, if self-aware, is conscious of the perils of premature certainty as well as of the full legal issues. But is not the expert focusing primarily on symbolically mediated icons or indices? The expert is related to ‘the situation’ hermeneutically, to be sure, but also hierarchically, in a semiotic sense. Hence, the type of fallibilism, ambivalence and fluctuation of hypothetical reasoning that marks the expert is not the same as that of the primary caregiver. There is, indeed, to use Polanyi’s notion, a different set of heuristic passions at work. The primary caregiver, in fact, has to overcome, primarily at the affective and energetic/indexical level, what Polanyi calls the ‘principle of suppressed nucleation’, that is, the deep resistance to what would break one’s interpretive framework, which is lived through rather than thematized. So, this principle prevents questions (and answers) from even arising. Of course, the same could
be the case for the expert, but at a different semiotic level, concentrated in the symbolic realm.

Karl Bühler (1934/2000b), the great semiotically oriented psychologist, following in the footsteps of Philipp Wegener and Sir Alan Gardiner, adverted to the role that shared semiotic fields play in the mutual play of language-mediated understanding. The point he made was a general one and is clearly exemplified in the cases discussed by Jensen. Bühler, for his part, distinguished two fields: a deictic field and a symbolic field. The deictic field made possible the activity of ‘pointing’, of deixis. This is an experiential field first of all, constituted by shared perceptual situations. However, within such shared fields, objects, significant units, could be ‘picked out’ only on the basis of our ascribing to ourselves certain powers of discrimination, powers of diacritical apprehension. Such objects were defined by marks or *differentiae* that were analogous to the phonemic diacritica that make possible the division of the flow of sound into significant units. The powers of apprehending linguistic units exemplify perceptual powers quite generally, which have a semiotic structure. The symbolic field, however, is not dependent upon the ‘presence’ of anything to be ‘pointed to’. It is radically different from pointing. It involves the creation of an abstract meaning structure, an intelligible content, with many internal levels of sophistication and technicality. The abused, the primary caregiver, and the expert exist in a different mix of fields, with at times fateful, but quite different, consequences for each one.

Bühler’s famous organon model of language (developed extensively in Bühler, 1934/2000b) schematized three radically different ways a linguistic sign could be related to its correlate in any concrete situation or act of linguistic interchange. Linguistic signs ‘express’, ‘steer’ and ‘grasp’. Considered in its relation to the speaker, it is a symptom or index, revealing the subjectivity of the speaker. Considered in its relation to the addressee, it is a signal, steering (or attempting to steer) behavior. Considered in its relation to objects and states of affairs it is a symbol, whose abstract, intelligible structures it is meant to capture and objectify. Hence, Bühler was able to distinguish three radically different linguistic functions: the expressive, the conative and the representational. Now, in the cases discussed by Jensen, all three of these functions (and others developed out of Bühler’s schema by Roman Jakobson in his classic paper ‘Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics’, 1960/1985) are present in any concrete interaction between primary caregiver and child, between caregiver and therapeutic expert, between expert and child, and, most importantly, between abuser and abused. They are, in fact, characteristics of the
overlapping and non-isomorphic situations themselves and explode the purely linguistic domain. Indeed, Bühler convincingly showed in his *Die Krise der Psychologie* (1927/2000a) that every perceptual occasion—every sign-constituted situation—exemplified or contained an ‘expressive’, a ‘steering’ and a ‘representational’ component.

Consequently, Peirce’s typological schemata of semiosis can be enriched by functional schemata that highlight different features of the plenum of perplexity in which the actors in the scene of child sexual abuse find themselves. Interpretation as semiosis is deeply embedded in a perceptual matrix of discovery and heuristic tensions that encompasses both formal and informal components. Interpretation is a semiotic skill, extending from perception and affective attunement to the articulate formation of hypotheses. As Peirce (1958–66) wrote:

> Experience can only mean the total cognitive result of living, and includes interpretations quite as truly as it does the matter of sense. Even more truly, since this matter of sense is a hypothetical something which we can never seize as such, free from all interpretative working over. (7.538)

Is it any wonder, then, that the determination of the signs of child sexual abuse is so difficult and that the various interpretations of its interpretation presented in Jensen’s paper are so insightful and thought-provoking?

**Note**

1. I have developed and deepened further aspects of these comments in three books (see Innis, 1982, 1994, 2002).

**References**


**Biography**

ROBERT E. INNIS is Professor of Philosophy and Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. He is the author of many works, both systematic and historical, dealing with the intersections between philosophy, semiotics and the human sciences, including *Karl Bühler: Semiotic Foundations of Language Theory* (1981), *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology* (1985), *Consciousness and the Play of Signs* (1994) and *Pragmatism and the Forms of Sense* (2002). He was also twice Fulbright Professor at the University of Copenhagen and has been a Humboldt Fellow at the University of Cologne. He is currently preparing a book, *Susanne Langer in Focus: The Symbolic Mind*, to be published by Indiana University Press.

ADDRESS: Prof. Robert E. Innis, Department of Philosophy, University of Massachusetts Lowell, Lowell, MA 01854, USA.

[Email: Robert_Innis@uml.edu]