ON THE NATURE OF 'SIGNIFICATION':

A GENERAL SURVEY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

The paper tries to grasp the genealogical trajectory of the concept and nature of 'signification' which is generally a much-discussed term in the works on semiotics by the pre-Saussurean and post-Saussurean philosophers. It traces the history of its formulations from the Aristotelian conventionalism up to Saussure's (1857-1913) work of *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) and beyond. Improving John Locke's idea of words as signs, Saussure articulated the co-relation of sound and its consequent thought manifested in words as a 'form' in its social use of verbal signs. In the latter half of the 18th century, Condillac's observation on the dependency of thought on language was exciting. In this context, influenced by the American Pragmatist School of Thought, Peirce empirically constructed a typology of meaning. The later tradition of semiotic thought also supported its ever-flourishing development exploring exhaustively further clarification of different modes of signification by a host of well-known philosophers like Jacobson, Barthes, Derrida, Eco etc. In this sense, it draws a brief account of the history of systematic theorisation of the concept 'signification' in a complex social sign system.

KEYWORDS: Sign, Word, Signification, Meaning, Arbitrariness, Saussure, Semiotics

INTRODUCTION

The treasure domain of philosophical knowledge had been undergoing for some recent years mild and hard critical scrutiny, even in the field of analytic and continental philosophy by several other scientific disciplines and allied cultural practices. Yet, it was the redeeming feature of philosophy specifically in the domain of 'embodiment', 'signification' and 'ideality' that it retained its fruitful relevance of productivity. In this context, 'signification' which is largely a semiotic discussion comprises the signification of language very much pertinent to the contemporary philosophical enterprise.

According to *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (1996),[1] 'to signify' means 'to make known by sign, speech or action' or 'to be a sign of'. Signification describes how things carry meanings with them. It applies different criteria by means of which differentiation of sign-types and identification of their meanings are possible. The process seems to generate etymological consequences by tracing back into the origin of signs through analogical reasoning and transformation. Semiotics (from Greek 'semeion') explores this world of signification. And here

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[1] (Revised ed.). New York, Avenel: Gramercy Books.

in this world of signification, language is only one means of it.

Ancient Greek Philosophy

Signs represent the world. But how? Philosophers and historians of signs have long been trying to answer this question. The birth of the study of language as a system of signs could be traced back to the early pre-Socratic period of philosophy when Heraclitus, Parmenides, Democritus dominated in the realm of philosophy of language. Plato's *Cratylus* was the early known document or account of the etymology and signification of language. Nature was then thought to be opposed to convention. The meaning of this opposition was acknowledged in the theory of signification. The notion of the linguistic sign was assumed differently by the Stoic philosophy (as 'semeion' or 'symbolon') and Aristotle (as 'semainomenon' or 'lekton'). Aristotle's conception of 'impression' stated that words are sounds symbolising the corresponding mental 'impressions'. In Epicurean philosophy and Augustine's treatise *De dialectica* too the idea of signification was reflected. Therefore, this concept seemed to have followed a hierarchical conception of linguistic signification, signs and logical structure of proposition by Aristotle and subsequent philosophers.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

Recently Hobbes's theory of signification has come into the limelight due to the increased interest in his political philosophy in *Leviathan*. His theory of language or speech and meaning is about two ideas, namely,

- The concept of signifying something (verb 'significare'),
- The concept of arbitrary and conventional correlation between a word and a thing (verb 'denotare', a phrase containing the noun 'nomen' and the verb 'appel-late').

Though often misunderstood, Hobbes' 'significare' denotes what and how to signify, but his locutions often show beating a different track self-contradictorily. His term 'denotare' is actually a crude form of 'significare'. For him, a linguistic form does 'stand for' some external object, otherwise it means nothing. So, any expression has its own counterpart stood for that expression. But, words like 'if' or 'is' have no meaning unless referred to in the context of other words, therefore only having meaning in a Pickwickian sense. Different varieties of meanings are the results of different interpretations of the same basic object. According to Hobbes, linguistic expression 'to stand for' is 'to mean' some mental images. As Richard Peters (1966) remarked, "[Words] are caused by external things ... the word standing for the private phantasm..." Hobbes is famous for his "peculiarly private theory of meaning."

Etienne Bonnot De Condillac (1714-80)

Though Humboldt (1988) deserved the credit for having first explained the triadic nature of the linguistic sign as established by Aristotle: the concept, the thing, and the relation between the concept, thing, and name, Condillac's contribution was recognised for probing deeper into the mystery of signification which was often guided by the influence of philosophy of sensationalism. Condillac assumed thought as shapeless entity until and unless expressed in the linear order of language. Apart from this, in deciphering a gestural sign he invoked the idea of its different components which could be broken into several units in a sequential order. Like Reid, he classified the sign system into 'accidental', 'natural' and 'instituted'. Accidental signs denote the frequently occurred circumstances whenever a man faces a particular object. This type of sign is created when an object is suddenly affected by a situation like the dawn affected by the crowing of a cock. Its natural consequence is that the man is then automatically propelled to start believing the association between the

two. Though Condillac's explanation fell short of proper treatment of how the former and the latter could be associated together. He had no substantive precision to conclude over this judgement which Hume had minutely dealt with firm differentiation between 'resemblance', 'contiguity', 'cause and effect'. Next to this, natural signs are produced more instinctively without certain distinctive intention. For example, the meanings of cries and gestures are not inborn; they are only human dispositions on certain occasions. Eventually, we come to recognise them as features evoking and constituting the corresponding meanings themselves. Occasionally we also try to reverse the process as the meanings of the circumstances of these signs have been institutionalised. Again, for Condillac, instituted sign happens through the operation of higher order. Reid later explained that instituted signs are always the result of the social agreement in a community of speakers before they come into language use along with other innately understood signs. But Condillac stressed more on the processes of how the artificial signs are first formed instinctively rather than innately and then socially established. These natural signs along with accidental signs are essentially called 'the language of action' which is then thought to be cultured and nourished by generations of users and ultimately consolidated into spoken or written form of language.

In this context, Condillac believed that our memory consists of only instituted signs, whereas the natural and accidental signs are mostly 'remembered'. This institution of signs makes us capable of reflecting on complicated ideas, unifying these ideas, imagining upon aesthetic objects, thereby developing our cognitive power with enriching possibility.

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914)

Peirce's account of sign theory is distinct in the sense that it has been his central innovative effort to examine in detail the complexity of 'signification', 'representation', 'reference' and 'meaning' with empirical rigor of Saussure's notion of signification. His sign theory is conducive to understanding his works on logic and pragmatism. His ideas on sign and signification could be classified into three broad periods: the earlier brief account from 1860s, the interim account during the period of 1880s and 1890s, and the last complete account in 1906 and 1910. During that course, his theory was developed in precision and complexity remaining throughout its uniformity in interpretation.

Peirce's basic sign structure consists of 'sign', 'object' and 'interpretant'. The third one is Peirce's genuine contribution to understanding how sign system works. In order to mean something by a sign, an interpretant is necessary for making its presence in reality. Some terminological difficulties were there when he referred sign in different terms like 'sign-vehicle', 'representation', 'ground'. For Peirce, not all aspects or features of a sign are responsible for signifying something, rather only some elements of the sign (or 'qualified sign') are really indicative of the object signified. The object too is to be qualified up to some parameters ('placing of constraints') so that some of the features of the object could be represented. Apart from these, in this triadic structure the process of a sign is to be determined by an interpretant to ensure the possibility of evoking the related object. The interpretant acts as a translator of the original sign which activates the sign/object relation.

Peirce's key terms in the trichotomy, namely, 'icons', 'indices' and 'symbols' stand for different possible manners of integration between sign and corresponding object. The proposed contrast between the 'analogue' and the 'digital-support' is also novel in its approach. If we associate sign with an object by virtue of shared features or likeness, then it could be termed as an 'icon'. An 'index' is a sign related to a causal incident or experience. 'Symbol', on the other hand, is

more observed and conventional in its social origin.

In the earliest account between 1867-68 as in 'On a New List of Categories' (1867), Peirce's formulation and reformulation of basic sign structure were important as they hinted sufficiently his later preference for the term 'infinite semiosis'. By this, he actually meant a chain of signs preceding and following a sign. This dynamic nature allows a sign to anticipate further interpretant in its progress. Associating sign with cognition, Peirce stated that every interpretant also acts as a further sign of the object. Therefore, thoughts could also be signs ('thought-signs'). And as the interpretants themselves become signs and signs are interpretants of previous signs, the chain of signs is thus conceptually 'infinite'.

The interim account during 1903 showed the development in the classification of signs into three to ten classes of signs. Peirce also withdrew his assumption that the infinite chain of signs precedes any given sign. Peirce's identification of six classes of signs in his final typological account (1906-10) was explicitly and firmly proposed, but still it is a matter of much debate and discussion as the manner and order of sign remain imprecise and unexplained. It is also difficult to recombine them satisfactorily. As Houser (1992) pointed out, "a sound and detailed extension of Peirce's analysis of signs to his full set of ten divisions and sixty-six classes is perhaps the most pressing problem for Peircian semiotics."

Ferdinand De Saussure (1857–1913)

Saussure, 'the founder of semiology' defined signs by their hierarchical positions of occurrences, stating the fact that signs exist only at the level of the synchronic system. Saussurean dyadic sign structure proposes that a sign is composed of the signifier ('signifiant') and the signified ('signifie'), i.e.,

signifier + signified = sign

The element of speech sound and the visible thing in the world as its possible denotation cannot be conceptualized as separate entities as these elements are mapped together into one. Indeed, the relationship of language to parole (or speech-in-context) has often been a theoretical riddle in linguistics.

Saussure stated that the relationship between a sign and the real-world thing is arbitrary. This is not a natural relationship between a word and the object it refers to, nor is there any causal relationship between the inherent properties of the object and the nature of the sign. Saussure called this phenomenon as 'relative motivation'. The possibilities of signification of a signifier are constrained by the compositionality of elements in the linguistic system. Benveniste's paper on the arbitrariness of the sign had aptly described it. Moreover, a word could get a new meaning or 'semantic value' only if it is distinctively different from all other words in the given language system, otherwise it would not be possible to define a meaning for anything. The whole foundation of Structuralism is based on this novel idea of Saussure which argued about the concept of signs as a system of mutually dependent entities well-defined in their effects.

Roman Jacobson (1896-1982)

During the 19th century, research into the 'phonetics' was going on and in the 2nd half of the 19th century linguists' interest was thrust in the naive form of sensualist empiricism highlighting 'sensations'. The Neo-grammarian School of Thought excluded the teleological study of language orienting for the most part on the linguistic phenomena rigorously and isolating 'form' from its 'function'. Then Jacobson came to focus light on the unity of two components in a word or any verbal sign: the sound on the material side and meaning on the intelligible side. He was interested in identifying the

quantum of language, the smallest unit of phonetic elements. He observed that the linguistic sounds are divided into the motor and the acoustic. The motor organs are internal physiological prerequisites for the production of external acoustic sounds. He thought that Neo-grammarians engaged their attention too much on the articulation part of the sound, not on the acoustic aspect of it. In *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) Saussure already asserted, "... it would be impossible to discover the subdivisions in these sequence of articulatory movements... Without acoustic perception how could we assert, for example, that in 'fal' there are three units and not two or four?" In his *Lecture-IV* (1937), Jacobson summarised his observation by invoking Saussure's notion of arbitrariness which according to him, cannot be answered without the reference to a given language. The external relation between signifier and signified is only occasionally found in onomatopoeic and expressive words such as 'zigzag', 'crack', 'cuckoo' etc. But the internal relation remains unexplained. The concept of 'sound-symbolism' developed by Sapir (1929) finds out the inner latent feature of the sound expressed in the emotional and aesthetic meaning of a given word or even pairs of words.

Hjelmslev (1899-1965)

It is to be noted in passing that Hjelmslev viewed on semiotics as the study of signs similar to language. He called it 'metasemiotic' and its language is rooted in the terminology of semiotics. For him, 'semiology' is non-scientific, whereas 'metasemiology' is scientific and uses as its subject matter the terminology of 'semiology'. Hjelmslev's semiotic theory was built on the cornerstone of four dimensions, namely, 'content-expression', 'form-substance-purport', 'system-process' and 'paradigm-syntagm' which were thought to be influenced by Saussure's Theory of Signs. This, according to him, could best explain the stratified model of language. Needless to say, his concept of signs was also deeply resulted from the ongoing experiments on phonic patterns of language in the early 19th and 20th Century.

Roland Barthes (1915-80)

Barthes wrote extensively on the nature of signification in *Mythologies* published first in 1957. Unlike Leymore (1975), Barthes's stance didn't end at the impasse of merely describing the signifier and the signified. Being a post-structural semiotician, he further suggested that the sign could be renewed when the signifier finds new signified on a new plane. At the denotational or most basic level, a sign may signify something or may also mix with another at the second level of meaning. Such associations are natural and given though arbitrary by origin. As such, this encoding process is necessary for our experience. However, in his book *Elements of Semiology* (1977), Barthes explored semiotics as language. The linguistic and semiological signs are different in following respects:

- The 'speaking mass' is responsible for the creation and elaboration of language as a sign system.

- Linguistic signs are expanded into semiological signs by means of 'speech'. This is evident from the fact that signs are restricted in linguistic use, but speech broadens their meanings by using them in varying situations.

Resisting Saussure's ideas, Barthes developed on his own a new concept of semiology as 'science of signs' which seemed to be undeveloped discipline at that time. According to him, semiology is to be considered as a 'sub-discipline of linguistics' which should take discourse into its realm. He then explained the following four domains of binary pairs to support his argument:

- **Language and Speech**: By these terms, Barthes possibly wanted to incorporate Saussure's discussion on the

dichotomous nature of the concepts of 'langue' and 'parole'. These practically inseparable entities are brought forth to clarify the existence of language as a social institution ('langue') and its manifested practice in speech ('parole'), the combination of which constitutes 'meaning' in the problematic sense of the term.

- **Signified and Signifier**: Though linguistics and semiology were taken in parallel, Barthes always put emphasis on linguistics which comes first and foremost in the semiological analysis. Barthes then went on explaining the concept of signs as a system comprised of the signifier and the signified. The content and the expression are inseparable from each other. Strictly speaking, this relationship is more than mere straightforward co-relation. It is like cutting across two amorphous masses simultaneously or like 'a sheaf of paper', each side having its opposite side. The meaning of sign comes into reality only by its practical or utilitarian use known as 'sign-function'. In fact, signifier is a mediator to refer to image of an object or a concept and signified, after Barthes, is "the mental representation of a thing...a concept"; it also comprises elements like practices, techniques, ideologies etc. Their union is termed as 'signification'. Sometimes this process is the arbitrary result of social convention. Barthes concluded that the prospect of semiology is very large as it would create a basis for producing reality with the assistance of taxonomy. A science of apportionment in the form of the anthropological study may thus evolve out of this process.

- **Syntagm and System**: Meaning comes out of the differences in the order of words, sentences, paragraph, chapters etc which is of two kinds: 'paradigmatic substitution' and 'syntagmatic positioning'. While performing a semiotic analysis of a text, Barthes postulated this well-formed arrangement according to the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships in which the minimal units of the text are organised in vertical and horizontal axis respectively. A paradigm is a category-based set of different but related units, i.e. signifiers or signifieds, for example, a set of nouns, pronouns or verbs etc. It is to be mentioned that the units could be alternatively placed in such order so that on a particular occasion only a unit belonging to a set can be selectively placed, or it can be substituted by another unit to refer in another context. Syntagm, on the other hand, is the linear combination or 'chain' of the units of signifiers coalescing with each other and guided by proper syntactic rules and conventions. Although the present study doesn't like to go into the details, it cannot be overlooked that signs are parts of the structural 'system' and as codes they function within this system. It is important to note that these two planes cannot survive in isolation while performing a semiotic analysis of a text. Therefore, it is by dint of this analytic framework of conceptual understanding that we can successfully systematize the identification, segmentation of the pairings between constituent elements in a system.

- **Denotation and Connotation**: Barthes reanalysed the interrelationship of sign, signifier and signified by using a different terminology, stating the fact that the 'relation' (R) between 'content' (C) and 'expression' (E) is dynamic and staggering in its way. For example,

(ERC) RC, where E = (ERC)

Here the first system means connotation on the first plane; the second is about denotation which occurs on the collective level when all have to agree upon a fixed meaning of a text or image.

By the way, it is a relevant point to be noted that Barthes's concept of 'metalanguage' is the use of knowledge of primary language to discuss or decipher the knowledge or discourse of another language. He apprehends in this a danger of

self-destructive cycle as each language may take the seat of another language when it tries to explain another.

Noam Chomsky (1928-)

Chomsky, known as the 'father of transformational generative grammar' rejected the notion of sign. For him, instead of symbols language consists of a set of sentences which is generated by a set of rules or grammar. So, grammar is the very internal element of language. Chomsky's (1956) argument for grammar was devoid of the concept of meaning. Empirical consequences of Chomsky's grammar showed this. But any linguistic element or unit couldn't be independent of meaning as language as a sign system is assumed to be an amalgamation of a physical sequence of sounds and their meanings. Contrary to this, Chomsky's (1957) syntactic structure was an autonomous element of grammar and he hadn't messed up grammar with its semantic components. To support this assumption, he exemplified a sentence: "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously." Here Chomsky distinguished lexical meaning from grammatical meaning. This sentence is grammatically correct in which noun 'ideas' implies a set of objects, verb 'sleep' – a state the ideas are in, adverb 'furiously' – the property of sleep, adjectives 'colorless' and 'green' – two different properties of ideas. Thus, the meanings are generated through different grammatical categories, classes of words and other linguistic units. According to Chomsky, this sentence appears nonsensical due to the clash between grammatical and lexical meanings. But it is to be remembered that we couldn't form immediate constituents of the words in this sentence without assessing their semantic meanings. Therefore, a semantic analysis should be considered first preceding a syntactic analysis, so to say. Otherwise a syntactic analysis without a semantic judgement would be absolutely arbitrary. Even in his second version of grammar Chomsky (1965) did maintain his syntactic structures as autonomous and independent of semantic components which are rather necessary to interpret them.

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)

We know that Derrida is more interested in the written form of a word, the interrelationship between speech and writing. While Saussure made a narrow and derivative approach to writing following the Western tradition, Derrida had shown writing as a 'mode', not only structure. It has an explicit functioning, not completely phonetic. Focussing critical light on the relationship between spoken word and written word, he argued against Saussure that a word ('vox') is exclusively a combination of sound and sense. He made use of the term 'sign' to define the whole system and preferred the terms 'sound-image' and 'concept' to 'signifier' and 'signified' respectively. Derrida also departed from Saussure who like Plato or Aristotle held the notion in *Cours* that "Language does have an oral tradition that is independent of writing" and writing is only the second representative signifier of the first signifier or the spoken word which itself represents the mental image or the ideal object. Contrary to this, Derrida stated the assumption that writing is only the exterior part of the sound-sense unity or signification of the word in the process of which writing has no role to play. Therefore, writing itself is not a sign among all signs.

As a matter of fact, 'writing' which signifies inscription and remains durable as an institution of signs covers all the signs as a whole. Derrida pointed his finger against Saussure's lack of assuming properly about writing as an 'image', a 'figuration' or 'representation' of the spoken form of language. His contention was that writing provides us ample scope to treat it under the banner of the concept of 'episteme' and logocentric metaphysics. So, it has much wider dimension which allows us to take it as a means of deconstructing 'the greater totality' or the text itself. Naturally, writing could be

characterised as more exterior to speech. But it could be found as interior to speech as well, in the sense that even before engraving or drawing the letter or referring to a signifier, the concept of grapheme already has an 'instituted trace' of the past. And of course, this trace is 'unmotivated', though not capricious; whereas for Saussure it is 'arbitrary'. Derrida called upon this notion of arbitrariness as the chief regulator of the relationship between the natural 'phonetic' signifier and the signified. He also coined the term 'differance' to denote the newly emerging changes of existing written form.

Umberto Eco (1932-)

Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976) criticised the theory of signs which states that the meaning of sign is fully determined by the corresponding object. Instead, the meanings of the iconic signs are not dependent solely on the object signified, rather they may be independent. According to Eco, typology can never solve the problem of how different modes of production exist. To form a unified theory of semiotics, Eco rather suggested enquiring the production, functioning and integration of signs.

According to Eco, an all-purposive general theory of semiotics may serve to comprehend how to integrate the codes for different objects which are being produced and then communicated. This theory of code is therefore not just an explanation, but also a working principle of how to encode the content in expression to be transferred by means of communication. Eco's theory of sign system is important in the sense that it formulates two theories clarifying the notions of signification elaborately:

- Theory of 'mentions' (i.e. referring acts) proposes to show how naming of an object and making a statement about a situation are performed,
- Theory of communicational acts explains how a message ('signal') is transferred from a source ('content-continuum') through a channel ('expression-continuum') to a destination. This 'signal' may be a stimulus to a particular response. It is a kind of sign which signifies a meaning or may not have any significance at all. Here content and expression are two terminals or 'functives' of each and every 'sign-function'. The rule which co-relates the element of the content plane with the element of expression plane is called a 'code' which generates the sign to be interpreted. The content actually carries the meaning of the sign which is a 'cultural unit' (or 'semantic unit' or 'sememe') as meaning is always culturally defined. The expression element may have more than one content and the content element too may have more than one expression. This system of code is termed as 's-code' which has syntactic, semantic and behavioural operations. 'S-code' is special than an ordinary code because it belongs to a system of signification.

Eco's theory of sign system denies the concept of 'naive iconicism' which means that signs are direct production of the related object as they are analogous to them. Rather, it believes that the production of sign is actually determined by cultural convention, though not arbitrarily. The iconicity depends on the expression's degree of 'correlation' (not similarity) with the object. That's why, the iconicity of sign couldn't be the sole property of a specific sign. Broadly speaking, Eco's concept of semiotics is overwhelmingly diverse encompassing different fields of research like zoosemiotics, paralinguistics, kinesics and proxemics, tactile and visual communication, medical semiotics, text theory, study of rhetoric and ancient alphabets, formalised and natural languages, so on and so forth.

Julia Kristeva (1942-)

In reply to the question raised in 'Why do we speak', Kristeva addressed the issue of meaning through her discussion on the conceptualisation of language. Signification, for Kristeva, is unique as it shows a dialectic between the semiotic and the symbolic. Semiotic aspects of language make signification possible. On the other hand, symbolic provides the referential meanings of structures or sounds. More precisely, the semiotic parts motivate the stable symbolic parts in this process of signification which is by nature dynamic. To elaborate the semiotic element, it gives signification the meaning in the broadest sense. It actually emerges out of the symbolic element which itself is supposedly resulted from the driving force of the body. Thus, signification works through symbolic and semiotic elements which betray a striking parallel with the relationship between body ('soma') and soul ('psyche'). Kristeva pointed out this bodily origin of language as depicted in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984). Even what is lost, absent or impossible in language is also manifested through tones and rhythms of language. This is evidently found when in *New Maladies of the Soul* (1995) she wrote on the 'translinguistic' or 'non-linguistic' elements of language which though irreducible to the symbolic structure of language, can signify their meanings. The traditional problem of representation could thus be resolved by showing this transfusion of the concept of body into the study of language.

CONCLUSIONS

The semiotic understanding of language and its meaning so far articulated here showcases in brief detail how this concept had gone through several diachronic changes during the distinctive periods of time and consequently been flourished into a full-fledged theory in the wake of the intellectual movement of 'structuralism'. As such, a sort of philosophical reform regarding this concept had been taken place by the necessary strong as well as weak theorisation of various philosophers in the past and present era. Needless to say, in this little discussion I've selected only the prime figures so far as the history of the theory of signification is concerned.

It could also be observed that earlier philosophical discussions on the nature and function of 'meaning' or 'linguistic content' were often discussed in terms of the concept of 'signification'. But, it is to be clearly noted that signification which precedes and results in meaning is more than meaning, thereby couldn't be directly translated into the modern theories of meaning.

Anyway, it could be summarised finally by saying that the concept of signification was originally built on solid basis by the works of philosophers like Saussure and Peirce who offered thoughtful insights into this new theory of linguistic meaning. The later tradition of research on signification in our century was begun in Russia and Czechoslovakia, then encountered anew in France and Italy specially during the time period of the 1950s and 1960s and finally spread over the whole world. At present, Peirce's philosophical stand is being integrated with the empirical richness of Saussure's work.

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