Deixis and the Ontology of Signs: Two Essays
Towards a Clarification

Per Aage Brandt
Case Western Reserve University, USA

I. Deixis – a Semiotic Mystery: Enunciation and Reference

Abstract
This note aims at clarifying the relation holding or not holding between deixis and indexicality, and then elaborating a new model based on the Danish semiotic enunciation theory that could also account for reference. The ‘mystery’ in question is the mysterious fact that the intersubjective aspect of deixis has to constitute the referential anchoring of signified meaning in the extra-communicational world. The model proposed may lay the ground for a new understanding of signs as such.

Keywords: deixis, index, enunciation, reference, common ground

Planting a stick in your flowerbed, to remind yourself or others of having placed a bulb there, is a deictic act. Sending flowers to a beloved person, in order to thank her for something or to remind her of your existence, is a deictic act. Looking at the ceiling and rolling your eyes while someone is speaking is a deictic gesture, most often intended to let the speaker or someone else know that you find the conveyed content of the speech less than useful. What is common in those examples of deictic acts or gestures? They all produce or present a certain object or effect—stick, bouquet, eye movement—that carries a message, and the message again contains an indication of something the receiver should attend to. Such semiotic acts often use signifiers with little direct relation to their indicative signified indication, other than the time and place of the act—the location of the stick, the temporal occasion of the bouquet, the spatio-temporal moment of the facial
gesture—and their intelligibility or ‘felicity’ depends strongly on the presupposition of a communicative intersubjective bond, such as shared caring for something: plants, interpersonal respect, discursive relevance, etc. Their indicative force depends on this shared concern for some aspects of reality.

Deictic acts, or deixis, are as essential in inter-human semiosis, as they are in human-animal or inter-animal communication.¹

Deictic acts are reflected in language by the demonstrative pronouns—this, that—and the demonstrative adverbs—here, there, now. These closed-class forms are the core elements that create the referential dimension in communication.² In speech, they are often accompanied by pointing gestures of different types: finger, hand, arm, body posture, eye movement.³ Since in this case they both point and contain indications, they have often been associated with a semantic sign type suggested by philosopher C. S. Peirce, who called it index and opposed it to icons and symbols. Indexical signs, or indices, are signs “whose relation to their objects consists in a correspondence in fact” (Peirce, 1982, Vol. 2, p. 56). Curiously, Peirce included pointing fingers and proper names in the indexical category.⁴ The most common elementary example of an index is smoke as a ‘sign’ of fire; a more elaborate example is a weather cock as a ‘sign’ of wind direction. The smoke in question is causally related to the fire that produced it; the angle of the weather cock to the points of the compass is caused by the direction of the wind that pushed it. But this causal “correspondence in fact” seems unrelated to the characteristics of deixis. Did Peirce think that the pointing finger was “corresponding to fact”? And that proper names were caused by the persons having them?⁵

One possible reading would be that Peirce takes deixis metaphorically: Nature is addressing us and calling our attention to a fire by showing us its smoke.⁶ Nature points to an illness by showing us its symptoms. In both cases, Nature thinks that we should do something about it—the fire, the illness. So deixis would be a metaphor for what is really just an “index” in the sense of a phenomenological occurrence, that is, not a sign but just some effect that happens to make us think of some cause for it to be there. And the metaphoricity of the connection could vanish through habitual usage. But the inverse does not work well. My stick in the flowerbed is not caused by the bulb, unless we eliminate my intentional relation to stick, bulb, and care, or unless we include this relation in a wider notion of causation. This wider notion would however erase all differences between finality and causality, and between consciousness and matter. It would make subjectivity and meaning disappear into Nature. That is a costly operation. I suspect that Peirce was ready to pay the price, whereas it is obvious to a semantically informed semiotician that this is less than useful: unacceptable.

As Eco notes (Eco, 1976), the structure of deixis cannot be reduced to that of a ‘natural sign’, that is, an index in the strict sense.⁷ As our initial examples show, deixis structurally includes both enunciation—communicative intent and subjectivity—and reference—anchoring in the content-external world. In fact, I intend to show that reference and enunciation must be modeled as a structural whole, as a core referential
enunciation, which also has to include the common concern or ground that makes reference meaningful, that is, possible. How this works has remained a mystery to standard semiotics, whereas cognitive semiotics, with its routine of finding and modeling semantic schemas, may have a chance to find an appropriate representation of the deictic schematism of this complex: grounded, referential enunciation.

Firstly, enunciation is a schema: personhood is a basic relation between three instances, a first person (P1), a second person (P2), and the object of shared attention called third person (P3). The relation itself is a schematic act of showing. P1 shows P3 to P2. P2 is thus in a dative position, receiving P3 from P1 as a ‘gift’. Showing is “donner à voir”, with a French expression. P1 ‘gives’ P3 to P2. P3 is the target of the showing, which is again the root of the deictic pointing. P3 is an object presented in a demonstrative mode: This!—“I want you to attend to this (here, now)!”—and it is therefore possible to say that the basic schematic relation between P1 and P2 is already proto-deictic. The relation develops real deicticity through a further semiotic unfolding.

The basic schema, secondly, allows a semio-syntactic iterativity in two directions. One is dialogical: in a subsequent substructure, P2 (you) becomes P1 (I) and P1 is included in a new P2, when the addressee answers to the speaker and possibly to other hearers. It typically has propositional P3s: “You tell me that X, but I insist that ¬X!”. P3 thus unfolds a maintained theme ‘X’ across the turns of speech. Another form of iterativity, embedded enunciation, occurs when P3 includes a new substructure with P1–P2–P3 format, and so on: “I say (to you) that he says (to someone) that she says (to everyone who wants to listen) that X...”.

The structure of full-blown deixis contains both types of iterativity. The P1 of the central substructure has already been ‘informed’ in a preceding substructure, where an authoritative instance (A) showed P1 (dative) what to care about in some respect (R, a referential reality that makes the signified relevant); here is what matters: the reference to a real concern in the pre-enunciational world. P1 speaks or signifies ‘on behalf of’ this preceding instance, which now functions as a relevance principle justifying the present enunciation. The present act of signification demonstratively shows P2 a signifier (this stick, this flower, this gesture…), and this P3 becomes a subsequent P1 (which is precisely why it is called a signifier: it is meant to signify, ‘speak’ to the same P2 about something to attend to, so its signified is the deictic message. The following graph summarizes the resulting deictic complex:
As we see, P2, *you*, appears in two different parts of the structure, as a receiver of the deictic signifier and as a receiver of the message signified (*Sé*) by this signifier (*Sa*). The initial reference R makes the *Sa* relevant ‘in the context’, and some convention on the level of the *Sa* allows a reading that yields *Sé*. The intentional subject (*I*) was first the *me* of the substructure A–R, a part which is necessary in any act of signification; we all express ‘ourselves’ by transmitting a concern stemming from a presupposed domain of reality.

This model may solve the mystery of deixis, namely that it introduces and includes both subjectivity and reference in the same basic, iterative schematic structure. Deixis thus explains the essential relation between signified meaning and its referent, the *reale* that the signified meaning is *about*. Without this ‘aboutness’, meaning would be meaningless.

I would like to offer a more elaborate example of the stick-and-bulb type deixis: a tombstone. The Latin inscription may be the classical one: *Eram quod es, eris quod sum*—“I was what you are, you will be what I am”. This is a talking stone, not just a stick; the text has a P1 that represents the person buried under it. The stone with the engraved text is a deictic object addressing any passer-by, that is, P2 in the embedded part of the schema above. It confers a message, transmits an idea; you and I are the same, we live, we die, so in a sense, apart from the time difference, you are me, and you should think about it. Why? Well, since this is what will become of you sooner or later, consider *now* how you are spending your life! *Now* is the deictic moment of the fortuitous encounter here between tombstone and (by-)passing wanderer. The speaking tombstone is not verbally deictic, since it lets the stone carry the spatio-temporal ‘pointing’, while the words, all closed-class, of course set up the enunciation with their elegant chiasm (crossing {*I was – I am*} with {*you are – you will be*}).

Now consider a non-verbal traffic sign, supposed to say: *Wrong way!*

Fig. 1. The enunciational structure of deixis

Fig. 2. Traffic sign
It is a deictic object equivalent to a gesture telling you, the driver or biker, not to turn into the lane, street, road that could be accessed right where the sign post carrying it is planted. The sign, issued by a public institution, maybe a ministry of transport, is thus signed by an instance (P1) informed by a societal interest (A) in assuring safe motorized circulation (R). The targeted subject (P2) receives first the address by the sign post as such, as a sign post, standing there instead of a police agent, showing a signifier composed by a white horizontal stroke in a red circle. Since P2 is supposed to know the traffic code, this sign expression is then read by P2 in the final substructure (of fig. 1) as a negative order: “Don’t go there!” This implicit deictic there refers back to the implicit here and now of the Sa on the sign post encountered by the driver, and further back to R, meaning: the turn is prohibited because for some traffic-relevant reason that street has been defined as a one-way channel. The enunciational structure is present and includes as in former examples a strong reference to the domain-relevant reality.15

Traffic signs such as this one are classical examples of the sign type of symbols, because they are explicitly coded by convention. The Wrong Way sign could additionally be said to iconically include the figurative association of a head’s or hand’s horizontal movement in the gesture meaning No, or it could just be a simplified gestural drawing of a barrier. But nowhere has it been made a theoretical point of insight that symbols, as well as icons, must communicate by the inscription of their Sa–Sé relations in a deictic structure. Nevertheless it is the case that deicticity, including its entire enunciational scaffolding, is responsible for our making sense of any iconic, symbolic, verbal, or mixed, semiotic act or object.16 A written text will ‘speak’ like a tombstone. A fictive text will include a simulated narrator as P1, informed by a literary A–R grounding substructure. Literary enunciative embedding can be deep and include many hypotactic P3 layers, and it can be polyphonic, offering a paratactic multitude of P1-voices.17

We may be able to formulate a revised basic typology of signs on the grounds18 of deixis as described above. It can even be illustrated just by one-hand gestures, as in the following presentation:

Simple deixis (D) without further unfolding. (E.g.: P1’s pointing finger orienting P2’s gaze toward an object—The demonstrative pronouns in language orienting P2’s attention to some phenomenon in the situational or the discursive context).

D – Ic. Deixis with Iconic unfolding. (E.g.: pointing as above but with facial expression of emotion added; the “come here” finger sign; or the “air kiss”).

D – Sy. Deixis with symbolic unfolding. (E.g.: upwards pointing finger as the “I want to speak” sign; the “o.k.” finger sign; the “thumbs up” sign).

D – Ic – Sy. Deixis with unfolding from iconic to symbolic (E.g.: the ILY “I love you” finger sign, which (Ic) combines shapes of the letters ‘I’, ‘L’, and ‘Y’ from American Sign Language (Sy) by extending the thumb, index finger, and little finger while the middle and ring finger touch the palm. An informal expression of love.). Fig. 3:
D – Sy – Ic. Deixis with symbolic unfolding further used iconically (E.g.: the Christian *benedictio* sign, a raised right hand with the ring finger and little finger touching the palm, while the middle and index fingers remain raised. This sign was used by the Romans for “I am speaking” (Sy) and then copied (Ic) by the Christians to perform blessings. Blessings further use gesture drawing of the sign of the cross: D – Ic – Sy.)

The latter combination $D – Sy – Ic$ is, as the example illustrates, rather unstable and readily embeds the more intuitive $D – Ic – Sy$ form. Most of what we find in the semiosic activity of daily life, including the social media, can be analysed in terms of such semiotic series or sign cascades, often even deeper than such embeddings: $D1 – Sy – Ic$ ($D2 – Ic – Sy$)…. When D appears more than once in the embedding cascade, it in fact does refer multiply to the grounding reality: $D1 – “I am hereby blessing you”, D2 – “(In order to do so) I am hereby transmitting to you the force of Christ”. One “hereby” can contain another “hereby”).

This series summarizes the sign types we will find in most practical forms of communication, a case of special interest in this deictic framework being that of *diagrams*, which I will reserve for special treatment at another occasion. For the moment, we can conclude that D is both a sign and a structure that necessarily frames the two well-known basic semantic types, icons and symbols. Icons and symbols cannot appear without this deictic framework. The notion of the index as a sign type should be eliminated; it totally lacks justification.

*Writing* is used in mathematics, music, and language. In all three cases, the graphic deixis iconically represents the relevant operative, performative, and phonetic concepts, respectively, and the represented concepts are again signifiers for concepts of mental, instrumental or pronunciational operations.

In theatre, one of the foundational cultural practices of human societies, we may also identify certain deictic cascades. $D1$: The framing deixis of theatricality (“I am now acting, and not behaving naturally”); $D2$: The narrative deixis (“I am now playing the role of a character in the story X”); $D3$: The aesthetic deixis (“I am shaping this role in a certain way and signing this version as ‘this way’ of playing it here now”). As this example shows, the deictic emphasis increases down through the iterative cascade, because its third instance points to the manner, the timbre, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* of the present experience; the deepest deixis is perceived as the strongest or most intense,
since it can not be contained in a nominal concept. This may contribute to explaining the forceful impact of art in general and in particular. The here-now-this-ness could be the root of beauty.

Notes

1 When we scratch our cats behind the ears without believing that they have an itch there, and instead sharing with the cats the understanding that this is a greeting; or when one of our cats urinates on a selected surface to let another cat understand that it should not be there, we are dealing with deictic acts.

2 The cognitive linguist Holger Diessel (Diessel, 2012) writes: “… although demonstratives are often used as pronouns and determiners, their communicative function differs from that of other function morphemes. In contrast to genuine grammatical markers serving language-internal, organizational functions, demonstratives are commonly used with reference to things and situations in the outside world […]. In their basic use, they function to establish a joint focus of attention, i.e. they create a ‘common ground’ […], providing a prerequisite for all other joint activities between speaker and addressee (cf. Diessel, 2006). Since this is one of the most fundamental functions of human communication, cognition, and language […], it seems plausible to assume that demonstratives emerged very early in language evolution and independently of content words.”


4 The obvious reason for this is that proper names are understood as signs of existing individuals. Jensen means this (singular and existing) man. So the name ‘contains’ an implicit demonstrative. Now, in a semiotic perspective, names are basically signifiers for calling a person, not for pointing at a person. The vocative case is the natural circumstance of a name, as in: “O Jensen, come here! I want to tell you something”. We can call (on) Jensen, because we already know Jensen, which makes a name anaphoric, rather than deictic. The argument that when we hear the name Jensen, it is an index of there being someone called Jensen ‘out there’, corresponds to claiming that ‘horse’ is an index, since it invites the idea that there are horses ‘out there’. In that case, any part of any utterance—or of any expression in general—would be both indexical and deictic. This view may be held by Freudian psychoanalysts, but hardly by anybody else.

5 The weather cock is what I would call a probe, like a thermometer and all other instruments of measurement. Probes are human artefacts designed for allowing us to obtain quantified information about aspects of the world. This quantified information is then interpreted in predefined contexts, but still is not a ‘sign’ of what our interpretation lets it mean.

6 The weathercock is of course a cultural rather than natural mechanism, but the wind direction is natural. Weathercocks pertain to a category I propose to call probes (see note 5). Probes are technical devices allowing us to expand our knowledge of nature by making selected states of affairs measurable: wind direction, temperature, pressure, radioactivity etc. Microscopes, telescopes, and other –scopes are such probes.
Eco however still treats the demonstratives as indices (Eco, 1976, pp. 115-121). A ‘natural sign’ is in fact an ordinary causal or meterological relation between events or things in our lifeworld, and the term ‘sign’ is used metaphorically about it. Strictly speaking, there are no indexical signs, because indexical relations are not semiotic; they do not involve communicative subjectivity, enunciation. However, if someone believes that the gods express themselves through meteorology, for example, then meteorological indexicality certainly becomes semiotic and deictic (cf. the meteorological destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, *Genesis* 19).

This simple fact has never really been stressed in French enunciation theory, whereas it has been and is a core point in Danish text theory from the 1970s and onwards (see L. Brandt, 2013, chapter one, “Enunciation: Aspects of Subjectivity in Meaning Construction”). See Fig. 1, below, for a graphical representation of the schema, combining dialogue and embedded enunciation.

A first unfolding of this model, inspired by Benveniste (1966), appeared in Brandt (1974). It was used in Rosenbaum and Sonne (1986) and significantly amplified in Rosenbaum (2000).

When we try to express what we think, thought is our authority. When we speak in the name of our institutional status, profession, role in a family, etc., this function tells us what to express in a given situation so that the status becomes relevant. This is basic pragmatics, corresponding to Michel Foucault’s idiom, “where do you speak from?” (D’où parlez-vous?). In dialogue, the addressee that addressed you and whom you are talking to as a response, has already attributed to you a certain A function, which allows you to carry on the torch of communication. I am using Jacques Lacan’s symbol A (for ‘le grand Autre’, the authority, the Law) to inscribe the function in the deictic structure. Rosenbaum (2000) stipulates that in daily dialogues and conversations this function, A, links thoughts and expressions in a dialectical and more or less balanced way. According to Rosenbaum, who is a psychiatrist, in states of psychosis this stability in the relation between thought and expression is disturbed; and it is the link between thought and expression—and thus the link between ‘reference/common ground’ and ‘relevance/anchoring the sé in the domain R’—that primarily does not function, not necessarily thought itself. However, the erratic feedback from spoken language to thought would soon influence and disturb thinking itself.

I apologize for using the French abbreviations for *signifier* and *signified*; these terms are translations from the French *signifiant* and *signifié*, and are used throughout the Saussurean semiological tradition, and have the advantage of not inviting any confusion with the blurred terms from the Peircean semeiotic tradition, especially those of the trinity Representamen – Object – Interpretant.

As for the semantic, or experiential, domains of human reality, see Brandt, 2004b, chapter 3.

The visual art specialist Ian Verstegen reminds me in a personal note that pictorial perspective also is deictic in this sense: *this* is what (imagined or perceived) things *right now* look like seen from *here*. We could add, in a Barthesian key, that photography works like enunciative tombstones: I was here, in front of this… Now I am no more, and you, who see this in my place, will soon also not be anymore. But what you see will still be there. The inherent sadness of this modern art, photography, is in fact striking!
I would like to thank Andrea S. Højgaard for this example, which she analysed, using the model of conceptual blending, in her inspired semiotic PhD dissertation on Talking Stones ("Talende sten"), 1994 (unpublished).

Traffic pertains to the territorial life of a community. The territorial life of a community is denoted D5, the Political Domain, in the model presented in Brandt (2004b).

Even music is deictic. It either carries external references as functional music (for ceremonies, or in films, or as simple jingles) or it refers ‘anaphorically’ to moments in its own internal, temporal ‘discourse’ (as variations refer to themes, for example).

On polyphony and other enunciational effects, see Brandt (2004a).

See also the deictic grounding of propositions and speech acts in chapter 1, Figs 1-5, in Line Brandt (2013).
II. From Mirrors to Deixis—Subjectivity, Biplanarity, and the Sign

Abstract

A much-discussed problem concerning the semiotic status of the mirror image opposes Umberto Eco and Göran Sonesson. Since the mirror image is a case of biplanarity in Hjelmslev’s sense, (the “expression” is in the mirror, but the “content” is outside the mirror, there are thus two planes), therefore it is a sign (G.S.), but it still is not a sign (U.E.), because there is no signifying intention in the phenomenon. I claim that Eco must be right and argue that signs have deictic structure manifesting an enunciative semantic setting, whereas non-signs do not, even if they are biplanary. This discussion leads to a new description of the semiotic function: all signs are deictic, and then have iconic and symbolic embedded structures within the enunciative frame.

Keywords: deixis, enunciation, sign function, mirrors, biplanarity

Umberto Eco in memoriam

“There is sign production because there are empirical subjects which display labor in order to physically produce expressions, to correlate them to content, to segment content, and so on. But semiotics is entitled to recognize these subjects only insofar as they manifest themselves through sign-functions, producing sign-functions, criticizing other sign-functions and restructuring the pre-existing sign-functions. By accepting this limit, semiotics fully avoids any risk of idealism.”

Umberto Eco. A Theory of Semiotics, 1976, p. 317, the final chapter: The subject of Semiotics

Umberto Eco has continuously felt the need to return to the basic question and to reopen it despite its frequent closures: what is a sign / a sign function / a semiotic event / an object
of semiotic analysis? Or shorter: what is semiotics about? Recent discussions such as Göran Sonesson’s (2010), about the semiotic status of mirrors, in an article about pictorial semiotics, made it clear to me that the question still calls out rather loud for critical treatment. Against Eco’s view, Sonesson argues that mirrors are indeed signs. This is so, he thinks, because, in Louis Hjelmslev’s corresponding terms, two ‘planes’ can be distinguished in the device under scrutiny: a ‘plane’ of percepts that can be said to ‘express’ the content of another ‘plane’. The term ‘expression’ is taken to mean that the perceiving subject apperceives something through something else. We might call this principle an experienced, or phenomenological, biplanarity. There is a sign when there is biplanarity in the phenomenon. Therefore Peirce’s index is a sign; e.g., on one plane, smoke; on the other, fire. Additionnally, a mirror is an artefact, made with the purpose of expanding the field of vision. In my own terminology, mirrors pertain to the the category of probes: microscopes, telescopes, weathercocks, sundials, thermometers, etc., are all artefacts that allow us to extend our field of perception and obtain knowledge about parts of the world that otherwise would be out of reach. So the experiences they offer are ‘biplanary’ and would be signs in this sense. The probes themselves may be signs in some sense, indices of human curiosity, and the apperceptions they offer are indeed signs if we accept the clear and simple definition of biplanarity.

However, I would object to that view, both by sharing the intuitions that made Eco reject the determination of mirrors (or mirror experiences) as signs, and by adducing supplementary arguments from cognitive science. In fact, biplanarity is rooted in human cognition. This is why the logician C. S. Peirce was interested in the first place. Seeing things as manifestations of other things is the general condition for thinking: establishing connections between percepts and concepts. We do this in every second of our waking life, and we even try to do so when we assign meanings to our dreams. More specifically, our minds are able to perceive sounds and visual events, and even other sensory events, as representations of states of affairs situated outside of their own immediate time and place, as imaginary events or states. These sensory events can be cognized as representations of virtual events or states in at least two ways: as imagery or as signaling. The mirror image offers imagery and most often also signals to us some critical state of affairs (examples: my own face; shaving needed!; rear-view in car: other car approaching; watch out!). These two representative functions, imagery and signaling, can evidently be imitated and inscribed in the realm of human communication, and will then be called iconicity and symbolicity respectively. But the biplanarity of such representations does not make them signs, unless we absurdly decided to identify all perception as semiotic. What makes biplanary events semiotic, and thus their bindings between percept and concept become sign functions, is their communicative function. We can produce images and calls. We have developed this capacity into language. The linguistic sign is not just a structured biplanary phenomenon, as Hjelmslev thought, but an iconico-symbolic routine in human communication, which builds on cognition (Brandt, in press) and in particular on the mechanisms of shared attention, or thinking-together, blending other subjects’ expressed
thinking into individual processes of sense-making. This perspective changes the discussion on what constitutes the sign, not only concerning language.

The percept is really an expression, according to this communicative-cognitive view, if it is intended by a subject to mean something outside itself to another subject (or to the same subject), that is, if it expresses a subject’s communicative intent and a content intended to be decoded and understood by another subject. In typical cases, the expression is itself a percept produced intentionnally by the subject, now to be termed a subject of enunciation, or ‘enunciator’, and intentionally addressing a subject, an ‘enunciatee’, variably specified. We may say that communication as such consists in using the biplanarity built into human cognition in order to share the thinking which is based on it. S1 addresses a percept (grounded in a certain frame or context) to some S2 in order to have S2 perceive it as a representation of a ‘meant’ content, a meaning, a concept meant by S1 to be shared. Such an idea is of course incompatible with structuralist impersonality (and ‘idealism’ in Eco’s sense), since it involves embodied consciousness, attention, intention, intent, volitive and communicative activity; therefore, a host of mysterious formulae have been proposed when the sign function had to be defined. Unless it was left undefined.

Our initial quote from Eco’s treatise has to introduce the subject, not as a mere ‘logical’ subject of an ‘inner’ experience of biplanarity, as in Husserl or Piaget, but, as he writes, as an instance “producing”, “criticizing”, “restructuring” sign functions, in order to obtain a definition of the sign function, that is, the function that makes the relation between the two planes of cognitive double-perception a semiosis. Eco tries to avoid the structural impersonality of a totally non-subjective sign function, but without venturing into explicitly communicative lands. Still, his mirror is not a sign despite its biplanarity. What you see in the mirror is not ‘in the mirror’ but ‘out there’ where the optical source of the image is situated. The mirror image is not an expression in the communicative sense, since it has no enunciator.

In a recent study (Brandt, 2016), I have proposed a general model of the sign function that includes the necessary enunciative structure and thus accounts for its cognitive grounding. The simplest version of a sign is taken to be a deictic gesture.

Fig. 1. A simple deictic gesture: pointing [Anonymous photo]
In Fig. 1, S1 addresses S2 by eye contact (and, supposedly, by previous verbal contact) and points towards an item (O) on the wall, *in casu* a photo. The triad S1-S2-O is constitutive of this relation. Here is a famous pictorial example of pointing:

Fig. 2. Nicolas Poussin, *Et in Arcadia ego*

The general structure of enunciation, whether considering dialogue or reported discourse, is the generative cell: *S1 shows S2 an O.* Showing is a form of giving (giving-to-see, French: *donner-à-voir*). In dialogue, S2 becomes an instance of S1, and S1 is universally supposed to have been an S2 (enunciatee) to some other instance that informs his present enunciation as a source of knowledge, or authority (A).

But in fact, in all cases of deixis, S1 shows S2 a *signifier*, an expression, which is the immediate object (O) of shared attention. In turn, this signifier will show S2 a content, a *signified*. The *signifier* is now an *enunciator*, the representative of S1 that shows and signifies the concept, the content, the signified, to S2. So the intersubjective relation S1-S2 is directly involved in the sign function relating signifier (sa) and signified (sé). This is the new, enunciation-based view of the sign function that I wanted to introduce. The sign is based on deixis (S1-S2-sa & sa-S2-Sé). In order for S2 to ‘decode’ the signifier, some knowledge of what motivates S1’s act of signifying is required. The model proposes a pre-present instance (A-S2-R) that lets some authority inform S2 (to become S1 in the present) about a contextual state of affairs (R) (in French I would say: *une problématique référentielle*) which explains how the signifier can mean the signified. We always speak ‘from somewhere’, as Foucault said. I add that the addressee is supposed to know and presuppose this, and, in general, to automatically guess which implicit context is likely to be the relevant one, unless the enunciator presents himself explicitly as a representative of an A addressing a circumstance of an R.

If this is correct, the sign function is really a deictic function of enunciation that posits the sign—sa/sé—as an instance of communicating intersubjectivity, without which there would be no connection between the two ‘planes’ of the sign. If I am right, they are distinct ‘planes’ of enunciation, not of a preset impersonal function of immanent interdependence. Impersonal sign systems only exist as fossilized parts of
living signification. Even in the most rigid sign systems, such as those of the traffic code, enunciation posits the planes institutionally.

Fig. 3. The enunciative structure of deixis, creating a sign function

This new view of the constitutive relation between deixis, enunciation, and sign function changes the semiotic landscape considerably. All signs are deictic. The object of the triad $S1-S2-O$ is really a signifier supposed to mean a signified to S2. How this $sa$-$se$ relation obtains depends on the $A-S(2\rightarrow I)-R$ stance, and here is where ordinary sign classification starts. In fact, both the signifier and the signified must already be cognitively biplanary. The signifier percept must be a token of a type, which makes it iconic: an image of some sort of percept; a sound sequence, for example, may be the token of a type that is a word in some language. The signified is a concept activated by that word, presupposing that language, and has to unfold a semio-pragmatic value in the context of speech, so its biplanarity is symbolic: its concept represents a personalized semio-pragmatic message.

Let us consider an example.

Fig. 4. A French World War I memorial monument
The column is in itself deictic, like a raised finger or a tombstone. The statue and the cock are pieces of imagery that together make up the compound concept /French soldier/. The list of proper names on the sides of the column will then be read as signified by this iconic compound, and prompt for the understanding that these names refer to people from this place who died as soldiers during the war in question. The deictic formation thus contains an iconic biplanarity that comes to signify a symbolic biplanarity. The result is a structure slightly more complex than those offered by Saussure's or Peirce's basic models. The internal biplanarity was what Hjelmslev mistook for a form-substance relation on both planes. It accounts for the fact that no sign can be said to be exclusively iconic or symbolic.

Fig. 5. The components of the sign function

The semiotic biplanarity differs clearly from the purely cognitive biplanarities in that the latter do not rely on any enunciative grounding, since they stem from ‘pre-semiotic’ cognitive devices present in the human mind. Their integration in the semiotic function, by contrast, is only possible because the enunciative grounding in deixis creates a relation of signification between them. In life, we find this configuration ready at hand (or rather ‘at mind’) and forget the role of deictic intersubjectivity at the root of semiosis, or we add it as an external circumstance, as in Roman Jakobson’s communication model. But as Umberto Eco notices, it is essential to semiosis that subjects not only use it but also produce, criticize, and change it. These semiotic activities are possible and occurring because subjectivity is internal to the sign function.

**Conclusion**

If signs are defined by conceptual ‘biplanarity’ (expression plane, content plane), there are...
still two different modes in which they can exist and convey meaning: signs as DEICTIC acts of signifying in communication, and signs as means of conceptual MARKING in individual thought.

In the former case, roughly corresponding to Saussure’s semiological conception, signs—as signifiers over signifieds—involves communicative intersubjectivity, intentionality, and enunciation.

In the latter case, corresponding to Peirce’s logic-based sign notions, they involve pre-reflexive cognitive imagery and embodied symbol use as purely mental operations.

Understanding the essential difference between these two modes of biplanarity may help clarify our concepts and ease the task of building a coherent theory of general semiotics. However, it is possible to stipulate an evolutionary path from (internal, cognitive) marking to (external, communicative) deixis. Such a semiotic evolution may have happened through music, and it may be the one leading to language (Merker, 2015). This model would reflect the view of a cognitive semiotics. And in particular, it is possible, as our examples have indicated, to understand the complexity of empirically existing semiotic phenomena as embeddins of cognitive biplanarities in communicative biplanarities.

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**Notes**

1. The section “The mirror and the picture sign” of his entry Pictorial Semiotics.
2. Sonesson writes: “According to a theory first presented in Eco’s (1984) dictionary entry on the mirror, and enlarged upon in his recent writings (1997, 1998, 1999), the mirror is no sign. In particular, Eco quotes seven reasons for denying the sign status of the mirror, which can be summarised as follows: 1) Instead of standing for something it stands before something (the mirror image is not present in the absence of its referent); 2) It is causally produced by its object; 3) It is not independent of the medium or the channel by means of which it is conveyed; 4) It cannot be used for lying; 5) It does not establish a relationship between tokens through the intermediary of types; 6) It does not suggest a content (or only a general one such as “human being”); 7) It cannot be interpreted further (only the object to which it refers can).” Then Sonesson argues against each point, starting by mentioning the views of Husserl and Piaget: “Neither Peirce nor Saussure have really defined the concept of sign, but simply take it for granted. We can spell out what is presupposed by the sign concept by making use of some ideas derived from Husserl and Piaget (cf. Sonesson, 1992b). According to the former, the sign requires a difference in focus and mediation. The expression is directly perceived but is not thematic, and the content is indirectly perceived but thematic. But this criterion clearly applies to the mirror, just as well as to the picture. Something which is comparatively more direct and...
less thematic, the mirror image, stands for something which is less direct and more thematic, the object in front of the mirror. / Piaget’s criterion depends on the notion of differentiation. Expression and content are differentiated from the point of view of the subject. There seems to be two possible interpretations of this conception: Differentiation may mean that the expression does not continuously go over into the content in time and / or space; or that expression and content are conceived as being of different nature. In both senses, the mirror is certainly as sign. The person or thing in front of the mirror is clearly differentiated from the image in the mirror.”

3 See P. Aa. Brandt, “From Linguistics to Semiotics. Or: Hjelmslev’s Fortunate Error”, at: https://www.academia.edu/6819523/From_linguistics_to_semiotics._Hjelmslevs_fortunate_error

4 I am really saying that in all cases of deixis, the O is a signifier! If you point to a present object, e.g. in a baker’s shop: “How much is this [or that] bread, please?”—the object can be materialized by a different loaf in the shop, so it serves as an image of what you ask about.—You hear a metallic sound afar: “Was that a phone call?”

References (of the two essays)


**About the author**

Per Aage Brandt (pab18@me.com) is Adjunct Professor at the Department of Cognitive Science of Case Western Reserve University, USA. He studied with Greimas in Paris (Sorbonne Thesis 1987) and was the founder of the Center for Semiotics (1993) at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, and of the Journal *Cognitive Semiotics* (2007). He was a Fellow of the Centre for Advanced Study of the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, CA. And he is also a poet and a musician.