



# 1 The intersubjective nature of symbols

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Symbols are often conceptualised as intersubjective only to the extent that they are shared. Language, it is said, is composed of symbols that we share, and because we share these symbols we are able to communicate. Simplistically, the idea is that each symbol or word stands for a single object, action or phenomenon in the world, and because we share this set of correspondences we can understand each other's utterances. In this chapter, I want to argue that symbols are intersubjective in a more fundamental sense. Symbols are shared, but what is shared is not a single meaning or correspondence. Specifically, I propose a neo-Meadian theory in which each symbol corresponds to at least two meanings, and these different meanings originate in the different perspectives of social actors interacting around the given phenomenon. Symbols, in this neo-Meadian sense, are intersubjective by virtue of linking together these different perspectives around a phenomenon and enabling different social actors to coordinate their joint activity in relation to the phenomenon. The aim of the present chapter is to develop this position by making the argument that symbols bind together different but complementary perspectives which exist within social interaction.

In order to develop and clarify this argument about the intersubjective nature of symbols, and attempt the difficult ascent from the abstract to the concrete, this chapter begins by criticising two dominant assumptions. First, the idea that symbols, or signs, "stand for" the signified will be exposed as monological. Second, the assumption that communication is, and originated in, expression will be challenged. On the basis of these critiques, the chapter draws upon Dewey and Mead to theorise symbols as fundamentally intersubjective. Free association data are then used to provide illustrative support for the theory. Finally, the chapter concludes by extrapolating from the theory to suggest future avenues for research.

## Sign and signified

The first assumption which needs to be questioned concerns the seemingly obvious relation between the sign and that which it signifies and the idea that signs "stand for" specific signified meanings. This basic idea can be traced





## 24 *Semiotic foundations*

back to Saussure (1916/1972). According to Saussure, a linguistic sign is a link between a concept and a sound pattern. The sound pattern is the material element (signal) while the concept is the more abstract and ideal element (signification or content). The signification, or mental content, is a mental trace of an experience of the signified object. The signal and the signification are connected in the brain by an associative link, and this link is so established that “each triggers the other” (Saussure, 1916/1972, p. 66). Simply put, the sound of the word and the meaning of the word become fused. Within this scheme, understanding linguistic communication entails linking incoming sounds, manifesting in the brain as sound patterns, with the appropriate concepts.

However, language, for Saussure, is not a collection of isolated significations. “Language,” Saussure (1916/1972, p. 112) insists, “is not to be reduced to a mere nomenclature.” The value of signs comes from the relation between signs. Signs gain their value because of their similarity to and dissimilarity to other signs. It is this emphasis on the relation between signs, or the position of a given sign within the system of language, that instigated the structuralist movement in linguistics and beyond. Thus, from a Saussurean point of view, the relation between the sign and that which it signifies leads us to a consideration of the structural relation between signs, with meaning being derivative of this structure. This structure Saussure called *langue* and he opposed this abstract structure to *parole*, which is the actual manifestation of language in spoken utterances in various contexts. According to Saussure, utterances are meaningful because we all share, or partially share, an abstract understanding of *langue*. From a Saussurean point of view, a sign signifies a relational position within the structure of *langue*. And because we all share, or partially share, this abstract *langue* structure, so the signs we use for communication signify, for each communicator, the same, or similar, positions within this structure. Thus, it is the fact that we share the *langue* structure and the set of correspondences between signs and this structure that makes communication possible. The point I want to make is that this conception of signs relies upon a weak form of intersubjectivity, namely sharing.

A separate tradition, which also posits a weak form of intersubjectivity at the heart of signification, is that proposed by the analytic philosophers, where again signs “stand for” values, except instead of “standing for” a position within a structure the correspondence is to the external world. Frege (1952) and the early Wittgenstein (1922/2001) maintained that meaning comes from the logical proposition of an utterance. Propositions, they argued, mirror the world more or less accurately and thus can be either true or false. From this point of view, the proposition is the source of meaning, and consequently an utterance with a fallacious or illogical proposition is meaningless. Decoding the proposition entails being precise and focusing on definitions. Simplifying somewhat, we could say that all one needs to understand an utterance is logic and a good dictionary. According to this tradition, we are able to communicate to because we are fairly logical and we have been taught the





*The intersubjective nature of symbols* 25

appropriate definitions of words. Although the analytic philosophers have a much less structural perspective than Saussure, both assume that language is based upon shared meanings. For the analytic philosophers, as with Saussure, language works because communicators share a set of associations between certain sounds or signals and that which is signified. Thus, in both cases, the intersubjective nature of the sign or symbol is reduced to the sharing associations. This, I want to argue, is a weak conceptualisation of intersubjectivity and insufficient for understanding actual language use.

Although the early Wittgenstein advocated a propositional view of language, he later came to reject it, and his reasons for doing so are a good starting point for criticising both the Saussurean and the analytic theories of language. According to a dictionary view of language, one decodes an utterance by reference to the rules of logic and the precise meaning of the words. For this to work, one needs to make explicit one's assumptions and one's definitions. But, the later Wittgenstein (1953, p. 40) asks, can there be an exhaustive list of assumptions? And can there be exhaustive definitions? The problem is that every utterance makes innumerable assumptions. Moreover, definitions only lead to more definitions. Looking up one word in a dictionary will only lead to more words, each of which requires its own definition, and looking those up will sooner or later lead one back to the initial word. The account is circular. As Wittgenstein (1953, p. 41) writes, "The explanation is never completed."

What is missing from Saussure's structural account of language and from the analytical philosophers' propositional account of language is the social and pragmatic context of language use. That is to say, words gain meaning by virtue of having effects within social interaction. Social interactions within which words become meaningful, Wittgenstein (1953, p. 5) called, "language games". While some discourse analytic scholars have interpreted language games as being purely linguistic games, played out within the confines of language, this is not what Wittgenstein meant. Wittgenstein (1953, pp. 5–11) is very clear that language games go beyond language or discourse; they involve actions, and words are used to coordinate social activity. Moreover, it is the joint activity in the world, which is beyond the discourse, which gives the meaning to the words. Wittgenstein's argument is very close to Mead's (1922), because he argues that the meaning of an utterance essentially derives from other people's responses to that utterance. This is why, Wittgenstein argues, there can be no private language.

The alternative to a propositional view of language is clearly encapsulated by Rorty (1999, p. xxiv) when he writes, "When we utter such sentences as 'I am hungry' we are not making external what was previously internal, but are simply helping those around to us to predict our future actions." Or, we might add, the utterance is an attempt to tell someone that it is time for them to cook dinner. Or maybe also it might be used to blame the person who forgot to pack the food for the camping holiday. In each case the meaning of the utterance is not about being hungry (i.e., the ostensible proposition





## 26 *Semiotic foundations*

signified by the signs). Rather, the meaning of the utterance is aimed at having a particular effect on the interlocutor. The utterance is made against the backdrop of a shared here-and-now (Rommetveit, 1974), such as the mutual understanding that it was one person's responsibility to bring the food for the camping trip. Against this genuine intersubjectivity, the utterance, "I am hungry", then, is performative. It aims to have a perlocutionary effect (Austin, 1962), such as creating a feeling of guilt and failure. The important point is that the actual meaning of the utterance, once fully situated in its context, often has very little to do with the propositional meaning or veracity of the statement, "I am hungry."

### **Symbolisation as "expression"**

The second pervasive idea about symbols which I want to challenge is the idea that symbols are primarily expressive. This idea goes back at least to Darwin's (1872) *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. In this work Darwin provides an evolutionary account of the expression of emotions with the suggestion that these communicative expressions are the precursors of language. Darwin's main concern is to demonstrate the evolutionary relation between the expression of emotions in animals and humans. While this work was pioneering in many ways, it propagated one particularly problematic assumption, namely that language is first and foremost a means of "expression". The suggestion is that the "expression" is communicating a feeling or emotion within the animal. Indeed, Darwin (1872) writes of the dog's enthusiastic posture and wagging tail as expressing the emotion of "joy" at going for a walk with his master.

Wundt in his *Volkerpsychologie* developed Darwin's idea of communication as expression (Farr, 1996). His focus was on the gesture, and he theorised how language could evolve from expressive gestures. His theory was that organisms developed some means of decoding the meaning inherent in expressions. This idea that language evolved out of expressive gestures has been given recent attention by researchers such as Armstrong, Stokoe and Wilcox (1995). In explaining the movement from expressive gesture to communication, these theories usually turn to evolution. Given the evolutionary advantage bestowed upon an organism that can understand the expressions of other organisms, it seems obvious that language would be selected for (Pinker, 1995). With language one can coordinate joint behaviour, thus enabling more complex social organisation, but one can also safeguard individual genes with manipulation (Byrne & Whiten, 1989).

However, this view that language developed out of expressive gestures is fundamentally flawed. The basic problem is that this theory separates ideas from communication, putting ideas and emotions as prior to communication. "Language," Dewey (1958, p. 169) writes, caricaturing this point of view, "expresses" thought as a pipe conducts water." This conduit metaphor maroons thoughts and emotions outside language. "In consequence," Dewey





*The intersubjective nature of symbols* 27

continues, “the occurrence of ideas becomes a mysterious parallel addition to physical occurrences, with no community and no bridge from one to the other.”

The mistake, Dewey and Mead argue, is in the very idea of “expression”. Rather than starting with expression, we need to start with impressions. Mead describes it clearly when he says:

In the very beginning the other person’s gesture means what you are going to do about it. It does not mean what he is thinking about or even his emotion. (Mead, 1934, p. 49)

Communication, for Dewey and Mead, does not begin with an “expression”; rather, it begins with the impression that one organism unwittingly makes on another organism (Farr & Rommetveit, 1995). It is from the soil of impression and impression management that communication grows. Before symbolic communication the organism does not possess any thoughts or emotions that it is trying to express. It is only within language that these become constituted as ideas capable of expression. Prior to language, the meaning of a given “expression” is in the impression it makes upon its audience. Returning to Darwin’s dog, we would say that the dog’s gestures are creating the impression of joy in Darwin’s mind, and that if the dog could become aware of the significance of these gestures for Darwin, then the dog would be in a position to communicate. It is only with such perspective taking, before language, that the dog’s own emotion of joy would become constituted as an emotion for the dog (i.e., the self-attribution of joy).

The first step in recognising the validity of this argument is to recognise that often we communicate without knowingly communicating. That is to say, our interactants may be “reading”, “hearing” and “listening” to us in ways that we do not expect.

So too a man’s posture and facial changes may indicate to another things which the man himself would like to conceal, so that he “gives himself away.” “Expression,” or signs, communication of meaning, exists in such cases for the observer, not for the agent. (Dewey, 1946, p. 177; see also Farr, 1984)

We are, as visible social actors in social worlds, always “giving off” (Goffman, 1959, p. 14) expressions, even when we are not aware of it. We unwittingly create “excess” (Bakhtin, 1923/1990, p. 22) or “surplus” (Gillespie, 2003) meanings. These surplus meanings exist for the audience before existing for the actor, and communication is the process of coming to master the effect that these initially naive expressions are having on the audience.

The core critique here is that instead of communication beginning with an expression, or the desire to communicate, and then the groping for an appropriate gesture to make oneself understood, communication begins with





## 28 *Semiotic foundations*

the creation of unintentional, excess or surplus meaning. The organism acts and this action has consequences for other organisms and thus comes to have meaning for those organisms. At this stage, however, there are no symbols. Symbols emerge as the organism begins to master the meaning of his or her actions upon others. While organisms may agree that the sight of a predator means escape or hide, and this meaning is shared, this is not symbolisation in the full sense or in an intersubjective sense. Full symbolisation entails intersubjectivity and perspective taking, as elaborated in the next section.

### **Signals and symbols**

If symbols are not to be understood as signals associated to signifieds, which are widely shared, and which originate with expression, then how should we conceptualise symbols? The remainder of this chapter will present an account of symbols, and language, which accepts that words, or signals, often have different meanings depending upon who hears them, and which assumes that communication begins with impression rather than expression. In place of the weak conception of intersubjectivity and symbols (i.e., that symbols are intersubjective because they are shared), I will make the case for a neo-Meadian account of the symbol, which is in accord with the theories of Dewey, and later Wittgenstein and Bakhtin. The crux of the difference being argued for is that symbols are intersubjective in the strong sense of combining two or more perspectives. Minimally, these two perspectives pertain to the perspective of the actor doing a given action and the perspective of the other for whom that action creates an impression. It is the integration of these two quite different perspectives within the mind of the actor that marks the birth of symbolisation in the full intersubjective sense.

There has been much confusion and debate about the terms “sign”, “signal”, “comsign”, “symbol”, and “significant symbol” (Morris, 1927; Dewey, 1946; Schutz, 1973, p. 287; Gillespie, 2005). One danger with this confusion is that an important distinction is lost. For Mead, this is the distinction between the symbol and the significant symbol. While Mead’s terminology has not been adopted, the distinction which he pointed out has been incorporated into more recent research. For example, Werner and Kaplan (1963, p. 14) point to the same distinction, but use the terms “signal” and “symbol”. This is confusing because what Werner and Kaplan mean by “symbol” is what Mead (1922) means by “significant symbol”, and what Werner and Kaplan mean by “signal”, is what Mead means by “symbol”. Given that Mead’s terminology has not been adopted, and that when the term “symbol” is used, it is usually used in the spirit which Mead used the term “significant symbol”, I am going to adopt Werner and Kaplan’s terminology in what follows.

According to Werner and Kaplan (1963, p. 14), signals are perceptions that indicate a certain action but which do not represent that action. Signals are stimuli calling out a response. These are often in the form of other people’s actions. An incoming punch is a signal to dodge. The incoming punch is





*The intersubjective nature of symbols* 29

entirely meaningful. However, it does not represent the action it stimulates. Humans and non-human animals alike respond to signals. Signals, when originating in other people's actions, create impressions, however, they are not necessarily expressions.

Symbols, on the other hand, are more particular to humans. Symbols *represent* the given action. Symbols achieve this by being intersubjective in a way that signals are not. Symbols entail not only doing some action that creates an impression in the mind of an other, but also being aware of that impression. It is this awareness of the impression being created which makes communication and thus expression possible. Symbols, or significant symbols in Mead's terminology, necessarily entail the combination of two or more perspectives. For example, in the case of the symbolic meaning of "punch", they are the perspectives of punching and of being punched. For the person punching, to reflectively understand the significance of the punch, the puncher has to understand what it means from the perspective of the person on the receiving end of the punch, at the same time as having his own perspective on the action of punching. And vice versa for the person being punched. Each needs to take the perspective of the other. However, it is critical to realise that this does not mean "sharing" a single perspective. Giving a punch and receiving a punch are two very different meaning complexes. Rather what is shared is the meaning of the action from both perspectives, even though those perspectives are divergent. It is in this sense that the symbol is intersubjective, in the sense of sharing a divergence of perspective.

In any communication, there is the perspective of the communicator and the perspective of the interlocutor. For the symbol to work, it is not enough for communicator and interlocutor to "share" the symbol. Rather what needs to be shared is the divergent perspectives of both within relation to the ongoing social activity. The symbol is intersubjective because it positions communicator and interlocutor differently within the social field and makes this difference shared.

In order to illustrate the intersubjectivity of symbols let us consider how language functions within a social context. Specifically, I want to focus upon deictics. Deictic words include personal pronouns (*I, you, they, us, we, it, he, she, our*, etc.) and words that contextually position times, places and things (i.e., *this, that, here, there, before, now, afterwards, then*, etc.). All known human languages have deictic words, and within each language their use is widespread. A sentence such as "She told me to go out there" relies heavily upon context for identifying who "she" is, who "me" is, and where "there" is. While deictic words have been overlooked, or maybe even suppressed, by mainstream linguists, they have been a focus for Wittgenstein (investigations) and Rommetveit (1974, p. 40).

Both Wittgenstein and Rommetveit use deictics to argue against propositional theories of meaning by demonstrating the situatedness of meaning. I, however, want to go one step further and use deictics to argue not only for the contextual nature of language but for the intersubjective nature of





### 30 *Semiotic foundations*

symbols. Deictics, I suggest, are a particularly clear example of perspectival reference. The meaning of a deictic word is not singular; rather, it is perspectival. Specifically, the meaning of deictic words is different depending upon one's position within the field of action. But more than this, for the communication to be successful, speakers must not only be aware of the particular meaning that the deictic word has for them, but they must also be aware of the particular meaning that it has for other participants in the social field.

Consider the personal pronoun "I" and how it is used within a specific context. Imagine a conversation between Person A and Person B in which both use the pronoun "I". Although the word is the same regardless of who uses it, the meaning is quite different. What is meant when Person A says "I"? Obviously the referent is Person A. So what does this mean to Person B? From the perspective of Person B, the symbol "I", uttered by Person A, actually means "you" (i.e., Person A). From the perspective of Person B, the utterance "I" does not actually mean "I" (i.e., Person B). If "I" did not mean "you" to Person B and "I" to Person A, confusion would ensue. If both actually understood "I" egocentrically, as pertaining to themselves, the communication would break down as they would be unable to fix who is saying what.

The general point being made is that whenever one speaker says "I", the interlocutor must understand it as "you", and equally, whenever the speaker says "you" the interlocutor must understand this as "I" or "me". There is, thus, at the level of meaning a deep intersubjective relation between "I" and "you". The same applies for many the other deictic words. "Here" is often meant to be understood as "there", and "there" is often meant to be understood as "here". "Our" is often meant to be understood as "your", and "your" is often meant to be understood as "our". These deictic symbols reveal that singular symbols do not have singular meanings. These singular symbols are in fact integrations of distinct but complementary meanings. These symbols are intersubjective, not in the weak sense of being shared, but in the strong sense of integrating different perspectives within the social field.

Deictic words reveal with particular clarity the strong intersubjectivity I aim to demonstrate. However, the strong intersubjectivity of symbols extends far beyond deictic words. Consider the meaning of a word such as "buy". What does this symbol mean? In a formal sense the verb "to buy" means to give acceptable currency to someone in exchange for a desired commodity. But when we situate buying in a social context and imagine Person A approaching Person B, saying "I would like to buy X", then it becomes apparent that the meaning of "buy" is as perspectival as the deictic word "I". For Person B the meaning of "buy" is "sell", for Person B is not going to buy X; rather, they are being invited to sell X. If "buy" did not mean "sell" for Person B, the exchange could never occur. Each participant needs to understand the buy/sell situation from both perspective of buyer and seller simultaneously. The suggestion is that the meaning of "to buy" is not simply the





*The intersubjective nature of symbols* 31

dictionary definition; rather, it entails also the meaning of “to sell”, and it is this integration of perspectival meaning which I am calling the strong intersubjectivity of the symbol.

According to the present neo-Meadian account of the symbol, symbols are deeply intersubjective. Symbols are not intersubjective merely because they are shared, as proposed by Saussure. Rather symbols are intersubjective in the sense that they bind together meanings originating from different social positions within the field of action. This is not to deny the dictionary definition of words. Rather it is to add to these dictionary definitions a second broader realm of meaning which is intersubjective and reciprocal. Thus, for example, the meaning of “give” is also “receive”, the meaning of “talk” is also “listen”, the meaning “lose” is also “win”, and the meaning of “hide” is also “seek”. It is the strong intersubjectivity implied by this integration of perspectives which marks the difference between signals and symbol, or between what Mead called symbols and significant symbols. Without the intersubjective integration of complementary meanings, there would only be signals. The words might stimulate action, but they would not entail any perspective taking within the ongoing social activity and thus they would not entail any understanding of the action or representation of the action.

### **Examining the association of ideas**

If symbols are intersubjective, in the sense of combining complementary perspectives, then we should expect to find that the association of ideas within people’s thoughts follows this intersubjective structure. One simple way of exploring this consequence of the theory is to examine word associations.

There already exists a wealth of theoretical work on the types, or “laws”, of association. The idea of laws of association gained particular prominence with associationism in psychology, pioneered by John Stuart Mill, Bain and Spencer. Their ideas influenced Wundt, James, and Musterberg, among many others. However, the “laws of association” go back to Aristotle, who proposed three ways in which ideas can be associated together: similarity, contrast, and contiguity in space or time. Beyond these elementary laws, subsequent scholars added secondary laws of association such as recentness, emotional congruence, and intensity (Mill, 1843). Yet others, like James, reduced the number of laws; in his case to two, contiguity and similarity (James, 1899/2001, Chapter 9).

From a Meadian perspective, it is expected that intersubjective associations will be widespread. What is meant by an intersubjective association? The association of “ball” with “kicking” may pertain to a situated action, but this is not an obviously intersubjective association; rather, it is an association of contiguity. The type of association we are looking for is much more precise. By intersubjective association I am referring to associations which entail an explicit switching of perspective.

Consider the possible associations to the symbol “give”. Within the





### 32 *Semiotic foundations*

Aristotelian scheme, we would expect the word “give” to produce associations based on contiguity (e.g., “gift” or “birthday”), based on similarity of sound (e.g., “live” or “sieve”) or similarity of meaning (e.g., “offer” or “bestow”), and based on contrast (e.g., “take” or “withhold”). However, from our neo-Meadian perspective, we also expect to find perspective switching associations, such as “receive”. Giving is not similar to receiving and does not clearly contrast with receiving. One could make the case that “give” and “receive” are related by contiguity, but, strictly speaking, this is incorrect because although contiguous in time, the experience of giving and receiving is not contiguous within the experience of one individual. Rather the contiguity is across individuals, and this is what makes the association intersubjective in the strong sense.

In order to explore the neo-Meadian expectation further, I will make use of the free association data set constructed by Nelson, McEvoy and Schreiber (2004).<sup>1</sup> The data set comprises nearly three-quarters of a million free associations by over 6,000 participants to over 5,000 stimulus words. One of the established findings regarding free association data is that the patterns of association between individuals are remarkably shared. For example, in the data set, 163 participants out of 184 associated “West” to “East”. It has also been established that this similarity tends to be clustered within families and groups. For example, the participants who produced this data set were students in the USA, and 146 out of 165 associated “beer” to “keg”. There are also idiosyncratic associations, defined as associations produced by just one participant. In the following data, all the idiosyncratic associations were removed, and thus all the reported associations were produced by more than one person. Also given the sheer magnitude of this data set, I will focus the analysis exclusively to associations to words beginning with “a”.

Looking at the associations participants produced to words beginning with “a”, we find considerable convergence with the laws of association laid out by Aristotle. The most frequent form of association conforms to the law of similarity. Examples include the following associations: abduct–capture, adorn–decorate, accept–agree, accumulate–collect, acquire–get, adjourn–end, adultery–cheat, aggravate–annoy, apology–sorry, argue–fight, and attempt–try. In each of these cases, the association seems to be based upon a similarity of meaning. There are also some cases where the similarity seems to be based upon similarity of spelling or sound (e.g., abduct–adduct and accept–except), but such associations are quite rare.

The law of contiguity is also very prominent. This form of association pertains to ideas associated by virtue of occurring simultaneously or sequentially in actual experience. These associations often have a narrative feel to them. Examples include abduct–alien, abuse–child, accuse–guilty, attack–dog, admission–ticket, aggravate–brother, assault–weapon, and achieve–goal. Related to the law of contiguity, but worth distinguishing is a small subset of associations which seem to contain a judgement; for example, abuse–bad, adultery–sin, and award–good.





*The intersubjective nature of symbols* 33

Association by way of contrast is the least prominent form of association as described by Aristotle. Clearly identifying associations of contrast proves to be somewhat difficult, with some cases being ambiguous (e.g., question–answer and attack–defend). The clearest cases of contrast are accept–deny, accept–reject, agree–disagree, and awake–asleep.

So far there is nothing surprising or outside the frame of traditional research on the association of ideas. However, there is an additional set of clearly defined associations which has not been articulated within the traditional schemes. I am referring to the set of associations which entail a switch of perspective and which would be expected according to the neo-Meadian theory outlined above. Associations which entail a switch of perspective include abduct–missing, accept–give, accuse–defend, accuse–deny, apology–accept, and apology–forgive. Less clear examples are acknowledge–show, attack–defend, answer–question, and accuse–lie. In order to explore the Meadian idea of the symbolic as combining distinct perspectives within the social field, let us consider each of the associations in turn.

To “abduct” is to take a person, and the person who has done the abduction has taken possession. Yet “missing” as an association to this is framed not from the perspective of the person doing the abduction, but from the perspective of those left behind. Thus, the association abduct–missing seems to cross over two quite distinct, but related, perspectives. This is not an association of similarity, contrast or contiguity. Rather it seems to violate even the most basic assumption of the association of ideas, namely that ideas become associated if they have been associated in experience. Yet the experience of abducting is very unlikely to be followed by the experience of missing. Although co-occurring, in the sense that abducting creates the experience of missing for someone else, these experiences do not co-occur within the experience of one individual. Here we have an intersubjective association that cuts across, and thus joins up clearly distinguishable, and even divergent, perspectives within the field of action.

Equally “accept” pertains to the experience of one person within a social interaction while “give” pertains to the experience of the other person within the same social encounter. One person is giving while the other person is accepting. There is contiguity of experience, but again the experience is not within the same person. Thus, again, we are dealing here with a genuinely intersubjective association; that is, an association which bridges the experience of one person with the experience of another.

Turning to the association of “deny” to the cue word “accuse”, again, I suggest, the cue word and the response words pertain to the experience of different people within the social interaction. It is only in the context of one person accusing that another person can deny. The two experiences are quite different, and it is only at the level of the symbolic that they are integrated associatively. Without symbols these two experiences would never become associated.

Finally, the associations of “apology–accept” and “apology–forgive” have





### 34 *Semiotic foundations*

a narrative quality. Where there is an apology, we often expect to find someone accepting the apology or forgiving. However, the experience of making the apology and the experience of accepting the apology, or forgiving, although related, are not related within the experience of a single person. Again, there is contiguity but it is not the contiguity described by either Aristotle or the associationists. For them, associations were formed by the contiguity of experience. The essential point is that “apology” and “accept” or “forgive” are not contiguous within the experience of the same individual. For the contiguity to reveal itself, there needs to be a perspective switch. The contiguity is *between* the perspectives within the social field, not *within* the experience of any one actor. Such associations, I am suggesting, are deeply intersubjective not in the sense of sharing a single meaning, but in the sense of combining meanings from different perspectives.

#### **Concluding suggestions**

This brief analysis of associations is not meant to be exhaustive, but illustrative. It is intended to illustrate that the intersubjective structure of certain deictic words, such as pronouns, can also be found in other symbols. Seemingly simple verbs, to which dictionaries give fairly straightforward definitions, are revealed to be deeply intersubjective at the level of association. This limited data analysis illustrates that in a significant sample of symbols people spontaneously form intersubjective associations which are not simply intersubjective in the sense of being shared, but are intersubjective in the sense of weaving together divergent perspectives within the field of social action.

Word association data is, however, a relatively crude way to explore the way in which ideas are associated, especially for investigating perspective shifts within the stream of association. The problem is that the data are just isolated and decontextualised words. It is difficult to know in which way and with what personal sense a given word is manifested within the consciousness of a given participant. Indeed, if all words are, as argued, deeply intersubjective, then it is very difficult to say that individual words pertain to one perspective over another. For example, “apology” can be understood both from the perspective of the person giving the apology and from the person accepting the apology. Thus, one could even argue that the above analysis is lacking, because the associations which I claim reveal perspective switching could be interpreted differently. Ironically, however, such a critique only strengthens the argument that I am making, namely that these symbols combine perspectives because it is for this reason that they can be seen to apply to different perspectives within the field of action.

In any case, future research might examine the association of ideas within the stream of thought more dynamically. Recording the stream of association through a talk-aloud protocol (Ericsson & Simon, 1993) may reveal more explicitly and vividly how the mind moves from one perspective to another.





*The intersubjective nature of symbols* 35

The talk-aloud protocol would give access to the shifting imagery, which would enable an analysis of the participants' perspective relative to the activity. For example, would providing the stimulus word "boat" lead to an oscillation between first-person perspective feeling of being on a boat and the third-person perspective feeling of watching boats at sea? Would there be imagery associated with being on a boat, such as feeling the sea breeze, or would there be imagery associated with seeing a boat out at sea? And specifically, would these two sets of images be associated, thus enabling oscillation between these perspectives? Equally, would the stream of association to the cue "run" oscillate between participation in a first-person perspective on running and a third-person perspective of watching other people run? Such oscillations would be expected according to the theory being outlined in the present chapter.

Another possible location for future research is to focus upon joint activities and the way in which language is used to coordinate joint activities. The intersubjectivity of symbols arises out of the role of symbols in coordinating social activities. What symbols mean can only be diagnosed by what they are doing within a given context, by examining what impact they are having upon others within that context. And often, I have argued, that meaning has little to do with the propositional content of the given statement. We all know that statements such as "You sit down and relax, put your feet up, while I prepare the dinner" does not mean what it proposes to mean. Within any social activity, whether it be collaborative or conflictual, there are divergent perspectives and usually a division of labour. In such contexts, language structures the divergent perspectives, fixing positions and perspectives, enabling speakers to direct the behaviour of one person without directing the behaviour of everyone. How can it be that everyone hears the same utterances, and understands the same utterances, yet reacts differently? At the level of assumptions, there is a web of intersubjectivity and each member of the group must have an internalised model of the group and their place within the group, and it is this taken-for-granted, intersubjective background that enables communication. A microanalysis of how individuals organise themselves within joint activity and how they use language to do this could further reveal the intersubjective nature of symbols.

However, the evidence for a Meadian theory of the symbol, I suggest, extends beyond empirical research, and into the domain of aesthetics. The intersubjective nature of "I" has been dramatically actualized in a poem by Brion Gysin (1958/2007) entitled, "I am that I am." When Moses asked God his name, he reputedly said "I am that I am" (Exodus 3: 14). Gysin takes this biblical phrase, breaking it down to individual words, and then recombines it in many different permutations. Thus, the phrase, "I am that I am" is followed by permutations such as, "am I that? I am," "I that I am, am," "That I am I am," and "Am that I, am I?" and so on. The poem continues in the same vein, cycling through the possible permutations of "I am that I am." It is the aesthetic effect of the poem that I want to point to. Each permutation





### 36 *Semiotic foundations*

seems to conjure a new meaning. The words, or symbols, within the phrase, “I am that I am” seem to adapt to each new permutation, producing a new meaning. The reason for this is the deictic words in the poem, which enable a shifting of meaning with each configuration. But more than this, there is also a sliding of positions. As one permutation follows another, the poem saturates terms to such an extent that their meaning becomes unfixed, applying to nothing and everything at the same time. Consider the meaning of “I” within the poem. Does the “I” refer to God? Or to Brion Gysin? Or, perhaps, it is the “I” of the text that is speaking? Or, given that it is the reader who is reading, maybe the “I” refers to the “I” of the reader? Or maybe it refers to all the previous readers? Or to every possible reader? The aesthetic effect is to produce an indeterminate space of possible, shifting and overlapping meanings that coexist. What makes this effect possible? If language and symbols had clearly defined propositional meaning, if every sign had a clear and singular signified, then such an effect could not be possible. This aesthetic effect, I suggest, is produced because of the intersubjective nature of the symbolic.

#### Note

1 I am grateful for this data set being freely available for download from the Psychonomic Society at [www.psychonomic.org/archive](http://www.psychonomic.org/archive).

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*The intersubjective nature of symbols* 37

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