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# In the stillness of the fullness of time: relations of immediacy and simultaneity in the semiotics of Peirce and Saussure

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**Abstract:** The concept of “the synchronic” factors prominently in Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralist semiotic theory, while that of “the immediate” is of central importance in the post-1903 pragmaticist semiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce. Although the two sign theories are often characterized as fundamentally different, a point of articulation between the two is apparent when synchrony and immediacy are examined closely in their respective theoretical and semiotic contexts. In this regard, both the Peircean and the Saussurean traditions may be observed to deal comparably with a condition designated here as *sign pregnancy*. This point of articulation depends on the recognition of a potential aspect inherent in the definition given to the synchronic dimension of Saussure’s approach.

**Keywords:** Immediate Interpretant; Immediate Object; sign pregnancy; synchronic linguistics

## 1 Introduction

The question of how (if at all) the semiotic traditions of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce might best be understood in relation to one another has given rise to much discussion across the disciplines embracing semiotic theory since the emergence of the field many decades ago. Some of the leading Peirce Studies scholars in philosophy and semiotics have rejected the suggestion of any kind of basic alignment, deeming the two approaches fundamentally different and incompatible (Short 2007: 16; Shapiro 1983: 7; Singer 1984: 4–6). Scholars in biological, linguistic, and cultural anthropology, on the other hand, continue to assume, without much objection, that a basic congruence, or what Michael Shapiro has identified as a “point of tangency” (Shapiro 1983: 6), exists between Peirce’s notion of the symbol and Saussure’s conceptualization of the linguistic sign (Daniel 1984, 1996; Deacon 1997; Gal and Irvine 2019; Geertz 1973; Keane 1997; Kohn 2013; Rappaport 1979; Parmentier

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1994).<sup>1</sup> A clear consensus on the question of the relationship between the two approaches has yet to emerge. It is a question that retains its salience, however, given the influence that the two traditions have had and continue to have, often in combination (intentional or unwitting), on the development of so many fields of theoretical inquiry in the humanities and social sciences.

It is the purpose of this essay to suggest a theoretical perspective that can effectively identify a qualified alignment between the two approaches of Saussure and Peirce. It is an alignment that potentially affords the integrated and productive use of both theories. This perspective brings into focus a point, not of tangency, but, perhaps more ambitiously, of what might be termed *articulation* between the Saussurean and Peircean legacies. “Articulation,” here, is used in a broadly kinesiological sense. That is, the two theories, if properly oriented toward one another, may be observed to present an area of conceptual alignment that can serve as a juncture of formal coherence, a locus of dynamic interrelationship. This point of articulation, it is herein suggested, affords movements of thought from one body of theory into and through the other and back again. As such, the point of articulation has the potential to enable the two sign theories, different as they may be in so many regards, to act in intelligent coordination, much as the bones of an arm and those of a shoulder girdle, if they are properly aligned, can together join in the performance of a single coherent gesture, one that neither part of the skeletal system, moving in isolation, could produce on its own. While the sign theories of Peirce and Saussure may well be described as being as different from one another as the bones of an arm are from those of a shoulder girdle, nonetheless, the two theories might still be able to move as one coordinated system by virtue of something like an inter-semiotic ball and socket joint, a mutually co-constituted point of articulation.

The point of articulation considered here is by no means unknown. Roman Jakobson and certain of his students, among others, were well aware of it, although they did not characterize it in the terms that will here be employed (Portis-Winner 1994). However, it has been relatively neglected in comparative work on Peirce and Saussure. This may be because the point is only evident in relation to the later post-1903 versions of Peirce’s semiotic, and these are less often used in comparative projects. However, it is more likely due to the fact that the point, once identified, appears just as vulnerable to the same objections of incompatibility that have been raised in relation to the Peircean symbol/Saussurean sign point of tangency. The

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<sup>1</sup> Ness and Coleman (2023) provide a detailed account of this discussion in anthropological discourse. It should be noted that Paul Manning (2012) and, more significantly, Richard Parmentier (1994) could be considered exceptions to this generalization, although Parmentier, while he draws contrasts between Saussure and Peirce at virtually every other opportunity, indicates that an equivalence between Saussure’s “sign” and Peirce’s “symbol” is, at least for some purposes, valid (1994: 103).

most frequently sited of these, and arguably the most compelling, since it focuses directly on what is identified as the basic relational character of each theory, argues that such comparisons erroneously conflate signs that are in Saussure's theory defined as static, binary (or dyadic) oppositions on the one hand, with those in Peirce's theory, which are defined as dynamic, triadic processes, on the other. The perspective here developed will attempt to show that this objection, among others that will arise, is not insurmountable.

Objections being what they may, the specific point of articulation at issue in what follows is evident in relation to two distinct kinds of sign relations that are identified in Saussurean and Peircean theory respectively. These are:

- 1) the sign relations that are identified as “synchronic” in Saussure's *Course in general linguistics* (2009 [1916]: 99–136) and
- 2) the sign relations that are identified as “Immediate”<sup>2</sup> in Peirce's later 1903–1908 elaborations of his triadic sign.

The theoretical perspective brought to bear on these relations and which justifies their capacity to create a functional point of articulation recognizes and foregrounds two key foundational principles, both of which are explicitly recognized in the originating texts of each body of theory. These are:

- 1) the primacy of temporally dynamic (in Saussure's terms “diachronic”) patterning in all sign relations and
- 2) the living, evolving nature of all semiotic forms, both linguistic (in Saussure's terms) and more broadly symbolic (in Peirce's).

Seen through this temporally grounded, evolutionary lens, both Peircean and Saussurean forms of sign relations – synchronic as well as Immediate – may be interpreted as exhibiting a common formal quality that will be referred to in what follows as sign *pregnancy*. That is, both kinds of sign relations may be understood as actualizable but as yet still only “pre-actualized” or on-the-verge-of-forming sign relations in actuality. As such, they both possess a limited capacity to determine and/or constrain actualized forms of meaning-making (Symbol forms of semiosis in Peirce's terms or linguistic speech acts of *parole* in Saussure's).

After a review of the definitions given for each of the two kinds of semiotic, the essay proceeds to a discussion of the semiotic and philosophical issues that may appear to forestall this point of articulation. It then illuminates the character of sign pregnancy as it is manifest in both Immediate and synchronic sign relations. The

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<sup>2</sup> In order to recognize Peirce's use of certain concepts as technical labels, the formal labels he gave to his classes and classifications of signs will be capitalized. Saussure's terminology will remain in lower case in keeping with the style of his (translated) text.

essay concludes with a discussion that briefly suggests a few possibilities for how the “ball” of Saussurean synchronic sign relations can fit into the “socket” of Peirce’s post-1903 expanded theory of the triadic sign, forming a global point of articulation across which analytical activity involving both theories may be pursued coherently for a variety of purposes. These include analyses that may generate additional meta-semiotic insights into both the Saussurean and Peircean approaches themselves and their respective legacies, particularly with regard to the question of semiotic forms of determinism in language and in symbolism more broadly considered.

## 2 Immediate and synchronic sign relations defined

### 2.1 Peirce’s immediate sign triad

Focusing first on Peirce’s Immediate triadic sign relations, the Immediate sign triad initially appears in Peirce’s sign theory sometime after 1902 (Ransdell 2007). It is explicated in detail in a letter to Victoria Lady Welby, where it is identified as the triadic relation that defines both its Object and its Interpretant as these perform internally within the sign itself (1904, SS: 32; Jappy 2017: 42–43). This Immediate triadic relation remained integral to Peirce’s sign theory as he developed it in his 1904–1908 semiotic writings. It appears literally and figuratively at its core, constituting its centerpiece, and performing as the germinating seed of semiosis.

To elaborate briefly, the final 1903–1908 period of Peirce’s work on semiotic is characterized by expansion. That is, Peirce expanded his theory of the triadic sign by subdividing its three components – what he had previously identified as its three “correlates” (1903, EP2:290) – into six aspects. The Object correlate of earlier work was divided into two, one of them being the Immediate Object (Oi).<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the Interpretant correlate was divided into three variants, one of them, again, being the Immediate Interpretant (Ii). As a consequence, many more varieties of sign relations

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<sup>3</sup> While alternative forms of abbreviating the correlate variants of the hexadic sign are currently in use, the form that is employed here follows that developed by David Savan (1916–1992) for his introductory text to Peirce’s full semiotic (1988). Savan’s approach has been adopted because it most effectively preserves the integrity of the triadic correlate structure that is maintained in Peirce’s later expanded sign theory by leaving the initial for the triadic correlate itself in the first position and capitalized and, then, adding the specific variant of the correlate referenced after it in lower case. The abbreviations here use lower case instead of subscript (Savan’s method) for the second initial. Otherwise, the method of abbreviation is consistent with Savan’s.

became conceivable beyond the ten classes that Peirce had identified in 1903 using the more basic, three-correlate, triadic structure (1903, EP:296). Peirce scholar, Tony Jappy, has characterized this expanded model of the Peircean sign relations as the “hexadic” model, given its six-correlate structure (Jappy 2017, 2024). Jappy’s term will be employed in what follows.

The basic relational character of the hexadic sign relation, despite its expansion, remains fundamentally triadic in form. That is, the Representamen (what Peirce sometimes identifies simply as the “sign” in these writings), the Object, and the Interpretant correlates retain their prominence as the only three named relational aspects of the sign, even in the hexadic form. The additional correlates of the hexadic sign relation serve, not to further diversify the character of the sign relation, but rather to provide a magnification of the evolutionary process of semiosis as Peirce understood it to be unfolding in and through time. The hexadic sign model, in sum, diagrams the manner in which the growing movement of a process of semiosis progresses as it can be observed to pass through different stages over the course of its life, moving through different modes of being and achieving different grades or levels of reality in so doing. The expansion, in this regard, indicates Peirce’s ongoing concern with evolutionary theory – always a central interest in his scientific and philosophical thinking.<sup>4</sup> It also foregrounds his desire to bring his semiotic into line with the leading evolutionary philosophers of the period, Henri Bergson prominently among them (1911, SS:142).

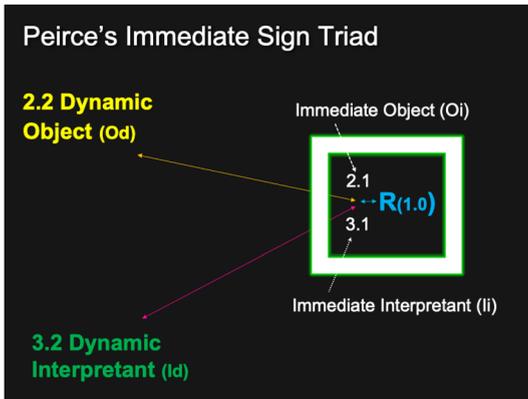
The Immediate correlates of the hexadic sign (Oi and Ii) together with the first correlate of the hexadic sign relation, the Representamen (abbreviated here as “R”), form the Immediate sign triad of Peirce’s hexadic sign (correlates 1.0, 2.1, and 3.1 or R/Oi/Ii; see Figure 1). Peirce drew a strong contrast between the Immediate correlates of the hexadic sign and the two correlates he termed the “Dynamical” or “Dynamoid,” or, as they will be identified here, the “Dynamic” sign correlates of the hexadic model. These consist of:

- 1) the Dynamic Object (correlate 2.2; abbreviated as “Od”) and
- 2) the Dynamic Interpretant (correlate 3.2; abbreviated as “Id”).

The Dynamic correlates are defined as having an existence that is actually independent of the sign relation in which they participate, even while they also perform integral roles in the sign relation in certain ways. The Dynamic Object, in other words, is the Object “in itself,” as Peirce explains (1904, SS:32; Jappy 2017:42–43). The Dynamic Interpretant, similarly, is the Interpretant that in fact “is produced” regardless of how the triadic relation is meant to be understood (1904, SS:32; Jappy 2017: 42–43). The Immediate Interpretant (Ii), in contrast, is the Interpretant that the

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<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Vincent Colapeitro for his biographical commentary on Peirce in this regard.



**Figure 1:** Diagram of Peirce's immediate sign triad (correlates 1.0, 2.1, 3.1 shown inside the box) as it relates to the dynamic correlates (2.2, 3.2) of the hexadic sign relation (the sixth variant of the hexadic sign relation, sometimes designated as the “final” interpretant [3.3], is not shown here).

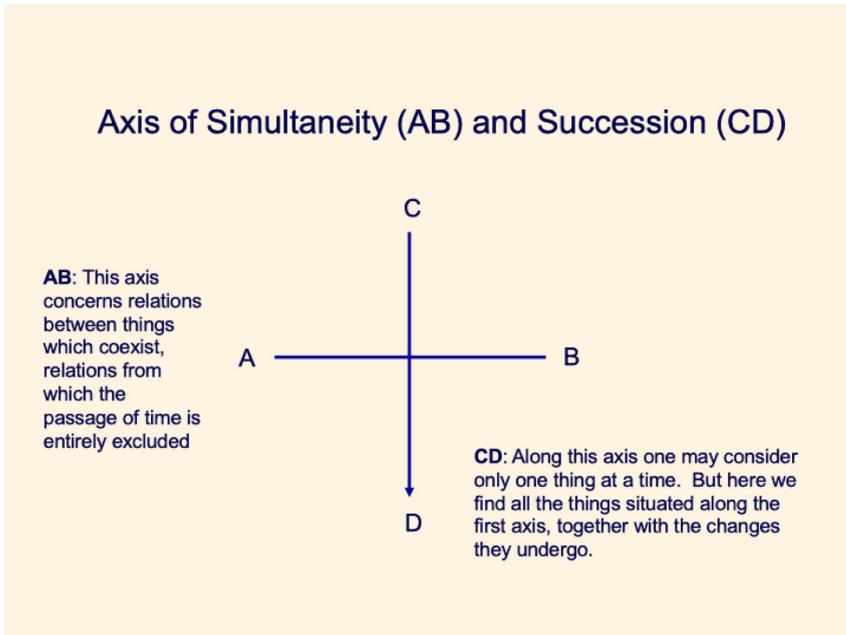
sign, as Peirce explains, is “calculated to produce, or naturally might be expected to produce” (1909, SS:110). It constitutes a given sign’s possible and inherent “interpretability” prior to any actual interpretation of it (1909, SS:110). The Immediate Object (Oi), for its part, is the Object as the Representamen (R) is capable of representing it, regardless of any actual Object that might exist independently of the triadic relation (1908, EP2:482). The Immediate Object can at best “hint” at the Dynamic Object that it is meant to represent. Peirce described the Immediate Object (Oi) as “within” the sign (1908, SS:83), while the Dynamic Object he characterized as the reality “without” the sign, the Object that exists regardless of how the sign might represent it (1908, SS:83). Early on in his development of the hexadic sign, Peirce went so far as to describe the Dynamic Object (Od) as a “dark underlying something” that could never be known or approached except via signs of it that represent various aspects of it (Peirce MS599.35 c.1902, as cited in Ransdell 2007).

Viewed from a theoretical standpoint, the Immediate relations of the triadic sign must be understood as *nothing* other than the creations of the triadic sign relation in which they are participating. Unlike, the Dynamic correlates, the Immediate correlates of Peirce’s hexadic sign derive their distinctive quality of immediacy precisely from the circumstance that they live, move, and have their being as well as their meaning wholly and completely within the confines of the triadic sign relation in which they participate. To the extent that they inhere “in” or “within” the triadic Sign, they are literally figments of its (growing) imagination (1908, EP2:482; 1908, SS:83).

The triadic relation of the Immediate correlates of Peirce's hexadic sign relation, in this regard, may be understood to form a "closed" sign system as far as their epistemological and semiotic character is concerned. Their identity and their very being, as well as their knowability and their meaningfulness, depend entirely on the relations of copresence created and sustained within the Immediate sign relation itself. As such a closed system, they are comparable to the sign relations identified by Saussure as "synchronic." They have no relationship to what might be termed any extra-semiotic reality, much as Saussure's linguistic signs are understood to have no identity outside the linguistic systemic structure within which they, too, are generated.

## 2.2 Saussure's synchronic sign relations

Saussurean semiotic theory similarly recognizes sign relations of co-present, coordinated semiotic correlates, concepts or "signifieds" whose identity is wholly a function of relations within their given semiotic system or, in Saussure's terms, *langue*. These relations are identified in Saussure's *Course in general linguistics* as



**Figure 2:** Saussure's synchronic and diachronic dimensions of language (2009 [1916]:80).

“synchronic.” They are described as being situated along a one-dimensional linear figure that is termed the “axis of simultaneity” (see Figure 2).

The verbal description of the axis of simultaneity specifies that, along this dimensional span, sign relations all share the character of “coexistence.” To quote the *Course*, the axis of simultaneity describes, “relations between things which coexist, relations from which the passage of time is entirely excluded” (2009 [1916]: 80).

Shortly after this initial description appears, it is elaborated further in one specific way, a way whose importance for the science of synchronic linguistics cannot be overstated. The elaboration identifies a particular character that all sign relations of coexistence situated on the axis of simultaneity exhibit: that of collectively perceivable *systematicity*. This elaboration appears in a statement that defines the mission of synchronic linguistics as follows:

Synchronic linguistics will be concerned with logical and psychological connexions between coexisting items constituting a *system*, as perceived by the same collective consciousness. (2009 [1916]: 98 emphasis mine)

The characteristic of generally recognizable systematicity – the linchpin on which the whole of structuralist semiological analysis of the Saussurean approach comes to depend – is in this passage attributed specifically and exclusively to sign relations of coexistence situated on the axis of simultaneity. Simultaneity and systematicity are in this way inextricably linked. Their linkage in part provides the justification for the argument that linguistic signs, both in form (signifier or sound image) and in content (signified or concept), are not related to or dependent upon anything outside or external to the linguistic system of relations itself for their definition. Like the correlates related in Peirce’s Immediate sign triad, Synchronic signs operate within the confines of a closed relational system.

To underscore the exclusiveness of the association of systematicity with synchronic sign relations, another statement in the *Course* describes the contrasting field of linguistic study, “diachronic” linguistics, as composed of sign relations that are situated on a different axis, the axis of succession. This axis is diagrammed as running perpendicular to and intersecting with the axis of simultaneity (see Figure 2). The *Course* contrasts the two branches of linguistics situated on these two intersecting axes as follows:

Diachronic linguistics on the other hand will be concerned with connexions between sequences of items not perceived by the same collective consciousness, which replace one another *without themselves constituting a system*. (2009 [1986]: 98; emphasis mine)

By framing the two fields of linguistic study in this way, the *Course* appears to assert a radical difference between the two kinds of sign relations situated on each respective axis. They are identified as mutually exclusive. However, this characterization is undermined to a considerable extent by the methodological comments that follow their description. In these comments, although the two axes and their respective subfields of linguistic study are defined as mutually exclusive with regard to the sign relations on which they focus, the reason given for this differentiation appears to be practical rather than empirical or evidence-based. That is, the two axes and the relations situated on them are said to be studied exclusively in the manner that they are for the purpose of organizing and simplifying a certain methodological approach to their scientific study. The *Course* states in this methodological regard:

It should be added that the more complex and rigorously organized a system of values is, the more essential it becomes, on account of this very complexity, to study it separately in terms of the two axes. [...] The multiplicity of signs, which we have already invoked to explain linguistic continuity, precludes absolutely any attempt to study simultaneously relations in time and relations within the system.

This is why we must distinguish two branches of linguistics. (2009 [1916]: 81 [117])

The division of the object of study, language, into two domains, represented by the two axes of succession and simultaneity, is in this way explained to be a methodological necessity. The axes, in other words, do not attempt to diagram the unified reality of human language as it is to be found in its actual contexts of operation.

This methodological justification for the axial division is also evident in another statement that succinctly describes the intersecting relation of the axis of simultaneity with the axis of succession. In describing this interrelation, the *Course* specifies that,

[...] here [on the axis of succession] we find all the things situated along the first axis [the axis of simultaneity], together with the changes they undergo. (2009: 80)

In other words, the integrated reality of language is situated on the axis of succession, and this axis includes all of the relations that are situated upon the axis of simultaneity. The reverse is not the case. It is only due to the complex “multiplicities” that attend to the study of linguistic sign relations in their diverse entirety that the two axes are formulated so as to appear as though they might be understood as existing independently of one another. This divide-and-conquer approach is articulated as follows:

Everything is synchronic which relates to the static aspect of our science, and diachronic everything which concerns evolution. Likewise *synchrony* and *diachrony* will designate respectively a linguistic state and a phase of evolution. (2009: 81 [117]; emphasis in text)

In its intent to study linguistic complexity manageably, the *Course* describes linguistic systematicity as though it can only be found in a timeless condition, even though the *Course* also expressly denies that any aspect of language is in reality situated in an absolutely timeless realm. The statement of axial interrelation asserts unambiguously that diachrony is always the true condition of all aspects of linguistic sign relations, simultaneous as well as successive. This becomes critically important in the argument for articulation of Immediate and synchronic sign relations that follows.

### 3 Differences in relational, temporal, and metaphysical character

At least three problems are immediately apparent in the attempt to demonstrate the compatibility of Peirce's Immediate sign triad with Saussure's synchronic sign relations as they are set forth above. First, there is the often-cited problem of relational incompatibility mentioned above. Synchronic relations have generally been understood as binary oppositions or dyadic in structure, while Immediate sign relations are defined explicitly as irreducibly triadic. Second, there is the problem of temporal incompatibility. Synchronic relations are explicitly defined as timeless or static structures, while Immediate sign relations are generally assumed to be part of a complex process that is primordially dynamic in temporal character. Third, there is the problem of metaphysical status. Synchronic sign relations are explicitly defined as relations of coexistence, while Immediate sign relations, as will be discussed below, are identified as potential rather than as existential or actual in character. Each of these apparent obstacles to articulation, however, can be overcome if the broader context of evolutionary dynamism within which both kinds of relations are conceptualized as being situated is foregrounded. The following discussion will seek to demonstrate this, addressing each problem in turn.

#### 3.1 Relational compatibility: dyadic versus triadic relations

The characterization of Saussure's synchronic sign relations as "dyadic," even while it remains the predominant view of Saussurean structuralist sign theory, has not gone unchallenged. Jacques Fontanille and others working to expand semiotic theory into the study of discourse, for example, have argued for the recognition of the human body as a third element in the Saussurean sign relation that is positioned in

between the signifier and the signified. As such, the body interlocks the signifier and the signified into a triadic formation (Fontanille 2007: 2, 16–17; Padoan 2021: 194). Fontanille's approach suggests that it is possible to understand Peirce's Interpretant as being an implicit aspect of Saussure's theory of the linguistic sign, making it a triadic theory in operation if not in explicit definition. The present essay concurs with this perspective, although it seeks to present an argument that uses the concepts and definitions that are given in the *Course* to make its case.

The perspective adopted here is as follows: Binary characterizations of Saussurean sign theory would seem to overlook, or at least inadequately explain, the all-important feature of coexistence and the capacity for systematicity that is attributed to coexistent synchronic sign relations. To be sure, individual relations of contrast and opposition that are defined and exemplified in the *Course* in and of themselves can be viewed as binary in character. However, the *Course* also recognizes, even emphasizes, that these oppositional relations do not exist simply as individual dualisms. On the contrary, explicit recognition is given to their collective relational character. Such a view necessitates the development of a more complex view of synchronic sign structures than a theory composed of isolated, exclusively binary relations is capable of conceptualizing.

Even more to the point, however, is the insistence the *Course* places on the systematic character of collectively coexisting oppositions. In this regard, coexistential relations are asserted to be themselves interrelated, giving the whole complex the meta-relational form of a system. The attribution of systematicity in effect makes some recognition of a relational structure that transcends a pure binary opposition imperative. Systematicity as an attribute of any relational structure cannot itself be defined via oppositional relations alone, since oppositions in and of themselves can only characterize difference. The most basic relational form that can diagram or define any kind of systematicity is the form of a connecting link. Such linking forms and the concepts that represent them are inherently and irreducibly triadic.

In sum, the claim that the oppositional relations of coexistence situated on the axis of simultaneity must be understood to form a larger relational whole or system and the assertion that this system can itself be made available as such to a collective consciousness necessitates the recognition of a relational structure that transcends dualistic relations of mere contrast and opposition. In its very capacity to form a complex structure – a system in which one relation of contrast can operate as a sign, even a causal sign, of others – the relations of the axis of simultaneity achieve at least a triadic level of relational complexity. In essence, the systemic character of the axis of simultaneity creates a semiotic dynamic among oppositions of oppositions, enabling them to co-perform as Interpretants of one another in a manner comparable to sign relations of a Peircean Immediate sign triad.

### 3.2 Temporal character: static versus continuous

Considerably more difficult than the question of relational structure is that of temporal character. The *Course* identifies synchronic sign relations as timeless or static, while Peirce's triadic signs are generally understood as temporally dynamic or processual. The two approaches may well seem basically incompatible on this point. However, even this fundamental difference can be overcome if the broader theoretical context of each approach is taken into consideration. In this regard, the hexadic structure of Peirce's 1904–1908 semiotic is of critical importance, as is Saussure's stipulation that sign relations situated on the axis of simultaneity – that is synchronic relations – can all nonetheless be found along the axis of succession as well.

The problem can best be approached from the Peircean side. The term “Immediate” and its contrasting correlate term “Dynamic” are key concepts to consider in this regard. As a consequence of this expansion of his triadic theory, Peirce was able for the first time to isolate with some precision exactly that aspect of his theory that can be understood to correspond most closely to Saussure's axis of simultaneity. While the hexadic model as a whole diagrams a temporally continuous process of sign activity (semiosis), the Immediate correlates of the triadic sign can be understood as “pre-processual” or “pre-temporal” in character. That is, these correlates diagram sign relations that have yet to be actually transmitted to a Dynamic (spatio-temporally instantiated) Interpretant (Id) from a Dynamic Object (Od). They are “*im*”-mediate in the sense that they have yet to undergo an actual process of mediation that would necessarily be spatially and temporally dynamic. Immediate sign relations serve merely as the potentially animating kernel of such movements, and as such they perform as the incipient, not the enacting, aspect of that mediation's taking place in actuality.

In this regard, the Immediate sign triad describes a relation of copresence that is comparable to a synchronic sign situated on the axis of simultaneity. While it might not be accurate to say, as the *Course* does, that “the passage of time is entirely excluded” from Peirce's conceptualization of Immediate sign relations, it would be valid to describe them as relations from which the passage of time is only potentially included. Immediate sign relations, in this regard, are the one aspect of Peirce's hexadic sign relation that can be understood as comparable to synchronic signs as far as their temporal character is concerned. Moreover, the situatedness of the Immediate sign triad, nested as it is inside the triadic sign relation that is formed by Dynamic sign relations (Od and Oi), themselves situated within the ongoing processual flow of semiosis, parallels the situatedness of synchronic sign relations on the axis of simultaneity as it intersects with and can be found within the temporal vector of the axis of succession at their shared point of conjuncture.

Given the similarity identified above, no further discussion of the problem from the Saussurean side would seem to be required. However, the parallel identified between the situatedness of Immediate sign relations with that of synchronic sign relations raises an intriguing question with regard to the methods by which synchronic sign relations and the axis of simultaneity may be studied. This question will be addressed at some length below, as it proves helpful in the discussion of the third and final problem of metaphysical status that will be addressed in the following section.

The *Course*, as cited above, specifies that synchronic sign systems should be studied in isolation from diachronic signs, and to date no attempt to depart from this recommendation appears to have been made. Yet, this methodologically driven isolation must be acknowledged as necessitating the imposition of what can only be considered an artificial semiotic environment as a basis for inquiry into these sign relations – an environment in which a false absolute dissociation is made between synchronic relations and the real context of their actual existence. While the abstract character of the diagram of the axes of simultaneity and succession in its imagined representation of a kind of pure or ideal relationship between the two might suggest that such a hypothetical disembodied state of being is asserted as being in reality the case for synchronic sign relations, this would be a misleading and unwarranted interpretation of the diagram. Synchronic relations are explicitly *not* conceptualized in the *Course* as occurring in a semiotic realm that is itself existentially or absolutely timeless. Their universe of being is *not* defined as absolutely disconnected from the living realities that are actually evolving in human linguistic experience and beyond. Quite the contrary. The *Course* states explicitly that synchronic signs are “linguistic facts” that users employ in the everyday contexts of life. As such, these sign relations can actually bring about certain state-like modes of conscious awareness when speakers are engaged in using them (2009 [1916]: 81).

Given the explicit identification of synchronic sign relations as being situated at the intersection of the axes of simultaneity and succession, the possibility arises for pursuing inquiry into synchronic sign relations and their axis as they, in fact, are experienced in lived reality and not as if they were formed in some timeless realm of imagined, disembodied mental relations. What might it mean, in this regard, to study synchronic sign systems “in the wild,” so to speak, in such a natural environment? Such inquiry would need to observe for synchronic sign systematicity as it manifests in situations actually experienced by speakers in the flow of ongoing communicative practice.

Another illustration given in the *Course* that is also used to represent the manner in which synchronic and diachronic sign relations intersect as a unified linguistic reality may offer some assistance in this regard. This illustration presents a detailed drawing of the internal organic, cellular structures of a plant that has had both a

transverse and a longitudinal section cut away. The cuts made make the systemic relations of the plant's component structures in both its horizontal and vertical dimensions of growth visible (2009: 87). The transverse cross-section in this manner reveals a "slice" of a living, three-dimensional organism with all its component elements as they exist in actuality but which under normal circumstances are not available to visual observation as long as the plant exists in its natural state. The cross-section is drawn realistically so as to show how its simultaneously coexistent relations occur as *nothing other* than one ordinarily invisible aspect of the material body of the living, growing plant itself. That is, the synchronic relations evident in the plant are constituted by its changing organic material and cannot be dissociated from it without ceasing to exist themselves. The plant illustration, in this regard, serves to depict the embedded presence of internal synchronic relations that are, at any stage of the plant's life, part and parcel of its embodied, continuously changing life form.

Similarly, synchronic sign systems are conceptualized as not empirically isolatable from diachronic realities, even though they may be represented imaginatively in this manner. In actuality, synchronic systems exist inherently as an aspect of temporally dynamic sign relations. While they may often be imperceptible to consciousness in ordinary experience (as is the cross-sectional view of a plant), this does not negate their having been constituted by and in diachronic sign events and processes – the people, places, and things involved in their production.

The plant drawing suggests that the identification, recognition, and study of synchronic sign systems and their axis of simultaneity as they can be found to manifest in lived semiotic experience is possible. The experience of such relations can be understood to occur in any communicative process where the passage of time, experientially speaking, is entirely excluded from conscious awareness and the diachronic continuity of the axis of succession is suspended or disrupted in participants' awareness by an all-consuming present moment. In such experiences, as the perceivable flow of communication comes to a standstill, a hiatus in which the shared understanding and/or rules of comprehension normally in the background for that particular moment may come to the fore. When this happens, the whole system of synchronic relations may begin to make its presence felt or known. In other words, the "static" or state-like character of these relations is produced *performatively* in actual practice as a consequence of the ongoing enactment of coordinated co-action or co-positioning that is made evident by a lack of active, eventful progression or perceivable change in the processing of signs.

Many examples of pronounced experiences of the state-like character of synchronic linguistic practice come to mind. They occur in the wake of shockingly inappropriate speech acts, for example, as participants fall silent, having no idea how to respond or go on together. They can occur in moments of sheer "dumb-struck" surprise after an exceptionally well-delivered and unexpected comeback line is

uttered in a joking interaction. I once attended a classroom lecture given by a Japanese classical dancer, who at one point chose to illustrate for the students how a dancer's fan could on occasion be used to represent a sword in battle. Without warning, he opened his fan in a sudden laser-like arc and a thunderous crashing sound reverberated throughout the room. The sound caught the students completely off guard. They froze instantly and the room became completely silent. The concrete immediacy produced by the lecturer's performance brought the students into instant copresence with him. A near-absolute degree of communicative synchrony resulted. The sense of interconnectedness among the participants became palpable as "time stood still" in the wake of the demonstration.

Experiences of the rupture of a given axis of succession can also become pronounced in the occurrence of what sociolinguists have termed "rich points" (Agar 1996). Rich points are produced in speech events when members of diverse speech communities unwittingly employ different semiotic systems of comprehension and interpretation with one another. When this happens, participants may fail to accurately comprehend each other's communications, even if they share the same linguistic resources. Rich points may produce experiences in which the flow of sign transmissions and the experience of time's passing embodied in them come to a halt when moments of uncertainty or confusion necessitate that a process of communication be put "on hold" until some new form of understanding emerges. Multiple systems of synchronic relations may be brought to conscious awareness in this experience. I once entered a shop in Montreal, Canada, for example, where a salesclerk asked me in English as I approached the counter if I would like to take a closer look at some of the merchandise stored under the glass. I hesitated, not sure I wanted to indicate I was that serious about a purchase. After a brief instant, the clerk repeated her question in French. She interpreted my hesitation as a sign that I would be more comfortable speaking in French. The slight hiatus had produced a rich point when the different rule systems the clerk and I were following in the interaction had momentarily, partially become available for conscious review.

Conversely, a pronounced experience of a static linguistic situation may also occur in communicative processes that require rapt attention and understanding, experiences in which participants are "spellbound" by whatever has come to lay claim on their attention. When pauses occur in these kinds of processes, when a player in a poker game, for example, pauses to make a decision on a bet as the others wait in silence for the information to flow again, the sense of time standing still can be extremely acute, not from a lack of comprehension, but from a depth of it.

In sum, there are countless varieties of communicative experience that may produce a particularly pronounced collective sense of synchrony and communicative simultaneity. When they happen, time seems to "hang in the balance" as an exceptionally significant speech act appears to be on the verge of taking place. As the

above examples illustrate, whether synchronic sign systems are encountered experientially in actual practice or whether they are studied as abstract theoretical constructs in imagined analysis, their temporal character remains essentially static or state-like. This condition allows the development of a point of articulation with Peircean Immediate sign relations. Whether the passage of time is entirely excluded in imagination or in experiential awareness, or whether it is only a potential not an actual presence, both kinds of relations treat the dynamic flow of time as an absence rather than as an active presence.

### 3.3 Metaphysical status: potential versus actual modes of being

The final problem here considered concerns the difference in metaphysical status assigned to Immediate and synchronic sign relations respectively. Metaphysical status refers to the mode of being and/or grade of reality that is attributed to these sign systems respectively. As noted above, Immediate sign relations are identified by Peirce as signs of possibility or potentiality in terms of their mode of being. Rather than being identified as “representational,” a term Peirce eventually abandoned in favor of the concept of mediation in his later work (1898, CP:4.3), Immediate sign relations are better understood as simultaneously “co-presentational” in triadic formation. They are potentially mediating, presently co-relating signs, conceptualized as pre-actual, pre-continuous, and communicatively pre-borne in their mutual relations of potentiality. As noted above, the relations they maintain are conceptualized as yet-to-be-transferred from any actually existing Object (Od) to any actually formed Interpretant (Id).

As the most initial stage of a given sign’s growth and life, Immediate sign relations are the aspect of the hexadic sign that is on the verge of bearing or making actual connections of meaning but which has not yet become involved in embodied, instantiated, fallible movements of significance. Synchronic sign relations, in contrast, are identified in the *Course* as relations of coexistence. As such, their mode of being is that of actuality, not mere possibility. The relations recognized as situated on the axis of simultaneity, in this metaphysical respect, appear to correspond to one of Peirce’s other modes of being, that of actuality (or Secondness), the mode of being that is identified with relations of spatio-temporal existence and instantaneity. The axis of succession, for its part, in its identification of semiotic relations of evolution and historical change is comparable to the mode of being of continuity (or Thirdness) in Peirce’s terms. This mode is similarly identified with relations of processual movement and evolutionary change.

In this metaphysical regard, there appears to be nothing set forth in the *Course* that identifies anything comparable to Peirce's relations of Immediacy (or Firstness), whose mode of being is that of possibility or potentiality. No axis of possibility, for example, is conceptualized in the *Course* that might form a third dimension of Saussure's axial diagram. No explicit recognition or analytical attention is given to the study of sign relations that might be characterized as virtual or potential sign relations. The signs of language as the *Course* conceives of them appear never to have been mere possibilities.

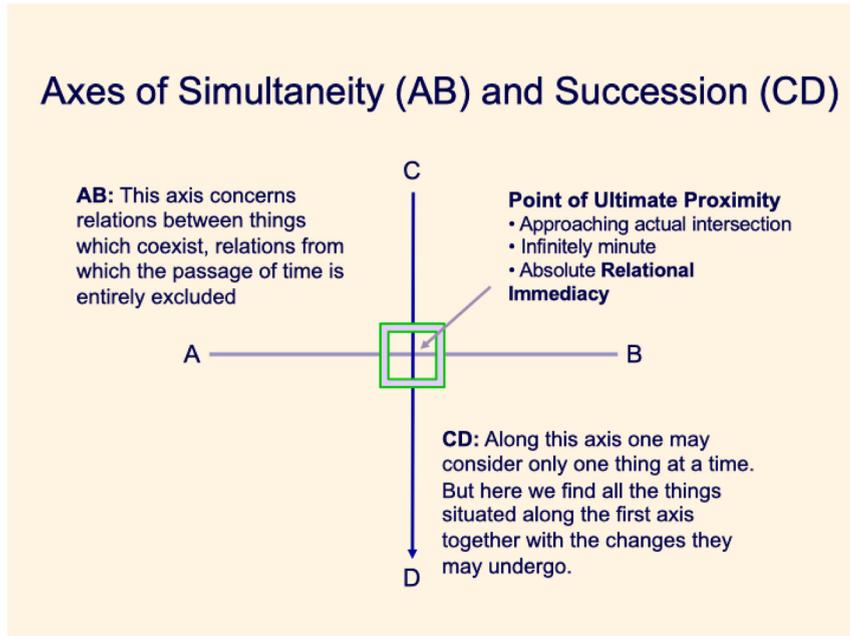
This difference of metaphysical status presents the greatest obstacle of the three problems for inter-semiotic articulation identified in this essay. Without doubt, it is the most difficult to attempt to overcome. Metaphysical differences between Immediate and synchronic sign systems are themselves expressions of much more complex differences: profound and sweeping differences in philosophical orientation, differences in disciplinary practice and objectives, differences deriving from the very different purposes for which each sign theory was originally designed and employed, and differences in cultural and historical circumstances (including linguistic differences) as they influenced the development and elaboration of each theory. A comprehensive discussion of these complex differences as they are articulated explicitly or indicated indirectly in the metaphysical or quasi-metaphysical commentary provided for each approach would be the subject of a far lengthier work. Only a partial resolution of this difference is offered below. However, it is hoped that even the very modest effort that is made here to identify one comparable metaphysical aspect – that of sign pregnancy – is enough to effectively support the claim that the point of articulation that has been identified can still be used feasibly.

The problem of sign pregnancy as a shared metaphysical status must necessarily be approached from the Saussurean side. The Immediate sign triad, in its character as a potential sign triad – a triad of copresence rather than coexistence – is by definition a pregnant sign relation in the Peircean semiotic. As such, it offers no complications. Relations of possibility or potentiality are necessarily recognized as wellsprings of living energy out of which new beings may emerge. The evolutionary orientation of the Peircean approach identifies growth as the universal aspect of all signs, whatever their mode of being. Signs of actuality, what Peirce termed Sinsigns, are signs that have grown into embodied, empirical being. Signs of generality or law, what Peirce termed Legisigns, are signs of continuous habitual, intelligence-cultivating growth. Signs of possibility, for their part, are signs of potentially embodied growth, signs that are on the verge of growing into living, existing forms of actuality. The condition of pregnancy, in this regard, is implicit in the definition of Immediate sign relations by virtue of their mode of being as evolutionary relations of animate possibility.

What might be understood as the pregnant aspect of synchronic sign systems, however, is not so easy to identify. Static relations of any kind generally appear to be not only timeless, but lifeless as well. In their changeless condition, they appear to have no capacity for life-giving growth. However, it can be argued, as it will be argued here, that any form of existent being possesses some kind of potential as well as actual character, even if that character becomes imperceptible in imagined, ideal renderings of it. Any form of existent being, by virtue of its very existence, is inherently endowed with the potential for ongoing existence. This is one inalienable aspect of its character as long as it does, in fact, exist. This argument holds true not only for individual existing organisms. It holds true for the living reality of Saussurean sign relations of collective coexistence as they are animated in actual practice as well. Relations of co-possibility and co-potentiality can be understood in this regard to inhere within relations of systemic coexistence situated along the axis of simultaneity. Sign pregnancy, the potential to generate anew the energy of an ongoing existent being, inheres necessarily in synchronic sign relations of actual practice as it does in Peirce's Dynamic sign relations, which necessarily contain within them the potential sign relations of Immediacy.

Conceptualized in this manner, the characteristic of pregnancy in synchronic signs would not need to be represented as an additional axis unto itself. Rather, it can be recognized as already represented in the twin axes diagram by the increasing proximity of the two axes as they can be seen to move closer and closer to one another in approaching their ultimate intersection. At the point of utmost co-axial proximity, not an instant before or after, but exactly on the verge of their coming to pass one another, the crossing of the Saussurean axes can be understood to represent in their interrelationship what in Peircean terms would be called a relation of immediacy. As they reach this intersectional ground zero, something like a virtual interrelationship between synchrony and diachrony that is entirely on the verge of actually happening but which has not quite happened yet, becomes apparent (see Figure 3). In this way, relationships characterizing the virtual, pregnant aspect of a given existent synchronic linguistic sign system may be recognized in the perspective set forth in the *Course*.

The pregnant, potential energy of Synchronic relations is, perhaps, easiest to appreciate in the experience of actual speech events whose purpose is to achieve and prolong communicative synchrony to the greatest possible extent. Such events often create what is characterized as a "pregnant" pause. When a public speaker steps up to a podium to introduce a famous personality, for example, and the audience falls silent, the speaker may draw out the pause. In so doing, the sense of potential energy intensifies collectively, and the room is said to become "charged." Similarly, when a parent of a bride at a wedding banquet rises and taps on a glass to indicate that they



**Figure 3:** The “pregnant” locus of synchronic sign relations is illustrated at the point where the two axes verge on crossing (Saussure 2009 [1916]: 80).

are preparing to make a toast to the happy couple, guests cease their talk in response. The longer the parent waits to commence, the quieter and more “pregnant” the silence will become.

This experience of synchronic energy in actual practice is not perceivable through the embodied senses. One doesn’t taste, touch, see, hear, or smell sign pregnancy. Rather, the quality is conveyed meta-sensorily, transmitted via kinetic life energy as such, as it permeates an embodied interpreter’s nervous system. It registers as a spine tingling, hair-raising, ghostly feeling, the feeling of the not-yet-but-any-moment presence of actual significant change. This is the lived experience that corresponds to what is represented abstractly in the crossing of the axes of simultaneity and succession at its very center if the intersection were to be magnified exponentially so that the exact point where the dimensional forms are on the threshold of passing is perceivable (see Figure 3).

With the identification of this pregnant aspect of synchronic sign relations, the point of articulation between synchronic and Immediate sign relations is brought into full alignment.

Whatever else their differences may be, sign pregnancy, in combination with relational systematicity and temporal immediacy, align the Saussurean and Peircean sign theories so as to allow for at least some forms of inter-semiotic inquiry. A few possibilities for consideration along these lines are suggested in the section that follows.

## 4 Discussion: potential inter-semiotic inquiry

The identification of the point of articulation between Saussurean synchronic and Peircean Immediate sign relations opens up a number of possible avenues of investigation for integrated inquiry. It is beyond the scope of this essay to do more than note a few apparent possibilities in hopes of providing a glimpse of what could be developed into productive fields of inquiry should further work along these lines be undertaken.

One possible direction focuses on the elaboration and development of Peirce's Immediate sign theory through the integration of advances that have been made in the tradition of Saussurean synchronic linguistics since its original formulation. As has been noted previously, the Immediate sign triad was recognized by Peirce only in his final years. His writings provide little more than a tentative and often inconsistent sketching out of these relations and of the hexadic sign relation more generally. Even the most basic identifying terminology of the hexadic sign correlate structure was never completely stabilized by Peirce. He acknowledged this incipient state of affairs in 1907, famously identifying himself as a pioneer or "first-comer" to the semiotic realm he had set about exploring. He saw himself as limited mainly to opening up the vast new semiotic territory he had recognized, giving attention only to some of its most important questions (1907, CP:5.488). Unfortunately, Peirce's hope of being joined by increasing multitudes of like-minded semiotic explorers who could bring about the fulfillment of his most highly elaborated semiotic vision did not materialize. Peirce's work on the hexadic sign, and the Immediate triadic relation it contained, remains underdeveloped even to the present day.

Synchronic sign relations, in contrast to Immediate sign relations, have been extensively studied as the primary subject matter of many branches of the Saussurean tradition. Elaborated through the concept of *langue*, they have been developed in relatively great detail compared to Peirce's hexadic sign theory. In view of the point of articulation here identified, this large body of work can be interpreted as developing the understanding of one particular type of Peircean Immediate sign relation. In Peirce's semiotic terms, it would be the specifically linguistic variant of Peirce's most highly evolved Immediate sign triad, the first correlate of which Peirce termed a Legisign (Jappy 2017:186), and thereafter also identified as a Type or

Famisign (1908, SS:84; CP:8.347). The mode of being of this first correlate (R/1.0) is that of regularity or rule-governed reality. It corresponds in this regard to that of the general sign relations of *langue*. Legisigns are actualized in practice as Tokens or Replicas, corresponding in their mode of being to the coexistent sign relations situated on an Axis of Simultaneity. The Immediate sign triad that forms in relation to a Legisign co-relates (that is, establishes a relationship of copresence) with an Immediate Object (Oi, correlate 2.1) that was identified by Peirce as a General Idea sign. It also co-relates with an Immediate Interpretant (Ii, correlate 3.1), that Peirce identified as a Relative sign (Jappy 2017:118; Peirce 1908 CP8.356–8.369). Both of these correlates correspond to the general qualities and characteristics of signs that are related to one another in synchronic sign systems. The General Idea of “blackness,” for example as it is contrasted with the Relative, “whiteness” in the color system of the *langue* of the English language forms one such Immediate sign triad.

The integration of synchronic linguistic theory into the study of the Immediate sign triads formed in linguistic Legisigns would substantially transform the understanding of Peircean hexadic sign theory. It might carry the added benefit of clarifying the potential usefulness of hexadic sign theory for structuralist and post-structuralist forms of linguistic inquiry and semiotic cultural study as well. In this latter regard, it could be noted that Peirce’s late 1906–1908 elaborations of his ten sign trichotomies, which expanded his ten-class typology of sign relations to 28 and then to 66 classes of relations, has the potential to provide a fine-grained analysis of the ways in which synchronic sign relations on the axis of simultaneity might be transformed and transmitted into those of diachronic relations on the axis of succession in the micro-contexts of ordinary language use. The ten trichotomies that organize these various sign relations identify blended correlate combinations that diagram with relative precision how Immediate correlates may be conveyed into Dynamic sign relations (as well as diachronically continuous ones) as these operate in both Type- and Token-level sign relations (1908 CP:8.363–8.376).

In addition to these forms of basic and exploratory inter-semiotic inquiry, another area where Peircean hexadic sign theory might conceivably contribute to structuralist and post-structuralist semiotics via the Immediate/synchronic point of articulation concerns debates arising around the issue of linguistic determinism and more specifically the capacity of synchronic systems to overdetermine interpretive and cognitive processes in the experience of their users. That is, the “always already” determinative power attributed to synchronic systems as they may be asserted to create veritable “prison houses” of semantic closure (Jamison 1972) remains a controversial issue that continues to underpin a wide variety of contemporary semiotic work in cultural and literary fields of inquiry. The nesting of synchronic sign relations within the Immediate triad of Peirce’s hexadic model, a model that is

itself also conceived explicitly in terms of processes of determination, albeit somewhat differently defined,<sup>5</sup> may at some future point be seen to provide a novel perspective on questions of linguistic determinism in this regard.

To elaborate briefly, hexadic sign theory, similarly to the linguistic determinist arguments of (post-)structuralist linguistics, supports the claim that synchronic sign relations have the power to determine all subsequent diachronic sign activity that would follow from their intersection with the axis of succession. In Peircean terms, all Interpretant sign relations that follow from the Immediate Interpretant (Ii) are indeed determined by their relation to this correlate variant (Jappy 2017: 86; Peirce 1908 SS:84–85). At the same time, however, Peircean hexadic sign theory does not grant absolute powers of determination to Immediate sign relations alone. These relations are themselves conceptualized as being determined by a non-Immediate relation. That is, they are themselves constrained and determined by their relation to a Dynamic Object (Od). A “vector” of determination, as Richard Parmentier has termed it, governs the determination of meaning in any given process of semiosis, and this vector does not originate in Immediate sign relations, even though they exert some degree of determinative power over its evolution (Parmentier 1994:5, 25–26). The ultimate determining source of the vector lies in Dynamic rather than Immediate Object relations (1908 SS: 84). The intermediary situation of Immediate sign relations in this way could enable a relatively dynamic view of the determinative relation of synchronic to diachronic signs as they are defined in the *Course* to emerge.

## 5 Conclusion

It remains to be seen, of course, whether or not any of these suggested avenues of inter-semiotic investigation, or others still to be imagined, might actually produce genuinely substantial results for the field of semiotics. Time and continued research alone will tell if the alignment here identified is in fact a true point of articulation,

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<sup>5</sup> Peirce’s definition of sign determination during the later stages of his work, as set forth perhaps most clearly and explicitly in a 1909 letter he wrote to William James, derives from the German term *bestimmen* (“to specialize”). The concept in Peirce’s later sign theory is used to refer to the constraints that are placed upon a process of sign transmission that serve to limit the range of interpretive variability or, if ignored, produce a failure of transmission (Peirce 1909 EP2:492–493 and CP:6.3470). Determination is not necessarily understood to carry a causal, positive force for Peirce, contrary to some of the more extreme forms of linguistic determinism. For more extensive discussions of the concept of determination in Peirce’s semiotic writings, see Ness 2023; Ransdell 2007; Skaggs 2018.

enabling the kind of coordinated study envisioned, or if it constitutes no more than another of Shapiro's relatively inconsequential points of tangency. Regardless of the actual outcome, however, further exploration would seem to be warranted, given what might be learned at this potential juncture, not only about these two extraordinary bodies of theory and their ongoing legacies, but more broadly about the semiotic phenomena both seek to analyze and understand.

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## Appendix A: Abbreviations to Peirce's works used in the text

CP: Peirce, Charles S. 1931–1935, 1958. *The collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. 8 Volumes. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss & Arthur W. Burks (eds). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

SS: Peirce, Charles S. & Victoria Welby-Gregory. 1977. *Semiotic and signification: The correspondence between C. S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*. Edited by Charles S. Hardwick. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

EP1: Peirce Charles S. 1992. *The essential Peirce: Volume 1: 1867–1893*. Edited by Nathan Houser & Christian J. Kloesel. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

EP2: Peirce, Charles S. 1998. *The essential Peirce, Volume 2: 1893–1913*. Edited by the Peirce Edition Project. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

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