Abstract: In The Symbolic Species (1997) Terrence Deacon identifies human verbal language acquisition as the first and foremost evolutionary threshold where symbol use happens, with all the concomitant adaptive advantages it affords, but along with these advantages in this book and elsewhere he alludes to certain disadvantages that result from symbols. To describe these disadvantages he uses words like maladaptation, parasitism, cognitive penumbra, and other hyperbolic terms. He does so offhandedly, either in connection with the results of some laboratory experiments, or simply in disconnected ominous generalizations, but never justifies these sign effects within the dominantly Peircean model of language acquisition that gives the book its title. In later works Deacon attempts to contextualize these generalizations within Richard Dawkins' theory of the meme. Deacon is sometimes disparaged for his supposedly imprecise or incorrect use of the sign theory of Charles Peirce to defend his claims about memes and symbols. The problem is not that Peirce should not be used in this way. In fact Deacon's book is a singular achievement in the application of Peirce. The problem is that Deacon's Peircean model is too simple. In fact Deacon's claim about the possible disadvantages of symbol use can be reinforced with a closer look at the mature, turn-of-the-century Peircean sign model. This preserves the theoretical integrity of The Symbolic Species and clarifies the relation between memes and signs.