

'Interpretant' (pub. 15.08.13-16:46). Quote in M. Bergman & S. Paavola (Eds.), *The Commens Dictionary: Peirce's Terms in His Own Words. New Edition*. Retrieved from <http://www.commens.org/dictionary/entry/quote-letters-william-james-7>.

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**Term:** Interpretant

**Quote:** Now let us pass to the Interpretant. I am far from having fully explained what the Object of a Sign is; but I have reached the point where further explanation must suppose some understanding of what the Interpretant is. The Sign creates something in the Mind of the Interpreter, which something, in that it has been so created by the sign, has been, in a mediate and *relative* way, also created by the Object of the Sign, although the Object is essentially other than the Sign. And this creature of the sign is called the Interpretant. It is created by the Sign; but not by the Sign *quâ* member of whichever of the Universes it belongs to; but it has been created by the Sign in its capacity of bearing the determination by the Object. It is created in a Mind (how far this mind must be real we shall see). All that part of the understanding of the Sign which the Interpreting Mind has needed collateral observation for is outside the Interpretant. I do not mean by "collateral observation" acquaintance with the system of signs. What is so gathered is *not* COLLATERAL. It is on the contrary the prerequisite for getting any idea signified by the sign. But by collateral observation, I mean previous acquaintance with what the sign denotes. Thus if the Sign be the sentence 'Hamlet was mad,' to understand what this means one must know that men are sometimes in that strange state; one must have seen madmen or read about them; and it will be all the better if one specifically knows (and need not be driven to *presume*) what Shakespeare's notion of insanity was. All that is collateral observation and is no part of the Interpretant. But to put together the different subjects as the sign represents them as related - that is the main of the Interpretant-forming. Take as an example of a Sign a genre painting. There is usually a lot in such a picture which can only be understood by virtue of acquaintance with customs. The style of the dresses for example, is no part of the *significance*, i.e. the deliverance, of the painting. It only tells what the *subject* of it is. *Subject* and *Object* are the same thing except for trifling distinctions. [—] But that which the writer aimed to point out to you, presuming you to have all the requisite collateral information, that is to say just the quality of the sympathetic element of the situation, generally a very familiar one - a something you probably never did so clearly realize before - *that* is the Interpretant of the Sign, - its 'significance.'

**Source:** Peirce, C. S. (1897-1909). *Letters to William James*. L [R] 224.

**References:** EP 2:493-4

**Date of** 1909

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