

# Interpretant

1866 | Lowell Lectures on The Logic of Science; or Induction and Hypothesis: Lecture VII | W 1:464-465

...the process of getting an equivalent for a term, is an identification of two terms previously diverse. It is in fact, the process of nutrition of terms by which they get all their life and vigor and by which they put forth an energy almost creative since it has the effect of reducing the chaos of ignorance to the cosmos of science. Each of these equivalents is the explication of what there is wrapt up in the primary – they are the surrogates, the interpreters of the original term. They are new bodies, animated by that same soul. I call them the *interpretants* of the term. And the quantity of these *interpretants*, I term the *information* or *implication* of the term.

1866 | Lowell Lectures on The Logic of Science; or Induction and Hypothesis: Lecture VII | W 1:466-467

We are all [...] sufficiently familiar with the fact that many words have much implication; but I think we need to reflect upon the circumstance that every word implies some proposition or, what is the same thing, every word, concept, symbol has an equivalent term or one which has become identified with it, – in short, has an *interpretant*.

[—]

Whatever a word addresses [...] or stands to, is its interpretant or identified symbol. Conversely, every interpretant is addressed by the word; for were it not so, did it not as it were overhear what the word says, how could it interpret what it says. There are doubtless some who cannot understand this metaphorical argument. I wish to show that the relation of a word to that which it addresses is the same as its relation to its equivalent or identified terms. For that purpose, I first show that whatever a word addresses is an equivalent term, – its mental equivalent. I next show that, since the intelligent reception of a term is the being addressed by that term, and since the explication of a term's implication is the intelligent reception of that term, that the interpretant or equivalent of a term which as we have already seen explicates the implication of a term is addressed by the term. The interpretant of a term, then, and that which it stands to are identical. Hence, since it is of the very essence of a symbol that it should stand to something, every symbol – every word and every conception – must have an interpretant – or what is the same thing, must have information or implication.

1866 | Lowell Lectures on The Logic of Science; or Induction and Hypothesis: Lecture IX | W 1:474

...by an interpretant we mean a representation which represents that something is a representation of something else of which it is itself a representation.

1867 | On a New List of Categories | W 2:53-54

---

... every comparison requires, besides the related thing, the ground, and the correlate, also a *mediating representation which represents the relate to be a representation of the same correlate which this mediating representation itself represents*. Such a mediating representation may be termed an *interpretant*, because it fulfils the office of an interpreter, who says that a foreigner says the same thing which he himself says.

1893-5 [c.] | Chapter II: The Categories | NEM 4:309-10; CP 1.339

---

A sign stands *for* something *to* the idea which it produces, or modifies. Or, it is a vehicle conveying into the mind something from without. That for which it stands is called its *Object*; that which it conveys, its *Meaning*; and the idea to which it gives rise, its *Interpretant*. The object of representation can be nothing but a representation of which the first representation is the interpretant. But an endless series of representations, each representing the one behind it, may be conceived to have an absolute object at its limit. The meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation. In fact, it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevant clothing. But this clothing never can be completely stripped off; it is only changed for something more diaphanous. So there is an infinite regression here. Finally, the interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along; and as representation, it has its interpretant again. [Lo] another infinite series.

1895 | Short Logic: Chapter I. Of Reasoning in General | EP 2:13

---

A *sign* is a thing which serves to convey knowledge of some other thing, which it is said to *stand for* or *represent*. This thing is called the *object* of the sign; the idea in the mind that the sign excites, which is a mental sign of the same object, is called an *interpretant* of the sign.

1895-6 [c.] | That Categorical and Hypothetical Propositions are one in essence, with some connected matters | CP 1.564

---

A representation is that character of a thing by virtue of which, for the production of a certain mental effect, it may stand in place of another thing. The thing having this character I term a representamen, the mental effect, or thought, its interpretant, the thing for which it stands, its object.

1896 [c.] | On the Classification of the Sciences | MS [R] 1345

---

A *Representamen* can be considered from three formal points of view, namely, first, as the substance of the representation, or the *Vehicle* of the *Meaning*, which is common to the three representamens of the triad, second, as the quasi-agent in the representation, conformity to which makes its *Truth*, that is, as the *Natural Object*, and third, as the quasi-patient in the representation, or that which modification in the representation makes its *Intelligence*, and this may be called the *Interpretant*. Thus,

in looking at a map, the map itself is the *Vehicle*, the country represented is the *Natural Object*, and the idea excited in the mind is the *Interpretant*.

1897 [c.] | On Signs [R] | CP 2.228

---

A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign.

1901-1902 [c.] | Definitions for Baldwin's Dictionary [R] | MS [R] 1147

---

A *representamen*, or sign, is anything which stands, in any respect, at once in a relation of correspondence to a correlate, called its *object*[,] and to another correlate, its *interpretant*. which is a possible representamen determined by the first and referring to the same object.

1903 | Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism: Lecture V | CP 5.138

---

I call a representamen which is determined by another representamen, an *interpretant* of the latter.

1903 | Syllabus: Syllabus of a course of Lectures at the Lowell Institute beginning 1903, Nov. 23. On Some Topics of Logic | MS [R] 478:8

---

A representation represents an object to an interpretant, which is a representation of the same object determined by the first representation.

1904 | On the Foundations of Mathematics | MS [R] 8:4-5

---

Every sign functioning as such determines an interpretant sign. Generally there are [many] different signs of different meaning which the sign authorizes. I call all these its *interpretants*. The complete interpretant is the sign itself.

1904 | Foundations of Mathematics [R] | MS [R] 9:1

---

A sign is also intended to determine, in a mind or elsewhere, a sign of the same object; and this *interpretant* of the sign may be the very sign itself; but as a general rule it will be different.

1904 | Firstness, Secondness, Thirdness, and the Reducibility of Fourthness [R] | MS [R] 914:5-6

---

Every sign has an object, which may be regarded either as it is immediately represented in the sign to be [or] as it is in its own firstness. It is equally essential to the function of a sign that it should determine an *Interpretant*, or second correlate related to the object of the sign as the sign is itself related to that object; and this interpretant may be regarded as the sign represents it to be, as it is in its pure secondness to the object, and as it is in its own firstness.

1904 [c.] | New Elements (Kaina stoiceia) | EP 2:304

---

... every sign is intended to determine a sign of the same object with the same signification or *meaning*. Any sign, B, which a sign, A, is fitted so to determine, without violation of its, A's, purpose, that is, in accordance with the 'Truth,' even though it, B, denotes but a part of the objects of the sign, A, and signifies but a part of its, A's, characters, I call an *interpretant* of A.

1905 | An Attempt to state systematically the Doctrine of the Census in Geometrical Topics or Topical Geometry, more commonly called "Topologie" in German books; Being A Mathematical-Logical Recreation of C. S. Peirce following the lead of J. B. Listing's paper in the "Göttinger Abhandlungen" | MS [R] 145(s)

---

The interpretant is created by the sign; and since the sign *as such* determines the interpretant, it is in some sense represented in the sign, that is, it is called up by the sign while in itself it is acted on by the sign. It is so acted upon as to represent the sign to be a sign of the object. Thus, while the object is bifiss, the interpretant is trifiss or trifissile.

1905-07 [c.] | On the theory of Collections and Multitude | MS [R] 31:2

---

...an interpretant is an idea or other sign legitimately & purposely determined by a sign.

1906 | Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmaticism | CP 4.536

---

... a Sign has an Object and an Interpretant, the latter being that which the Sign produces in the Quasi-mind that is the Interpreter by determining the latter to a feeling, to an exertion, or to a Sign, which determination is the Interpretant.

1906 [c.] | On the System of Existential Graphs Considered as an Instrument for the Investigation of Logic | MS [R] 499

---

...a sign is not only on the one hand determined by a more or less real object but on the other hand it determines something, - which I call its *interpretant*, - to be through it determined as it is by the object

of the sign. The interpretants of the signs with which logic chiefly has to do are themselves signs. For every cognition is a sign as Leibniz and other nominalists have sufficiently shown and all deliberate meditation is of the nature of a dialogue as Plato represented it to be. But it is important to recognize that there are signs whose interpretants are not *ipso facto* signs. Such is the command of a captain of infantry "Ground arms!" [—]

The object is the sign's *determinant*; the interpretant is the *determinand* of the sign and through the sign of the object likewise.

---

1907 | Pragmatism | MS [R] 318:163

---

A 'sign', I say, shall be understood as anything which represents itself to convey an influence from an Object, so that this may intelligently determine a 'meaning', or 'interpretant'

---

1907 | The Fourth Curiosity | CP 6.347

---

.. a sign endeavours to represent, in part at least, an Object, which is therefore in a sense the cause, or determinant, of the sign even if the sign represents its object falsely. But to say that it represents its Object implies that it affects a mind, and so affects it as, in some respect, to determine in that mind something that is mediately due to the Object. That determination of which the immediate cause, or determinant, is the Sign, and of which the mediate cause is the Object may be termed the Interpretant...

---

1907 | Pragmatism | MS [R] 318:37-8

---

I pass now to the [...] essential ingredient of the interpreter, or as I prefer to call it, the *interpretant*. I might call it the Meaning, since it includes all that the sign really does convey to the interpreter, its entire essential influence, in its capacity as sign. But I prefer, for the present, to use the word "meaning," - until I can consult the more delicate apprehension of Lady Welby, - for the entire significance the sign conveys, object and interpretant *in transiter* together, securely boxed up in the sign for delivery. The interpretant is merely so much as the sign itself determines in the interpreter's mind.

---

1907 | Pragmatism | MS [R] 318:13-4

---

...any sign, of whatsoever kind, professes to mediate between an Object, on the one hand, that to which it applies, and which is thus in a sense the cause of the sign, and, on the other hand, a Meaning, or to use a preferable technical term, an *Interpretant*, that which the sign expresses, the result which it produces in its capacity as sign.

---

1907 | Pragmatism | CP 5.473

---

For the proper significate outcome of a sign, I propose the name, the *interpretant* of the sign. The example of the imperative command shows that it need not be of a mental mode of being.

1907 | Pragmatism | EP 2:429; MS [R] 318:40-1

---

How shall we name the entire mental effect which a sign of itself is calculated, in its proper significative function, to produce? The word *signification* is somewhat too narrow, since, as examples will soon show, this mental effect may be of the nature of an emotion or that of an effort. No existing word is sufficiently appropriate. Permit me to call this total proper effect of the sign taken by itself the *interpretant* of the sign.

1907 | Pragmatism | MS [R] 318:14-5

---

...the essential nature of a sign is that it mediates between its Object which is supposed to determine it and to be, in some sense, the cause of it, and its Meaning, or, as I prefer to say, in order to avoid certain ambiguities, its *Interpretant*, which is determined by the sign; and is, in a sense, the effect of it; and which the sign represents to flow as an influence, from the Object. [—] So far, so good: the Object, the determinant of the Sign, and the Meaning, or Interpretant, that which the sign, *as such*, determines, its effect.

1908 | Letters to Lady Welby | SS 80-81

---

I define a Sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former. My insertion of “upon a person” is a sop to Cerberus, because I despair of making my own broader conception understood.

1908 | Letters to Lady Welby | SS 83

---

It is usual and proper to distinguish two Objects of a Sign, the Mediate without, and the Immediate within the Sign. Its Interpretant is all that the Sign conveys: acquaintance with its Object must be gained by collateral experience.

1909 | Letters to William James | EP 2:493-4

---

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.'

---

1909 | Meaning Preface | MS [R] 637:36

It is not only essential to a Sign that it should *represent*, i.e. stand in place of or for, an Object, but, if possible, still more so that it should be capable of *Interpretation* by or through a mind, into which it implants a germ which, on development, will affect the conduct of the person to whom that mind appertains; and not until this effect, which throughout this volume will be called the *Interpretant* of the Sign, is brought about will the sign function as the Sign *τοῦ ἑνὸς ἐκείνου*.

---

1909 | Essays on Meaning. Preface | MS [R] 640:9

By the *Interpretant* of a Sign is meant all that the Sign can signify, mean, or itself convey of new, in contradistinction to what it may stimulate the observer to find out otherwise, as for example, by new experience, or by recollecting former experiences.

---

1910 [c.] | Letters to Paul Carus | ILS 285

... any thing that the sign, *as such*, effects may be considered as the Interpretant.

The *Interpretant* is the mental action on the Object that the Sign excites.

...that which is modified by the representation, that is, [the] idea created in the mind, called the *Interpretant*.