

---



# *Abduction, Wit, Stupidity - from Peirce to Freud*

---



Uwe Wirth

The Commens Encyclopedia  
The Digital Encyclopedia of Peirce Studies  
New Edition

Edited by Mats Bergman and João Queiroz

**URL** <http://www.commens.org/encyclopedia/article/wirth-uwe-abduction-wit-stupidity---peirce-freud>  
**Retrieved** 09.01.2026  
**ISSN** 2342-4257  
**License** Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike

**Abstract:**

According to Kant, human stupidity reveals, a lack of "power of judgement", or as Peirce might say, a lack of abductive competence that confuses the relevant and the irrelevant. Peirce anticipated this idea. He writes: "I have come to the conclusion that it is folly to attempt to set limits which human stupidity cannot overpass (CP 4.321). Apparently both, Semiosis and human Stupidity are unlimited. The only two possible reactions to this condition humain are either critical reasoning or laughing. It was Aristotle who first defined man as at the same time animal syllogans and as animal ridens: an animal that can reason and that can laugh. I want to highlight a particular aspect of this very general double determination, namely the relation between the Peircean logic of abduction and the Freudian "logic" of the comic.

**Keywords:** Abduction, Freud

According to Kant, human stupidity reveals, a lack of "power of judgement", or as Peirce might say, a lack of abductive competence that confuses the relevant and the irrelevant. Peirce anticipated this idea. He writes: "I have come to the conclusion that it is folly to attempt to set limits which human stupidity cannot overpass (CP 4.321). Apparently both, Semiosis and human Stupidity are unlimited. The only two possible reactions to this condition humain are either critical reasoning or laughing. It was Aristotle who first defined man as at the same time animal syllogans and as animal ridens: an animal that can reason and that can laugh. I want to highlight a particular aspect of this very general double determination, namely the relation between the Peircean logic of abduction and the Freudian "logic" of the comic.

Abductive inference is a "Logic of Discovery" which covers two operations: the selection and the formation of hypotheses. In his Lectures on Pragmatism Peirce defines Abduction as "the process of forming explanatory hypotheses" (CP 5.171), and as the "only kind of reasoning which supplies new ideas, the only kind which is, in this sense, synthetic" (CP 2.777). Abduction "consists in studying facts and devising a theory to explain them" (CP 5.145). In the Peircean concept of semiosis, interpretation is based on argumentation. From the abductive suggestion "deduction can draw a prediction which can be tested by induction" (CP 5.171).

In the "normal science paradigm" and in everyday understanding, abduction is performed as the process of inferential reconstruction of causes and intentions. It is, however, also the process of inventive construction of theories and revolutionary

"paradigm switching". In Peircean late Semiotics Abduction becomes the most important moment of rationality and of human understanding: It is not only a form of inference, but becomes the "first stage" in the process of unlimited interpretation. The task of abduction is to determine the feature of a surprising fact (CP 7.218), relevant to the formulation of a plausible hypothesis "that furnishes a possible Explanation" (CP 6.469).

In difference to Popper's "Logic of Science" which is limited to the methods and procedures of testing and criticizing hypotheses, the abductive process operates on the borderline between psychological reality and logical criticism. Since we are very often able to grasp the relevant aspect, without explicit, conscious knowledge, Peirce assumes, that abduction is lead by an underlying "guessing instinct", based on an "affinity" between the reasoner's mind and his or her cultural and natural context.

This "guessing instinct" might be seen as a hermeneutic "smell for the relevant", which is not only a "natural insight", a *lumen naturale* but also, as Bonfantini and Proni point out, a *lumen culturale*, an insight in our cultural background (Bonfantini & Proni, 1983, p.134). With Eco we thus can conclude: "The logic of interpretation is the Peircean logic of abduction" (Eco, 1990, p.59). Abduction is, so to speak, the transformation of an association into an argumentation. The specific achievement of abductive reasoning as a strategy of investigation is its effectivity, which provides a shortcut of thinking.

Like abduction "wit" and "the comic" are due to a surprising phenomenon that disappoints a prediction. Thus, Kant defined the comic as "an expectation dwindled into nothing"; what Freud calls in his book on Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious the "comic of expectation", which "lies in our relations of the future" (Freud, 1966, p.774). The "comic of expectation", as well as the "comic of situation" derive from the disappointment and miscalculation of an expected expenditure of energy or thought. According to Freud comical effect and laughter are due to the recognition that utterances, thoughts or actions of some one else "are immoderate and inappropriate" (Freud, 1966, p.769). Here, of course, the question emerges, what happens if we apply this notion of incongruity to the process of interpretation?

In one of Monty Python's Sketches, called the "Encyclopedia Salesman" we can experience how our expectations as interprets get disappointed in a funny way. The scene contradicts our background presuppositions. Hence our "normal understanding", our *lumen culturale* gets irritated.

A Man - apparently an Encyclopedia Salesman - walks up to the door of an apartment and rings the

bell. He is dressed smartly.

Man: Burglar! (a longish pause while he waits, he rings again) Burglar! (a woman appears at the other side of the door)

Woman: Yes?

Man: Burglar, madam.

Woman: What do you want?

Man: I want to come in and steal a few things, madam.

Woman: Are you an encyclopedia salesman?

Man: No madam, I'm a burglar. I burgle people.

Woman: I think you're an encyclopedia salesman.

Man: Oh I'm not, open the door, let me in please.

Woman: If I let you in, you'll sell me encyclopedias

Man: I won't, madam. I just want to come in and ransack the flat. Honestly.

Woman: Promise. No encyclopedias?

Man: None at all.

Woman: All right. (she opens the door) You'd better come in then. (Man enters through the door)

Man: Mind you I don't know whether you've really considered the advantages of owning a really fine set of modern encyclopedias ... (he pockets valuable) You know, they really can do you wonders (Monty Python's Flying Circus, 1989, p.65f)

In his lectures on Interpretation and overinterpretation Eco points out that immoderateness and inappropriateness of thinking, behaving and speaking indicate a lack of insight in what is "in the modus" (Eco, 1992, p.26) that is, in what is relevant in a certain cultural framework. On contrary, understanding a text or an utterance is an abductive process that starts with a guess or a conjecture, in order to set up a relevant relationship between utterance and context. This textual relevance is according to Sperber and Wilson indicated as an "interesting effect" (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p.122) that is processed with minimal effort and maximal effect.

The semiotic model reader has to take on the role of a detective, who is lead by his hermeneutic "smell for the relevant". Interpretation is based on a process of pondering evidence and of integrating plausible hypotheses coherently in an already existing theoretical framework by abductive inferences.

But what if abduction fails? What if the interpreter guesses blatantly wrong, or is seduced to select an irrelevant and implausible hypothesis? Then, the interpretation becomes comical, if it reveals a surprising incongruity. The comical discourse works, as Eco points out in his article on "The Comic and the Rule", "because rules, even

unconsciously, are accepted", and thus "their unmotivated violation becomes comic" (Eco, 1986, p.273). This is of course not only true for the violation of conventional rules, such as the "fulfilling conditions" in "Speech Act Theory" or Gricean "conversational maxims" - but also for the "leading principles" of Abduction.

Eco argues that in a given social or intertextual "frame", the comic violates the presupposed and commonly accepted rules implicitly. The comic effect displays the violation of the rule "without, however, making it explicit in discourse" (Eco, 1986, p.272). As Eco points out in "The Frames of comic 'freedom'" it is crucial that the "broken frame must be presupposed, but never spelled out" (Eco, 1984, p.4). The rules and conventions that are violated by the comic are part of our "horizon of understanding" that is, of our cultural background.

The definition of comic as a violation of conventional rules, leads to the idea of Carnival. As Eco points out, Carnival is the attempt to find a situation in which we are not concerned by the rules of our social context. The comic seems to be subversive, because it gives license to violate the rule. But, according Eco,

"it gives such license precisely to those who have ... absorbed the rule ... The rule violated by the comic is so acknowledged that there is no need to reaffirm it. That is why carnival can take place only once a year. It takes a year of ritual observance for the violation of the ritual precepts to be enjoyed ... In a world of absolute permissiveness ... no carnival is possible, because nobody would remember what is being called ... into question. Carnival comic, the moment of transgression, can exist only if a background of unquestioned observance exists." (Eco, 1986, p.275).

Thus, the Question emerges, whether wit and comic really violate "conventional rules" It could also be "conversational rules", such as those pointed out by Grice in "Logic and Conversation" (1975). According to him, everybody who communicates tries to make her utterance as economic as possible, and therefore obeys some or all of the following maxims: "tell the truth", "be informative", "be relevant" and, "avoid obscurity". The speaker has two options when dealing with these "conversational maxims": Either she complies with the maxims or she does not. When the speaker complies with the maxims, her intention is to produce a successful communication. But similarly, if she intentionally disobeys the maxims, she can convey implicitly some non-conventional meaning. In this case, the maxims are, how Grice calls it, "exploited", in order to produce a "conversational implicature".

Grice gives the following example of an implicature: At a tea party two person are in a conversation. One says: "Isn't Mrs. X an old bag?" The other replies: "The weather has been quite delightful this summer, hasn't it?" The second person has blatantly refused

to make what he says relevant. This irrelevance indicates an implicature, conveying, that the remark about Mrs X should not be discussed and perhaps, more specifically, that the first person committed a social gaffe (Grice, 1991, p.35).

Eco endorses that "many comic situations can be produced by breaking Grice's conversational maxims" (Eco 1984, p.5), but he insists, that this is not sufficient. A "conversational implicature" is not yet comical, since it is an intentional violation of a rule; In order to produce a comic effect, the implicit violation of the rule has to be non-intentional. If we apply Sperber and Wilson's "principle of relevance", we could conclude that the apparent irrelevance of what was said has the function of a signal, in order to draw the interpreter's attention to an implicit meaning. But if, on the other hand, the interpreter finds reason to suspect that the irrelevance was produced non-intentionally, that it was simply a mistake of the utterer's, due to incompetence or a lack of knowledge, then the irrelevance becomes an unintentional symptom. A symptom for the stupidity of the utterer. Hence, the utterer produces a comic effect.

The reason of this comic effect, however is rather a violation of "economical rules" than a violation of "conventional rules". This fits with the Freudian definition of "wit" and "the comic". The comic pleasure originates, as Freud says, from "the economy of expenditure" in thought and is due to a form of sympathetic understanding of the other's lack of economy in thinking, acting, speaking. In order to make this comparison one has "to put one's self into the psychic process of the producing person" (Freud, 1966, p.767).

We can discover here a surprising connection between the logic of comic and the logic of abduction: the "Principle of Economy". According to Peirce "the leading consideration in Abduction" and thus of reasoning and interpretation, is, "the question of Economy ... of money, time, thought and energy" (CP 5.600). The "Principle of Economy" is providing the possibility to prove a hypothesis with minimal effort and with maximal effect. Peirce points out that abductive reasoning is based on the idea of "Okham's Razor" (CP 7.92): Make your argumentation as simple and as effective as possible. And therefore "the simpler Hypothesis in the sense of the more facile and natural, the one that instinct suggests, that must be preferred" (CP 6.477).

Economy and Simplicity, however, are also the discursive "leading principles" of Comic, Wit and Humor, as Freud's definition indicates: "All three modes of activity of our psychic apparatus derive pleasure from economy" (Freud, 1966, p.803). The first step of wit, according to Freud, is "(p)laying with words and thoughts, motivated by certain pleasures in economy" (Freud, 1966, p.719). Another motivation of wit is the

search for pleasure, which derives from the possibility to be nonsensical. The wit producer makes "use of play in order to withdraw from the pressure of critical reason" (Freud, 1966, p.717). This "resistance against the pressures of thinking" (Freud, 1966, p.717) is a rebellion against the laws of logic. Deliberate reasoning is, as Peirce points out, "the critic of arguments". It essentially involves self-control. On contrary, the pleasure of wit consists in loosing self-control and playing or punning instead.

Like wit, abductive and conjectural thinking is in the beginning "pure Play", which is not controlled by critical reason. Peirce states: "Play has no rules, except this very law of liberty" (CP 6.458). Conjectural thinking is related with "a certain agreeable occupation of mind" which Peirce calls reverie or "Musement" (CP 6.458). It is a kind of daydream, as Freud called it. The result of Musement can be a creative, witty Abduction. Indeed, one can suspect that Peirce had the classical notion of wit in mind, when he defined abduction as an "act of insight", that "comes to us like a flash" (CP 5.181). Abduction is, "the idea of putting together what we had never before dreamed of putting together (an idea) which flashes the new suggestion before our contemplation" (CP 5.181).

Like wit, a creative abduction is a surprising shortcut in thinking. But even though both, abduction as well as wit, are based on play, there is a fundamental difference: Musement is a mental movement oscillating between freedom and the reoccupation of the mind by the constraints of self-control. Wit on the other hand is a tendentious mental movement, attempting to find pleasure in undermining the conventions and restrictions of society and the laws of logic. We could say: Abduction is based on Musement. Wit is aiming at Amusement.

In inventing new ways of using expressions wit appears as a "creative abduction" that is surprisingly relevant, simple and economic. To find something comic, on the other hand, means to discover the reason why something appears to be comical. The comic effect is due to the detection of a mistake in the process of interpretation and of abductive re-contextualization. The abduction reveals a lack of "abductive competence" The "stupid abduction" offers an interpretation that is surprisingly irrelevant, incoherent, and either too complex or too simple - and therefore stupid.

## References

Bonfantini, M. & Proni, G. (1983). To guess or not to guess. In U. Eco & T. Sebeok (Eds.), *The Sign of the Three. Dupin, Holmes, Peirce* (pp.119-134). Indiana University Press.

Eco, U. (1984). The frames of comic 'freedom'. In U. Eco & T. Sebeok (Eds.), *Carnival!* (pp.1-9). Berlin, New York, Amsterdam: Mouton.

Eco, U. (1986). The Comic and the Rule. In *Faith in Fakes* (pp.269-278). London.

Eco, U. (1990). *The Limits of Interpretation*. Indiana University Press.

Eco, U. (1992). *Interpretation and overinterpretation*. Cambridge University Press.

Freud, S. (1966). Wit and its Relation to the Unconsciousness. In A.A. Brill (Ed.), *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*. New York.

Grice, P. (1991). Logic and Conversation. In: *Studies in the Way of Words* (pp.22-40). Harvard University Press.

Monty Python's Flying Circus (1989). *Just the Words*. Vol 1. Methuen London.

Peirce, C. S. (1931-1960). *Collected Papers*. (CP), 8 Vol. Harvard University Press.

Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (1986). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford.