THE SEMIOSIS OF THE DEGENERATE INDEX

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Introduction

First, I would like to lay some groundwork regarding the attributes, or properties, of Index from a Peircean perspective. There are four primary properties of Index, and two additional properties which are subsumed under the primary four properties (see Table 1.0). The first is the implication of the presence of factual information; subsumed under this first primary property is that Index is independent of interpretation. The notion is that Index is factual and as pure a form of Secondness as can be found. Consequently, it is independent of interpretation. The second attribute of Index is that there is contiguity (physical contiguity) between the object and the sign. The third is that Index refers to an individual; and the fourth is that Index is not law-like, nor does it resemble the object. Subsumed under this fourth primary property is that Index asserts nothing, in that the indexical sign does not possess any characteristic of resemblance or of conventional signification.

Theoretical Background

Based upon this foundation, I would like to supply some historical/hysterical notion of Index, and how Goudge, Atkin, Short, and Kruse perceive the Degenerate Index, as opposed to the Genuine Index, not that one is necessarily more indexical than is the other (see Table 1.0).
Table 2.0). The first interpretation of Peirce’s Degenerate vs. Genuine Index (Goudge 1950: 144; 1965: 67-68) indicates that the Degenerate Index is referential and verbal, while the Genuine Index is causal and nonverbal, that is, to qualify as a Genuine Index there must be a causal relationship between the sign and its object. Kruse (1991: 276-277) represents the second interpretation of Peirce’s indexical categories. She indicates that the Degenerate index has an identity relationship with its object, namely, that it is reactionally-based, such that an equivalency-based relationship exists between index and its object. Kruse notes that the Genuine form of the Index, on the other hand, contains a resemblance between the Index and its object. Atkin (2005) sets forth a similar paradigm to that of Kruse. The essence of Atkin’s Degenerate Index is that it qualifies as a designation. Its function is to designate one object from others without expressing iconic attributes. Conversely, for Atkin, the Genuine Index is a reagent. Atkin employs “reagent” in the physical science sense—Index measures a reaction when added to a compound, or its addition to the mix, in some way, can bring about a reaction. Short (2007: 89-90) represents the fourth and final perspective of Peirce’s concept of indexical subcategories, prior to discussing my own. Short indicates that the Degenerate Index is irreducible, which is tantamount to the fact that it is nonverbal and nonreferential.
mount to Atkin’s categorization of the Degenerate Index as a designation. According to Short, the Genuine Index, on the other hand, is reducible, in the sense that (citing Kruse’s prior and extensive work) there is an “involved icon”. Some of my own thoughts (see Tables 2.0 and 3.0) reflect a developmental perspective, I make the claim that the use of Index proceeds from the Degenerate to the Genuine. My assertion is not that the Degenerate is any less likely than is the Genuine to be used later in development; rather, the Degenerate use of Index is merely augmented by its Genuine use—one use is not necessarily preferable over the other. The Genuine use is more developmentally enhanced than is the Degenerate use, although the two are employed concurrently throughout later childhood and adulthood.

New Perspectives

Of the five or six attributes of Index which I propose three are highlighted. First, apart from many Peircean scholars, I claim that Index, as a Degenerate, can lack an interpretant. Such is derived from CP 2.304: “An Index is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant” (1902). Were Index’s Interpretant not present (as is the case when Index is realized as a pointing finger, a gesture, or even an Index which refers to a single non-contrastive object) it can be designative only, as Atkin would contend. In this designative sense Index does not need an Interpretant, since the object itself defines its use, namely, whatever is being focused on. The reverse is the case for the Genuine Index, which must be associated with an Interpretant, consequent to its reagentive nature, likewise building upon Atkin’s work. Additionally, the Genuine Index is reducible to an involved icon (according to Short’s analysis). Otherwise, the Genuine Index can possess an involved law-like character, such that some quality of the object is mirrored in some aspect of the sign—producing an analogous relation between the two (illustrating an involved icon).

Second, I shall focus on the contiguity with respect to the Degenerate Index, between object and sign. By contiguity, I refer to the existential contiguity which holds between representamin and object, both spatial and temporal. I extract this primarily from CP 2.306: “Psychologically, the action of indices depends upon association by contiguity, and not upon association by resemblance or upon intellectual operations” (1901). This notion of physical contiguity, including spatial and temporal, is paramount for Peirce to qualify as a Degenerate Index because of its “brute force” focus. It is as pure a form of Secondness as can exist. Moreover, because the Degenerate kind may not have an interpretant, the presence of the object virtually defines the
use of the Index. Conversely, the Genuine Index, by necessity, is associated with an Interpretant, in view of the fact that it has an involved icon. Physical contiguity, then, is not essential to qualify as a Genuine Index—such Index can co-occur with its object, but need not.

The third attribute is the issue of intention and attention, especially with respect to the Degenerate Index. The type of attention to which I refer predisposes the presence of intention, since a sign cannot be a sign without intentionality, Index included. In the case of Degenerate Indexes, attention is directional. Attention can be unidirectional or bidirectional, or even joint directional/attentional, i.e., two individuals gazing simultaneously toward an object of focus but without reciprocity in this early use. The issue of attention with respect to the Degenerate Index is a central component of Peirce’s concept of Degenerate use in CP 8.41: “One of these kinds is the index, which like a pointing finger exercises a real physiological force over the attention, like the power of a mesmerizer, and directs it to a particular object of sense. One such index at least must enter into every proposition, its function being to designate the subject of discourse” (1885). Still later, in CP 8.350, Peirce again emphasizes the force of attention as orchestrated via the Index: “…Designatives (or Denotatives), or Indicatives, Denominatives, which like a Demonstrative pronoun, or a pointing finger, brutally direct the mental eyeballs of the interpreter to the object in question, which in this case cannot be given by independent reasoning” (1908). Even in his later writings Peirce consistently underscores the attentional power of the Index. Such influence is mediated by socio-cognitive skills, since it is not until joint attention surfaces that Index becomes bidirectional and afterward reciprocal—each participant not merely looking toward the object of a pointing finger/use of “that”, but intermittently gazing toward each other.

Table 3.0 indicates approximate ages when the Degenerate Index comes into use, and when it is joined by its Genuine counterpart. At early stages until about four months of age, Index is not full-fledged; it

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1 If intention is not present, it can only be a proto-Index.

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is but a proto-use as illustrated by the use of gestures and early use of distal demonstratives. Employing distal forms only (without proximal ones); “that”, or even the locative “there”, is tantamount to using designations to refer to something “out there” that is being focused on. Thereafter, from 1;6 until 2;7, the distal demonstratives continue their use devoid of their proximal counterpart; and the Self is the only origo, the only point of orientation. Such is evidenced by the onset of the productive use of “I” at 3;0 as a contrastive term to the use of “you” (West 2010: 8). Afterward, “this” becomes part of the repertoire after 3;4; and it begins to be coordinated with the use of “that”. At this point, the reagentive use of “this” and “that” emerges, because there is in fact, some classificatory notion of “this” as near space and a near object within that space surfaces. Furthermore, “that” as a far object from a point of orientation is likewise apprehended at the same age. Nevertheless, it is not until approximately 4;8, according to Tanz (2009: 87, 125), that children employ demonstratives from the perspective of the individual who is employing them. This latter use constitutes a deictic advance, in that the child’s orientation to the objects in question may contrast with that of the other party, if the parties are facing opposite directions.

The use of the index finger, or of “that” to refer to an absent object, which materializes at approximately two years of age, appears to constitute the threshold for the use of Index as Degenerate only, to its more Genuine use. This is so as a consequence of the presence of an emerging mental construct which can serve as Index or its object; and that mental construct is, at very least iconic, and at most, symbolic. It is when these deictic terms begin to be used as indexical legisigns that they characterize the more Genuine use. Because they are reducible, and because they are apprehended to represent a class of objects, these indices are legisigns. “This”-objects, and “that”-objects belong to contrastive space from the speaker’s orientation.

At this juncture in development, the indexical sign and its object transcend the actual, into constructed realities, such that objects of indexical signs can extend to imagined places (not merely to places where the child is located). After having apprehended that Index and its object can be displaced in space from one another, these deictics can be employed to instruct others (even the imaginary wanderer) to orient in absent places. To adequately construct such orientational directions, children need to depend upon a cognitive representation of the potential orientations of the origo in question and of the spatial layout of the absent place. Children may even need to rely upon their own mental

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2 This expression is used by Bühler (1934/1990) to demonstrate the mental operations necessary to take another’s viewpoint in a different environment with different points of reference.
construct of places they have never seen, and must attempt to orient people whom they have never met or who do not exist in their reality. The latter deictic uses certainly highlight the critical influence of Peirce’s Indexical Interpretant and the evolution of that Interpretant, especially in contexts in which the Genuine Index is allowed free reign to convert social realities into intrapsychological ones.

Conclusion

Peirce’s continuum of Degenerate to Genuine Index highlights the place of his Interpretant in Index’s semiosis. This contrastive use of Index showcases how the presence of an Interpretant imbues the Index with characteristics beyond “brute force” attention. In this “brute force” based use, an Interpretant may not be present as part of the Index – object relation. In Genuine uses, however, the Interpretant has wide latitude to instill Index with Firstness and/or Thirdness. It is responsible for infusing Thirdness when the law-like, conventional classification of near versus far space is applied to objects within these spaces. Firstness is influential when constructive cognitions and affect drive spatial contrasts to embrace unobserved and unknown places and wanderings within those places. The robust nature of the Indexical Interpretant in elevating nonexperienced events to experienced ones via mental representations distinguishes it from other signs. Because of its core property of pure Secondness, Index travels with its dynamic objects to a wider range of Interpretants than is possible for Icons or for Symbols. Since its Interpretant and its object can produce a greater influence on Indexical signs rather than the reverse, as compared to other signs, they may result in a more extended breadth of meanings, especially on the intrapsychological plane.

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