Peirce’s Matrix of Individuation: The Work of Pronouns in Attentional Phenomena

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Abstract: Peirce’s distinction between individuals and singulars is examined in light of developmental advances in pronoun use. While singulars individuate tokens of types/kinds, individuals assert their utter uniqueness. Components of individuals include: qualification as generals, determinateness, and instantaneous imposition into the context; those defining singulars entail: continuity of existence, self-contradiction, and boundaries of cognition. Early appearance in ontogeny, attention-securing status, and amplified application suggest the primacy of individuals over singulars. Its primacy is grounded in the Object’s influence over the sign and the Interpretant, requiring attentional devices in Secondness, or turning to symbolic representations in Thirdness. Findings indicate that pronouns first materialize as individuals—“that” referring to any Object of focus (Dynamical Objects); later comparisons among Objects control pronoun use (Immediate Objects). In short, increased use of pronouns to refer to Immediate Objects facilitates Origo and orientational shifts, critical to symbolic reasoning.

Keywords: individuals, singulars, pronouns, Index, Dynamical Objects

Introduction

Peirce’s two-fold distinction between individuals and singulars in the individuating enterprise characterizes fundamental advances in pronoun use, from static uses to Origo-informed\(^1\) dynamic ones. In fact the perspective that pronouns are preeminent historically and ontogenetically has

\(^1\) Origo is employed in the Bühlerian sense, which is further developed by Diewald (1991)—an entity taking a point of orientation (human or otherwise). Such ordinarily requires the animate/inanimate vantage point to have an inherent front/back/side, which ordinarily
some notable tradition in Linguistics, even well prior to Peirce’s recognition of such. Wilhelm von Humboldt (1836/1971: 74) asserts that pronouns, as opposed to nouns “must have been the original ones [root words] in every language” Peirce (1896) later supplies rationale for the preeminence of pronouns over nouns with his individual/singular distinction. But what Peirce left unexplored is the unique ontogeny of pronouns (unlike nouns) as having the means to illustrate either form of individuation. Because pronouns often lend themselves to instantiations as individuals (pure Seconds), and because Peirce assumes individuals to be preeminent given derivation of primary lexical categories from pronouns (e.g., nouns), they constitute an especially fertile forum to illustrate the individual/singular contrast.\footnote{“[T]here is no reason saying that ‘I’ ‘thou’ ‘that’ ‘this’ stand in place of nouns; they indicate things in the directest possible way. It is impossible to express what an assertion refers to except by means of an Index. A pronoun is an Index. A noun, on the other hand, does not indicate the object it denotes; and when a noun is used to show what one is talking about, the experience of the hearer is relied upon to make up for the incapacity of the noun for doing what the pronoun does at once. Thus, a noun is an imperfect substitute for a pronoun. … A pronoun ought to be defined as a word which may indicate anything to which the first and second persons have suitable real connections, by calling the attention of the second person to it” (1893: EP2: 15n, emphasis Peirce’s).}

Functional attributes made explicit by Peirce which define individuals (global, Origo-blind pronoun use) include: status as generals, determinateness, and instantaneous introduction into the here and now; those defining singulars (pronouns informed by Origo establishment) entail: continuity of existence, internal self-contradiction, and establishing boundaries of cognition. Three related arguments augment Peirce’s tacit claim that individuals are more primary: their earlier appearance in ontogeny, their attention-securing status, and their amplified application to diverse referents. While singulars individuate tokens of types/kinds, individuals, especially upon initial assignment to objects, assert their utter uniqueness.

What Peirce intimates is that individuals directionize in Secondness as pure Indexes, while singulars incorporate Thirdness-based projective (often spatial) vantage points. In fact, spatial vantage points (which underlie individual pronoun use) surface as primitives (Mandler 2010: 33, 2012: 427), even as early as two months of age (Baillargeon 2004b: 392–393). Short (2007: 50) reframes this issue in Peircean terms, namely, that Peirce’s increased valuation of Index (1885 and beyond) accounts for modifications in his individuation paradigm. Short (2007: 38–39) further intimates that apart from their Object’s first instantiation, individuals have a singular character. Variation in behaviors/characteristics over instantiations constitutes Short’s
rationale for the dubious status of signs as individuals. While this may be so in large part, the global nature of pronouns (their means to de-emphasize detailed feature comparisons across Objects) may keep at bay any conscious or unconscious recognition of such variation. Demonstrative use (especially global applications of “that”) particularly demonstrates how the same pronoun can be reapplied without being subject to, or having recourse to, Object comparisons. As such, on each occasion of use early productions of “that” maintain their individual status beyond initial applications (West 1986: 115; 2011: 94; 2013a: 28). Although Objects and properties of Objects of “that” vary, demonstratives are impervious to feature alterations, since they do not specify defining properties, but are restricted to notice in the haecceity of time and place, a necessary tool in early ontogeny.

**Individuals Versus Singulars**

Whereas early on, Peirce emphasizes subjectively conceived of distinctions between individuals and singulars (compulsive imposition on the consciousness versus boundaries of cognition), later he focuses on universally derived ontological differences (continuity and determinacy).

But here it is necessary to distinguish between individual in the sense of that which has no generality and which here appears as a mere ideal boundary of cognition, and an individual in the far wider sense of that which can be only in one place at one time. It will be convenient to call the former a singular and the latter an individual … while singulars are real they are so only in their generality; singulars in their absolute discrimination or singularity are mere ideas. … In short, those things which we call singulars exist, but the character of singularity which we attribute to them is self-contradictory. With reference to individuals, I shall only remark, that they are certain general terms whose objects can only be in one place at one time, and these are called individuals. They are generals, not singulars. (1868: MS 931: 24, W2: 180–181)

Since singulars qualify as “boundaries of cognition … mere ideas”, their instantiations originate in semantic files (ideas, concepts) in which a host of perceptual and functional qualities of a particular type of referent are stored. These semantic files bind an instantiation to all perceptually and functionally similar objects. As such, singulars are “self-contradictory.” While they exist as distinct entities, they are not strictly separable from categorically similar

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3 Peirce focused on haecceity consequent to his influence from Duns Scotus’s 1295 *Early Oxford Lectures on Individuation*. In CP 3.434 (1896) Peirce defines haecceity as “thisness:” “An object, in so far as it is denoted by an index, having thisness, and distinguishing itself from other things by its continuous identity and forcefulness, but not by any distinguishing characters, may be called a haecceity.”
referents, since they refer to classes of objects. Hence, together with individuating a token, singulars determine a type or fit for the Object, e.g., “my car” constitutes a “self-contradictory” form of individuation in that it singles out a particular referent, while classifying it as a kind (vehicle). In short, pronouns are singulars when they individuate distinct entities, while ascribing membership in a class, e.g., “I” denoting all speakers while individuating the one speaking, and “this” denoting objects proximate to “I” while indexing a particular object.

Conversely, individual uses of pronouns amount to the instantiated object alone, independent of incidental feature alterations. They refer to “certain general terms whose objects can only be in one place at one time.” What Peirce means by “in one place at one time” is the snapshot-like nature of compulsive notice of entities present to the senses. In other words, the particular realization of the entity, given its specific contextual features, constitutes the referent, e.g., “That’s quite interesting” (while gazing at a friend’s painting). This heightened reliance on Secondness in each instantiation obviates the irreducibility of global demonstrative use—little is more irreducible than present Objects. Moreover, use of “that” in its individual sense is equivocal to the second subcategory (Designatives) of Peirce’s second trichotomy of his ten-fold division of signs detailed in his letter to Lady Welby dated 25 December, 1908 (EP2: 484). Accordingly, it is unquestionable that “that” Objects inherently “brutely compel attention”, in that their notice is unexpected. They are, as Peirce contends in the same passage “like a demonstrative pronoun or a pointing finger, brutally direct[ing] the mental eyeballs of the observer.” With individuals then, stored semantic knowledge detailing characteristics of similar objects (as is the case with singular and more symbolic, more reducible pronoun uses) does not enter into the semiotic equation. Rather, individual uses of pronouns designate any brutally compelling object in observable space, especially when they have the status of individuals—a function equivocal to “pure” Indexes. These Designatives carry no conventional meaning, but their referents shift from use to use ad infinitum, unmanaged by covert instrumentation. “That” might refer repeatedly to the same entity (blind to any intra-Object alterations), while within the same discourse, it can designate a host of different Objects: a present/absent entity/event or an abstract something. Because deployment of individual uses of pronouns is not instigated by notice of similarities among referents (as is the case for singulars) but by compulsive attention to a salient object, the Interpretants that hold do not depend upon feature-based comparisons of perceptual or functional similarities, but upon some fleeting characteristic which constitutes
the very reason for the notice, e.g., “that demonstrates springtime” (referring to an azalea bud on a neighbor’s bush, a gardenia on one’s own property within reach, or leaves on an oak tree down the block). These Designatives qualify as individuals, in that they rely upon the power of the referent to compel the observer’s attention. Similarly, Peirce’s additional requirement in W2 (MS 931) that individuals be “in one place at one time” underscores the aforementioned existential restriction of signs to their referents. Adherence to the here and now reifies Objects’ uniqueness as pure Seconds. “That” as an individual, expressing speaker’s focus (fleeting or otherwise), considers the referent apart from other referents, as a specimen distinct in the wellspring of experience. This uniqueness lends superlative status to the referent, indicating the most noticed or most desirable at any one point in time.

In his later works, Peirce integrates Scotus’s concept of “thisness” (universality of near space) into his notion of individuation: “The individual … is that which is in every respect determinate. It is, therefore, the instantaneous state of an existent. The singular … is that which has a continuity of existence in time and at instant is absolutely determinate” (c. 1905; MS 280: 27). Peirce’s claim that an individual “is in every way determinate” implies the underlying status of the individual to be determined by its Object on each occasion of use. Rationale rests upon the fact that any Object or variation of an Object is capable of being governed by a quintessential illustration of an individual—the global demonstrative “that.” In short, instantiations of “that” are determined by an existent “determinant” (influential objects in near space) because, independent of the sign, the real Object (the Dynamical object in the space and time of the utterance) determines the topic (and by virtue of that, in some cases the sign) under consideration. Selection of individuals (via global pronoun use) requires that a present object assert itself upon the attention of the observer, giving rise to notice of the salience of a real Object in its totality without compartmentalizing its features. Objects in this capacity impose themselves upon interpreters; and interpreters react compulsively, in view of the object’s sudden appearance in the consciousness—an “instantaneous state of an existent.” Peirce’s notion of “Concretives” in the third trichotomy of his ten-fold division of signs (1908: EP 2:488–489) further supports his conviction that individuals occupy a central place in existential Object-sign relations (especially since the third trichotomy primarily concerns itself with the nature of the Dynamical Object). In contrast to the other subcategories within this trichotomy (Abstractives, Collectives) the nature of Concretives

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4 Although Peirce focuses on the Dynamical Object here, he likewise integrates the nature of the Immediate Object. But, while Peirce explicitly claims that both Abstractives and Collectives characterize Dynamical and/or Immediate Objects, his silence regarding Concretives
is similar to the distinctness of a proper name (“Charlemagne” constitutes Peirce’s illustration of Concretives). In the same passage (pertaining to the third trichotomy), two of the three subcategories of Dynamical Objects likewise apply to Immediate Objects, namely, Abstractives and Collectives. While Abstractives refer to features such as color, mass, whiteness, etc., Collectives refer to classes of entities, e.g., humanity. The subcategory which applies to Dynamical Objects only is Concretives. In accord with Peirce’s categorization, it is obvious that both color, substance attributes, and classes which encode those attributes (realized in Abstractives and Collectives) can have both Dynamical and Immediate Object reference, and that these subcategories conform to singular uses. Conversely, demonstratives and other designatives (which do not rely upon similarity relations) do not qualify as Abstractives or Collectives; rather they fit best into Peirce’s subcategory of Concretives. While demonstrative pronouns individuate globally, proper names do so using a rather specific sign, such that the sign and the Object have more of a one-to-one correspondence. Nonetheless, both refer to the uniqueness of coexistent entities in the immediate context; consequently, both qualify as Concretives, not Abstractives or Collectives (see West 2013b for an in-depth discussion of semiotic distinctions among demonstratives, proper names and nouns).

Peirce’s further requirement that individuals constitute generals holds special prominence even in his later works, illustrating not the global character of demonstratives only, but the particular Objects’ magnetic pull on the observer’s attention to react to the haecceity inherent to the context. Here Peirce means that there is no common meaning inherent or contrived which applies to Objects associated with signs that have a “general” character. Conversely, instantiations of singulars, are “absolutely determinate”—the semantic content of their class’s features carries to all instantiations, dispersing their continuity across space and time, and lending some common meaning across singular-Object pairings—a defining attribute of symbols). Since singulars emphasize their Objects’ membership in a class and hence imply shared attributes with other members of that class, the Interpretants of each instantiation are determined “absolutely,” given the fit of each instantiation to represent an exemplar of the concept, illustrating the concept’s attributes in the monadic tradition. As such, instantiations of singulars and their Objects belong not merely to a composite of similar entities; they promulgate that status still further upon subsequent applications of sign-Object pairing—an inherent function of symbols. Either in “her cat is dangerous,” or in “Cats are
dangerous,” the noun (as an abstractive in the former, or as a collective in the latter) constitutes a singular, since shared qualities of cathood apply to the Interpretant in either case. “That is dangerous” requires no shared characteristics applied to its objects. Conversely, no Interpretant-based commonalities exist across uses of individuals. In sum, the purpose of individuals and singulars, as reflected in Peirce’s later works, is quite distinguishable.

The Ontogeny of Individuation

Findings from children’s early use of Index (gestures, demonstratives) illustrate that individuals precede singulars in development. Prior to the onset of single words, individuals materialize as “pure” indexes, pure Seconds (West 2013a: 162), attentional devices in the here and now of discourse, e.g., “just want dat,” referring to a block that a child has just dropped, or to any other object (like a piece of cereal) that has been dropped. These designatives (as individuals) surface initially as attentional pointers associated with a single sensory modality, as is the case for following another’s gaze at 0;2 (Scaife and Bruner 1975: 265), and tracing another’s coming and going in and out of a room (Baillargeon 2004a: 89), in conformity to Lakoff and Johnson’s (1999: 31–32) container schema. At 0;4 Indexes coordinate two particular sensory modalities—gaze and reach (Piaget 1961/1969: 324–325). Afterward, unidirectional and bidirectional gaze and pointing surface (Bates 1976: 61; Tomasello 1999: 62; Saylor 2004: 608; Baldwin and Saylor 2005: 136). These gestures represent primary Indexes which qualify as Concretives in Peirce’s third trichotomy—they are associated with coexistent Objects only. These gestural Indexes prefigure demonstrative pronoun production, and occur in “one place at one time,” referring to an amplified range of objects. Therefore, they constitute individuals. They rely on observation of the context to attach sign to Object. Early linguistic signs (distal demonstratives “that”) are likewise individuals, in that they emanate from indexical gestures and are used concurrently with them. Furthermore, global demonstratives attach to an unlimited range of Object types (West 2013a: 28). The onset of “that” materializes within the first ten words (Clark 1978: 96–97). Such uses are exophoric in that the sign and Object are restricted to the same spatio-temporal frame (West 1986: 32). These uses constitute individuals only; they are confined to noncontrastive space—near and far places are undifferentiated until beyond the four year mark (Clark 2009: 145; West 1986: 115; West 2011: 94–95; Clark and Garnica 1974: 570–571); and they single out any object of focus.

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5 Exophoric demonstrative use was coined by Halliday and Hasan (1976: 31–33) to refer to a present referent, e.g., ”That’s what I ran into” (a toy train in the physical environment).
(Clark 1978: 96–97). Neither distance nor orientation is a factor: the child until after 3;0 refers to any salient object with an individual “that.”

The global use of “that” (as an individual only) is likewise fostered by “Origo blindness.” If “that” refers to objects of focus without alluding to vantage points, its use is predeictic⁶ (Clark 2009: 166–167; West 2011: 94–96; West 2013a: 28); hence these “thats” constitute individuals only—they conform to Peirce’s category of Concreitives and likewise qualify as generals, since no common meaning resides in all global uses of “that.” In the event that a single Origo is recognized (self), Origo blindness is operational; and individual use is unquestionable. Recognition of speaker as origo (and Origo’s possible orientations to focused objects or to contrastive near/far locations), gives rise to singular uses of “that.” Indexical gestures (likewise individuals) still compensate at this stage for the lack of linguistic specificity (West 2013a: 21–23). Goldin-Meadow (2003: 80) and Tomasello and Akhtar (1995: 220–221) claim that gestures in exophoric pronoun use serve to disambiguate which referent is the object/event of focus, when at least two possibilities are in issue, underscoring the critical function of individuals in early reference.

Even after 3;0 when children begin to envision themselves in other orientations, origo (self as point of orientation) remains static (Tanz 2009: 87, 125). First uses of “this” appear and “that” begins to be used contrastively, marking the inception of Origo recognition—role-taking in events. Demonstratives begin to be employed deictically, as singulars, referring to classifications of space (proximate and distant) with respect to classes of event participants (speaker, addressee, and the like). Such spatial differentiation is initially projected from a single, static Origo and orientation. But, pronouns become more systematic, illustrating transcendence to singular and deictic uses, after event roles are apprehended (West 2011: 95; West 2013a: 31). Assuming conversational and functional roles via shifting pronoun use (“I,” “you,” and “this,” “that”) appears to be a prime indicator of the onset of singular use. Nonetheless, the process of using these pronouns as singulars, as role designators which shift is rather protracted, such that their association with particular conversational role vantage points emerges later than productive reference to speech participant roles—2;7 for the former, 2;0 for the latter (“I”/“you,” (West 1986: 115; West 2011: 95), extending into the fourth and fifth years—errors in demonstrative use are prevalent even at 4;1 when another’s perspective is the reverse (Tanz 2009: 87, 125).

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⁶ Predeictic uses entail an absence of reference points and orientations to them, while deictic uses embrace systematic Origo and orientation shifts.
The Object's Function in Individuation

Peirce lays great store in the fact that his two types of Objects give rise to distinct functions:

But now I must call attention to the circumstance that every sign has two objects. It has that object which it represents itself to have in immediate Object, which has no other being than that of being represented to be, a mere Representative Being, or as the pre-Kantian logicians used to say a merely Objective Being; and on the other hand there is the Real Object which has really determined the sign which I usually call the Dynamical Object and which alone strictly conforms to the definition of the Object. The Object of a Sign is its progenitor, its father. The Dynamical Object is the Natural Father, the Objective Object is the putative father. (n.d.: MS 499: 86–MS 499s: 2)

Peirce articulates that both the Dynamical and Immediate Object constitute “progenitors” but of different types, such that they bring into existence and/or nurture the sign. The Dynamical Object, in its natural function—that of birthing the sign—refers to its insinuation as an individual with the influence it musters over sign selection. As such, it has a direct, primary relationship with its sign, and materializes suddenly with brute force. Consequently, Dynamical Objects “really determine” the Object—they are equivocal to the real object in its material form.

The Immediate Object, as a fostering device, consolidates instantiations of the Object, such that Interpretant slots begin being filled with feature comparisons. Immediate Objects do not beget their signs; rather they, with their Interpretants, nurture them—producing singulars, mentally constructed comparisons across instantiations. Accordingly, singulars are likely to select symbols, laying the groundwork for the inclusion of Immediate Objects. As pronouns, Objects of singulars define spatial parameters with respect to a shifting vantage point: “this” demarcating near entities/space; and “that” determining more distant referents/places within Origo’s temporary spatial array. Objects within these spatial parameters are similar insofar as they group every object within the designated near/far space to have a similar relationship to Origo. Hence, singular pronoun use via the Interpretant reveals that a coordinate deictic system defines distance and accessibility of Objects at time of utterance with respect to the established Origo.

Conversely, for individuals, the Immediate Object inclusive of an Interpretant is immaterial; and Peirce’s requirement of objectivity (the reverse of

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7 The Dynamical “that” object brings into existence the demonstrative “that” as a sign which points, beckoned by the power of the single object. Immediate “that” objects, in contrast, merely foster uses of “that” because already present within the semantic content of this singular use is a conventional directional meaning—objects in far space.
subjective/egocentric viewpoints) in MS 499 (satisfied by conventional feature comparisons) is not yet operational. The Dynamical Object gives rise to individual pronoun use, given its attentional force for interlocutors. Hence, the Dynamical Object (the “natural Father”) endows individuals with unmitigated reality, independent of discrepancies noted by Short (2007: 38–41). Reality for Dynamical Objects resides in their material makeup, and not in “whatever we happen to think” (W2: 467). Despite limitations accorded to Dynamical Objects by virtue of their restriction to co-existence in the physical world, reality is nonetheless ascribed, since their status as members of an undifferentiated but non-coalescing collective secures their place in the reality of the moment. Dynamical Objects of “that” are discrete foci; they do not acquire individual status by blending into the spatial array. Although existence in pure Secondness often consigns Objects to being Dynamical, it still allows for the Object’s place in the unified collage of experience.

The Object’s reality in Secondness further describes the Dynamical Object’s full effect on individual signs and their signers. These Objects must have within them a salience of such proportion that they grasp the “mental eyeballs” (1908: EP 2: 484) of the signer. In this attentional capacity, Dynamical Objects intensify their uniqueness for signers. In fact, the Object’s presence and perhaps accompanying Indexes (gaze, pointing) suffice to elicit individual pronoun use—little need arises for access to prior stored mental representations to enhance their compulsive notice. This attentional character of individual pronouns brought about by their Dynamical Objects, determines their status as “pure” Indexes, highlighting but not discriminating Object location from Object identity.

Dynamical Objects’ influence on attention and on sign selection is unparalleled; the lack of nucleus or periphery to establish typicality is absent. The typicality of Object features does not determine sign appropriateness. In fact, Objects of individuals (especially demonstratives) strip their signs of the means to subsist as best exemplars of a class. The Dynamical Object of “that” in its global use (a particular toy clown) raises its status to a salient level; and the individual sign (“that”) does not rely on any common features with other clowns/toys—the mere uniqueness of that particular clown takes precedence. Furthermore, the Dynamical Object here surfaces directly without indicating its location—proximate or distant. The choice of “that” (compelled by non-concept-driven naming of Objects) equalizes and perhaps reduces all objects to salient entities—requiring the Dynamical Object alone to take hold of signers “mental eyeballs.” In short, the riveting influence of the
Dynamical Object on sign use accounts for its preeminence in the semiosis of sign-Object-Interpretant relations.

**Conclusion**

Pronouns are quintessential measures of semiosis; they illustrate transition from solely attentional devices in embodied experience to individuating proximal or distal spatial confines, incorporating orientational concepts into the mix. Hence, Peirce’s distinction between individuals and singulars effectively provides the theoretical mechanism to chart the semiosis of linguistic indexical signs.

As such, Peirce’s individual/singular distinction provides an explanatory framework to showcase developmental advances in pronoun use—under-scoring the preeminence of pronouns over nouns. While early on in development, individuals promote salience of objects in the haecceity of the context, singulars later consolidate Objects into bundles of cognition, going beyond stark instantiations of Secondness. Essentially, individuals (gestures, global demonstrative pronouns) serve as agents of attention-fixing and refixing, which facilitates the emergence of naming (West 2013b). As such, they foreground subjective momentary attractions to Objects as discrete compelling entities. This subjective, nonsystematic device, in turn, contributes to the increased influence of Dynamical Objects in the early stream of consciousness to make the Object’s presence felt.

Singulars, in contrast, are symbolic representations which materialize consequent to the formation of Immediate Objects, and are accompanied by more objectively conceived Interpretants. They have “continuity”—they bring with them (from within their lexicon) properties/attributes which determine their category fit. Their continuity resides in the fact that their Interpretants carry this meaning across uses. The continuity which Peirce identifies resides in application of the same sign and Interpretant to different Objects which are deemed to warrant inclusion in an identical class. This more objective paradigm (either by invoking pronouns or nouns) gives rise to increased means to enter others’ worlds, permitting demonstratives to imply Origo shifts and orientational alterations. This change in the function of the Object, from Dynamical to Immediate, during the course of development, traces how a simple pointing mechanism acquires a symbolic character, bundled in the shared semantic conventions accorded to viewpoint roles.
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