



Nonsensical signs

Description

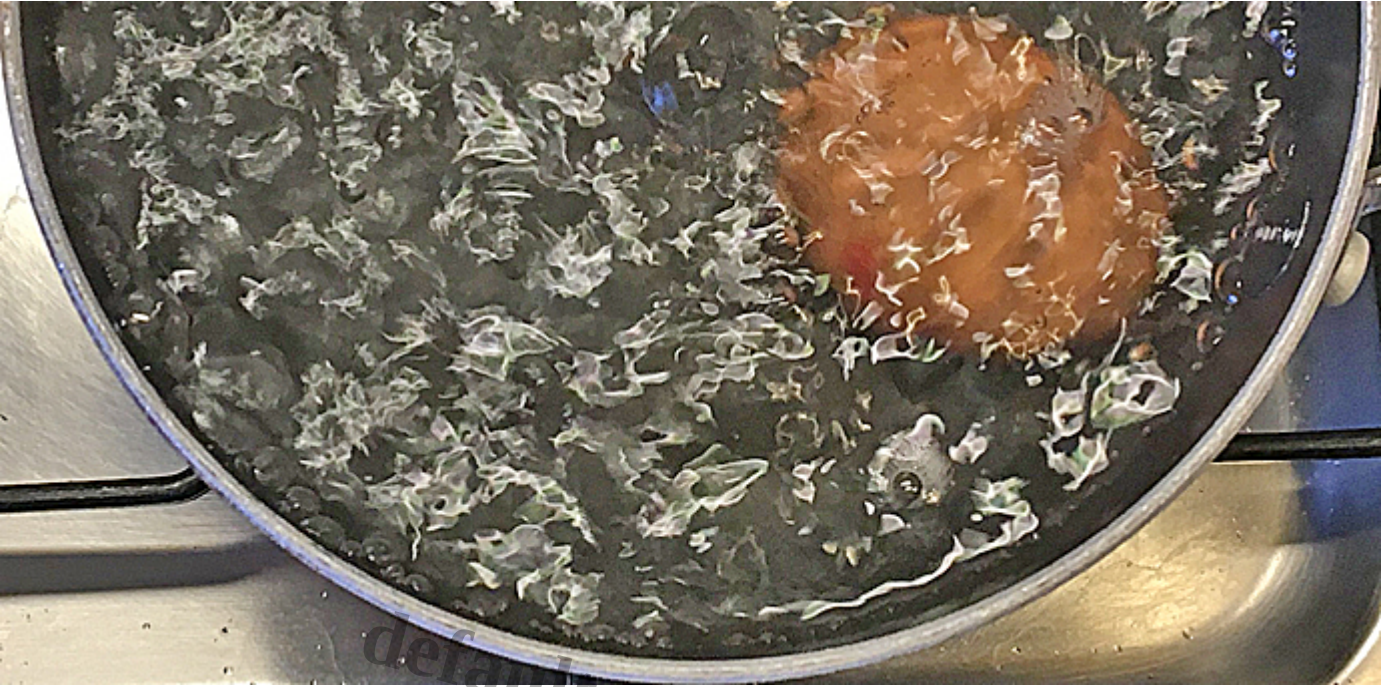
• A tweeting egg! This struck Alice as very odd; she had only ever heard of birds being able to tweet. But then again, birds *did* come from eggs, so it made sense they should have this ability from the outset • (52).

That's Alice's first impression of Trumpty Dumpty sitting on a wall in the satirical book *Alice in Brexotland* by Lucien Young, recasting some political nonsense in the manner of Lewis Carroll's masterwork *Alice in Wonderland*.

Nonsense and metaphor

The linguist George Lakoff titled one of his books: *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*. That's three unlikely descriptors, apparently attributed to a classification system of the Dyrbal language, in which the female gender category includes water, fire, violence, and some animals. The book is about metaphor, [giving a thing a name that belongs to something else](#), according to Aristotle. Metaphor is about making sense out of category mistakes, errors, strange juxtapositions, and even absurdities.

The strong claim of metaphor theory is that all language operates that way. It requires no more cognitive effort to think that a human being at a computer can tweet than that a bird can tweet, or that an egg can, or that an egg can speak.



Under the rule of metaphor, any unlikely assembly of terms makes either perfect sense (due to linguistic convention) or simply shifts the unlikely into the realms of imagination, fantasy, paradox, absurdity, nonsense and the surreal. We make meaning out of anything.

Semiotics and nonsense

To pursue the nonsense theme, how does semiotics account for signs that ostensibly make no sense â?? non-signs? Is there any sign that falls outside of C.S. Peirceâ??s apparently exhaustive system of [ten sign categories](#)?

Peirce worked in threes â?? three categories (or classes) of things, grouped in threes, and in combinations of three.

Here is an example of a crude three-way classification system of my own invention. Imagine an arbitrary description system in which

- kittens are fluffy, black and/or wild
- eggs are raw, white and/or cracked
- hats are woollen, grey and/or frayed.

Under this informal system, fluffy things are likely to be kittens, cracked things are likely to be eggs, and woollen things are probably hats.

The descriptors are not exclusive (a kitten can be both fluffy and black), and some of the descriptors cross over between kittens, eggs and hats. So fluffy white frayed things are likely to be hats, even though the attributes are shared amongst the categories.

But the combinations can be limited to something sensible. Imagine a rule that allows certain attributes such as colours to be shared, but you cannot apply structural defects (cracked or frayed) to living things

(like kittens).

Outside of such a rule, this particular system does invite aberant combinations, such as

- fluffy, raw and frayed
- wild, cracked and woollen.

I donâ??t have much trouble imagining a wild hat, a fluffy egg, or a cracked kitten.

My arbitrary system above presents three descriptors (e.g. fluffy, black, wild, etc) and three categories (kittens, eggs and hats). The descriptors can be assembled in nine different ways (3Ã?3) â?? but not all combinations make perfect sense.

Ten categories of signs, again

My tortured example is a bit like Peirceâ??s system for categorising signs. His semiotic theories posit not just three sets of three descriptors (nine combinations of three), but three sets of three sets of three descriptors for classifying signs to form 27 possible sign categories (3x3x3). Peirce proposed a rule that limits the combination of descriptors such that there are only 10 sign categories.

As I attempted to explain in a [previous post](#), Peirceâ??s rule assumes that a sign may emerge from the raw quality of a thing, a brief declaration about a thing, or a complex proposition or argument about a thing. The way Peirce derives his classification system is complicated, if not arbitrary. But it does invite speculation as to what the 17 nonconforming, nonsensical, sign categories might be like.

Failed sign categories

Here is a list of all 17 categories that Peirceâ??s system rejects, and my attempt to give them meaning with examples. I have failed. But for me, examples flow with the same degree of difficulty or ease as for Peirceâ??s ten proclaimed legitimate sign categories. I think that many scholars in the field of semiotics have similar difficulties.

In so far as I have interpreted the various descriptors (Dicent, Rhematic, Qualisign, etc) correctly I would argue that the following at least have currency in the realms of metaphor, absurdity, imagination, fantasy, magic, paradox, jokes and surreality. Any sign systems has to cater for the absurd.

- Dicent Iconic Qualisign: A statement about a thing that resembles the quality of the thing being referred to (**this apple is red**)
- Delomic Iconic Qualisign: A rule that resembles in quality the quality being referred to (**all apples grown here are red**)
- Rhematic Indexical Qualisign: spontaneous red smoke issuing from a firework indicating the firework contains red powder
- Dicent Indexical Qualisign: Ah! The smoke is red!
- Delomic Indexical Qualisign: Red smoke that declares itself to be red (spoken by a smoke-like genie emerging from a bottle)
- Rhematic Symbolic Qualisign: red smoke as a symbol of the revolution
- Dicent Symbolic Qualisign: â??the red smoke from this fire symbolises (is a metaphor for) the revolutionâ?•

- Delomic Symbolic Qualisign: A rule or argument: “the red smoke from this fire is a metaphor of the revolution as it reflects the blood of the fallen”
- Dicent Iconic Sinsign: a statement that looks like the statement it asserts, or perhaps another statement, or is ambiguous, as pointed out in a book about semiotics: “I saw her duck under the table.”
- Delomic Iconic Sinsign: some text outlining such statements as the above that begins to look like the objects it is talking about: e.g. The text above swirling into the shape of a lady with a duck hiding under a table.
- Delomic Indexical Sinsign: An argument that emerges causally from an initial declaration, which looks like an inevitable deduction. Some computer programs do this, e.g. logic programming languages (Prolog)
- Rhematic Symbolic Sinsign: The spontaneous declaration “Red!” where everyone knows that as a warning (symbol) that someone is angry.
- Dicent Symbolic Sinsign: A statement about the quality of something that is a substitute (symbol) for something else. “He was red,” which actually means “he was angry.”
- Delomic Symbolic Sinsign: An explanation about how the quality of something is a substitute (symbol) for something else. Explaining how “He was red,” can mean “he was angry.”
- Dicent Iconic Legisign: A statement about a diagrammatic proposition.
- Delomic Iconic Legisign: A discussion or argument about a diagram.
- Delomic Indexical Legisign: A street cry that presents an argument: a shouting argument in the street.

The difficulty posed by this exercise signals the tenuous nature of Peirce’s sign system taken as a hard and fast classification system. Peirce even affirmed as much when he suggested that the challenge of categorising a sign is valuable in itself, and the process is approximate (297).

Peirce does write briefly about metaphor. Like diagrams, metaphors are mostly icons. But Peirce’s lack of a theory of metaphor may account for some of the difficulties I have with his classification system.

References

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Date Created

January 13, 2018

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