Semiosis & sign exchange: design for a subjective situationism, including conceptual grounds of business information modeling

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part ii

ANATOMY OF MEANING
After the extensive groundwork of Part i, a now relatively simple task remains. What follows from those grounds when individual sign users exchange signs? That is, emphasizing a structural view, what is subjective situationism’s anatomy of meaning?

It only takes Chapters 7 and 8 to develop this anatomy. The other four chapters of Part ii are all critical; you do not miss anything important in a constructive way by skipping them.

The first four paragraphs of Chapter 7 mainly serve to introduce widening the scope from a single sign user to sign exchanges between sign users. Several aspects of communication are reviewed, and other interpretations are suggested, from the perspective created in Part i.

A traditional linguistic approach to meaning is often constrained at the semantic level (see Chapter 5). From there, theorists try to explain meaning from a given sign outwards. First and foremost, they consider a sign as a, say, self-contained system. It is believed to naively represent reality through one-to-one correspondences between its elements and real objects.

It is however impossible to label such an approach simplistic. As its core assumptions still leave many aspects of meaning unexplained, subsequently, intricate elaborations are usually added. Highly complex theories result.

SCHOPENHAUER also provides inspiration to refrain from explaining meaning from an unnecessarily limited linguistic perspective. He argues for three modes of causality. One mode entails causes of which the effects are motivationally induced.

Chapter 7 suggests that labels of (a) motivation-oriented causes and (b) signs with constituting semiosis are actually synonymous. Even with this assumption – introducing causation as a ground for sign exchange! – the last paragraph of Chapter 7 does not detract from the principle of a sign’s representational
nature. It is the sign's object that comes out differently, though. In general, its
object is the sign engineer's will. For a particular sign, it is a collection of par-
ticular motives or interests. The metapattern is applied as a modeling tech-
nique (see Chapter 4) to indicate in more detail what a sign stands for.

In terms of cause and effect, a motive encompasses the process-as-planned
from cause to effect. The sign engineer therefore accounts for the sign
observer(s) in his sign annex cause. For it is the observer who is addressed to
exhibit the effect as desired by the engineer.

The sign-is-cause view augments traditional concepts of language. For
every sign now turns out vastly more intricately structured. The ontology of
subjective situationism suggests that it is an insurmountable reduction to fac-
tor a sign into discrete elements while claiming that each element provides just
a single contribution to the sign's overall meaning. Instead, a sign is better
viewed as a convolution – of which a model representing objects with situa-
tionally distinctive behavior can be designed with the metapattern – much like
a chromosome. As a potential cause, a sign reflects (also read: represents) its
engineer in all his multiplicity. It therefore seems reasonable to posit that as far
as representation goes, one and the same sign element – which already is a
reduction, of course – serves in a multitude of configurations. Its contribu-
tions will of course vary with the configurations (also read: situations). A sign,
then, is like a tight bundle that can be unwrapped in many ways. It is offered in
exchange by the sign engineer. He aims it at one or more sign observers.

The ennead explains how a multitude of focus shifts along the ideal dimen-
sion, with the result of each interpretative step added to the body's (cognitive)
mass, can generate a large variety in effect from a seemingly compact cause.
By the way, this hypothesis only adds to the evolutionary advantage of sign
exchange at this level of intricacy.

Chapter 8 is an immediate continuation from Chapter 7. Corresponding to
the difference between cause and effect, what a sign represents is different for
its engineer and observer, respectively. The metapattern is applied for show-
ing their essential differences.
chapter 7

THE POLITICAL NATURE OF HUMAN EXCHANGE

All actions a sign user performs are ultimately determined by his will. It follows from SCHOPENHAUER’s scheme which I have outlined in the last chapter of Part i. The will itself in the Schopenhauerean sense is rationally unknowable. The will is the ultimate ground of knowledge. And as its ground the will is not the intellect. Even less does the will coincide with the faculty of reason. For the reason constitutes the intellect as – only – one of its parts, or roots as SCHOPENHAUER specifies.

The relationship between the will and the intellect is even such that the intellect is an instrument of the will. Nothing more, nothing less. The insolvable puzzle for rationality is of course that the intellect by definition doesn’t know, not essentially and wholly, what ‘it’ serves. The most a sign user can do with his intellect is to induce onto its objectified reality the existence of what it is instrumental for. He thus gains an at most partial belief. That is precisely what SCHOPENHAUER does, first in Über die vierfache Wurzel des Satzes vom zureichenden Grunde (1813, 1847), and next in Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung (1818, 1844, 1859). He engineers the sign will and thereby includes an ultimate background interpretant in his conceptual system (suggesting an ultimate object annex situation as reality).

The intellect does not control the will. The intellect serves the will. The Schopenhauerean configuration of concepts has profound implications for explanations what really happens when one sign user is involved in an exchange with one or more other sign users. My treatment of such exchanges makes up Part ii.

This opening chapter of the treatise’s second part is dedicated to introducing additional concepts and terminology. My presentation in §§ 7.1 through 7.4 necessarily lacks systematic cohesion from the point of view of established paradigms. For I am first of all exploring basic concepts that I may later
fruitfully deploy in a different conceptual configuration. But already in § 7.5 the puzzle starts to come together with important pieces finding their tightly integrated position. Chapter 8 completes the picture of the anatomy of meaning as-a-dynamic-system.

In general I refrain from providing empirical evidence. For, as already indicated in the Introduction, empirically testable hypotheses that correspond with subjective situationism lie outside the scope of this treatise. I engage in ontological design as innovative speculation. It is finished when I reach a well-rounded ontology that suggests improvements in both what business information models construct as representing reality and how the modeler interacts with (other) stakeholders.

Chapters 7 and 8 develop sign structures that differentiate between sign engineer and sign observer. They allow for a much richer analysis of what a sign “stands for” (PEIRCE) than what VOLOSHINOV criticizes as “abstract objectivism.” A conceptual information model is also a sign. The sign structures I present here illuminate more ‘interestly’ (SCHOPENHAUER) what such information models represent.

7.1 thematic constraints

As in Part i, in Part ii I attempt keeping concepts as widely applicable as possible. I make some limiting assumptions, though. I believe these constraints on my subject matter make the development easier to follow.

The first constraint reads that I suppose a sign user to be a human being, a person. I am therefore interested in exchanges between persons. But then, not all their exchanges are relevant for this treatise.

So, as a second constraint I limit my exposition to a particular category of exchanges. Now SCHOPENHAUER doesn’t claim it as his original insight but in Über die viervache Wurzel des Satzes vom zureichenden Grunde he already remarks on the nature of (ex)changes that (p 62)

die Kausalität also, dieser Lenker aller und jeder Veränderung, tritt nun in der Natur unter drei verschiedenen Formen auf: als Ursache im engsten Sinn, als Reiz, und als Motiv.

[thus causality, this director of each and every change, now appears in nature in three different forms, namely as cause in the narrowest sense, as stimulus, and as motive.]

About changes of his first category, i.e., resulting from “cause in the narrow-

1. The classification of causal modes SCHOPENHAUER presents may now appear as evident. The early development of empirical science in the seventeenth century, however, ‘causes’ designs of widely competing views of causation. See Causation in Early Modern Philosophy (1993) edited by S. NADLER.

236
est sense,” SCHOPENHAUER explains

däß der vorhergehende Zustand (die Ursache) eine Veränderung erfährt, die an Größe der
gleichkommt, die er hervorgerufen hat (der Wirkung). Ferner ist nur bei dieser Form der
Kausalität der Grad der Wirkung dem Grade der Ursache stets genau angemessen, so daß
aus dieser jene sich berechnen läßt, und umgekehrt.

that the preceding state (the cause) undergoes a change which in magnitude
equals the change (the effect) brought about by that state. Further, it is only in this form of
causality that the degree of the effect always corresponds exactly to that of the cause, so that
the one can be calculated from the other.

With a stimulus, representing his second category of forms of causation, though,

sind […] Wirkung und Gegenwirkung einander nicht gleich, und keineswegs folgt die
Intensität der Wirkung, durch alle Grade, der Intensität der Ursache: vielmehr kann, durch
Verstärkung der Ursache, die Wirkung sogar in ihr Gegen teil umschlagen.

action and reaction are not equal to each other, and the intensity of the effect
through all its degrees by no means corresponds to the intensity of the cause; on the con-
trary, by intensifying the cause the effect may even be turned into its opposite.

The third form of causality, SCHOPENHAUER reports,

ist das Motiv: unter dieser leitet sie das eigentlich animalische Leben, also das Thun, d.h. die
äußern, mit Bewußtsein geschehenden Aktionen, aller thierischen Wesen. Das Medium der
Motive ist die Erkenntnis: die Empfänglichkeit für sie erfordert folglich einen Intellekt.

Daher ist das wahre Charakteristikum des Thiers das Erkennen, das Vorstellen.

is the motive. In this form causality controls animal life proper and hence conduct,

that is, the external, consciously performed actions of all animals. The medium of motives is
knowledge, consequently susceptibility to motives requires an intellect. Therefore knowing,
the forming of a representation or mental picture, is the true characteristic of the animal.

Persons involved in exchange resort to all three forms of causation. I give the

example of John wanting one of Bill's lower legs lifted, with Bill sitting down
in a chair. John can make it happen “in the narrowest sense” of causation by
lifting up Bill's leg. Then John carries its full weight (and overcomes any addi-
tional resistance). A stimulus would be a light tap on Bill's knee. When hit at
the right spot, the proverbial knee-jerk reaction of Bill is to lift up his lower
leg. Finally, John may ask Bill to lift his lower leg. This sign, or information,
results in a motivational interpretant with Bill who then proceeds to perform
the action himself. It is in this sense that GREGORY BATESON (1904-1980)
remarks (1972, p 381):2

The technical term “information” may be succinctly defined as any difference which makes
a difference in some later event.

I restrict the main argument of this treatise to exchanges based on signs which

are engineered. It is irrelevant whether the engineer is ‘signing’
consciously or unconsciously. As the previous chapter has dem-
onstrated, any sign is to some extent the product of irrational
determinants.

Suppose John attempts to lift Bill’s leg by his own sheer force or by adminis-
tering a stimulus. Then Bill usually takes such an action also as a sign, often
even primarily so. His motives are engaged by the exchange, too. Bill may, or
he may not, like John to pull his leg by cause in the narrowest sense, or by stim-
ulus. Next, Bill may perform a – by definition – motivated (re)action based
on John’s action taken as a sign.

The third constraint limits the sign-based exchanges of persons to business.
Instead of striving after a formal definition I offer some concepts closely
related to that of business. Actually, already in 1932
4
the various senses in which the word is now used all show loss of relation to those of
‘busy.’

I believe restoring this orientation at action as the primary sense of business is
productive. For then the most important characteristic of business is that it is
not conducted in private. Of course, private is a problematic concept, too. My
emphasis is that business, sooner or later, always requires transactions, i.e.,
actions involving two or more persons. Transactions are exchanges, vice
versa.

A business organization may very well consist of a single person. No ‘busi-
ness,’ however, is viable when it doesn’t do ‘business’ with other parties. I
don’t find it relevant for the concept of business whether or not transactions
are commercial. Organizations and persons in both the public and the
private
5
sector are all engaged in business.

3. Along these lines, sign and design are syn-
onymous. And the sign engineer is of course
a sign designer. No, excuse me, he is a design
designer. That is, a designer. Or a signer, for
short, which completes the loop. That such a
circular movement occurs should not come
as a surprise for I started out from the
assumption of a sign user. The relief sketched
by introducing concepts such as engineer
helps to lead the loop(s) to an interpretation
from a focus with a higher precision.

4. See the lemma business (p 138) in The
Universal Dictionary of the English Language
(1932) edited by H.C. WYLD.

5. On purpose I have reused the term private,
rather than profit. The change of focus is
designed to alert the reader to a different
context, making it clear that here ‘private’ is
the signature standing for a different object
than the homonymous signature a few sen-
tences earlier. There, private was even placed
in opposition to business. Such differences
should underline the importance of the situ-
tional nature of behavior. Only when signs
are recognized as a configuration of signa-
ture, context, and intext is it possible to inter-
pret reality as an unambiguous configuration
of object, situation, and behavior.
The conduct of business requires information. The premise of this treatise is that it is often both possible and beneficial to apply tools for information processing. Tools are increasingly counted upon to store, process, distribute, etcetera, information in correspondence with the design models specified for them. Such a model is also called a conceptual information model. It is conceptual because there is not yet any immediate construction involved. It is an information model because it is oriented at construction – and implementation, use, maintenance, and, ideally, also eventual removal – of a tool that is more generally called an information system.

I can now succinctly express the fourth constraint. The anatomy of meaning I present here in Part ii concerns the sign exchanges between persons who are involved in the modeling of an information system for business.

With these constraints stated, I right away follow with a disclaimer to the extent that they are not really fundamental. I therefore repeat what I have written at the start of this paragraph. These constraints should especially help to provide assistance imagining where and how to put this theory to practice. But again, I pretend my suggestions only as an example. I believe the anatomy of meaning that Part ii adds to subjective situationism is just as generally applicable as what Part i suggests about the individual sign user.

7.2 politics of modeling

Digital information technology is increasingly applied for information systems. Its digital nature requires highly analytical dedication at construction. Often a person with (some) experience in computer programming is ‘promoted’ to the job of developing conceptual information models.

The traditional career path is the cause of much confusion about the nature of modeling. For regularly the technical specialist tends to persist in his rational-analytical attitude. Then he first of all misses that he himself is actually not completely reasonable, at all, but too a large extent motivated by preintellectual interests. Secondly, with such an attitude he fails to accept that other persons will have different interests and corresponding perspectives on advantages and disadvantages. Information modeling as a process should very much be concerned with making different assumptions (also read: interests) explicit.

Rather, different persons will have different interests and corresponding perspectives on advantages and disadvantages. Information modelers are increasingly expected to determine these interests in advance. This requires a deeper understanding of the potential application of information technology.

6. Stated like this, it is jumping to a conclusion. I have included this mention of benefits in this one-sided manner to draw attention to the often implicit assumptions about the application of information technology. Rather, different persons will have different interests and corresponding perspectives on advantages and disadvantages. Information modeling as a process should very much be concerned with making different assumptions (also read: interests) explicit.

7. In several places, for example in Informatiekundige ontwerpleer (1999), I argue that the terminology of analysis and design should be reversed.
sons have interests for which they cannot find or, anyway, cannot articulate ‘reasons.’

The negation or, often even worse, neglect of interests has all sorts of effects. I assume the most important variables are the intensity of interests and the power balance in the exchange. Negating or neglecting interests can even have to opposite effect. Suppose one person makes a proposal to another person in which the former doesn’t take latter’s interests into account. When the other has both strong enough interests to disagree and feels powerful enough to oppose, he may in fact continue pursuing his own interests with increased intensity. Failing to take interests seriously is the one sure way of not developing a conceptual information model that is sufficiently accepted.8

For an understanding of what happens in human interaction a radically political “image of organization” (G. Morgan, 1986) is most helpful.9 I characterize an exchange as political when more than one interest among more than one participant (also read: stakeholder) is involved. So, when John lifts a stone in his enduring privacy, I consider it an unpolitical act. However, it immediately is political when someone else has an interest in that stone and therefore in what John’s lifting of it may bring about.10

8. I am aware that the start of this paragraph doesn’t rest on sound empirical research. I offer it as my personal observation. I think it is valid enough as an introduction to my emphasis on politics.

9. Though assuming the rational nature of behavior, I. Mangham also views an individual person as unique. This is already sufficient ‘reason’ to adopt the political perspective of The politics of organizational change (1979, p xi): “I believe that at the hub of all social life is the process of face-to-face interaction[...].” I consider nearly all behavior to be fundamentally political in the sense that when one individual interacts with another, more often than not he is motivated to do because the encounter provides him with some benefit, even if that benefit may be nothing more than a reduction of uncertainty.” In my anatomy of meaning, question-begging reservations such as “nearly” and “more often than not” are completely absent. As if such positive clarity still needs an excuse, G. Jordan and C. Weedon state in their Cultural Politics (1995, p11): “In this book, we make a scandalous claim: everything in social and cultural life is fundamentally to do with power. Power is at the center of cultural politics. It is integral to culture. All signifying practices — that is, all practices that have meaning — involve relations of power. They subject us in the sense that they offer us particular subject positions and modes of subjectivity.”

10. In Politics & Philosophy (1991), S.S. Kleinberg has devoted a separate chapter to "definitions of politics." He mentions (p 19) “a number of concerns that may be relevant to the concept of politics.” He continues to state that (p 24) “definitions of politics are to be assessed not as right or wrong but as more or less appropriate to the task in hand. What complicates matters is that we cannot assume
An action is usually only labeled political when interests might conflict. The problem with limiting what is political to the value of an action attribute is of course that a criterion is required for what counts as conflicting. This difficulty is bypassed altogether when every (possible) exchange between persons is considered political. From a Schopenhauerean point of view it is also perfectly consistent to do so; every person is interest-driven by nature. Recognizing all multiperson exchanges as essentially political prevents a purely rational approach that would severely limit fulfillment of ‘real’ interests.

Much practical advice on conduct in human interaction in fact simply assumes the irrational nature of determinants. A book like You Can Win at Office Politics (1984) by R. Bell serves as a popular illustration. The author states his “basic decision-making principle of game theory” as follows (p. 5):

For each of your choices, consider only what you don’t want but are afraid you might get, and pick the alternative that looks best when viewed in this light.

The single interest, or motive, that Bell is addressing appears to be the avoidance of fear. Apparently he sees it as fundamental in man. His advice reads that a person becomes aware of his fear(s), then assesses whether or not those fears are justified, and when they are attempts to avoid them by ‘acting’ away from that ‘danger zone.’

I don’t believe that human behavior is only about getting out, and staying out, of trouble. When conditions are favorable it is also about getting into a

agreement about what that task is.” It is precisely for this reason that I propose a ‘definition’ of politics at the level of the individual interest holder. A distinction that Kleinberg emphasizes is that between observer and participant. He offers as a definition (p 25) “[f]rom an observer’s perspective […] that politics is that area of human activity which is undertaken in pursuance of any participant’s definition of how the affairs of a community ought to be regulated.” What is left unexplained is the concept of community. I will attempt to illustrate it as a consequence of personal politics.


Such publications can all be shown to build, either implicitly or explicitly, on behavioral theories of meaning. And that is precisely what the term pragmatism is also applied for as a label. Almost invariably, the concept of situation appears. Another example of a scientific treatment featuring meaning as situational is Meaning, Communication, and Value (1952) by P. F. Kepesekmeti.
situation of opportunity, and staying there and preferably even improving upon the opportunity. I agree with Bell, however, that irrationality of behavior is natural. It is Schopenhauer’s contribution, following Kant who follows Hume, to radically recognize the limits of rationality and even build a conceptual (also read: subsequently rational) system from that insight.

I proceed to call a person holding an interest a 
\textit{stakeholder}. An especially valuable aspect of this concept is that stakeholders may also identify \textit{themselves} as such. A proponent doesn't get every claim to stakeholdership honored. But especially, and regardless of right or wrong, rejection is a highly political act on the part of the rejector.

Mainly for purposes of illustration I mention some types of (potential) stakeholder regarding business information modeling. With such variety it is evident that dynamics of interests soon become highly complex.

I start with the simplest stakeholder configuration imaginable. Then a particular person uses a completely isolated information system. Without any noticeable effects elsewhere it may of course be wondered why the person uses it in the first place. It is nevertheless conceivable. Now suppose, too, the tool in question is designed, constructed, and implemented all by just that single person, too. Throughout the information system’s life cycle he is the only stakeholder. It indeed is a rare case.

With any information system of some complexity, several persons are involved in its conception, design, construction, use, management, audit, etcetera. Even more people may be using it as their tool for operational activities. And many persons are affected by its results. They are all stakeholders. And there is one critical activity where their influence has most impact for real consequences. They must join conceptual information modeling with their voices. For it is through modeling\textsuperscript{12} at the conceptual stage that a tool is essentially determined. Specifying some of the roles persons\textsuperscript{13} may occupy at conceptual information modeling helps to appreciate the extent of stakeholdership.

There will be a person whose formal responsibility it is that the information

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} At this point I don’t assume anything about the eventual model’s quality. It could very well be that no model is drawn up. But such absence fundamentally determines the tool, too. So, all that I am stating here is that there is some activity, and I call it modeling, during which the major characteristics of the tool are specified, implicitly or explicitly.
\item \textsuperscript{13} It is customary to entitle organizational entities with roles. I don’t believe, however, that a committee, for example, can exhibit interests in the Schopenhauerian sense. Therefore, I persist in analysis at the personal level. The introduction of other than persons I consider a practice of reductionism. Any collective entity should be decomposed into the participating persons. They at least exhibit ‘real’ interests.
\end{itemize}
system becomes available. He is the sponsor. It is important to realize that there are good sponsors, bad sponsors, and persons with sponsoring qualities that lie somewhere in between. All I am arguing here is that there is a sponsor, whatever his abilities.

During the activity of modeling, by definition the corresponding – version of the – tool is not yet available. So, at that stage there are no users but prospective (direct) users. Supporting their work or, for that matter, leisure activities, education or whatever is the raison d’être of the tool. Now with a large-scale information system it is normal that not every user makes the same use. It helps to classify prospective users. In extremely varied and therefore complex cases, every individual user may need to be directly involved in conceptual modeling.

Once it is operational, keeping an information system in working condition requires system management. At the time of conceptual modeling, a variety of such tasks may lead to different kinds of prospective system managers. There may also be prospective security officers and prospective auditors.

An information system is made operational through all sorts of activities by all sorts of persons. They usually act in a temporary capacity, their involvement ending, at least under the heading of their corresponding roles, when their change-oriented tasks are fulfilled (or, what regrettfully also happens, are miserably bungled). I give some examples of types of change agent.

The collection of related activities to get an information system operationally established is usually called a project. Then there is also a project manager.

When the information system requires software engineering, another role during modeling is that of prospective software engineer or programmer.

And there is the role of conceptual modeler. The more stakeholders there are, the more his role is directing the modeling process, rather than specifying in detail the actual model all by himself.

It is easy to extend the list of (potential) stakeholders. Customers may be affected by a new information system, and suppliers. There may be additional shareholders to consider when the changes affect their ‘stakes.’ And all sorts of government agencies.

Any attempt at a complete list of stakeholders is in vain. Especially regarding technological developments, old specializations fall into decay and new specializations appear on the scene. The upshot is that stakeholders may be many, and varied. Their number and variety make it especially important to conceive of modeling as a process in a political arena.

For ‘practical’ conceptual grounds in the arena of business information modeling I extend subjective situationism with an explicit anatomy of meaning. In preparation I first remove some traditional theoretical confusion about the concept of meaning.
7.3 meaningful exchanges

Does etymology provide any insight? Causing me to research word origins, and my subsequent proposal for the 'object' of meaning, are some writings in the English language on “the meaning of meaning.” Without fail their authors feel compelled to make clear that there are actually two major meanings of interest. The first is that a particular person may mean something. His meaning is closely associated with his intention, opinion, etcetera. In short, it is something intrapersonal. The second important meaning of meaning concerns, not a person, but a sign. It is interpersonal. In this respect the meaning of a sign is taken as what it objectively stands for, i.e., its meaning is the 'other' object. The underlying assumption of realism is of course that the object that is 'meant' really exists.

For example in German this whole matter is originally hardly relevant. The word Meinung only has connotations with individual knowledge: Ansicht, Anschauung, Standpunkt, Urteil, Wertschätzung. And for what a sign means there exists a completely different word: Bedeutung. With separate terms available no confusion arises about meaning as exists in English.

The modern English language is the result of many influences. The Concise Oxford Dictionary (edited by D. THOMPSON, 1998) explains that (p ix) “the earliest sources are Germanic, Norse, and Romanic.” I would say that the original Bedeutung of the English word meaning coincides with Meinung. I derive support for this position from Herkunftswörterbuch (edited by G. DROSDOWSKI and P. GREBE, 1963) that relates the original Bedeutung of the verb meinen to wähnen.

14. See for example The Meaning of Meaning (1923) by C.K. OGDEN and I.A. RICHARDS. Their book is interesting in many respects. It presents, on page 11, the semantic triangle. The authors don’t refer to PEIRCE at that point, though. But his work is treated, and elaborately quoted from, in one of their appendices. It is plausible that the triangle of OGDEN and RICHARDS is a direct simplification of PEIRCE’s foundation of his theory of signs. My interpretation is that the fundamental indirection shifts in the process of their derivation. With PEIRCE, no direct relationship appears between object and interpretant as the sign mediates. OGDEN and RICHARDS changed it to an indirection between referent (PEIRCE: object) and symbol (PEIRCE: sign), with the thought or reference (PEIRCE: interpretant) as the mediating factor. See Figures 2.4.1 and 2.4.2. The interpretation by OGDEN and RICHARDS is subsequently taken up as the canon for linguistic studies, generally without recognition of the Peircean origin of the triangle.

Another publication, among many, on the philosophy of meaning is Meaning (1972) by S.R. SCHIFFER.

15. See the lemma Meinung (column 2398/2400) in Deutsches Wörterbuch (1971) edited by G. WAHRIG.
And the latter is described in *Deutches Wörterbuch* (edited by G. WAHRIG, 1971) with the verbs: vermuten, fälschlich annehmen, sich einbilden, glauben. The root of *wähnen* is of course equal to the root of *Wahr*: illusion.

With the *Bedeutung* of *Meinung* so clearly associated with the individual knower, say, with ‘me’ and ‘mine,’ and with *Meinung* as the probable source of the English term of meaning, how does meaning in English acquire yet another *Bedeutung*? In fact, this second *Bedeutung* is … *Bedeutung*.16

The *Universal English Dictionary* (H.C. WYLD, 1932) is most helpful by distinguishing two groups of *Bedeutungen* for the adjective mean. One group derives from what is in modern German the word *gemein*. Its old connotations are with common. Even exchange is mentioned in *The Universal English Dictionary*. Those origins lead to the modern *Bedeutungen* of mean, like undistinguished, inferior, mediocre, squalid, stingy, etcetera. These later developments, however, don’t concern me here.

The second group of *Bedeutungen* of the adjective of mean arrive at a later stage in the English language. For they have their origin in a word that reads *moyen* in modern French. I assume that *gemein* and *moyen* have a joint ancestor. But the *Bedeutungen* of mean, inspired by the French influence, lack any social connotation: middle, average, in between.

What use is this inventory? Doesn’t DE SAUSSURE state that a sign is arbitrary? Actually, it is exactly because of its arbitrary nature that I explore the range of *Bedeutungen* that meaning may be associated with. For I want to continue this treatise with a – far more – precise *Bedeutung* for meaning. I propose to apply the Peircean triadic terminology and my own extension into the ennead (for the ennead see § 4.5, especially Figure 4.5.2).

The term meaning does not show in my ennead. In fact, PEIRCE already leaves it out of his original triad. And what I like about the historical *Bedeutungen*, no, I should say about objects, of the adjective of mean is the emphasis on an exchange where the participants meet somewhere in between. Meaning, I therefore suggest as its *Bedeutung*, is the process of establishing an exchange. Then meaning is actually synonymous with communication. And it is *not* a sign that has meaning. Quite the opposite, it is the process of meaning that requires a sign. Meaning is *not* a property of an individual sign user or a particular sign. Meaning is *the whole frame of reference for sign exchange*.

A consequence of this redefinition of meaning is that shared meaning is no longer a contradiction but a pleonasm. For meaning includes, by definition, an exchange. *What stakeholders share is participation in the exchange.*

16. The reader who by now has the firm impression he is reading the script of a sketch to be performed by Monty Python is mistaken. My analysis is quite serious. I have nevertheless made no attempt to suppress any surrealist signatures.
An exchange requires ‘a middle.’ Such a mean, however, does not predetermine the quality of the exchange. As VOLOSHINOV remarks (1929, p 13):

The reality of the sign is wholly a matter determined by that communication. After all, the existence of the sign is nothing but the materialization of that communication.

But isn’t all this just playing with words? If they share meaning by definition of their exchange, surely they share something else, too? Shared interpretants, however, is a contradictio in terminis. For an interpretant is essentially individual. They cannot be shared between individuals. This has been eloquently put by E. VON GLASERSFELD who argues in Aspects of Constructivism (1996, p 6) that

it is one thing to assert that, as far as one’s experience goes, the meaning others attribute to a word seems to be compatible with one’s own, but quite another to assume that it has to be the same.

17. For a book-length treatment by VON GLASERSFELD see his Radical Constructivism: A way of knowing and learning (1995). It is interesting that SCHOPENHAUER is actually mentioned once, there, albeit in a derogatory fashion. I believe that VON GLASERSFELD, like PEIRCE, doesn’t appreciate the degree to which his own conceptual scheme resembles SCHOPENHAUER’s.

Besides VON GLASERSFELD, as an eye-opener for looking beyond the limited positivist meaning of meaning I also recommend R. ROMMETVEIT. See for example his Outlines of a Dialogically Based Social-Cognitive Approach to Human Cognition and Communication (in: The Dialectical Alternative, Towards a Theory of Language and Mind, 1992 edited by A.H. WOLD). The resemblance to the ideas put forward in this treatise, which are developed from a different angle, is indeed remarkable and stimulating. It carries the promise of further synthesis (see also note 29, Chapter 3).


J.B. O’MALLEY presents “a radical social theory” in Sociology of Meaning (approx. 1972, pp 1-2): “[T]his radically critical perspective involves the deconstruction of any description that would uncritically assume the non-problematic status — ontological, or semiological — of what can only be meaningfully constituted in its actual encountering. [...] Constitution, as this present inquiry discovers it to be, is the dialexical process of encounter, its constitutive praxis. Which is to say that such praxis is as endemically social as it is individual.”

R. ROMMETVEIT, in On Message Structure (1974), theorizes about “the architecture of intersubjectivity” while criticizing (p 2) “the optimism and the faith in their own self-sufficiency displayed by transformational grammarians and psycholinguists of the Harvard-M.I.T. school.” He argues that (p 101) “[m]essage structure [...] will in part be assessed as a sequential structure by which semantic potentialities inherent in what is said (and hence shared perspectives and categorizations) are nested on to particular entities and aspects of a temporarily shared
He maintains that (p 5) the basic point is that the way we segment the flow of our experience, and the way we relate the pieces that we have isolated, is and necessarily remains an essentially subjective matter. We cannot afford to forget that knowledge does not exist outside a person’s mind.

VON GLASERSFELD continues (p 5):
This issue has recently been somewhat confused by talk of shared knowledge and shared meanings. Such talk is often misleading because there are strikingly different ways of sharing. If two people share a room, there is one room and both live in it. If they share a bowl of cherries, none of the cherries is eaten by both persons. This is an important difference, and it must be borne in mind when one speaks of shared meanings. The conceptual structures that constitute meanings or knowledge are not entities that could be used alternatively by different individuals. They are constructs that each user has to build up for him- or herself. And because they are individual constructs, one can never say whether or not two people have produced the same construct. At best one may observe that in a given number of situations their constructs seem to function in the same way, that is, they seem compatible.

[... p 6] The process that leads to such compatibility, however, is not one of giving, taking, or sharing meanings as an existing commodity, but rather one of gradual accommodation that achieves a relative fit. [...] Only repeated use and failures to achieve the desired response will bring about adjustments. [...] Hence, no matter how one looks at it, an analysis of meaning always leads to individual experience. [...] From this point of view, then, the task of the educator is not to dispense knowledge but to provide students with opportunities and incentives to build it up.

Meaning is the sign-based exchange through which each participant individually effects his objectified realities. For an objectified reality is subjective. The subject’s intellect is instrumental and constituted by uniquely individual interpretants. It is therefore also always a subjective measure to what extent another individual ‘shares’ one’s own objectified reality. No objective measure exists for what participants share in their knowledge. Each participant applies his own measures. The quality or, in terms of De Saussure, the value of an exchange is always experienced personally.

7.4 irreverent suggestions

Participants are conditioned for sign-based exchanges, for participation in the process of meaning. Wittgenstein (1953) calls such preparations to participate in a language game Abrichtung, or training. Preparations are of course conducted through sign exchanges, too, with nurture starting from and devel-
I favor WITTGENSTEIN’s German word because it so bluntly marks the major purpose of education, that is, the interests of educators. It helps gaining awareness that the world of meaning is political and therefore often far from egalitarian. VOLOSHINOV was acutely aware of this (1929, p 21):

Every sign [...] is a construct between socially organized persons in the process of their interaction. Therefore, the forms of signs are conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction.

When these forms change, so does the sign.

As becomes clear later on, my own position is even more radically dialogical. For the engineering “construct” and the observation “construct” are different, i.e., there is actually no incontestably single sign “between socially organized persons in the process of their interaction.” The meaning as a middle ground connects differences, rather than establishing a shared identity of interpreters.

Of the two major trends VOLOSHINOV identifies in the philosophy of language, it is already clear from § 5.7 that abstract objectivism does not apply to my theory. Individualistic subjectivism is an equally invalid label. VOLOSHINOV argues that (p 84)

[it] also took the monologic utterance as the ultimate reality and the point of departure for its thinking about language. [...] It approached it from within, from the viewpoint of the person speaking and expressing himself.

My anatomy of meaning includes the viewpoints of all participants in the sign exchange. The focus is not on the sign engineer to the exclusion of the sign observer, vice versa. Actually, whether involved in the particular exchange as an engineer or as an observer, I consider each individual participant as approaching the sign monologically. As a result, though, their communication is essentially dia- or even multilogical.

In this paragraph, I address several myths surrounding the correspondence of knowledge between different persons.

First of all, the concept of egoism must be understood here in a strictly Schopenhauerean sense. With will over mind, it is impossible for a person not to act egoistically. But this egoism does not preclude, at all, that a particular person does not respect, take into account, etcetera, other persons, or, for that matter, other parts of the world. On the contrary, as SCHOPENHAUER makes clear. It is precisely with his intellect, and SCHOPENHAUER points to the faculty of perception rather than of reason, that man can escape from the otherwise

Verbal Communication (1979).

Reasoning along similar lines, for example also strongly criticizing CHOMSKY's linguistic theories, is C.A. KATES in Pragmatics and Semantics, An Empiricist Theory (1980).
immediacy of the will. With his intellect, a person adds the dimensions of
time and/or space to his actions. He becomes capable of motivated empathy.

Figure 7.4.1 provides a highly simplified sketch of the two-dimensional range
of egoism.

Suppose a particular person attempts to guide his actions with an orientation
at both infinite time, and infinite space. Then he surely deserves to be called
an altruist. According to the conceptual system of SCHOPENHAUER he is nev-
ertheless still just as much an egoist. All that is different are his, say, behavioral
parameters for time and space. Even the widest orientation imaginable
reflects personal interests.

What orientation a person habitually applies is undoubtedly determined by
some configuration of nature and nurture. In addition, situationalism, with its
emphasis on behavioral variety grounded in different situations, points to the
possibility that the time/space orientation of a person may situationally vary,
too.

It may not be deduced that I am in favor of egoism. That is nonsense. On
the assumption that behavior is preintellectually interest-based it is pointless
to be for egoism, or against it, for that matter. The Schopenhauerean concept
of egoism must at any rate not be confused with strictly one-sided exploita-
tion in the sense of traditional Darwinism. It is obscene, for example, to think
that a victim of rape voluntarily succumbs. When the victim complies with
such ‘order’ s/he must surely attempt to avert even greater harm to self
and/or others. Interests therefore underlie avoidance of more disadvantage
just as much as promotion of advantage.

It is difficult to avoid an a priori normative approach to the anatomy of
meaning. It is continually tempting to reason from assumptions such as: suc-
cessful communication, integrity of participants, rationality of interests,
etcetera. If there is anything to be learned from SCHOPENHAUER it is to guard
against wishful thinking and self-fulfilling prophesies.

Secondly, and as a corollary of pervasive egoism, every exchange is interest-
laden. Take the simple case of an exchange in which two participants are
involved. Now John initiates it. Suppose he greets Bill. Why does John extend his greeting? And assume that Bill hasn’t yet responded but is still interpreting John’s sign. Why does his interpretation run the course that it does? The only point I make here is that underlying John’s sign is a large number of assumptions.

Much of analytical philosophy traditionally assumes that the natural character of a message is propositional, i.e., that it explicitly and objectively reports on the state of the world. It is for example the view of early logical positivism culminating in the earliest work of Wittgenstein (1921).18

Such propositions, however, are exceptional. If they exist at all. In fact, John probably doesn’t mean – in the sense of placing in the middle – any proposition when he already holds that Bill entertains similar assumptions. This brings education back into focus. Its purpose it not so much to teach how to

18. I find it characteristic for the continued stronghold of analytical philosophy that any shift away from its core assumptions by one of its original proponents is still heralded as a philosophical innovation. It usually happens with complete disregard for those who have voiced more balanced views in the past. In this vein, for example H. Putnam (1926-) receives favorable criticism from M. Lievers in NRC Handelsblad (newspaper issue of September 29th, 2000) for his latest book The Threefold Cord. All I can recognize from the review is that Putnam has now also finally achieved a position that integrates realism and idealism. From my position well outside logical positivism I fail to see why that is such an important intellectual event.

A famous example of a ‘converted’ positivist is of course Wittgenstein with his Philosophical Investigations (1953). Much of the fame of J.L. Austin also derives from what is considered a departure from a strictly analytical point of view. One of Austin’s publications is critically examined in the next chapter. Another example is R.M. Rorty (1931-) who only later in his philosophical career takes up a critical position against positivism, too. His iconized book is Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979). I agree with much that Rorty argues, but again I fail to see where his essential originality lies. On the design of information systems T. Winograd affirms a change of attitude in a book written together with F. Flores (Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design, 1986, p 8): ‘The task we have undertaken in this book is to challenge the rationalistic tradition, introducing an alternative orientation that can lead to asking new questions. In developing this new orientation, we were led to a critique of the current mythology of artificial intelligence and its related cognitive theories, drawing conclusions that contradict the naive optimism[...]. Our ultimate goal, however, is not a debunking but a redirection. The alternative we pose is not a position in a debate about whether or not computers will be intelligent, but an attempt to create a new understanding of how to design computer tools suited to human use and human purposes.’ I agree with their emphasis on tools. However, my anatomy of meaning is even more radically different from naive realism.
elaborate propositions. Rather, it serves to eliminate the need for recurrent propositions. Erstwhile participants at the particular educational program are counted upon to ‘share’ the impressions of their Abrichtung.

Thirdly, because a person is usually untrained at formulating propositions, the signs he engineers mostly take an extra irrational turn. Whether or not Bill accepts this from John is dependent on many aspects. I make no pretense at exhaustive explanation but only informally mention some variables.19 Most fundamentally, Bill checks how John’s sign might effect his own interests. Does John seem to promote them? Or does he intend harm? And what can Bill himself do in response to promote, or at least defend, his own interests? What especially complicates life for Bill at such moments is when John’s sign arouses conflicting interests in him. What feels right for one situation may turn out wrong in another. This naturally causes Bill to expand his situational horizon when he isrationally inclined. Then the instrument that his intellect is for his will opens up, so to speak. Acting primarily on irrational impulse, though, he takes the opposite approach and narrows his action to a limited situation. Closing his intellect, he suffers the consequences when indeed another situation forces itself upon him. Why for example not insult your neighbor? It seems like a bad idea to Bill when it stops his neighbor from presenting him with that second-hand book he has been craving to add to his collection. Or? The concept of responsibility is closely related, i.e., it may be understood as a function of the situational scope for behavior. The wider the scope, the more responsibly does a person act (at least in his own opinion). Acting on conflicting interests can only occur with maximum rationality from within a situation that brings them all together.20

It is implausible Bill always investigates the full range of possibilities. His interpretation is undoubtedly influenced by, when available, previous knowledge about John. How does Bill feel about the distribution of power between them? Does he feel dependent? Independent? Or even on the contrary, does he believe that John is dependent on him? Probably the most important variable controlling Bill’s interpretation is trust. Does he feel trusting toward John?

Complex relationships hold between – feelings of – power and trust. I have no expertise in those matters. Here I establish enough credibility for my proposal that purely rational sign-based exchanges are rare, when they occur at


20. Then, again, such a situation is subjective knowledge. For that reason, a person may be invested with a special role which is aimed at securing a view of a situation that reflects interests of other persons. Examples are referee, arbiter, and judge.
all. So, I believe that especially the concepts of power and trust are necessary for an exposition on the anatomy of meaning.

Suppose that John is the managing director of a middle-sized company. Bill is one of its 600 employees and works as an inventory clerk. One day, John steps into the office room where Bill and several of his colleagues are busy with the manual information system of the inventory department. John is accompanied by a person unknown to the employees. The stranger is now introduced as the project manager. The plan, he declares, is to switch from a manual to a computerized information system. John adds that everybody will benefit, though there of course can be some difficulties during the project.

What is Bill’s impression? Frankly, I don’t have a clue from such a sparse account. But one thing is sure, it is never completely rational. It could be that he sees John for the first time, too. Or perhaps Bill is the son of the company owner and is ‘learning the ropes’ so he can soon take over the job of managing director. Whatever their relationship, it would be a severe mistake by John to assume that Bill is disinterested. For he is not. He cannot even be disinterested. And he most likely has quite different interests from those of John.

My fourth irreverent suggestion, then, is that the degree to which participants align their actions, or contrast them, is predominantly a matter of how they each experience their interests are served. And what a particular person believes his interests are is much less controlled by his intellect than is often assumed, especially by himself. Of course, the fiction of the free will of man is necessary for many social processes. I fervently support it for many purposes. But that fiction may turn into a liability when the intellect attempts to gain control against the will whose instrument it ultimately is.

Fifthly, a person who gains an awareness that his intellect doesn’t independently and completely determine his behavior also realizes all that much sooner how dependent on that intellect he really is. Admitting he can never rationally know his own will in its entirety, he at least attempts to increase his self-knowledge. He then behaves more responsibly. And recognizing the same irrationality in his fellow human beings, he also tries to understanding them as equally individualized objectifications of the will. The paradox is that acceptance of irrationality enhances the rationally objectified reality, both intrabody and external to the individual’s own body. The most elaborate expression – and inspiring attempt to make it rationally productive – I am familiar with of precisely this paradox is Schopenhauer’s *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*.

A sixth notion is that ethics can be simply understood as prescriptions for values of time and space (situations), followed by some rules of conduct for the empathic egoist thus ‘situated.’ In different situations, often widely different behaviors are allowed, ordered, or whatever the force of rule is.

The rules, however, always work from the inside of a person. Saying that social
rules exist is only short-hand notation for the situation in which individual members of that society have each internalized habitual behavior. Such ‘rules’ are ultimately always imposed by other individuals. Again, that is the primary task of education. It takes practice – and earning a degree of servility – to become a functioning member.

I repeat it is only over this matter of priority that I disagree with VOLOSHINOV. While I argue from a psychological perspective, he does so from a sociological one (1929, p 13):

Individual consciousness is not the architect of the ideological superstructure, but only a tenant lodging in the social edifice of ideological signs.

While our explanatory concepts originally differ considerably, our explanations come out very similar. For VOLOSHINOV recognizes that “the social edifice of ideological signs” is not absolute, but changes as a result of “behavioral ideology,” i.e., of individual contributions (p 20):

Social psychology exists primarily in a wide variety of forms of the “utterance,” of little speech genres of internal and external kinds - things left completely unstudied to the present day.

And (p 91) we shall use the term behavioral ideology for the whole aggregate of life experiences and the outward expressions directly connected with it. Behavioral ideology is that atmosphere of unsystematized and unfixed inner and outer speech which endows our every instance of behavior and action and our every “conscious” state with meaning.

In other words, the category of behavioral ideology allows VOLOSHINOV to include a radical subjectivist perspective, after all. Elsewhere, he indeed favors an explanation at such an even more detailed level, that is, of particular sign exchanges rather than genres. I agree with that position (p 66):

[A] synchronic system is not a real entity; it merely serves as a conventional scale on which to register the deviations occurring at every real instant in time. [...] Any system of social norms occupies an analogous position. [...] They exist only with respect to the subjective consciousness of members of some particular community.

My seventh point that might be more or less divergent from common wisdom is that taken in its widest sense ethics is what many exchanges are really about. John may want Bill to behave in a particular way not just this once. Suppose he aims for Bill to integrate, as a behavioral pattern, what continues to serve his interest. For example formal education usually involves complex configurations of exchanges. John as a teacher probably doesn’t benefit directly from the results of Bill’s Abrichtung. But John is of course promoting his own interests when accepting a salary for training Bill. Only when its chain character is recognized is it possible to identify individual persons-with-particular-interests. An analyst overwhelmed by complexity commonly resort to aggregate concepts, such as culture, or society. The immediate consequence of aggrega-
tion is that the focus shifts from individuals. But it is always an individual person with particular interests who acts, even when it is to maintain the ‘culture’ from which he feels he benefits more as it is than from changing it.

Take subjective situationism itself as another example. It is only natural that I argue it solves problems and creates opportunities. But do the solutions actually work? Are there really only opportunities, and no risks? It of course depends on persons, their situations and their interests. I offer subjective situationism here to promote balanced relationships with room for development for all participants in relevant situations. However, the risk of misappropriation by the already more powerful is undeniable. They may seek to increase their power further still. Can subjective situationism provide them with an extra advantage? It probably does. But I believe that the opportunities far outweigh the risks. And whoever does not acknowledge the essential nature of empathy can hardly blame subjective situationism. For again and again I emphasize it as a key concept. The real risk always lies with the person who pursues his interests without ecological regard.

7.5 a natural escalation of the sign

I pursue my more or less anecdotal preparations for a subsequently more systematic treatment of the anatomy of meaning. That is, my method is mainly to start from the opposite of what is generally considered normal, i.e., I depart from what counts as the modern norm.

At least in analytical philosophy and logical positivism the canon for sign-based exchange is the propositional statement. Under such realist assumptions, every proposition can be decided to be objectively true or false. As a matter of procedural principle here, I do not agree. My continuing act of two gentlemen illustrates how the contents of the sign grow naturally when starting from irrational origins of interests.

The zero-base for my exchange theory is the case where John has a need but one that is unfelt by himself. So even though Bill might be able to fulfill it, John is incapable of emitting a sign. He also does not become frustrated that Bill does not (re)act. As I said, for now I assume John doesn’t have either a preintellectual nor an intellectual registration of his need.

The next case is that John does feel that, for example, his back itches. He wants Bill to scratch it as, for whatever reasons, he cannot reach the irritated spot himself. When this happens all the time, and when Bill is always happy to oblige, John may just grunt a single syllable to send Bill scratching.

21. Later, I discovered that the example of a grunt is already employed by H.P. GRICE in Meaning (1957). It seems that he is still reasoning from the language system and mean-
ings that are contained within language by convention (on meaning as convention see also, in Chapter 5, my critique of ECO’s A Theory of Semiotics). GRICE distinguishes between natural and nonnatural meaning. My interpretation of GRICE’s concept of natural meaning is that it basically pertains to a statement about objective reality. Nonnatural meaning involves intentions of the speaker. And GRICE writes (p 58): “Suppose I discovered some person so constituted that, when I told him that whenever I grunted in a special way I wanted him to blush or to incur some malady, thereafter whenever he recognized the grunt (and with it my intention), he did blush or incur the malady. Should we then want to say that the grunt [nonnaturally meant] something. I do not think so.”

My view is the opposite, to which I add that a sign is not primarily engineered to inform the observer about the engineer’s intentions. GRICE denies meaning to the grunt because “the recognition of the intention […] is for the audience a reason and not merely a cause.” It shows little appreciation for the differential nature of causes, such as SCHOPENHAUER presents (see § 7.1). The refusal to see signs as causes for effects in all modes, that is for effects in the narrowest sense, reactive stimuli, and motivationally induced effects, has kept language philosophy unproductively constrained. This I believe to have amply demonstrated through extended discussions of AUSTIN (see Chapter 9) and SEARLE (see Chapter 10).

In Relevance: Communication and Cognition (1986) D. SPERBER and D. WILSON argue that (p 24) “[H]uman interaction is largely determined by the conceptualization of behaviour in intentional rather than physical terms. The idea that communication exploits this ability of humans to attribute intentions to each other should be quite intelligible, and even appealing, to cognitive and social psychologists.” Not surprisingly, my anatomy of meaning therefore turns out to closely resemble their theory which especially develops ideas of GRICE. As SPERBER and WILSON propose (p 155), “an act of ostension is a request for attention. Someone who asks you to behave in a certain way, either physically or cognitively, suggests that he has good reason to think it might be in your own interests, as well as his, to comply with his request. This suggestion may be ill founded or made in bad faith, but it cannot be wholly cancelled. If a request has been made at all, the requester must have assumed that the requestee would
How can a minimal sign often have considerable effects? The answer is that the sign engineer appraises the sign observer. The result of this empathic factor in semiosis is incorporated in the sign. The more the sign engineer feels (also read: believes) he can rely on interests and knowledge already present in the sign observer, the less his sign has to cater for them.

Thus I offer it as an important law of sign-based exchange that: The sign engineer elaborates his sign in reverse proportion to his estimate of the sign observer’s own interests and knowledge. This relationship is shown in a simplified manner in Figure 7.5.1. It implies that no universally optimal way to engineer a sign. It all depends on the participants in the exchange instance. What do they each want (will, motives, interests), and what do they each know (objectified reality)? Vološinov is on this track of reasoning where he argues (1929, p 37):

The understanding of any sign, whether inner or outer, occurs inextricably tied in with the situation in which the sign is implemented. [...] It is always a social situation. [Introspection] is in actuality inseparable from orientation in the particular social situation in which the experience occurs. [...] The sign and its social situation are inextricably fused together. The sign cannot be separated from the social situation without relinquishing its nature as sign.

So, with a highly knowable observer a minimal sign will stand for just as much as what a more elaborate sign causes a less knowable observer to objectify as his reality. In a particular relationship the observer grows increasingly familiar with the engineer’s interests. A sign engineer can therefore engineer his relevant sign with correspondingly increased integration. Greater compactness is more efficient while keeping the sign effective. Through familiarity, the chances of evoking the desired effect(s), i.e., compliance by the observer, are at least equal. As compactness reflects familiarity, the engineer’s changes at compliance by the observer are likely even enhanced.22

Figure 7.5.1 also suggests that many sign engineers will not bother to approach other persons by sign when they feel there are no interests and knowledge to, say, harvest. Is it worth the investment? Politics always has important economic aspects, too. Suppose a particular person is not willing to try and convince another person through a sign. He may then first resort to other power politics, i.e., create a dependency by the other person and making him aware of it. Next, even a minimal sign might be enough to gain cooperation for fulfillment of an interest.

22. This view entails that concepts of syntax and, especially, semantics require critical reexamination and subsequent reconstruction of the concept of semiotics. It adds a powerful argument to triadic irreducibility against reduction of semiotics.
Can interests be objectively compared? It follows from subjective situationism that the ground for a comparison are the interests of the participant who executes the evaluation. The interests and knowledge of for example a sign observer may then be said to converge with (or diverge from) the engineer's interests to the extent that the observer will act (or refrain from acting) in accordance with the interests, and subject to the judgment, of the engineer.

Every single instance of exchange is asymmetrical. And for all participants it is riddled with – asymmetrical – uncertainties. The engineer brings to the middle ground between the observer and himself an expression of his interests while paying attention, in order to enhance chances of his success, to the interests the observer. In his turn, the observer may take up a particular sign. He does so from his own interests but then his empathy 'forces' him to pay attention to interests of the engineer. Their middle ground is not present before the exchange instance, for example as its precondition. Rather, the exchange instance constitutes a middle ground. Interest is the operative variable throughout. Despite his different priority i.e., with social ideology, I believe that the explanation by VOLOSHINOV is extremely insightful (1929, p 40):

In each speech act, subjective experience perishes in the objective fact of the enunciated word-utterance, and the enunciated word is subjectified in the act of responsive understanding in order to generate, sooner or later, a counter statement. Each word [...] is a little arena for the clash and criss-crossing of differently oriented social accents.

In my account, what “perishes” through the exchange is the expression by the sign engineer of his will. And the exchange is the arena, not for social accents, but for individual interests.

I emphasize that I am trying to give a realistic account of the dynamics of sign exchange. F. INGLIS puts the question (1988, p3):

If the chances are that someone is fixing things to suit their own and nobody else’s interest, how far does it get us to say so?

I believe a more thorough understanding helps to counteract abuse of power. When every human exchange is political it is best – with best as an ecological measure – to act on the basis of (ethical) rules that are as explicit as possible to the actor himself. Of course, the concept of abuse is again problematic. Its ‘definition’ here presumes my very own interests, reflecting choices for relevant values of time and space. Owning up to this subjective ground of my treatise, by the way, is also all about being scientific. For it is unscientific to suggest objectivity when it evidently doesn't follow from the grounds of subjective situationism.

The law of reverse proportionality, stated above, is of course a simplification. What compounds the issue is that comparison between interests and knowledge in strictly quantitative terms is an example of reductionism.
Analysis at an aggregate level will often be misleading. What really counts are qualitative differences between particulars.

With Bill still willing to scratch, the single grunt by John might not have been clear enough, though. What is the exact spot where John feels he is itching? Striving for proper gratification of his need John has to include in the sign an precise enough indication of his relevant body part. A small addition may be sufficient when Bill just doesn't know which one of John's regular problem spots is playing up this time around. In fact, it is impossible to clearly distinguish in the sign between what stands for John's interest and what refers to the desired location of manipulation. John entertains the Gestalt of an itch-at-the-spot. He may analyze it, and thus commit a reduction, to yield in his objectified reality a particular situation with objects and their behavior. From such analysis he may engineer a sign with corresponding elements. He indistinctly specifies context(s), signature(s) and intext(s). However, those are John's structural elements of the sign. Bill may interpret the sign differently. When recognizing a different signature, right away his focus and further interpretation don't correspond with John's interest 'behind' the sign.

In what follows I apply an artificial distinction. On one side I place both preintellectual interests and interests that 'known' as motives in objectified reality. On the other side there is the rest of the sign user's objectified reality. It entails a disruption of the sign user's Gestalt which is mitigated when the interest is structured in the sign as the context of the (other) objectified reality. Figure 7.5.2 sketches the (meta)structure of John's sign at this stage of escalation.

![Figure 7.5.2](image)

You scratch my back.

It is here still presumed that the sign's particular engineer is known. The abstraction from John onto engineers in general is shown in Figure 7.5.3. It helps to keep the participants in clear view when the 'middle' of a sign exchange is protracted. That is for example why I am explicitly named as its author as part of this treatise. It reminds the reader who the sign engineer is.
I hypothesize that the essential nature of any sign exchange is that the sign engineer attempts to get his interest across to the sign observer(s). The sign itself, as the medium of meaning, stands for its engineer's interests, rather than establishing a proposition about the world in general. Meaning, or a sign exchange, is then successful for the engineer to the degree at which the observer 'correctly' includes the engineer's interest in his objectified reality through perceptive and/or conceptual interpretants and acts upon it. This measure is ultimately elusive, though. There is no absolute or even intermediary way of specifying correctness of the observer's interpretation of the engineer's interest. Where success lies for the observer is in his – experience of – grasping of the engineer's interest. For the engineer the measure of success is the observer's reaction to his sign. John experiences he is successful with his particular sign only when Bill scratches his back and does so properly.

I make no pretense at outlining a comprehensive theory of human exchange. My aim is to build a credible case against (unproductively) reductionist concepts. VOLOSHINOV still assumes that the middle ground of a sign exchange is also a common ground (1929, p 68):

\[\text{It is an always changeable and adaptable sign. That is the speaker's point of view. But doesn't the speaker also have to take into account the point of view of the listener and understander?} \]

Isn't it possible that here, exactly, is where the normative identity of a linguistic form comes into force?

My answer to his last question is negative. Or does he apply to “the normative identity of a linguistic form” the characteristic that (p 66, also quoted above) “it merely serves as a conventional scale on which to register the deviations occurring at every real instant in time”? If so, I am again in strong agreement for an explanation is always required at the level of all relevant particulars.
Consistent reference to participating individual persons in the exchange uncovers unproductive assumptions behind concepts at the aggregate level. The idea that a sign has a fixed, social ‘meaning’ is a prime example of oversimplification. Rather, I favor the essentially individual orientation of Peirce’s account of semiosis. Every process of sign use may cause the interpretants in the subjective intellect of the sign user to change. It is the continued practice of sign use that keeps corresponding interpretants stable, or that can shift them, sometimes considerably.

Entirely different signs necessarily come into play when John can no longer assume Bill's cooperation. Supposing he can make it clear enough where exactly he itches, John can either attempt to make his own interest (more) credible, or seek to activate an interest of Bill. In the first of these two cases, the sign still stands unambiguously for John's objectified reality from his own perspective. He may accomplish this by inferring behavior as a situational object from the particular interest or motive. Then he represents the particular behavior. When John paints himself credibly for example as a bed-ridden patient, his interest in itch removal is more likely to be served by Bill than when John is a bank manager conducting a meeting.

Figure 7.5.4. The interests of the sign engineer as situational objects, too.

Figure 7.5.4 shows how the structure of signs is extended to accommodate focus on what situations the engineer believes to exist for himself. I fully acknowledge that this model is circular, even on several scores. For according to earlier assumptions any situation only ‘exists’ in the objectified reality of the sign user. Then, how can specification of objectified reality depend on a situation when that very situation depends on, indeed, specification of objectified reality? I don't pursue generative epistemological explanations such as
provided by Jean Piaget (1896-1980). I simply add relationships to the model, indicating that something like feedback must occur in the sign user's intellect. A similar feedback loop must be assumed from the intrabody objectified reality to interest. Finally, a feedback relationship is included from interests to sign engineer. This corresponds to Schopenhauer's axiom that an individual essentially knows himself as a collection of interests or motives. Actually, this loop for feedback is two-stepped. For an interest is not known directly, but only as a motive in the intrabody objectified reality – of the intellect – of the individual.

From this point of the Schopenhauerian escalation the contrast with the sign (meta)structure characteristic of the philosophy of pure realism must be evident. Realism, or materialism, starts from the notion of an ontology that is independent of knowledge. This absolute structure is then assumed to be faithfully represented in signs. See Figure 7.5.5 for the realist metastructure of signs.

Figure 7.5.5.
Realist metastructure of signs.

A strictly realist approach detracts completely from the interests of the participants in the exchange, not to speak of the situational nature of those individual interests. It presumes middle ground, or meaning. But in fact, that middle is not a ground in the sense that it exists independently from any instances of exchange. On the contrary, a middle is only established when participant are involved in a particular exchange as sign users. The 'real' ground of meaning therefore consists of the interests underlying the particular sign use.

I have already hinted at the alternative of addressing the interests of the sign observer. It is in these cases, that is when John tries to address Bill's interests, an essential split becomes characteristic of the sign. Of course, it can still only stand for John's objectified reality. But the sign is next supposed to express (also read: represent) interpretants 'about' Bill's interests and knowledge. For
the sake of my exposition I make the naive assumption that discrete parts of
the sign correspond to John's interpretants. Then one part of the sign stands
for John's objectified reality as seen from the perspective of his own interests.
Another part represents John's objectified reality from the perspective of Bill
... as perceived by John, of course. A similarly obscure formulation is that the
second part pertains to John's objectified reality from the perspective ... of
his perspective on Bill's interests. Such recursion reflects that human beings
have this ability of empathy.

To speed up my account of sign escalation from the ground of interests, I
continue by right away suggesting that John interprets Bill as a situational
object. Especially relevant is the sign engineer considers the sign observer's
interests situational objects, too. Figure 7.5.6 diagrams the structure of such
signs. Please be reminded of my necessarily naive assumption on parts of the
sign. As a model Figure 7.5.6 probably approaches more closely the configu-
ration of interpretants than how actual 'parts' of the sign are structured.

Figure 7.5.6.
You should be happy that you may scratch my back.

From the node of the extrabody objectified reality of the engineer a subset is
derived. The elements of this subset pertain to the sign observer as interpreted
by the sign engineer. There may of course be more than one observer addressed
by the engineer. For every observer thus 'present' in his interest-based extra-
body objectified reality, the engineer can now place his interpretations of the
observer’s interests. He can even interpret the interest-based intrabody and
extrabody objectified realities of the observer, including feedback mecha-
nisms. I also add a feedback relationship between the sign engineer’s interpre-
tation of the sign observer’s interests on the one hand, and — his interpreta-
tion of — himself as sign engineer. And how he sees himself as sign engineer
influences his self-knowledge in general. A situation such as personship, from
which sign-engineership would then be derived, is not shown in the figures.

I define first-order egoism as the exclusive attention to one’s own interests.
A person exhibits second-order egoism when he acknowledges the interests
of another person. Empathy is equivalent to second-order egoism. It is
important to recognize that second-order egoism, or empathy, only occurs on
the basis of first-order egoism. The interests of the other are always under-
stood within the framework of the interests, or will, of the self.

No attempt at classifying interests is made. The general concept serves me
well for the ontology of subjective situationism. Concluding this chapter I
only remark on some mechanisms for addressing interests. A common
approach in our society is to aim at the need for monetary reward. Many peo-
ple also go to great lengths for even the smallest dose of celebrity, as an
increasing number of television shows proves. In § 7.2 I already mentioned
that persons are easily scared; they often comply with the interest of the sign
engineer under his threat. Actually, I assume everybody does, given a serious
enough threat to others and self.

The emphasis on addressing the interests of the (prospective) partner in the
exchange is well known from sales. It backfires sooner or later in all walks of
life when the addressee does not find his interests properly respected. A strat-
egy of many sign engineers is leaving the scene before realization of deceit
hits the sign observer.

So far, the escalation has progressed on the assumption that just a single
sign is exchanged from John to Bill. However, in all but extremely simple mat-
ters several signs need to be exchanged in both directions for any sensible mean-
ing to occur. This calls for analysis at the level of relationship between partici-
pants in exchanges. The next chapter explains how an interpersonal relation-
ship is in many ways a memory for future meaning.