## Problems of Language in Welby's Significs

*Introduction*

The term "significs" was coined by Victoria Lady Welby (1837-1912) toward the end of the last century to designate the particular bend she wished to confer on her studies on signs and meaning. Significs trascends pure descriptivism and emerges as a method for the analysis of sign activity, beyond logico-gnoseological boundaries, and, therefore, for the evaluation of signs in their ethical, esthetic and pragmatic dimensions.

To carry out her work Welby was convinced that the instrument at her disposal, verbal language, should be in perfect working order. Consequently, the problem of reflecting on language and meaning in general immediately took on a double aspect as it also surfaced in her mind as the problem of the condition of the specific language through which she was thinking.

After her death Welby was very quickly forgotten as an intellectual and until recent times, if she was ever remembered it was as Charles S. Peirces correspondent and not necessarily in her own right as the ideator of significs. Her influence has gone largely unnoticed having been most often than not unrecognized. In addition to her publications, Welby was in the habit of discussing her ideas in her letters and to this end corresponded with numerous intellectuals, many of whom she knew personally, including a part from Peirce, M. Bréal, B. Russell, H. and W. James, H. Bergson, R. Carnap, A. Lalande, F. Pollock, G.F. Stout, F.C.S. Schiller and C.K. Ogden, G. Vailati, M. Calderoni and many others. Ogden promoted significs as a university student during the years 1910-1911, and contrihuted to spreading Welby's ideas. Recent research (cf. Gordon 1991; Petrilli ) has documented the influence exerted by Welby and her significs on Ogden, and yet the importance of this relationship is not recognized by him in *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), where she is very quickly disposed of in a footnote. A part from scattered mention of her name, Welby's ideas in fact gave rise to the Signific Movement in the Netherlands thanks to mediation bt the Dutch psychiatrist F. van Eden.

Significs today is a fascinating topic for diverse researchers and is gradually winning the attention it deserves. Significant events in this direction are the re-editions of her main works promoted by A. Eschbach and H.W. Schmitz (cf. Welby 1983, 1985), to which are connected a series of other initiatives including publication of the volume *Essays on Significs* commemorating the 150th Anniversary of Welby's birth (cf. Schmitz 1990), the International Conference of November 1986, *Significs, Mathematics and Semiotics. The Signific Movement in the Netherlands,* which is also the title of the corresponding proceedings (cfr. Heijerman-Schmitz 1991), the publication of an anthology of her writings in Italian translation (cf. Welby 1986), my own monograph on Welby (cf. Petrilli 1998a), papers by different scholars on various aspects of the signific movement considered both in a historical perspective as well as the theoretical, and further work in progress by myself as mentioned by Augusto Ponzio in his introduction to the present issue. Welby's unpublished manuscripts, correspondence included, are available at the York University Archives, Special Collections, in Ontario, Canada.

*Language problems in the study of language*

Welby discovered the philosophy of language as a consequence of her interest for problems of a moral, religious and theological order. Her first book, *Links and Clues* (1881), focuses on problems of interpretation relatively to the Sacred Scriptures. Her interests in ethico-social and pedagogical issues merged with or developed simultaneously with her philosophico-linguistic concerns (see also

the collection of her thoughts,*Grains of Sense*, of 1897). As anticipated, Welby was faced with the problem of constructing a language in which to adequately formulate her ideas.

And, indeed, a fundamental problem in reflexion on language and meaning, on signifying processes at large, as Welby was quick to realize, concerns the language itself in which such reflexion takes place. The very need to coin the term "significs"–difficult to translate into other languages, as discussed in her correspondence with such scholars as Michel Bréal or André Lalande for the French or Giovanni Vailati for the Italian–was a clear indication in itself of the existence of terminological obstacles to development in philosophico-linguistic analysis.

As tackled by Welby, the problem of language immediately took on a double orientation to concern not only the object of research, but also the very possibility of articulating discourse, that is the medium through which reflexion on language was articulated. Welby considered the linguistic apparatus at her disposal as antiquated and rhetorical, subject to those same limits she wished to overcome and to those same defects she intended to correct. Her condition was typical of a thinker living in an era characterized by the transformation and innovation of knowledge: she was faced with the task of communicating new ideas and to achieve this she aimed at renewing the language through which she was communicating.

Welby was particularly sensitive to everyday language and its improvement. Indeed, on proposing the term "significs" she kept account of the everyday expression "What does it signify?", given its focus on the sign's ultimate value and significance beyond semantic meaning. In her commitment to logical, expressive, behavioral, ethical and esthetic regeneration, she advocated the need to develop a "linguistic conscience" against the bad use of language which inevitably involved poor reasoning, the bad use of logic, argumentative incoherence.

Largely under the influence of Darwinism which she read critically, Welby viewed the development of expression and meaning in an evolutionary perspective. For instance her concept of "sense" is fundamentally organismic: beyond her use of the term "sense" to indicate the overall value of experience, the connection between sign and sense is compared to an organism's response to environmental stimuli. Analogies of the organismic type serve to underline the potential in language for expressive plasticity and renewal which goes hand in hand with the development of experience and knowledge.

Welby had already turned her attention to such problems in papers published toward the end of the last century, such as "Meaning and Metaphor" (1893), and "Sense, Meaning, and Interpretation" (1896). This work was developed in a volume of 1903, *What is Meaning?*, and subsequently in another of 1911, *Significs and Lanquage* as well as throughout a great quantity of unpublished papers available at the York Archives (cf. Petrilli 1998a).

Welby's decision to coin a new term "significs" was largely determined by the wish to name the specific bend she conferred on her studies of signs and meaning. And, as already mentioned, the need to coin new terms is already an indication in itself of the terminological obstacles holding up new developments in linguistic analysis. Given that such terms as "semiotics" and "semantics" were already available, Welby's commitment to this new term risked appearing as the expression of a whimsical desire for novelty. Peirce and Vailati may be counted among those who did not initially understand Welby on the belief that new terms could be avoided, however she was quick to convert them to her own views by showing how terminological availability was in fact only apparent, for none of the words in use adequately accounted for her own special approach to the problem of signs and meaning. Welby intended to describe aspects of the problem of language, expression, and signifying processes at large which had not yet been contemplated, which had largely been left

aside by tradition, or, more correctly, she was proposing a reconsideration of the same problems in a completely different light, from a different viewpoint, in a different perspective.

In her effort to invent a new terminological apparatus Welby offered alternatives to terms sanctioned by use. She introduced the term "sensal" for sense in its prevalently instinctive aspect, remembering also its close association with the concept of signifying value, as opposed to the term "verbal" for specifically linguistic, that is, verbal signs, whether oral or written. The term "interpretation" appears in the title of her 1896 essay and is initially used to designate a particular phase in the signifying process. Subsequently, however, on realizing that it designated an activity present in all phases of signifying processes, the term "interpretation" was replaced with "significance", this being another illustration of the fact that Welby's untiring terminological quest was motivated by concrete problems of expression.

Differently from "semantics", "semasiology" and "semiotics" the word "significs" was completely free from technical associations. As such it appeared suitable to Welby as the name of a new science focusing on the connection between meaning and value, pragmatic value, social value, as well as value in the esthetical and the ethical sense. In a letter to the German philosopher and sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, Welby claimed she was searching for a word able to express the link between sign and sense, a word which did not exist and which she thought she could obtain with "significs".

Other neologisms related to "significs" include "significian" for the person who practices significs; the verbs "to signify" (in Italian "*siqnificare*") and "to signalize" ("*segnalare*") which indicate, respectively, maximum signifying value and the act of investing a sign with meaning. In her 1896 essay Welby had proposed the term "sensifics"'–with the corresponding verb "to sensify"–which, however, she subsequently abandoned in favor of "significs" because it too closely recalled the world of the senses. But even when Welby used readily available terms including those forming her meaning triad "sense", "meaning" and "significance", she did so in the context of an impressively articulate theoretical apparatus clarifying the sense of her special use of these terms. (For all these aspects with considerations on the correlation between Welby's trichotomy and Peirce's own tripartition of the interpretant into "immediate", "dynamic" and "final" interpretant, cf. Petrilli 1998a).

When Welby turned her attention to problems that are still today animating debate in the linguistic sciences and the philosophy of language, it was because these problems were no doubt the privileged objects of her significs, but also because the conceptual instruments through which she was operating needed improvement. She was concerned with such problems as the value of the "ambiguity" of words; the role of "definition" in the determination of meaning; the relation between literal meaning and metaphorical meaning; the possibility of using metaphor and analogy to the end of augmenting the expressive import of language (cf. Petrilli 1989, 1990a; Ponzio 1990a; Schmitz 1985, 1988). It should be observed that even though Welby proposed new terms for the study of language, she did not fall into the trap of technicalism, that is of making excessive use of technical terms, just as, in spite of her constant efforts to render expression as precise as possible, her aim was not to (fallaciously) eliminate the ambiguity of words, their polysemy, which on the contrary she appreciated.

As to technicalism, Welby was intent on achieving the opposite objective, that is of coming as close as possible to common, everyday expression. As we have already observed, with her proposal of introducing the terms "significs" and "signify" Welby kept account of the expression "What does it signify?" as used by the man in the street, to indicate not only expression meaning, but also its value and significance. From this viewpoint, Welby (like Vailati) was particularly sensitive to what Rossi-

Landi called "common speech", that set of expressive modalities, techniques and practices forming mankind's common linguistic patrimony, often unjustifiably neglected where the taste for technicalism prevailed. Moreover, like Vailati Welby did not believe in definition as a panacea for the reduction of linguistic equivocation. In fact, though definition is useful in the field of technical languages, this is so precisely because it eliminates the expressive ductility of words rendering them inert and lifeless, instead of keeping them alive and dynamic (cf. Rossi-Landi 1998).

On the topic of the polysemy and ambiguity of words, Welby was on similar positions to Vailati and Rossi-Landi after him, as well as to Adam Schaff and Mikhail Bakhtin (see below). She too valued plurivocality as a positive aspect of language–apart from the fact that, of course, it cannot be eliminated–and maintained that expressive precision could only be reached by exploiting resources offered by language with the presence of words that in spite of apparent similarity need to be differentiated, and of word meanings which though not clearly differentiated require instead recognition and explicitation.

*Welby's language*

"Common speech" is not "ordinary language" as described by the British analytical philosophers. So-called "ordinary language" or "everyday speech" regards only one aspect of what is intended by "common speech". Welby was aware of the distinction and not only drew on everyday language (which she gave serious consideration) for her own terminology, but also on the language of different fields of knowledge and human experience–religion, biology, cosmology, ethnology, physiology, musicology, the figurative arts, etc. Her approach was motivated by the intention to overcome the tendency toward technicalism and the division of knowledge into separate compartments by pooling together their linguistic reserves and viewpoints.

Her critique of the bad use of language connected with the bad use of logical processes led Welby not only to describe but to analyze language to the end of transforming, regenerating and converting it to conscious and critical use. In her commitment to this work of logical, expressive, behavioral and therefore also ethical regeneration, Welby often pointed to the behavior of children as a possible model, whom she considered as critics *par excellence* thanks to their freshness, enthusiasm, taste for exploration and experimentation (as revealed by their candid whats?, hows?, and whys?).

In addition to referring to the child's "logic", Welby also underlined the need of recovering what she called "mother-sense" or "prirnal-sense", the source of the interpretive and signifying capacity, of humanity's propensity for inventiveness, creativity, innovation, for problem solving, critique and discernment among the multiple meanings of the word and sign activity at large:

> [...] the mother-sense never "sets its heart" on any "pet hypothesis": if it had done this in the original days of its reign, you and I would never have been here. The race would have been snuffed out. No: it takes one hypothesis after the other, treating the one it "cares" for with a more uncompromising scrutiny and severity than the others. The very life of its owner and her children once hung on this instinct of suspicion and of test. It is sheer mothersense–instinct of intellectual danger–which in you, as in Dewey, Peirce and James, calls out the pragmatic reaction! (from a letter of Oct. 20, 1907 from Welby to F.C.S. Schiller, in Welby 1985:ccxlix)

Welby did not deny the overwhelming importance of logic and of the symbolic order, but while recognizing the immense value of cognitive methods, she urged, in the spirit of significs, that our attitude toward logic be critical, that we use cognitive instruments and interpretive models consciously and, therefore, conscientiously, that we reflect on the feminine component, the very source of our intellectual capacity, present–though not necessarily operative–in the human person, whether male or female, that is, transversally across gender.

Regardig the established order of discourse, Welby emphasized the importance of the provocation of a question, the inclination for critical interrogation, recourse to a plurality of different viewpoints for innovation and creativity and, therefore, for continual revolution or regeneration of the established order. On a more personal stylistic level, while Welby largely formulated her ideas in the form of essays or essaylets, at the same time she made an abundant use of images, metaphors and association with reference to varying fields of human experience, which rendered her language suggestive, highly expressive in the manner of literary language. Not only did she theorize polylogic and plurilinguistic discourse, but she effectively put it into practice through her ongoing dialogue with other fields of discourse, with other discourse genres.

Welby went beyond the limits of the study of meaning in terms of philologico-historical semantics as developed, for example, by her contemporary Bréal, whom she took into direct consideration, to focus not only on what today falls within the domain of speech-act theory or text linguistics, but also with a view to the dynamics of expansion and potential for transformation of the signifying process, being determining conditions for the evolution of the human being's sensorial and cognitive capacities. In this respect, Welby anticipated studies on the relation between semiosis and evolution as developed especially by Thomas A. Sebeok (cfr. 1986, 1991a, 1998) in his own approach to semiotics.

Welby's evolutionary perspective on meaning and the cognitive capacity is closley related to her interest in the cosmological and biological dimension of existence and the sciences that study them. As we have already observed, her concept of "sense" is fundamentally organismic. She identified "sense in all 'senses' of the word" as the appropriate term for what constitutes value in the experience of life on our planet. She associated her definition of the link between sign and sense to an organism's immediate, spontaneous reaction to environmental stimuli: a process leading to the production of signs endowed with a value of their own, with implications and references, which stimulate a reply in their turn, whether direct or indirect. Analogies of the organismic type helped to underline the expressive plasticity and potential of signs and of verbal language in particular as their fundamental characteristics. Welby aimed at recovering such qualities where they had been lost as a consequence of poor expression and the bad use of language, or where such qualities were neglected in language theory. Words and their contexts adapt to each other reciprocally, similarly to the relationship between organisms and their environment. Critical as she was of any tendency toward anthropocentrism or glottocentrism, Welby's perspective on signifying processes was not only organismic and biological but, as stated, cosmological, for she was interested in signifying processes in the universe and, therefore, in the action of cosmological forces on human expressive, interpretive and signifying resources. In order to convey the idea of the expansion of experience and knowledge throughout the universe, paraleled by an increase in expressive value and psychical development in the human being, Welby identified "three levels of consciousness," which she named with terms from cosmological or astronomical language, precisely, "planetary", "solar", and "cosmic". To this division corresponds her triadic division of the signifying process into sense, meaning and significance, so that sense is mainly "planetary", meaning "solar", and significance "cosmic".

A recurrent image in Welby's writings concerns our scrutiny of signifying proceses in the universe and comes from the field of physiology and astrology, being associated to vision with reference to our use of such instruments as the telescope:

> Two things must, of course, be borne in mind. One, that when we use analogically the physiological processes of vision, we are bound to take the true ones so far as they are known. Thus we have no right to speak of the eye as though it were adjusted to the near, and needed to strain with painful effort to discern the far (as we so often do when contrasting philosophy with science or practical life), but rather as 'focussed to infinity'; while what requires muscular effort is the vision of–the tangible. Another, that not merely do we look through our sense-window at a vast star-peopled universe as

real as our own world,–a universe of which the telescope reveals further depths but no limits,–but also that we can devise a mechanical eye (the sensitive plate) which shall "see" and record a further world of suns and nebulae beyond even the power of the telescope to reveal to the human eye. That is a triumph of indirect evidence. And after all, as Professor Tait says, "it is to sight that we are mainly indebted for our knwoledge of external things. All our other senses together, except under very special conditions, do not furnish us with a tithe of the information we gain by a single glance". (Welby 1983:103-104)

Analogy is described by Welby as an interpretive method based on the relation of similarity, which she divided into six different types (cf. *ibid*.:19-20): 1) Casual likeness; 2) General likeness of the whole; with unlikeness of constituents; 3) Likeness in all but one point or feature; 4) Valid analogy ringing true in character throughout, bearing pressure to the limit of knowledge, and yet remaining analogy and never becoming equivalence, or identity in varying senses; 5) Equivalence; 6) Correspondence in each point and in mass or whole.

Furthermore, she distinguished between "analogy" and "homology" or what she signaled as a "stronger" type of analogy endowed with more effective signifying valencies, a distinction commonly practised in biology as the distinction between superficial similarity (analogy) and structural-genetic similarity (homology), and associated these concepts with various types of inference–deduction, induction and hypothesis –, characterized on the basis of their role in the development of knowledge, research and inventive potential.

The linguistic-cognitive mechanisms of analogy (and homology) typical of metaphor and association play an important role in translation, the latter being a fundamental aspect of sign activity. In a significal perspective "translation" not only alludes to the passage among languages, fields of experience, sign systems, but is also recognized as "a method turned both to discovering and evaluating, as well as to using analogy (or in some cases homology)".

Homology is constantly dealt with by Rossi-Landi a theorizer of the so called "homological method": the relationship identified by him between language and work, his theory of "linguistic work" is based on similarity of the homological type. His "philosophical methodics" (see Rossi-Landi l985) largely centres around the concept of homology.

The ongoing work of transfere and translation from one sign into another which contains the previous sign, enriching it with new meanings and values, was recognized by Welby as a fundamental mechanism in cognitive development. Her conception of translation is obviously far broader than is ordinarily intended in terms of the passage from one language to another. Going a step further Welby focused on the possibility of interpreting a sign through its encounter with other signs, with different sign systems, verbal and nonverbal:

The more varied and rich our employment of signs (so long as such employment be duly critical securing that we know well what we are doing, also the indispensable condition of humour), the greater our power of inter-relating, inter-translating various phases of thought, and thus of coming closer and closer to the nature of things in the sense of starting-points for the acquisition of fresh knowledge, new truth. (ibid.: 150)

These words recall the interpretive-cognitive model theorized by Peirce, founded on the sign-interpretant relationship, that is, on "the translation of signs in another sign system" (*CP* 4.127). In fact, according to Peirce the determination of linguistic meaning and consequent cognitive development is achieved through an "equivalent" or possibly "more developed" sign (the interpretant). And Welby too views translation above all as an interpretive method which as such invests all semiosic processes.