

Let sleeping signs lie: On signs, objects, and communication

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The seminar chaired by Thomas A. Sebeok on *Semiotics in the United States* (Urbino, July 6–10, 1992) was indeed rewarding from a scholarly point of view. The seminar generated fruitful discussions of American semiotics; in addition, general and basic questions concerning the doctrine of semiotics were raised and debated. What follows is a discussion of two claims put forward and defended by some participants in the seminar, and questioned by others. The two radical theses were:

- (1) People do not communicate with each other; and
- (2) Nothing exists but signs.

This article will be divided into three parts. First, I will attempt to make a case for the two claims within the framework of Peircean semiotics. Second, I will present my case against them, also based on Peircean semiotics. Third, I will try to balance the sheets and reach a conclusion. Needless to say, my discussion is indebted to the inspiring debates in the Urbino seminar.

A scrap from somebody's life

The claim that we do not communicate with each other seems counter-intuitive, given that we are constantly engaged in dialogues and in collaboration with other people, a collaboration mediated by speech. There are ways, however, of making a case for the claim that communication does not take place, or at least that it is necessarily defective, that it is (or seems to be) a kind of guesswork, and that its occasional success may be accidental.

One way of arguing this point is to generalize the arguments and points made by Quine in his reflections on the problems of *radical translation*. Quine imagines and analyzes the difficulties an anthropologist or linguist faces in translating an unknown jungle language into English with no