



PERGAMON

Language & Communication 23 (2003) 409–425

---

---

LANGUAGE  
&  
COMMUNICATION

---

---

www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

# Semiotics and the social analysis of material things

Webb Keane\*

*Department of Anthropology, 1020 LSA Building, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1382, USA*

---

## Abstract

This article discusses certain aspects of Peircean semiotics as they can contribute to the social analysis of material artifacts. It focuses on the concepts of iconicity and indexicality, paying particular attention to their roles in mediating contingency and causality, and to their relation with possible actions. Because iconicity and indexicality themselves ‘assert nothing,’ their various social roles turn on their mediation by ‘Thirdness’. This circumstance requires an account of semiotic ideologies and their practical embodiment in representational economies. The article concludes with a call for a richer concept of the multiple possible modes of ‘objectification’ in social life.

© 2003 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Sign; Semiotics; Materiality; Ideology; Representation; Objectification

---

‘She likes red,’ said the little girl.

‘Red,’ said Mr. Rabbit. ‘You can’t give her red.’

‘Something red, maybe,’ said the little girl.

‘Oh, something red,’ said Mr. Rabbit.

Charlotte Zolotow *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present* (Harper 1962)

Have we even now escaped the ontological division of the world into ‘spirit’ and ‘matter’? To be sure, social analysts may no longer feel themselves forced to choose between ‘symbolic’ and ‘materialist’ approaches. And certainly work as varied as that of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault has promised ways to get beyond such dichotomies. Yet some version of that opposition seems to persist in more or less covert forms. The new political economy, for instance, tends to portray modernity in terms of global *material* forces and local *meanings* (see Keane, 2003). And cultural

---

\* Fax: +1-734-763-6077.

*E-mail address:* wkeane@umich.edu (W. Keane).

studies still often ‘reads’ such things as ‘representations’ as being *about* the world in ways that make little of how they may be materially located *within* it.

Perhaps, as some have argued at the limit, we can’t shake these dichotomies because they are so deeply part of our metaphysics of presence (Heidegger, 1962), or because we are so entrenched in reified consciousness (Lukács, 1971)—because we have always been heirs of the Greeks or, conversely, because we are now capitalist moderns. But, to confine the problem for the moment, consider a more specific arena, the lingering effects of certain models of the sign. Efforts to bring theories of the sign into a full, robust articulation with accounts of human actions, self-consciousness, and social power are still commonly hampered by certain assumptions built into the lineage that runs from Saussure to post-structuralism. They tend still to demand that we divide our attention and choose between ideas and things. The result is that even those who would study ‘things’ too often turn them either into expressions or communications of ‘ideas,’ or relegate those ideas to an epiphenomenal domain. Those who would study ‘ideas’ too often treat the associated material forms as transparent, taking their consequentiality to be suspect, and, at times, imputing implausible powers to human desires to impose meaning on the world. And this divide seems to give rise to what is still a common, if ill-informed, perception among social analysts, that ‘semiotics’ is a species of idealism.

Two sets of dichotomies persist in the post-structuralist lineage, and continue to feed that perception. One is that between abstract sign system and its concrete instantiations. The other is a distinction between persons and things.<sup>1</sup> In order to situate material things within a dynamic social analysis, we must not simply reproduce these dichotomies in new forms. For even the Bourdieuvian critique of objectivism and the Foucauldian account of disciplinary regimes do not fully recognize the ubiquity of objectifications and the wide variety of modes they can take.

As Judith Irvine (1996, p. 258) has observed, ‘one of [Saussure’s] most durable legacies’ was the radical separation of the sign from the material world. Moreover, she added, this separation was consonant with the long separation of mind from body in Western thought. In making this connection between a model of the sign and an ontology, she was opening up the question of what I would like to call ‘*representational economy*’ and the ‘*semiotic ideologies*’ that mediate it. By *representational economy*, I mean to draw attention to the dynamic interconnections among different modes of signification at play within a particular historical and social formation. For instance, I have argued (Keane, 1998, 2001, 2002) that how people handle and value material goods may be implicated in how they use and interpret words, and vice versa, reflecting certain underlying assumptions about the world and the beings that inhabit it. Such assumptions, for instance, will determine how one distinguishes between subjects and objects, which implications for what will or will not count as a possible agent—and thus, for what is a good candidate for

---

<sup>1</sup> For purposes of this paper, I put this in very general terms. In any instance we would need to refine this distinction. The oppositions body and soul, human and non-human, animate and inanimate overlap and are often mutually reinforcing, but are not coterminous. In this essay, I am concerned primarily with human products (artifacts) and bodies, as the things that have been most central to social analysis.

being an indexical sign or intentional communication. Historically, changes in one will be reflected in changes in the other. Thus, they enter into a larger economy of mutual, often unexpected consequences. Expanding on the concept of ‘language ideologies’ (Kroskrity, 2000; Schieffelin et al., 1998), we might then essay an account of the ‘semiotic ideologies’ that interpret and rationalize this representational economy.

In my own work, this question has led me to explore the status of words and things, and their different modes of objectification, especially as they trouble ideologies of ‘modernity’ as they are embodied within certain dominant strands of Protestantism. I have argued in a series of studies of Calvinist missionaries in the colonial Dutch East Indies (Keane, 1996, 1998, 2002), that matter and materialism pose special difficulties for the more mainstream, and austere, kinds of Protestants. The effort to regulate certain verbal and material practices, and the anxieties that attend them, center on the problem of constituting a human subject that is at its core independent of, and superordinate to, the world of mere dead matter.

The problem that such Protestants face, I have argued, is both an expression and even an important source of a more pervasive problem for the subject within the self-understanding of ‘modernity’ and thus of the intellectual genealogies that have emerged in response to that self-understanding. Thus, for instance, the Weberian tradition in social analysis—whose assumptions still underlie an important part of contemporary anthropology—takes as foundational an original exclusion. In the opening pages of *Economy and Society*, Weber (1978) rules out certain phenomena as not suitable for interpretive social science. These include events like floods or circumstances like demography, which, although they have meaningful consequences for people, are not themselves meaningful actions. They remain external to human intentionality and action, and thus do not offer the meanings that mediate action for the self-interpreting actor. When Weber excludes these from interpretive social science, he is reproducing the very dichotomy between subject and object that also underwrites objectivism. For those things that are excluded because they are not elements of meaningful actions by self-interpreting humans are the ‘objects’ of objectivistic science. The efforts of people like Daniel Miller (1987, 1998), Marilyn Strathern (1988), and Bruno Latour (1993) to overcome this dichotomy and its exclusions have been crucial to making the question of materiality useful again.

As part of the effort to overcome this dichotomization I have proposed a rethinking of ‘logical-causal’ relations within representational economies (Keane, 1997). The goal is to open up social analysis to the historicity and social power of material things without reducing them either to being only vehicles of meaning, on the one hand, or ultimate determinants, on the other. The term ‘logical-causal’ (see Munn, 1986) expresses a fundamental concept in the Peircean model of the sign. The important contrast to bear in mind here is to Saussure.

## 1. Undoing the sign’s withdrawal from its worlds

Long after the heyday of structuralism, three interlocked aspects of Saussure’s model of the sign continue to haunt both post-structuralism and the arguments of

many of its critics: the distinction between signs and the world, the doctrine of arbitrariness, and the system of differences. Recall that Saussure founded the possibility of a linguistic science on an initial distinction between linguistic system and actual instances of discourse. He did not deny the reality of the latter but simply maintained that the particular analytic approach he was developing required that the two not be confused with one another. This is because analyzing language as a system of differences requires a degree of abstraction such that only certain kinds of difference are significant. Actual *material* differences between instances of speaking simply do not count in linguistic terms. Rather, what he called ‘semiology’ concerns only virtual types, not concrete tokens.

This distinction finds a parallel with that between signs and the world of referents: Saussurean analysis is confined to relations among signifiers and signifieds. Since signifieds are conceptual in nature, they too are part of the linguistic system (that is, they are meanings, not actual objects of reference). Thus, at least in Emile Benveniste’s (1971) reading, the doctrine of arbitrariness, strictly speaking, applies only to relations between signs and the world of referents. Relations among the elements *within* the system are mutually determining and therefore not arbitrary in the way we usually understand the word. Notice, however, that this mutual determination—the system of differences or value—depends on the virtual or ‘in absentia’ co-presence of all elements of the system. This is crucial to Jacques Derrida’s appropriation of Saussure, the notion that non-present elements of the totality are always implicated in the signifying capacities of those that are present. Derrida’s concepts of trace and difference depend, in part, on the prior notion of langue as a totality (or rather, an attempted totality), and on its radical separation from the world both of concrete instances of use and of referents. This much is well known. But the empirical study of discursive practices suggests that the radical indeterminacy of meaning as a matter of principle encounters constraints in practice. For instance, over the course of conversational interaction, the full range of possibilities is continually narrowed down and confined—a matter not of linguistic structure, in the Saussurean sense, but of social and political relations and the centripetal forces they involve (Bakhtin, 1981). One reason why this dynamic does not seem to come into view within Derrida’s work is that he remains within certain confines of Saussure’s model of the sign. In his most direct criticism of Saussurean structuralism (1970), he faulted it not for the basic two-part model of the sign, but for not being true to itself, shying away from its most radical implications. At this point, the analyst may find that the logic of deferral, posed as a critique of humanist notions of self-presence, situates the world of actions and interactions at the far reaches of an infinite regress.

Although the pure form of structuralist semiology associated with Saussure and, subsequently, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Kristeva, Baudrillard, and others, has long since passed into our deep historical background, certain of its fundamental assumptions have had a sustained afterlife in post-structuralism. For all its important insights, this genealogy has tended to block some useful avenues of investigation into questions of materiality. I mention the structuralist and post-structuralist genealogy at the start, therefore, in order to insist that even today we still need to be

clear about its characteristic assumptions about signs, in order to mark out some alternatives.

## 2. The outward clash

It is ironic, in view of the common tendency among many casual commentators to conflate Saussurean semiology with Peircean semiotics, and both with ‘idealism,’ that one of the motives for the rediscovery of Charles Sanders Peirce by people such as Emile Benveniste and Roman Jakobson was to find an analytically rigorous means by which to overcome the sign—world dichotomy. The three part model of the sign included the objects of signification. True (to abbreviate radically the complex debates about Peirce’s ‘realism’), the sign does not give direct access to objects. It mediates that relation by giving rise to further signs. But the object is not *in principle* eliminated from semiosis as it is for Saussure. In some cases, such as indexicality, it has a direct determinative influence on the sign. And it is in theory knowable in the long run, at least asymptotically, within a transgenerational community of interpreters.

The Peircean model of the sign has two features I want to bring out here. First, that it is processual: signs give rise to new signs, in an unending process of signification. This is important because, viewed sociologically, it can be taken to entail sociability, struggle, historicity, and contingency. This interpretation of the model offers a challenge to the facile but commonplace claim that to take things as ‘signs’ is to reduce the world to discourse and its interpretation, to give in to the totalizing imperative to render all things meaningful. Second is the considerable attention the Peircean model devotes to the range of relationships not only between signifier (sign) and signified (interpretant) but between both of those and (possible) objects of signification. Thus, most famously, the ground that characterizes and motivates the relationship between sign and object can be iconic (resemblance), indexical (causal or proximal linkages), or symbolic (most evident in ‘arbitrary’ social conventions). I would argue that even the arbitrary convention that grounds the symbol must be understood within the social dynamics of logical–causal relations.

At one point Peirce criticized Hegel with these words: “The capital error of Hegel which permeates his whole system . . . is that he almost altogether ignores the Outward Clash. . . [This] direct consciousness of hitting and getting hit enters into all cognition and serves to make it mean something real” (Peirce, 1958, pp. 43–44). Peirce offers a way of thinking about the logic of signification that displays its inherent vulnerability to causation and contingency, as well as its openness to further causal consequences, without settling for the usual so-called ‘materialist’ reductionisms.<sup>2</sup> To see this we need to recognize how the materiality of signification is not just a factor for the sign interpreter but gives rise to and transforms modalities of action and subjectivity.

---

<sup>2</sup> Note that he seems to be saying not that this ‘consciousness’ provides the meaning of the cognition, but rather that it gives that meaning its reality effect.

The utility of iconicity and indexicality for the social analysis of artifacts requires a consideration of their relationship to Peircean Thirdness. Consider the fundamental orientation toward the future that characterizes what Peirce called Thirdness, the ontological character of the symbol, and thus that which most directly pertains to Saussurean signs. In contrast to the concreteness of icons, which cannot in themselves determine the actuality of their objects, which remain hypothetical, or to the actuality of indexes, which are rooted in what has *already* happened, Thirdness concerns an unbounded and unspecified range of possible tokens yet to be:

Whatever is truly general refers to the indefinite future, for the past contains only a certain collection of such cases that have occurred. The past is actual fact. But a general law cannot be fully realized. It is a potentiality; and its mode of being is *esse in futuro* (Peirce, 1932, p. 148, quoted in Jakobson, 1990, p. 420)

This futurity, it would seem, is also implicated with human agency, since it is manifested in the people's capacities for acting on the basis of that law.

### 3. Sensuous quality

Let me start with Nancy Munn's (1986) use of the Peircean concept of qualisign in her analysis of value in a Melanesian system of production, consumption, and exchange. As Munn uses it, qualisign refers to certain sensuous qualities of objects that have a privileged role within a larger system of value. The idea of qualisign (a Peircean First, and thus, merely a potential component of an as yet unrealized sign) is that significance is borne by certain qualities beyond their particular manifestations. As Mr. Rabbit observes, in the epigraph above, 'redness' must be embodied in something 'red.' But the little girl's intuition is right too: for someone who likes 'red,' in theory any number of quite different objectifications will do. Similarly for Munn, the qualisign of 'lightness,' for instance, can pertain to canoes, garden plots, decorations, bodies, and so forth.

Mr. Rabbit reminds us that qualisigns must be embodied in something in particular. But as soon as they do, they are actually, and often contingently (rather than by logical necessity), bound up with other qualities—redness in an apple comes along with spherical shape, light weight, and so forth. In practice, there is no way entirely to eliminate that factor of co-presence or what we might call '*bundling*.' This points to one of the obvious, but important, effects of materiality: redness cannot be manifest without some embodiment that inescapably binds it to some other qualities as well, which can become contingent but real factors in its social life. Bundling is one of the conditions of possibility for what Kopytoff (1986) and Appadurai (1986) called the 'biography' of things, as qualisigns bundled together in any object will shift in their relative value, utility, and relevance across contexts.

One of the reasons Munn focuses on the qualisign, I think, is that it permits her to find identities among quite distinct modes of 'lightness.' For any analysis of signs in society needs to provide an account of how entities that are materially different in

their qualities or, minimally, in their spatio-temporal coordinates, count as ‘the same,’ without simply reproducing the conventionalism exemplified by the type-token relationship. Abstracting ‘qualisigns’ from objects offers a way of bringing discrete moments of experience into an overarching value system on the basis of habits and intuitions rather than rules and cognitions. But it is the cultural totality that makes it possible for Munn to speak of these instances as being ‘the same.’ That is, there is still some kind of Thirdness—some governing principle that makes of possible instances realizations of ‘the same’ thing, and thus the possibilities—and recognizability—of future actions.

For Peirce, qualisigns in themselves are unrealized potential (they contrast both to sinsigns, which are tokens, and legisigns, which are types). Something further is needed for them to be actualized. For one thing, they must have some particular embodiment, as iconic signs. Moreover, since resemblance is underdetermined, iconics need to provide some further guidance in order link their interpretant to an object. The general principle is apparent to anyone who has been baffled by supposedly transparent diagrams or who has had to interpret the ‘icons’ on their computer without verbal assistance. Resemblance can only be with respect to certain features, and therefore usually depends on some degree of conventionality. Even a portrait photograph, for instance, is normally flat, immobile, and much smaller than its subject. To determine what features count towards resemblance require some criteria. These involve the articulation of the iconic with other semiotic dimensions—and thus, I would argue, become thoroughly enmeshed with the dynamics of social value and authority.

#### 4. Pointing and causality

A qualisign is mere potential. In Munn’s analysis, for instance, lightness partakes in a network of possible causal relations. To give away food creates larger space-time than eating it, because it fosters exchange relations with expansive potential across social space and into future time. The absence of the food that was eaten makes it unavailable for exchange. What is given value by the specific aesthetic in which lightness plays this pivotal role are *causal* relations, not conventional or logical ones. These relations are, for instance, registered by effects on the body—one who eats instead of giving comes to have a heavy and sluggish body. The very objectualization and thus legibility of iconicity, in this case, entails indexicality. But these causal relations would still hold even if no one ever noticed them, in the absence, for instance, of an organizing Thirdness such as a Gawan aesthetics of value.

The concept of indexicality has been crucial for the effort to develop Peircean realism in the social analysis, especially of language, but also of material things. Many of the most important analyses of materiality within the social depend on some version of what we can call indexicality. Thus, for instance, Marx’s vision of non-alienated labor can be taken to be an indexical (as well as iconic) sign of that labor:



[non-alienated human] powers exist in their product as the amount and type of change which their exercise has brought about. The degree of change is always proportionate to the expenditure of powers, just as its quality is always indicative of their state. . . . Man's productive activity leaves its mark, . . . on all he touches (Ollman, 1971, p. 143).

In a vastly different approach (albeit one that also emerged from within the long shadow of German idealism), Heidegger also emphasizes the contrast between practical activity and the contemplative or theoretical attitude. He writes 'the shoemaker . . . understands *himself* from his things [the shoes]' (1982, p. 160, quoted in Munn, 1986, p. 275, n. 12).<sup>3</sup> And Thorstein Veblen's (1912) account of conspicuous consumption (whose logic reappears in Bourdieu's work) treats certain goods as indexical of their possessor's distance from the press of necessity.

There is an important distinction to note here. Veblen's conspicuous consumption takes its social value from people's interpretations. That is, one appreciates the value of a silk dress or a knowledge of Latin by recognizing their lack of utility. But that recognition depends on ideological constructions—that Latin is not useful, for example, depends on believing it doesn't have magical power. By contrast, whereas Veblen's approach to material things depends on their interpretability, Marx and Heidegger both propose an anti-interpretive position. The thing offers itself as an object for interpretation only under conditions of alienation, for Marx, or within a certain bad metaphysics, for Heidegger. For all their differences, Marx and Heidegger both offer accounts of objectualization, the conditions for the constituting of objects—above all, *as objects of cognition*. I return to this below, but first want to address the semiotic structure of things as components of material activity.

Part of the power of material objects in society consists of their openness to 'external' events and their resulting potential for mediating the introduction of 'contingency' into even the most hegemonic of social orders. But the introduction cannot occur directly. Consider Bourdieu's description of the production of the connoisseur by objective life circumstances:

The competence of the 'connoisseur', an unconscious mastery of the instruments of appropriation which derives from slow familiarization and is the basis of familiarity with works, is an 'art', a practical mastery which, like an art of thinking or an art of living, cannot be transmitted solely by precept or prescription. Learning it presupposes the equivalent of the prolonged contact between disciple and master . . . (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 66).

This mastery is indexical of the processes of which it is the causal product, and whose temporal extensiveness is crucial to their social value. But as a social value,

<sup>3</sup> Compare Lukacs: 'the essence of praxis consists in annulling *that indifference of form towards content* that we found in the problem of the [Kantian] thing-in-itself. . . . [T]he diversity of subjective attitudes orientates praxis towards what is qualitatively unique, towards the content and the material substratum of the object concerned. . . . theoretical contemplation leads to the neglect of this very factor' (1971, p. 126, italics in the original).



the connoisseur's competence is not merely indexical. It derives its fuller social power from the naturalization process that transforms it into an icon of the person's purportedly actual character. For the social effects to be complete, this mastery must involve naturalization, such that the expression of competence comes to be identified with that person. Connoisseurship or, at the other end of the class spectrum, the embodied 'taste for the necessary,' transform indexicality into iconism—certain kinds of food and the bodies they help shape, give substance to the social abstractions of class. But such things as taste can only effect such transformations by virtue of the mediation of ideologies of class—that there is something subject to iconism and indexicality in the first place—or else there would be no signs to read. So far, this analysis remains within the domain of sign interpretation: indexical qualities must be read primarily as iconic of the actual character of the person.<sup>4</sup> This is why, in Bourdieu's account, the connoisseur abhors the objectification involved in explicit teaching: 'the rational teaching of art provides substitutes for direct experience ... instead of springing from the supposed spontaneity of taste' (1984, p. 68). The connoisseur, an organic Heideggerian in this respect, rejects the theoretical stance towards things.

In general, for indexicality to be analytically useful, it must be understood to face towards possible futures as well as towards the past. To extend Michael Silverstein's discussion of linguistic indexicality, indexes do not only presuppose some *prior* causes of which they bear the effects, they may also have *entailments* (Silverstein, 1976, this volume). The social power of naturalization comes from this: not simply the false reading of indexicals as if they were directly iconic of some prior essential character, but rather the misconstruing of the possible entailments of indexicals—their effects and possibilities—as if they were merely expressing something (such as character) that already exists.<sup>5</sup> In Munn's analysis, goods that are physically capable of entering into transactions at a more distant time and place are available for generating greater value than those whose possibilities remain more restricted. What iconicity and indexicality begin to do is open up signification to causality, to the possible effects of material qualities, and of their logistical impositions, on persons and their social worlds.

## 5. From sign reading to semiotic ideology

As Peirce observed, the artist's preliminary sketch for a sculpture, like the reasoning of the mathematician, makes use of the characteristic openness of iconicity—which in principle resembles nothing in particular but only possible objects—as a means of discovery, 'suggesting ... new aspects of supposed states of things' (1955,

---

<sup>4</sup> We therefore need to distinguish between indexicality as an analytic device, and as a component of a semiotic ideology. The former involves non-relativistic claims about the observer's ability to recognize that what 'insiders' may, for instance, take to be iconic is in fact a naturalized indexical, or, say, what they take to be indexical as wholly conventional (see Gell, 1998; Pinney, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Gell's (1998) analysis of the agency intuitively imputed to objects by virtue of their effects on the viewer seems to be operating in this analytical domain.

pp. 106–107). But there is more to this openness than conscious thought or foresight. George Herbert Mead wrote that inanimate objects can be part of the generalized other insofar as the self responds to them socially, by ‘the internalized conversation of gestures’ (1934, p. 154, n. 7), for ‘The chair is what it is in terms of its invitation to sit down; the chair is something in which we might sit down, a physical ‘me’ ’ (1934, p. 279).<sup>6</sup> It is only as they resist our own gestures that they emerge as ‘objects’ for us (note here the resemblance to Heidegger’s (1962) famous account of the carpenter’s relation to his tools, which only emerge into awareness, and seem apart from his gestures, when something goes wrong). One could say that the iconism of the chair is thus not simply an expression of something, nor simply an index of the act of production, but an *instigation* to certain sorts of action, without regard to conscious awareness.<sup>7</sup> But for people who were formed in a world without chairs, for instance, there is no such invitation. They may even find the iconism ‘legible,’ in representational terms, and still fail to embody that response. Form will not translate into potential act. However sketchy Mead’s account may be, it suggests one way of going beyond the strongly retrospective character of a semiotics that favors the ‘reading’ signs in terms only of what they presuppose.

When Bourdieu appropriates Mauss’s (1979) concept of habitus, he is attempting to make sense of this sense of futurity or potential. The connoisseur’s embodied sensibilities are not simply the register of economics given bodily form through biographical circumstances. Biographical circumstance produces the connoisseur.

If a group’s whole life-style can be read off from the style it adopts in furnishing or clothing, this is not only because these properties are the objectification of the economic and cultural necessity which determined their selection, but also because the social relations objectified in familiar objects, . . . impress themselves through bodily experiences which may be as profoundly unconscious as the quiet caress of beige carpets or the thin clamminess of tattered, garish linoleum, the harsh smell of bleach or perfumes as imperceptible as a negative scent (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 77).

The qualities of things consumed enter into the certain qualities of subjectivity, regardless of whether those things ever become available for interpretation as ‘signs.’ As embodied subjectivity, they mediate future possibilities.

For these phenomenological characteristics of iconicity and indexicality to have consequences for social analysis, we need to see how the semiotic status of things is transformed across historical processes. What analyses of material things sometimes overlook is this important consequence of the Peircean architectonic: *icons and*

<sup>6</sup> I think Gell (1998) may be getting at something similar in saying he responds to works of art by mentally replaying the actions involved in making them.

<sup>7</sup> This I take to be one dimension of what Miller (1987) calls the ‘humility’ of objects, the extent to which their functions and effects on people remain beneath the level of consciousness.

*indexes in themselves 'assert nothing'* (Peirce, 1955, p. 111).<sup>8</sup> As Alfred Gell (1998, p. 15) and others have observed, making sense of indexicality commonly involves *ad hoc* hypotheses. These hypotheses are commonly contingent, even unique, in character. Indeed, an index cannot even tell us what is being indexed—something further is required. For Gell, this is provided by fundamental cognitive structures. But the social power of indexicals would seem to demand some further account of their social regimentation or at least coherence across discrete moments of intuition. For indexicality to function socially, the index as such must be made apparent, and it must be furnished with instructions (Hanks, 1996, pp. 46–47). It is semiotic ideology that helps do that. In the process, indexicals become ineluctably subject to historical dynamics, including the fallible struggle to construct such ideologies, in a way that Bourdieu's intensively structured account of class in France, for instance, is unable to capture.

By *semiotic ideology* I mean basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world. It determines, for instance, what people will consider the role that intentions play in signification to be, what kinds of possible agent (humans only? Animals? Spirits?) exist to which acts of signification might be imputed, whether signs are arbitrary or necessarily linked to their objects, and so forth. The Griecian (1957) distinction between natural and non-natural meanings does not apply in the same ways for all people because (among other things) different ontologies (what is 'natural?') underwrite different sets of possible signs (what intentional agent might turn out to lie behind a 'non-natural sign?'). In my research in Sumba, in eastern Indonesia, for instance, occasions when what I took to be 'natural' signs—an accidentally torn cloth, a lost gold valuable, or an illness—were interpreted by people as 'non-natural'—as registering intentions of persons or other agentive beings (Keane, 1997). Another example is Trobriand yam exchange. A poor harvest has the causal consequence of limiting the size of one's yam prestations. But Trobrianders may take this limited prestation to express a donor's stinginess or perhaps the malevolence of spirits towards the gardener. As examples like these suggest, semiotic ideologies are not just about signs, but about what kinds of agentive subjects and acted-upon objects might be found in the world. There is no reason to conclude, however, that semiotic ideologies are total systems capable of rendering all things meaningful. Indeed, I would suggest below that the openness of things to further consequences perpetually threatens to destabilize existing semiotic ideologies.

Symbols seem to offer Peirce an argument against mere empiricism. They differ from icons and indexes in their orientation towards the future, and thus, in their capacity to mediate the knower's and actor's stance toward that future, and by extrapolation, the very capacity to act:

An icon has such being as belongs to past experience. It exists only as an image in the mind. An index has the being of present experience. The being of a sym-

<sup>8</sup> The implications are broad. Note, for instance, that the indeterminacy of indexicals underlies Quine's (1969) argument about the indeterminacy of reference, with broad ramifications for the foundations of semantics more generally. A similar use of the indeterminacy of reference or of indexicality is important to the later work of Wittgenstein (1953).

bol consists in the real fact that something surely will be experienced if certain conditions be satisfied. Namely, it will influence the thought and conduct of its interpreter (quoted in Jakobson, 1990, p. 420)

But for indexes to have social significance, they must somehow be caught up into full-fledged semiosis. They must be mediated by what Peirce called ontological Thirdness, a general law that governs possible instances. At its most fully developed, this is the domain of types and tokens, legisigns and sinsigns, whose fullest expression is the Peircean symbol. But, whether we look at the risks endemic even to ritual (Keane, 1997) or the irruptions of inexplicable violence and radical displacement (Daniel, 1996), it is apparent that social existence cannot be fully and stably subsumed within the totally ‘meaningful’ world of Thirdness. The project of totalization is just that—a project (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

## 6. Semiotic ideology and the consolidation of social objects

I have been arguing against approaches to material things that privilege language as their model, or even received notions of ‘meaningfulness.’ By emphasizing the mediating role of semiotic ideology in the consolidation of objects as components of social life, I have also tried to bring out the historicity implicit in semiotics. A short essay, of course, can hardly do justice to these issues. I want briefly to sketch out one illustration of historical transformation and objectualization in which language does play a critical role.<sup>9</sup>

There is a familiar ethnographic topos that runs from Durkheim and Mauss’s *Primitive Classification* (1963) and much of Lévi-Strauss’s work, to Bourdieu’s (1979) early essay on the Kabyle house. Certain material forms, such as house structures or the layout of villages, seem to offer privileged sites for the expression or concretization of social structures and cultural meanings. Indonesia provides numerous well-known examples, among which are the houses of Sumba. If structuralist and symbolic anthropology found the existence of such structures to be unsurprising, by the time I began fieldwork in Sumba, a certain degree of skepticism seemed to be in order. After all, as Foucault (1972, p. 44) observed, ‘one cannot speak of anything at any time.’ What makes a cosmological house readily available for talk about cultural meanings in objectual form, with what material consequences?

I have argued that the concreteness of the house as a cultural object, that is, as a repeatable, relatively stable, and intertextually rich representation, derives in part from certain features of the ritual speech that purportedly refers to it. Among these features are an emphasis on canonical poetic forms such as parallelistic couplets and schematic list-making, and a pragmatic structure that tends to create a powerful deictic center within the ritual performance that can be linked to non-visible, and normally non-present, agents such as ancestor spirits. The various discursive possibilities afforded by the house take as their authorizing foundation, interpretative

<sup>9</sup> For a fuller treatment, see Keane (1995), and for more of the ethnographic context, Keane (1997).

content, and structural guide verbal performances that seem to trace a pathway through the house, naming its parts one by one. Poetic and performance structure are crucial not just to the apparent ‘meaningfulness’ of the house, but to its social role as something composed of discrete elements that together form a coherent, totalizable structure. This verbal structure is shaped, in turn, by certain presupposed conditions for ritual speech. Chief among these is the invisibility and possible non-presence of the spirit addressees, for whom the space of ritual encounter must be mapped out in order to guide them into the presence of the speakers—hence the diagrammatic character of the verbalized house. That is, the materiality of the house is comes to the fore as a response to a metapragmatic response to a certain material condition—the invisibility of interlocutors.

Now, how does this, as an analysis of the objectification of concepts or representations, help us understand the consolidation of material things as social objects? I argue that the significance of the material qualities of the house—and thus the ‘bundling’ of distinct material qualities provided by the objectualization of ‘the house’ as a unified entity—changes when the ontological conditions for ritual speech change. For self-consciously modern Christians, the spirits cease to be legitimate addressees. Their invisibility ceases to be a materially objective reality. Yet ritual speech persists, increasingly as a text understood as carrying traditional wisdom and ethnic identity. The materiality of its poetic form reproduces the structure of the house, but now as the object of reference, rather than as the sequence for a potential real-time unfolding of an encounter with invisible agents. This unfolding, I should note, did not in the past require that there be an actual house to match the verbal structure—any virtual house, even a mat on the ground, meeting proper ritual baptismal conditions, could serve. But as the use of ritual texts shifts, from addressing spirits in order to bring about consequential encounters, to entextualizing cultural meanings in order to render them visible and interpretable, so do the relations to materiality they presuppose.

This is part of a general shift in linguistic ideology, away from encounters and their consequences, and towards reference and predication. The shift entails a larger reordering, not just of language, but of the representational economy within which words and things are distinguished and linked, and the semiotic ideology that mediates their relations. If, for example, ritual speech (ideologically) functions to refer to the world, the felicity of reference depends on the physical existence of actual houses that match those which are being denoted. Any apparent mismatch between words and the world reinforces the sense that they exist in separate and self-contained domains. No amount of *ritual* felicity can bring about changes in the *material* qualities of the house being referred to. At the same time, as contemporary Sumbanese increasingly come to see their immediate surroundings in terms of the material absence of exemplars of the ‘traditional house,’ something else is going on. On the one hand, they may perceive the lack of the appropriate physical structures to indicate the loss of tradition and even work to preserve token houses of the proper type.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, as Pro-

<sup>10</sup> This representational economy would explain why the strongest advocates for the preservation of ‘traditional’ houses with thatched peaks, bamboo floors, and so forth, are self-consciously modern Christians.

testants, they are learning that verbal prayers are merely the outward expression of sincere inner thoughts that are, in essence, wholly immaterial, like the soul who intends them (Keane, 1998, 2002). They deny any significance to the material form that their words take. Language, like sacrificial goods, has become ‘merely symbolic’ and thus dematerialized—indeed, to an important extent, denaturalized and rendered ‘arbitrary.’ In short, an explicit ontological claim, reinforced by new liturgical speech practices, along with a host of other mundane practices of modernity,<sup>11</sup> underwrites the transformation of the dominant semiotic ideologies within which the objectivity of material things comes to play its emergent social roles. Whereas language should not be the privileged theoretical model for a semiotics of material things, discursive practices *do* play a crucial role in ideological *consolidation* or semiotic regimentation (Silverstein, this volume) in rendering iconicity and indexicality tangible and legible within regimes of Thirdness.

## 7. Objectualization, historicity, and social analysis

The idea of semiotic ideology should not be taken to imply totalization. Different orders of semiosis are differently subject to determination or autonomous logics. Thus the more *indexical* aspects of any configuration of signs will be more subject to direct transformation in response to material circumstances (subject to the various forms of mediation I note here) whereas a system of *conventions* is subject to quite distinct modes of determination and transformation. A yam prestation that falls short of expectations, or a telephone call not returned, index malevolent human intentions, an individual’s character (but no specific intention), the disfavor of spirits, abstract social forces, one’s own fate, mere happenstance, or something else only with reference to a specific ideological context that makes these plausible and relevant inferences. Conversely, insofar as even the most ‘conventional’ signs are instantiated in material forms, they are to that extent subject to ‘material’ causality. Conversation requires a shared language, yam prestation requires a garden, the phone call requires a phone—something so obvious as to be commonly overlooked.

Semiotic ideology should, however, help open up the idea of objectification, and free it from the various romanticisms that have tended to define and revile it. Contrary to, say, Heidegger (1977), humans across the ethnographic and historical record have a wide range of stances, of which ‘the practical’ is only one. It is unwise to claim self-consciousness, even alienation, *only* for the West, the elite, the educated, or the outside observer. We need to break down the monolithic concept of ‘objectification’ in order to specify its *different possible modalities*, of which the reifications most familiar to both modernist humanism and post-structuralism are only a particular species. In other words, we need to stop projecting a certain *kind* of objectification—whether that be identified with capitalism, metaphysics, Protestantism, rationalization, states, or science—onto objectification in general, collapsing

<sup>11</sup> These practices include the handling of money (Keane, 2001), the effort to speak sincerely (Keane, 2002), and the treatment of exchange valuables as symbolic of abstract social values (Keane, 1996, 2001).

important distinctions. The exteriorizations involved in gift exchange and sacrifice, in altarpieces and fetishes, in performance and oratory, are all forms of objectification. But they are very different modes of objectification from map-making, census-taking, photography, statistical analysis, pricing mechanisms, and so forth. In order to accept their distinctiveness, we must do more than simply identify them with the actions of which they are a part. We need to examine scrupulously the modes of objectification, the potential for reflexivity they capacitate, and the specific character of their respective vulnerabilities to contingency. This requires close attention to semiotic ideologies and their practical realizations in representational economies.

Iconism and indexicality function by virtue of meta-level semiosis. First, the very existence of a sign as such, for an interpreter, depends on a mode of proto-objectification. That is, before an object of signification can be specified, something must first be specified as a sign. And in the process, its objects must be determined to be objects. It is a historically specific semiotic ideology that determines what will count for the interpreter and actor as objects and in contrast to what subjects. Where one looks at the happenstance of famine, torn cloth, or a minor stumble as evidence of spiritual disfavor or reads connoisseurship as ‘natural,’ one is drawing on an ideology of ‘nature’ and of the ‘human.’ Thus the Protestant anxiety about the relative autonomy of the human subject from the material world constrains what will count as signs, as intentions, and as actions—excluding, like Weber, such things as the contingent materiality of things from the proper domain of the human. A semiotic analysis of the social power of things would thus demand an account of the semiotic ideologies and their discursive regimentation that enter into or are excluded from the processes by which things become objects. For these are the same processes that configure the borders and the possibilities of subjects.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Paul Manning, Daniel Miller, Christopher Pinney, and Christopher Tilley for comments on earlier versions of this article.

## References

- Appadurai, A., 1986. Introduction: commodities and the politics of value. In: *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge University, Cambridge, pp. 3–63.
- Bakhtin, M.M., 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, (M. Holquist, C. Emerson, Trans.). University of Texas, Austin.
- Benveniste, E., 1971. The nature of the linguistic sign. In: Meek, M.E. (Trans.), *Problems in General Linguistics*. University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL (original work published 1939).
- Bourdieu, P., 1979. The kabyle house, or the world reversed. In: Nice, R. (Trans.), *Algeria 1960*. Cambridge University, Cambridge. pp. 133–153 (original work published 1970).
- Bourdieu, P., 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (R. Nice, Trans.). Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. (original work published 1979).
- Daniel, E.V., 1996. *Charred Lullabies: An Anthropography of Violence*. Princeton University, Princeton.
- Derrida, J., 1970. Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the human sciences. In: Macksey, R.,



- Donato, E. (Eds.), *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*. Johns Hopkins, Baltimore, pp. 83–94.
- Durkheim, E., Mauss, M., 1963. *Primitive Classification*, (R. Needham, Trans.). University of Chicago, Chicago. (original work published 1903).
- Foucault, M., 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, (A.M. Sheridan Smith, Trans.). Pantheon, New York. (original work published 1969).
- Gell, A., 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Clarendon, Oxford.
- Grice, H.P., 1957. Meaning. *Philosophical Review* 64, 377–388.
- Hanks, W.F., 1996. *Language and Communicative Practices*. Westview, Boulder, CO.
- Heidegger, M., 1962. *Being and Time*, (J. Macquarrie, E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper and Row, New York. (original work published 1927).
- Heidegger, M., 1977. The age of the world picture. In: Lovitt, W. (Trans.), *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Harper and Row, New York, pp. 115–154 (original work published 1938).
- Irvine, J.T., 1996. When talk isn't cheap: language and political economy. In: Brenneis, D., Macaulay, R.K.S. (Eds.), *The Matrix of Language: Contemporary Linguistic Anthropology*. Westview Press, Boulder, CO, pp. 258–283. (original work published 1989).
- Jakobson, R., 1990. Quest for the essence of language. In: Waugh, L.R., Monville-Burston, M. (Eds.), *On Language: Roman Jakobson*. Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. (original work published 1966).
- Keane, W., 1995. The spoken house: text, act, and object in Eastern Indonesia. *American Ethnologist* 22, 102–124.
- Keane, W., 1996. Materialism, missionaries, and modern subjects in colonial Indonesia. In: van der Veer, P. (Ed.), *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity*. Routledge, London, pp. 137–170.
- Keane, W., 1997. *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society*. University of California, Berkeley.
- Keane, W., 1998. Calvin in the tropics: objects and subjects at the religious frontier. In: Spyer, P. (Ed.), *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*. Routledge, London, pp. 13–34.
- Keane, W., 2001. Money is no object: materiality, desire, and modernity in an Indonesian society. In: Myers, F. (Ed.), *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*. School of American Research, Santa Fe, pp. 65–90.
- Keane, W., 2002. Sincerity, 'modernity,' and the Protestants. *Cultural Anthropology* 17, 65–92.
- Keane, W., 2003. Self-interpretation, agency, and the objects of anthropology: reflections on a genealogy. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, 222–248.
- Kopytoff, I., 1986. The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process. In: Appadurai, A. (Ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge University, Cambridge, pp. 64–91.
- Kroskrity, P.V. (Ed.), 2000. *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities*. School of American Research, Santa Fe, NM.
- Laclau, E., Mouffe, C., 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Verso, London.
- Latour, B., 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*, (C. Porter, Trans.). Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- Lukács, G., 1971. Reification and the consciousness of the proletariat. In: Livingstone, R. (Trans.), *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. MIT, Cambridge, MA, pp. 83–222 (original work published 1922).
- Mauss, M., 1979. Bodily techniques. In: Brewster, B. (Trans.), *Sociology and Psychology: Essays*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London (original work published 1950).
- Mead, G.H., 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. University of Chicago, Chicago.
- Miller, D., 1987. *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Miller, D., 1998. *A Theory of Shopping*. Cornell, Ithaca.
- Munn, N., 1986. *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society*. Cambridge University, Cambridge.

- Ollman, B., 1971. *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society*. Cambridge University, Cambridge.
- Peirce, C.S., 1932. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce. II: Elements of Logic*. Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- Pierce, C.S.. In: Buchler, J. (Ed.), *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. Dover, New York.
- Pierce, C.S., 1958. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce. VIII: Review, Correspondence, and Bibliography*. Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- Pinney, C., 1997. *Camera Indica: the social life of Indian photographs*. University of Chicago, Chicago.
- Quine, W.van O., 1969. *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*. Columbia University, New York.
- Schieffelin, B.B., Woolard, K.A., Kroskrity, P.V. (Eds.), 1998. *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*. Oxford University, New York and Oxford.
- Silverstein, M., 1976. Shifters, linguistic categories, and cultural description. In: Basso, K.H., Selby, H.A. (Eds.), *Meaning in Anthropology*. University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, pp. 11–55.
- Strathern, M., 1988. *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. California, Berkeley.
- Veblen, T., 1912. *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*. Macmillan, New York.
- Weber, M., 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, (E. Fischer et al., Trans.). University of California, Berkeley.
- Wittgenstein, L., 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*, (G.E.M. Anscombe, Trans.). Macmillan, New York.

**Webb Keane** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He has conducted fieldwork in Indonesia and is author of *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society* (California 1997) as well as articles on semiotic and social theory, modernity, missionaries and converts, gift exchange and money, national and local languages, agency and voice, and religious language.