

SIGNIFICS

Initiated by Lady Victoria A. M. L. Welby (1837-1912) of England in the 1890s, significs was intended to mark the beginnings of a new science of meaning and communication that would combine philosophical, linguistic, logical and psychological aspects. Welby, god-daughter of Queen Victoria, had been in close touch with the linguists since mid-1880s, noticing in her 1903 book *What is Meaning?* that ‘some of the most distinguished experts in language—notably M. Michel Bréal and Dr. Postgate—have begun to protest in plain terms against the prevailing neglect by linguistic scholars of Semantics, the “science of the changes of meaning”’ (p. 229). She broadened the study of meaning to include sentences and discourse, took note of the intentional states of the utterer and the interpreter, and argued that the context serves to shape the utterance’s meaning. Thus arose her triangle of sense, meaning and significance. ‘The one crucial question in all Expression’, she explained in her 1911 book *Significs and Language*, ‘whether by action or sound, symbol or picture, is its special property, first of Sense, that in which it is used, then of Meaning as the intention of the user, and, most far-reaching and momentous of all, of implication, of ultimate Significance’ (p. 9).

Similar ideas were also contemplated not only in America by Charles Peirce but also in continental Europe by the Dutch writer, reformist and psychiatrist Frederik van Eeden (1860-1932). Van Eeden had met Welby in London in 1892 at a conference on experimental psychology. They planned the first summit of what was to become the Signific Circle after meeting again in London in 1907. Though initially undecided about Welby’s proposals, van Eeden soon wrote to Welby acknowledging that significs ‘has a solving, delivering, liberating power which can break and consume the worst fetters of humanity’ (Welby 1931).

In Cambridge, England, Charles Kay Ogden (1889-1957) worked as Welby’s assistant in 1910 until early 1912, close to her death in March 1912. He paid tribute to Welby in his address

to Cambridge Heretics, 'The Progress of Significs', in which his goal was to 'trace the development of the leading ideas of significs' on which he had 'expended much time and energy from Adam to Lady Welby—to show how indefatigable labours of the latter have at last caused the problem to take shape' (p. 4). After Welby's death, several attempts were made to institutionalise the study of significs. The Signific Circle gathered in Amsterdam in a new philosophy department in 1917-22. When the department closed down, a Signifische Kring was summoned during the years 1922-26. In the 1930s, many members of these former organisations formed the International Group for the Study of Significs. Its activities were finally broadened into the International Society for Significs. That society lived on until the 1960s, without ever gaining a great international reputation.

In addition to the initial impetus of Welby and van Eeden, philosopher G. J. P. J. Bolland (1854-1922), mathematician-logicians L. E. J. Brouwer (1881-1966) and David van Dantzig (1900-59), poet-lawyer Jacob Israël de Haan (1881-1924), man of letters and sinologist Henri Borel (1896-1933) and Brouwer's teacher, mathematician Gerrit Mannoury (1867-1956), all of them Dutch, were the driving forces in advancing the study of significs. During this later phase, the goal was to tackle the lack of understanding, the misinterpretations and ambiguities of language and communication in society, especially in scientific communication, by a variety of methods that analyze natural language in terms of different layers that the pragmatic and functional analysis would reveal. Eventually, the group did not beget enough followers, and could not survive in the whirlpool of rival trends. The movement bled out in the salvo of Anglo-Saxon philosophy of language and the analytic turn in philosophy. Some of its remains have integrated into neighbouring disciplines such as pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics, semiotics, and communication and information sciences. Its spirit lives on in multidisciplinary studies in the interfaces of language, logic and communication.

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