

**MEANING AND COMMUNICATION IN CHILDREN'S DRAWINGS:  
RESEARCHING THE DRAWINGS' MEANINGS**

**Margaret Karczmarzyk\***

**ABSTRACT** Why does a child draw? What does he or she want to tell us? Why are the first steps such as drawn words and colorful thinking so important? How can the environment influence the communication in the drawings? And what meanings are important enough to make them comprehensible for adults? These questions are at the core of my research. First of all, the goal of this research is to change the communication situation and a stereotypical way of thinking about children's drawing.

*Key words:* Drawing code, Drawing communication, Drawing-message, Drawing sign, Interpretant, Meanings of child's drawing, Object, C. S. Pierce Triad, Polysemy of drawing, Symbol (representamen).

**1. Introduction**

Why does a child draw? What does he or she want to tell us? Why are the first steps such as drawn words and colorful thinking so important? How can the environment influence the communication in the drawings? And what meanings are important enough to make them comprehensible for adults?

Although the issue of children's drawing has been analyzed many times (Fleck-Bangert, 2002· Krauze-Sikorska, 1998· Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996· Ligęza, 1995· Lovenfeld & Brittain, 1977· Szuman, 1990· Szuścik, 2006· Wallon, Engelhart & Cambier, 1993), we still do not know what message a child wants to convey in his or her drawing.

Painting is a kind of a language, which a child uses to communicate with an adult. The transformation of the surrounding reality into such a graphic language creates a visual code. Therefore, a child's drawing can be perceived as a text in the communication space. The semiotic analysis of children's drawings and verbal analysis from different representatives (interviews with parents, education experts, artists, children at the same age as the tested six-year-olds) are to help me to show the meanings and the communication aspects of this process. However, I would not like to provide "a recipe for good communication" because it is impossible. My aim is rather to create "a net of probable meanings and messages" by which the communication system has proceeded.

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## 2. Meaning and communication

Due to the fact that: *semiotics examines all cultural phenomena as if they were sign systems, and assuming a hypothesis that cultural phenomena are indeed sign systems, they are also communication phenomena* (Eco, 2003: 35), it is possible to state that all kinds of communication, either verbal or nonverbal, are based on semiotics. Therefore, pictorial communication owns certain forms which according to a semiotic perspective can be called signs, creating a specific text – drawing meant to be read by a receiver. Since in the next part of this article I would like to analyze the significance of drawing and phenomena concerning differentiating and operationalizing of a pictorial message, I would like to start by defining the theory of signs.

A sign is perceived in a twofold manner by different researchers. Employing structuralist theories, we may state that a sign is everything that enables an individual to communicate and express him/herself and that there is an ideal structure explaining all communication interrelations. This structuralist conception is characterized by determinism; research approach I am employing does not have to lead to determined settlements. Therefore, adopted here is a methodology not based on the superior aim to find an ideal structure in communication, but instead it refers to thinking about values connected with the description of a multitude of communication patterns. My own research belongs then to a poststructuralist trend characterized by the lack of one superior and objective view of knowledge about a subject and having a discursive character (Nycz, 1993: 54).

For Charles Sanders Peirce the concept of a sign is crucial and determines almost all. His conception sees a sign as a tripartite unity (Peirce, 1997: 137):

1. representamen (first correlate of a triadic relation),
2. object (second correlate of a triadic relation),
3. interpretant (third correlate of a triadic relation).

Following Peirce's theory I use his correlates, but I also introduce other terms connected with this area such as: *a drawing-message, a drawing-text or a pictorial text, the semantic content, drawing communication*.

Other categories employed in my research include: *drawing code, drawing sign, polysemy of drawing, semiotic enclave, drawingness*.

For this article, I will define these other categories:

*Drawing-message, drawing – text, pictorial text* it is product of child's thinking; what the child thinks and is translated into drawing. By Żółkiewski: *it is organize sequence of signs of the arrange system*.

*Drawing communication* – it is art- product which is also a communication medium between sender and recipient/ reader of a message.

*Drawing sign* – It is an art-product, or more specifically drawing of the child and elements in the drawing.

*Drawing code* – sequence of signs found in the drawing of the child.

*Polysemy of drawing* – multiplicity of meanings given to the iconic sign by other readers of children's drawing (here: early education expert, psychologist, artist).

## 3. Methodology

Due to the above-mentioned perspective, it is worthwhile to pose the following research questions.

Umbrella question: What meanings and communications emerge from children's drawings by different readers (parents, education experts, psychologist, artists and children)?

Sub-Questions:

- How can we widen our ability to understand a child through his/her artistic expression?
- What kind of potential communication barriers can we encounter in differentiating the meanings?
- What kind of similarities and differences could occur in constructing and reading the meanings of a drawing-message by children and adults?
- How can pictorial communication facilitate the understanding and agreement?
- What kind of pedagogical consequences could the discovery of a net of shared meanings related to a drawing and constructing by different social groups have?

### 3.1. *The own method of analyzing drawings according to the C. S. Pierce triad*

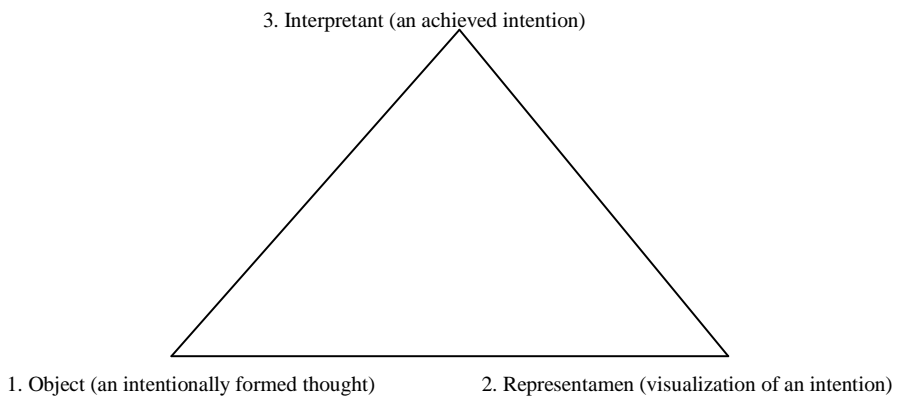
First of all, I would like to define some terms borrowed from Pierce theory and demonstrate the structure of my research.

My research has two-phases.

A. The first phase concerns the meaning created by a child,

B. The second phase concerns the interpretation of a particular drawing provided by the adults.

Below I present schematically the meaning created by a child and by the successive adults in the following diagrams:



**Figure 1. Own diagram based on C. S. Pierce's theory.**

According to the above model, the semiotic analysis in my research includes:

#### 3.1.1. *Object*

An *object* refers to the intentionally formed and thought of a child who responds to my question: What is your family like? Let's draw it for .... (here there are three

different addressees and therefore three different versions of a research: parents, teacher, other adults). For example: “You will hand your drawing later to ...”, or “We would hang your drawing on the blackboard and it would be seen by...” The intention forming the message and laying its foundation which is given by a child may be different due to the addressee. We may assume that a child communicating through the iconic sign “says” something different to his/her parents than to his/her teachers (A).

In turn the interpretation provided by an adult is an open issue which I would discuss in the second phase of my research (B).

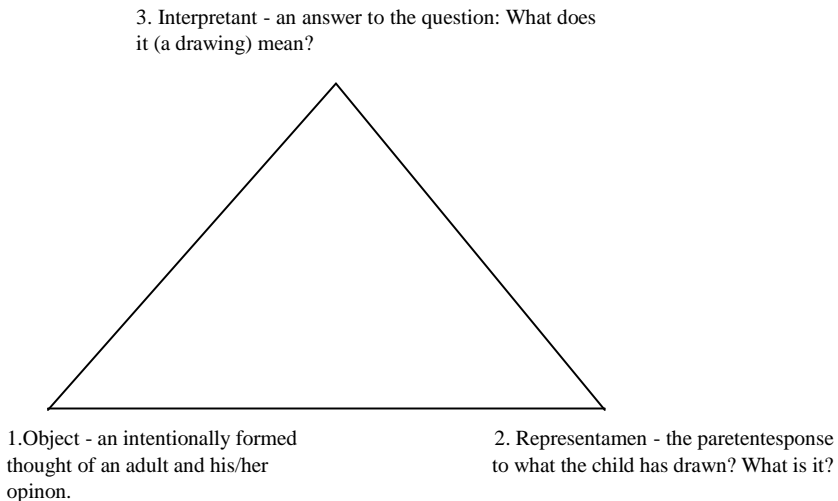
### 3.1.2. Symbol (representamen)

The way in which a child presents his/her family in the drawing, because of the object, would be a representation of an intention. Everything that appears in the piece of paper would be its visualization – as we may suspect sometimes different due to the receivers of a drawing.

### 3.1.3. Interpretant

I call an interpretant a child’s interpretation; that means the interpretation given to a drawing by a child. Having finished his/her work, every child described the content of the drawing. I asked them, among other questions: Do you remember for whom you made this drawing? What does this (a particular element and the whole drawing) mean? Why do you want to give/show this drawing to your parents/ other adults? And the child was encouraged to verbalize the meaning of the drawing. This verbalization allowed me later to compare these meanings with those given by its receivers.

The second phase of my research opens a discussion between an adult and a child because it was devoted to the interpretation provided by the adults. I employed the following model:



**Figure 2. Own diagram based on C. S. Peirce’s theory.**

I define Object and Symbol in a parallel way to the previous phase. Interpretant, however, is described as the interpretation of a particular drawing provided by an adult.

My analysis was composed of a few research procedures based on following methods:

- collecting the research data in the form of drawings made by the six-year-old children with purposely stated subject,
- nonstandardized interview with the respondents who belong to 3 groups (six-year-old authors of drawings),
- second, persons known to children and emotionally involved: parents or carers,
- third, persons not known to a child such as professionals: educators, psychologists, artists), qualitative analysis of collected data.

Yet I would like to find a common dimension or *the third space* (Bhabha 1991· Gutierrez, 2008· Soja, 1996) which is the communication space. Therefore, to widen the ability to read a code presented in children's drawing my research is designed to show different meanings related to children's drawings; I have tried to look for their common dimensions. The plane of agreement can create *the third space* (Soja, 1996: 56) where common meanings can meet and create shared meanings determined by different representatives. Thus it may be vital to successful communication between a child and his/her environment, including among others, the adults: parents, teachers and educators.

#### **4. A case study of a child's drawing**

##### ***4.1. The analysis of meanings produced by a child***

The girl's work is made horizontally on an A4 page. The child intended to depict precisely all persons and domestic animals, which was proved either visually or verbally. The child created stores about all figures and their characteristic features. The most important person for a child turned out to be a mother. The girl said:

and there is my mum here ... her hair is long ...and black ... she always smiles (.) her face is nice and .. I love her ...

The figure of a mother is wearing a long yellow dress. Despite the fact that it is not an everyday outfit. The pattern of a dress becomes a kind of matrix that shows the idea of femininity and beauty.

*Previously seen* in a cartoon or a commercial features describing woman's beauty incorporated in the representation: a beautiful dress, long hair, the charm, sensitivity and subtlety.

The girl loves her mum and wants her to be like that; therefore she depicts her in this manner.

The girl portrays herself in a similar “feminine” way. A long pink dress becomes an unconscious adoption of a *gender habitus* and of an imposed social role.

Except for “girlish” colors the girl used many details and decorative elements as well as the conventional signs. All of them are supposed to make the whole work “nicer”. This kind of strategy can be associated with the process of *aestheticization* of our contemporary world and its influence on shaping the aesthetic image of everything that surrounds the human beings. On the other hand, it may be seen as a way of “adaptation” to the aesthetics of the adults and the reaction toward the discourse of power. “Taming” the strange and imposed world, a child tries to assimilate own drawing code to a matrix and therefore in order to be understood she uses the conventional signs.

#### ***4.2. The analysis of meanings produced by adult “readers”***

A close person in this case a grandmother did not say much about the drawing. She noticed human figures but she did not pay attention to animals and nature. She attempted at interpreting some drawing signs only after being asked by a researcher. She noticed that a girl liked the nature and had a contact with it.

The marginalization of some drawing signs may result from treating a child’s drawing as something obvious. A drawing becomes “a silent picture” and the lack of comprehension developed by the family makes the child turn toward a *culture of silence*.

Other people – who were not emotionally involved with a girl, found many meanings in the drawings but those meanings sometimes contradicted each other. Each person found different *meaning point* which laid fundament to the understanding of a drawing.

For an educator the presence of many details constitutes two planes, one that divides a family according to gender and the second one that underlines the significance of a father in this family.

The first division separates women from men, creating two separate groups. Noticing the fact that daughters *are tied to their mother and sons are tied to their father*, the educator attempts to establish possible social roles.

This kind of stereotypization may result from the dominance of male discourse and from the *symbolic violence* that governs the society.

Another vertical division is formed by following drawing signs: a sun, a butterfly and a father of a family. Either an educator or a psychologist interpreted this triad as something meaningful.

The educator finds some spiritual values in a triad that stresses the importance of a father, he said:

Educator: I do not know what it means .... It makes me think about a Holy Spirit... ha! ha! Is it a kind of a pigeon over the God’s chosen one? A sun strengthens this effect....

The educator’s discourse shows a strong connection with the Catholicism and to a traditional model of family. According to him a father has a strong position and power because of his gender and the social role attributed to it.

Child: It means that there is a kind of meaning hierarchy (.) one person is the most important.. it must be a dad (...)

Nevertheless, the psychologist finds that the motifs of a sun and a butterfly underline the father's significance but at the same time indicate his distance. This way of psychologist's thinking may result from the attachment to a traditional model of family where it is the mother that cares after the children and is emotionally connected with them.

Another important issue that was raised during the analyses performed by the adults became the topic of a work. The drawing itself is not read but *related to the reality*. The following sentence illustrates this problem:

Educator: hhhmmm...I can see ... some animals, a dog.. a piglet maybe? .. I do not know. (.) .... some birds... it seems that the child likes animals which it has depicted ....it is possible that a child lives close to them? In addition, there are a few people there (.) one person is bigger than the others. (.)it must be an important person for this child ... the girls are separated from boys... (a person asks for some information connected with the topic of a drawing) .. Oh I see! A family? It means .. that a kind of meaning hierarchy is presented here.

Recognizing the thematic context of a drawing facilitated its interpretation but it had some drawbacks. The adults tended to “tag” *drawing signs* according to own categories and obtained aesthetic or psychological knowledge. The interpretation provided by the psychologists can serve as a great example:

Psychologist: But I am not an expert on it ... and I do not have any experience connected with children.. (.) oh ... it means that it is an example of drawing as a projection method in psychology? ...(...) okay then.

Additional problem presented the marginalization of an empty space of the drawing. The adults did not notice it (the educator and artist) or treated it as a natural way of drawing (a mother) or as a psychologist saw them as:

Psychologist: what does empty space mark? hhhhhh...a kind of leeway. (.) freedom and openness. (.) I find it so. (..) I mean it makes a kind of a background .... I do not know ... the background does not have to be painted, does it?..... It is not a negative thing that it is empty .... the other way round it is so spacious.

Whereas, the child perceives the “empty signifiers” of a drawing differently.

The girl said: the meadow is white ... and a bit green and a bit white.

This kind of statement may constitute an attempt to “defend” own artistic work, which results from the child's knowledge that the piece of paper should be all covered in colors.

The imposed category of “how to finish” an artistic work is something that has been educated and connected with the top-down aesthetics of the adults. Thanks to it

the adults have the power over a child and as a consequence limit a child's freedom of artistic expression.

## 5. Conclusions

The analyzed material shows that the single child's drawing makes the adults to produce meanings concentrated upon particular meaningful "frameworks" which have been culturally shaped.

The adults tend not to cross these "frameworks" and treat the drawing message as a realistic fragment of their world that should be interpreted according to established cultural patterns. Paradoxically, those "frameworks" do not facilitate the mutual **communication** between an adult and a child. Unfortunately a communication through drawings **is not** a "language" shared by children and adults. Despite the fact that the communicative potential of drawings is great since children "talk" with images, it is a "closed" space for the interpretant due to his/her strong rationality. Regardless of some interest connected with the phenomenon of children's drawings, the adults usually marginalize them and do not understand their intentions and originality. The issue of the lack of understanding is related to the employment of matrixes, classifications and special selections that govern adult's interpretation. This manner of "reading" is filled with simplification and explicitness which turns "readers" away from the essence of a message. What is more the adults are often not interested in a child's verbal description. Only a few "readers" asked for child's commentary. In spite of it, they wanted to know child's age and the title of a work which prejudices the process of reception.

The research shows that the adults are much more interested in their own commentary than the one provided by a child. As a consequence the *voice* of a child is unheard and young creators are pushed to the *culture of silence*.

The process of conventionalizing usually facilitates the process of communication but in the case of children's drawings it leads to the lack of agreement between a sender and receiver. One of the explanations suggests that the adult uses the "map of reality" based on the schematized personal experience, cultural texts, professional knowledge and the attempt to dominate a child during its process of socialization. Since, the dialog is one of the most important ways of establishing proper human relationships it is very important to listen to a child's **voice-drawing** and understand it in an appropriate manner. In order to do so, the adults must realize that they tend to oversimplify and schematize a way of interpreting the child's drawing they also must express their willingness to read it creatively.

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## **Νόημα και Επικοινωνία στα ιχνογραφήματα των παιδιών: Αναζητώντας το νόημα των ιχνογραφημάτων**

**Margaret Karczmarzyk\***

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ Στην εργασία αυτή η συγγραφέας επιχειρεί να εφαρμόσει τη σημειωτική θεωρία του C. S. Peirce στο παιδικό ιχνογράφημα. Στην εισαγωγή της θέτει τα πιο κάτω ερωτήματα: Γιατί ένα παιδί ζωγραφίζει; Τι θέλει με το ιχνογράφημά του να μας πει, τι είδους μηνύματα

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θέλει να μεταφέρει; Γιατί τα πρώτα ιχνογραφήματα των παιδιών είναι τόσο σημαντικά; Πώς το περιβάλλον επηρεάζει την επικοινωνία στα ιχνογραφήματα; Τι είδους νοήματα στα ιχνογραφήματα των παιδιών γίνονται αντιληπτά από τους ενήλικες; Βασισμένη στην θεωρητική προοπτική του Pierce υποστηρίζει ότι η ζωγραφική είναι ένα είδος γλώσσας που το παιδί χρησιμοποιεί για να επικοινωνεί για τα ζητήματα που το αφορούν. Βασικός στόχος της έρευνας της συγγραφέα είναι να αλλάξει την επικοινωνιακή κατάσταση και τον στερεοτυπικό τρόπο σκέψης των ενηλίκων σχετικά με την πρόσληψη και κατανόηση των παιδικών ιχνογραφημάτων.

*Λέξεις-κλειδιά:* Ιχνογραφική επικοινωνία, Ιχνογραφικός κώδικας, Ιχνογραφικό μήνυμα, Ιχνογραφικό σημείο, Νοήματα του παιδικού ιχνογραφήματος, Πολυσημία του ιχνογραφήματος, Σύμβολο, Τριάδα του C. S. Pierce.