

A Study of Sign and Symbol in Intellectual Development of Human Being

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show how the human intelligence gradually develops by using sign and symbol. The research problem is “why both sign and symbol play the essential role in human beings’ lives?” Tentative solution is that sign and symbol, instead of using little or without any words, can be used to communicate each other, to support human intelligence development and to find knowledge of human being’s emotions and the natural world. The research methods are the descriptive and evaluative methods. An evaluation is made with the principle of reciprocity. This paper will contribute towards understanding that the high intellectual development of human beings is the acquisition of using of symbols as a tool in almost everywhere.

Keywords: Sign, Symbol, Symbolic Function

INTRODUCTION

The roles of the Signs and Symbol are very important in language, art, religion, science and so forth. The intellectual development of human being begins with Signs and Symbols that come into existence through the evolution of signs. A Sign is a representation of an object that implies a connection between itself and its object. Some scholar divided it into two kinds, namely “a natural sign and a conventional sign”. A natural sign bears a causal relation to its object for instance; Snow is a sign for winter, padauk is a sign of summer and dawn is a sign of sunrise. A conventional sign signifies by agreement, for examples, *yellow card* – signified as an action which breaks the rules of a game as a full stop signifies the end of a sentence.

Symbol is a thing represents or stands for something else, especially a material object representing something abstract. According to some scholars, Symbol is divided into three kinds, personal symbol, cultural symbol and universal symbol. Symbol may have multiple meanings and can

change meaning over time. They are capable of stirring up deep emotion. It may be said that these facts differ from the *Sign* and *Symbol*.

The word ‘symbol’ is derived from the Latin ‘*symbolum*’ and *symbolus*. *Symbolum* means a symbol of faith and *symbolus* means a sign of recognition. And the word ‘Symbol’ is also derived from the Greek word ‘*symbolon*’. In ancient Greek, a ‘*symbolon*’ was a means of recognizing each other. It is used for ambassadors from two city states as a record of alliance. Symbol that distinct from Signs carry multiple meanings depending on the context and culture in which they appear.

In *Philosophy in a New Key*, Susanne K Langer expresses her view on the arising Signs as follows:

The use of signs is the very first manifestation of mind. It arises as early in biological history as the famous “conditioned reflex” by which a concomitant becomes a sign of the condition to which the reaction is really appropriate. This is the real beginning of mentality, for here is the birthplace of error, and We might call it mistake.²

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² Susanne K. Langer. (1948). *Philosophy in a New Key*. New York: New American Library. p.29.

It can be regarded that signs arise from the “conditioned reflex”. This concomitant, as the stimulus-function becomes a sign. Due to the misuse of signs, mistake can be easily made. But, the use of signs in this place may be called the beginning of intelligence.

Animal mentality is built up on a primitive meaning. Through the power of learning, signs have been existing to make adaption to an environment. The creature received signals and reacted them. But they have fixed reactions or fixed signals. More than one environment may confuse them. An animal’s mind is a simple and direct transmitter of messages from the world to his motor centers.

Human beings have a wider range of signals. Because of his greater power of integrating reflexes and quicker learning by trial and error, men are superior in using signals that are used not only to indicate things but also to represent them. Even our words are not always signs. Words are substitute signs. Human beings created signs with conformity to their common senses which has experienced in past. This substitute signs are called symbol that have the capacity of ‘thinking of’ or ‘referring to’ what is

not here. In *Philosophy in a New Key*, Langer expresses her view on the transform from sign-function to symbolic function as follows:

The speech line between man and beast is minimized by the recognition that speech is primarily an instrument The passage from the sign-function of a word to its symbolic function is gradual, a result of social organization, an instrument that proves indispensable once it is discovered, and develops through successful use.¹

It can be assumed that the speech line between man and beast is minimized by the recognition. The speech is primarily an instrument of social control in man. Animals relate to each other with the sign function ‘cries’. But the speech has acquired a representative function and a much greater degree of cooperation among individuals. The sign-function of a word transforms to symbolic function of men in gradually.

In *Philosophy in a New key*, Langer describes her view on the symbol held by Professor A. D. Ritchie, who remarks in his *The Natural History of the Mind*:

As far as thought is concerned, and at all levels of thought, it is a symbolic process. It is mental not because the symbols are immaterial, for they are often material, perhaps always material, but because they are symbol.... The essential act of thought is symbolization.²

It can be regarded that it is a symbolic process at every levels of thought. Symbols are material because they always represent as pictures. Nevertheless, they are mental process centrally concerning with mind. The essential act of thought is symbolization. The process of human conception always culminates in symbolic expression. Langer describes her view on the symbolism substantiated by other scholars as follows:

....Symbolism is the recognized key to that mental life which is characteristically human and above the level of sheer animality. Symbol and meaning make man’s world, far more than sensation.³

It can be regarded that symbolism is very important idea in mental life of human beings. It is the key distinct that differsthe human beings from the beast. Man’s world is made up by the symbol and meaning. Symbolism excels than sensational world.

¹ Susanne K. Langer. (1948). *Philosophy in a New Key*. New York: New American Library. P.32.

²Ibid., p.27.

³Ibid., p.28.

In the late 19th century, artists became free in creating their artworks. The symbolism movement also arose because of that change. Symbolism is an allegorical portrayal. Symbolists painted images of myths and dreams and even visualized their souls. Thus symbolists' art is to grasp more absolute truths that could only be accessed indirectly. And they painted highly metaphorical and suggestive manner.

Symbolism is the particular theory, the use of symbols to express or represents ideas or qualities in Literature, art, and so on. The evidences of symbolism can be found in *haiku* poems of Japan, Japanese aesthetics of poetry, Mudras in Buddhist iconography, and hand-gestures in Sanskrit whereas symbolism can be found almost anywhere. Symbolization is the starting point of all intellect in the human sense or experience. The intellectual development of human beings is the acquisition of using of symbols as a tool in painting, religion, poetry, art, literature and so on.

In painting, the artists have all used colors, lines, objects and subjects as symbols to give their work more meaning. It can be regarded that the bridge symbolizes the connection of standard living in the old city and in new community in expressionist painting of Max Pechstein Hermann's "**Construction**". Here the bridge is used as symbolic object which connects the two conditions. It can be regarded internal conflicts between the standard living of old city and of new community in Germany before the World War I. The brushwork and the usages of colors symbolize external conflicts between Germany and other countries of Europe for Colonialization because when everybody sees this painting, they may feel uncomfortable. The dark color of lowland symbolizes the natural environment which has still been unexplored. The huts symbolizes migrated worker from rural because of Urbanization. The color of vivid orange symbolizes industrialization. This painting induces people to memorize the conditions which had happen in Germany and after World War I. According to Paul Henel, among the four approaches, it can be assumed that this is the second method of approach to art from the symbolism point of view.

Another point, symbol is usually used in poems that mean more than the writer intends. These senses can be seen in this poetry, "**The Old Pond**" by Matsuo Basho composed as follows:

Old pond!
Frog jumps in
Water's sound.¹

The old pond is a *haiku*. A *haiku* is a form of Japanese poems. It is composed about very simple condition because poet uses objects such as frog, pond and water which can be seen in our daily life. Therefore, it can be regarded that this poem consists of the sense of *karumi* of Japanese aesthetics. It can be suggested that the old pond refers to the world. The frog represents human life. The word 'old' symbolizes 'time'. The senses of Metaphors can be found in this poem. The pond gave the fruit to the human beings who live in this world as he can when he was a young. Their lives have slowed down and have almost become stagnant.

Every almost forgets that they are there. This point shows that the old age, youth and importance is condition which take a moment as a splash that a frog made in the pond. Before a frog jumps into the water, there is silence. The frog leaps and this momentary event can be compared with a short span of life, one mundane occurrence of the surface of pond. It can be felt that it is impermanent of life and condition. Similarly, "the frog jump" is a metaphor because the condition of water surface becomes to action when the frog leap and this

¹William J. Higginson. *The Haiku Path*.http: www.bopsecrets.org/gateway/passages/basho-frog.htm.

momentary event compare with life is short. In this poem, the old pond is an allegory because it indicates that the pond has slowed down and has almost become stagnant, it is useless. The sound of water is the result of the actions the life had taken. The splash is a result of the frog jumping, a new life or after death life with new voices heard, changing our life. It can be regarded that this poem includes the sense of Yugen.

Religion can be looked as systems of symbols. According to Paul Tillich, religious symbols provide motivation and inspiration for individuals and groups. For Buddhism, Buddha images, pagodas and temples are the symbols of the faith. They are created according to Myanmar traditional custom and culture. Even before the creation of Buddha images, symbols were used to represent his Teachings, knowledge and belief. Among these

symbols, *Mudra* has different definitions regarding the Buddha's philosophy and belief. *Mudra* symbol may give people certain concepts, opinions and general notions of Buddha.

Aesthetics researcher said that a symbol does not mean thing, but conceptions. *Mudra* symbol helps us to cultivate *silā*, *samādhi* and *pañña*. So, *Mudra* of Buddha images in Myanmar are not only religious symbols but also philosophical symbol. For example- *Abhaya Mudra* style means prevention of danger. In this posture, the right hand rose in a line up to the shoulder. The palm turned to front with the fingers directed upwards. The left hand hangs down by the side of the body. By the historical background, one morning, Buddha went around the *Rajagaha* for collecting alms. *Devatta* let the various alcohols led elephant, *Nalagiri* to the path where the Buddha was coming to harm the Buddha. But it could not kill Buddha. Buddha sent living kindness towards the elephant. The elephant got the loving kindness of Buddha. It becomes tamed animals, and sat down in front of Buddha. When the Buddha was about to be attacked by an angry elephant, Buddha held up his hand in the fearlessness gesture. The gesture of fearlessness is only seen on the spiritual power of Buddha or Bodhisattva. The brown colour symbolizes protection, peace and security in this figure. The left hand symbolizes loving kindness towards the other livings. Everybody sees this *Abhaya Mudra*, they may feel peaceful themselves and reverence to Buddha images.

The meaning and interpretation of *Abhaya Mudra* is preventing one from any danger and suggest the life of Buddha who has dispelled completely the enemies. A symbol of *Mudra* has different meanings depending on various religions and thoughts.

In Hindu religion, *Abhaya Mudra* symbol is understood as the most dispel fear and accords divine protection and bliss to devotee by making hand style. It can be regarded that *Abhaya Mudra* symbol is a highly metaphorical and suggestive manner because the rude and drunk elephant becomes tame animal and sit down in front of the Buddha image silently. And it can be thought that it is possible in normal condition.

NLD party has chosen the image of a fighting peacock gazing at a white star as its new symbol in Myanmar political run. This image is a symbol of the country's struggle for change. In New seal, the white star represents the revolution. The fighting peacock (the crackdown) symbolizes the struggle of students during the 1988 democracy uprising. NLD's bamboo hat symbolizes a breakaway group that participated in the much criticized November 2010 election.

Political symbol occur in the flow of political statement. Political symbol plays in the integration and manipulation of society. Human being is interested and appreciated in symbol. The role of symbol and symbolic action plays in the legitimation of political power. The symbols are so important that today certain parties are identified by their symbol. If there is a

crackdown gazing at a white star or bamboo hat on a poster, it means the candidate is a member of NLD Party of Myanmar.

According to the diversities of culture, Symbols are used with their different meanings. Symbols and Signs represent the thoughts and conditions of every diverse culture. As stated by Susanne Langer, sign-function plays the fundamental role in linking up all related things. Based on sign-function, Symbol that represents an object has been developed. In some cases, symbols have taken the place of the word that may mislead or misinterpret the theories and philosophical profundities. The theory of symbolism cannot be grasped directly the ideas but can be understood through relative thinking. Creating and understanding symbol support human beings to communicate not only the embedded meaning within the symbols, but also suggest the human beings' feelings of belonging to the group, the culture and society. Therefore this stage is known through symbols in the progress of human beings' intellect.

High or low standard of a nation can be evaluated by looking at their artworks as well as their religious thoughts. Artworks reflect the political systems, the situation, the philosophies, the culture and aesthetic patterns of the society. Therefore, it can be summed up symbol and signs are played very important role in the development of human intelligence and culture.

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မြန်မာဘာသာကျမ်းကိုးစာရင်း

၁။ဇော်လင်းဦး။ (၁၉၈၂)။ *ရသပညာရှင်ဆုဆန်လင်ဂါ၏ သကေတဝါဒ*။ ရန်ကုန်တက္ကသိုလ်ဂျာနယ်၊ အတွဲ-၁၆။ ရန်ကုန်မြို့။ တက္ကသိုလ်များ ပုံနှိပ်တိုက်။

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