If a dog pricks up its ears like a wolf, it is a bad sign…
Omens and their Meanings

Introduction

What are omens? We may tentatively say that they are signs of something hidden to ordinary human perception, such as future occurrences, past transgressions, or current conspiracies. But why do people believe that omens can tell them anything about these things? And how are omens interpreted?

According to Victorian anthropology omens were merely a phenomenon indistinguishable from the other pseudo-sciences characteristic of primitive culture (Tylor 1891: 108). Divination, magic and omens can all be seen to obey the same basic mental principle, namely analogy characterized by weak and arbitrary resemblances (Tylor 1994: 293; Tylor 1891: 118). This view is characteristic of early anthropology in general (Rose 1974; Wallis 1974). Magic, divination and omens were not distinguished analytically.

Whereas divination occasionally achieved some attention, omens have received very little attention apart from the occasional collection of ethnographica (Thurston 1912) or folklore volumes often grouped with other types of superstition, but little analytical reflection (Cannell & Snapp 1933; Cielo 1918). The exception from this are treatments of cultures in which omens were important like the ancient Roman (Rasmussen 2003; Vigourt 2001) or the Babylonian (Baigent 1994; Gèotze 1983; Jastrow 1914; Koch-Westenholz 1995; Labat 1933; Reiner & Pingree 1975). These are very fine studies indeed, but their purpose is not to say anything in general about the questions posed at the beginning of the article. Their treatments are philological or historical and intrinsically tied to their material.

Therefore no general accounts of why people universally perceive omens besides the one offered by Victorian anthropology have been offered to this day. It is my contention that important insights can be gained from a thorough analysis of this phenomenon taking into account previous work done in different fields. This is what I will here attempt to outline.

Omens

As mentioned, some work has been made on omens. Probably the most perceptive analysis is Caroline Humphrey's article about omens among the Buryat (Humphrey 1976). This will serve as the starting point since I find her basic observations very helpful.

According to Humphrey it is necessary to distinguish omens, their results, and their explanations as three distinct analytical units. There may or may not be an explanation of the relation between the omen and its result, and there may even be several (33). Indeed she writes: "Explanations seem to have a free-floating, almost separate existence hardly attached to what they are thought to be 'explaining'" (Humphrey 1976: 38). Let me give one example of this:

> "*Omen*: If a dog pricks up its ears like a wolf, it is a bad sign.
> *Result*: Misfortune will come to its owner.
> *Explanation*: The dog must be inhabited by an evil spirit which will sooner or later cause harm to the owner" (Humphrey 1976: 28)

Humphrey also points to another very important characteristic of omens. Traditionally the treatments of omens have assumed a sequence where first a peculiar feature of the environment is detected (an omen), it is then explained so that one can find out its meaning (result) which most often is of concern to the individual[1]. Thus the sequence has previously been taken to be (indeed this is the pattern assumed by Victorian anthropology, which rendered interpretation of omens a pseudo-science):

Omen – Explanation – Result – (Concern)

According to Humphrey this sequence should be reverted. The detection of an omen starts from an agent/subject's concern for his own situation (Humphrey 1976: 35). This might sensitize a person to omens. These are learnt and so are their potential meanings to some degree. What is important is that the concrete concern for the person is what determines the interpretation of the omen. The explanation, as we saw, is more like an appendix that may or may not be there. Thus the relation according to Humphrey is:

Concern -   Omen -   Result
             Explanation

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[1] There are exceptions to this sequence especially among Roman historians, where a concern, a fear, precedes the perception of portents (Gladigow 1979; Rosenberger 1998)

For example the concern for how high the snow will be in the winter, sensitizes the Buryat to how high the mice build their nests. This is related as omen and result: if the mice build their nests high the snow will be high, if low then low (Humphrey 1976: 32).

Thus the meaning of an omen is intrinsically tied to an agent and his concern for his situation. The meaning is not, as assumed by symbolic anthropology championed by Victor Turner, fixed in a symbol. A symbol is not a repository of meaning[2] (Humphrey 1976: 37). An interesting implication of this is that meanings of omens in accordance with changes in people's condition, because concerns change.

But we still need to find out how the relation between omen and result comes about. Humphrey gives six principles used among the Buryat in detecting and interpreting omens. She herself admits that they are not properly worked out analytically (Humphrey 1976: 26). What I will try to do is to find out how omens are interpreted and perceived as signs.

Agenda

First of all the relation between omen and result is a semiotic phenomenon. It is a variation of the relation between a sign and its referent. Referent should not be taken in the literal sense as an object. Often it is a situation (rain), a condition (disease), an event (birth) or even vaguer as something good or bad.

Second, I believe that Caroline Humphrey is right in asserting the centrality of an individual[3] and his concerns for his life in a context, but most, if not all, semiotic theories are not in accordance with that assertion. Traditional semiotic theories tend to maintain a Cartesian distance between the signifying organism and the signified (Saussure, Peirce)[4]. An individual is essentially a biological entity, not a thinking Cartesian spirit[5].

So what we need is a semiotic theory which takes its starting point in a biological framework. To my knowledge, the American philosopher Ruth Garrett Millikan has provided, if not the only one then, the most sophisticated and elaborate framework that fulfils these criteria (Millikan 1995; Millikan 1984; Millikan 2004a).

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[2] This echoes the criticism of symbolism raised by Dan Sperber about the same time (Sperber 1975)

[3] Strictly speaking she does not assign the individual any centrality. She writes that the agent is central, and that this could be a group. But in the end a concern to the group is a concern to the individual, because his life is tied to the life of the group.

[4] Pragmatic theories of language do however put the individual in context, but they do not say much about the persons concerns. I will, however, use some versions of these later.

[5] Some progress at integrating meaning with individual concerns is being made though [cf. Barsalou et al. 2003a, 2003b], but these are not strictly speaking semiotic theories.

Outline of a theoretical framework

I would like to change the terminology of some of Humphrey's concepts to make them in tune with general linguistic and philosophical usage. First of all when speaking in general I will use sign. Instead of result, I will use referent or affair, which is also implied by Humphrey's analysis. The relation between a sign and its referent is the product of an interpretation. This may be the product of an explanation, or an explanation may follow from an interpretation. The difference between the interpretation and explanation is that the interpretation is always there and is most often unconscious and implicit, whereas an explanation is always explicit.

Signs

Ruth Millikan's sign theory

According to Millikan, meaning arises from the use of signs. All organisms use signs because it helps them survive. A rabbit being able to read the signs of the fox, would have had an evolutionary advantage over the on who couldn't. The more different signs of fox it is able to see the better. A rabbit though is not very good at reading signs of cups. This is because cups are not of its concern, or more precisely it has not been of any concern in its evolutionary past. Thus reading signs is a basic adaptive function, which accounts for the existence of this ability in all organisms (Millikan 2004b; Uexküll 1977). It also explains why reading signs relative to the concerns of the organism are central.

According to Millikan there is no principled difference between human and animal sign usage in this respect. Human sign usage is of course somewhat more complex. Signs can be divided in two classes: Natural and intentional.

Natural signs

According to Millikan: "A natural sign of a thing is something else from which you can learn of that thing by tracking in thought a connection that exists in nature." (Millikan 2004a: 37). This means that a natural sign recurs in nature. A recurrent natural sign is a sign that recurs in a natural environment like the fox' footprint recurring in the rabbit's environment. There must thus locally be a statistic correlation between a sign and its signified. In an environment in which an organism

exists there will be correlations between A's and B's these are "locally recurrent signs". For example a fox' foot prints are a locally recurrent sign of a fox for a hunter. The reason that they are local is that the same signs may have other referents in other environments, if for example cats could be able to produce the same footprints. The same signified may also have other signs in other environments; for example redness may be a sign of fox in a snowy environment. An organism is only concerned with its local environment and not some abstract or other environment: "The kind of knowledge that earthly creatures have is knowledge applicable in the domains they inhabit, not knowledge for arbitrary nomically possible worlds, nor for other domains, regions or eras within the natural world" (44).

Intentional signs

Intentional signs differ from natural signs in that they are purposefully produced. This means that they are produced for some kind of interpreter or sign user (73). Apart from this, for intentional signs to be interesting they must be cooperative: Smacking at flies is an intentional sign on my behalf that I want them to go away. Indeed, they do go away, but because my smacking is a natural sign of danger for them it is not an intentional sign. Millikan writes: "Cooperative intentional signs are produced by systems designed to make natural signs for use by cooperating interpreting systems. That is, the sign-maker system and the sign-using system must have evolved or been designed to function symbiotically."(73-74)

The feature of intentional signs of importance here is that they have been purposefully produced. For a sign to be interpreted as an intentional sign, an isomorphism between the two communicating systems is necessary. Intentional signs are related to some kind of purpose or intention and on cooperation between two similar systems; humans can communicate with humans because they are similar, and because they are similar they can guess the intention of each other through communicative cooperation [add. Sperber & Wilson 1986; Tomasello] (Nair 2002)[6]. An intentional sign assumes a basically isomorphic sign producer by necessity.

From sign to referent

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[6] It is hard to say whether Millikan would approve of using this approach I will be using. In chapter 10, page 127 she writes : "I want to argue that (..) no representations of speaker intentions in speaking need intervene between world affairs spoken of by speakers and hearer's understanding of their words". But she just says that there *need* not be any representations of intention. Surely this cannot be taken to mean that there cannot be any. What Millikan says is that the account given by neo-griceans is not valid for all human communication, but it may be of some. I believe that the situations I am treating belong to those where it is necessary to represent intentions.

Both natural signs and intentional signs can be embedded. They can be signs of signs. The actual sign is the most proximal sign. This can be a sign of continuously more distal ones along a route from sign to referent.

Sign (Omen)
Referent (Result)
Route (explanation)

A natural sign embeds a direct route between the most proximal sign and the most distal affair/referent. An intentional sign embeds an indirect route through producer's purpose, which signifies the most distal affair.

The difference between a natural sign and an intentional sign is that in a natural sign the route between the most proximal sign and the most distal sign is contained in the chain of signs. Let us look at an example of a natural sign: Goose droppings (A) are a sign of geese passing through (B) is a sign of frosty nights (C) is a sign of winter soon coming (D). A-D is the sign route. A is the most proximate sign and D the most distal (54-55). The same sign, D, may of course be signified by different sign routes, for example the length of the day. But it is not necessary consciously to recognise any of the signs along the route (58).

Intentional representations can signify a distal affair without at the same time signifying all the more proximal ones, because not just the origins, but the uses of the signs are used in determining the intentional signs' semantic value (58). The sentence "Winter is coming soon" is thus a sign of winter coming soon, without all the intermediaries of the sign route A-D.

Intentional signs in human communication

We still need to put the agent, and his concern and the concrete situation more precisely into the framework. Some Neo-Gricean interpretations have treated the relation between semantics and pragmatics. Pragmatics of course has a focus on the situation and the context for communication – the actual use of language - whereas semantics has a focus on linguistic meaning production in a more abstract and context-less sense. ¨

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's relevance theory provides a possible start to breaking down the obstacle. According to Sperber and Wilson language systems provide a partial coding, which by the use of inference is used to understand the information entailed in the communication. Basically a

sign producer, in Millikan's sense, produces a stimulus (a physical sign), which is interpreted by a sign consumer as a sign with a communicative intention (intention to *communicate* something as opposed to other kinds of intention). The informative intention of the producer is what he intends to communicate. The consumer interprets the informative intention by putting himself in the place of the producer, and asks himself: "what would I have intended to inform Y (the consumer) about, had I been X (the producer) producing these signs?".

Basically the process of interpretation is one of empathy or mind-reading. But this is assisted by other features such as, the knowledge of X (his peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, earlier interactions), the knowledge of the sign (is it a linguistic sign with a stable meaning) and the knowledge of the context (either it is defined by previous significations/communications or by the communicative situation in it self).

Joint attentional scenes

Michael Tomasello, the cognitive psychologist, has worked along the same lines. According to Tomasello children learn language when they recognise that the adult makes sounds for them to attend to something: "Sounds become language for young children when and only when they understand that the adult is making that sound with the intention that they attend to something" (Tomasello 1999: 101). When this happens communicants enter into a joint attentional scene. "But the joint attentional scene is not the same thing as the referential scene symbolized in a piece of language; the joint attentional scene simply provides the inter-subjective context within which the symbolization process occurs" (Tomasello 1999: 99): "linguistic reference is a *social* act in which one person attempts to get another person to focus her attention on something in the world"(97). Linguistic reference can only be thought of in the context of joint attentional scenes.

Therefore, intentional signs constitute a joint attentional scene between two communicants. In this scene the information can be inferred by "guessing" the intended meaning behind the signs.

Omens

What kind of signs are omens?

Above we established that omens were indeed signs bearing a relation to its referent, but are they natural or intentional signs. Since most of them rely on natural occurrences, it would be natural (sorry for the wording) to assume they were indeed natural signs. But on the contrary I will argue

that they are intentional signs to the interpreters. There is no recurrent relation between the sign and its referent in the environment.

Let us take an example: "At a turning point in her life, Cait, tried this technique [being attentive to omens]. Her omen was a sound: She heard a creaky screen door opening. She realized that a door was truly opening in her life"[7]. There seems to be a fundamental difference between the fox' tracks signifying the fox having been there and the sound of a creaky screen door signifying doors opening in life. It is difficult to see exactly what the referent of doors opening in life would constitute. Surely, what is meant, is not actual doors being opened, which the creaky sound is actually a natural sign of, but instead possibilities for Cait. consequently the route between sign and referent is not direct. It does not either have a natural recurrent relation with doors opening in Cait's life, or doors opening in life in general.

Recall also the Omen mentioned in the beginning where a dog's posture was interpreted as a sign from evil spirits that misfortune would come. Here we can also see that the sign is taken to be the sign of a purpose to inform someone of something. But how are omens actually interpreted?

Interpretation of omens.

Natural occurrences become omens the same way that sounds become language to the child in the Tomasello quote above; some sort of perceptible feature in the environment is taken to be an intentional sign, that is, something containing a communicative intention. This is sometimes explicitly, but always implicitly interpreted as a joint attentional scene with some agent. Only this agent is hidden, not perceptually present. I will call this a Counterintuitive Intentional Agent or CIA. This is because the agent producing the sign does not correspond to most intuitive expectations of a communicating agent. Such agents are for example mostly visible (though not always). Here I am also building on a growing body of research, tested experimentally and cross-culturally, testifying that people indeed are rather susceptible to representing CIAs (Barrett 1998; Barrett & Keil 1996; Barrett & Nyhof 2001; Boyer 2001; Boyer & Ramble 2001; Lindeman et al 2002; Pyysiäinen et al 2003). In most cases they are ghosts, gods or ancestors. In other cases lost souls of the dead or just a loose sense of some intentional entity. The goal of the joint attention is something of concern to the agent. So the omen is part of a joint attentional scene where some CIA wants the person to attend to something hidden, which is of concern to him.

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[7] From the website: http://www.care2.com/channels/solutions/home/1508 (22.07.05)

Thus the reference of the intentional sign is established through interpretation in relation to some context determined by the individual's concern. The purpose of the sign is for the CIA to bring something to the attention of the individual.

There are two ways in which the relation between the omen and its meaning can be interpreted: based on association and convention. These correspond roughly to the Peircean icon and symbol. The similarity based relation will (probably always) have some kind of perceptual feature in common with what is being interpreted. The convention based relation is based in memory. The sign-referent relation will have been encountered before.

Sign-referent relations based on association

These are very common. Let us take a simple illustration to begin with. This one is from the turn of the 20th century in Southern India: "A tickling sensation of the right foot foretells that the person has to go on a journey" (Thurston 1912: 23). The association is of course to the tickling sensation in your feet you will feel after walking, which was the mode of journeying for most people at that time and place.

Likewise an omen from Greenland has it that: "when the muscles in the body zithers, one of ones relatives will die" (Lynge 1981: 126). This relation stems from the fact that the flesh of seals, when killed, sometimes zither in this way. The examples alert us to one important thing that the association has to be seen from the point of view of the interpreters, or natives if you will. Thus a good deal of knowledge of local culture is needed in order to interpret the relation between sign and referent for similarity interpretations.

A more elaborate example from modern day Denmark shows how rich this interpretation can be. Dogs can also be the vehicle of omens: "(..) if it [the dog] lies on its front paws with the head turned toward the door, visitors will come. (..) If the nose is on the right paw it is an important guest. If the nose and tail are turned against the door and if the dog has arched its back, you will be visited by a thief". The turning towards the door as opposed to the wall or something else signifies that it must involve something with the door. Guests come through the door. The reason why the nose on the right paw signifies an important guest stems from an association to how you greet important guests in Danish culture – with the right hand in a handshake. The arched back is the posture an angry dog has, much like it would have, if a thief would come.

These omens also show something about how things are interpreted. It is interpreted thus: "What would someone be meaning if he had produced this intentional sign? What state of affairs, given the context, would I have found these signs most relevant to express". It is the same as me pointing to my coffee cop intending to communicate that I would like more coffee. Only in the case of the omen the agent is out of sight.

It is difficult to exhaust the different kinds of associations, but we can distinguish roughly three kinds of association: metonymy, metaphor and synecdoche. All are ubiquitous in everyday language[8] (D'Andrade & Strauss 1992; Holland & Quinn 1987; Lakoff 1987; Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Lakoff & Johnson 1999). I will not here go into a more elaborate charting of these different relations.

Sign-referent relations based on convention

As mentioned above the convention based interpretation depends on memory. A person has to either have heard of this omen/affair relation or experienced it beforehand. An example of previous experience comes from modern day Denmark: "Years ago I saw in dreams a black cat. Two days later min Uncle died. A similar experience occurred some years later. My aunt died and three days later I dreamt of a black cat again" (Lingren 2003: 42). This example shows that the relation between black cat in dream and death in family has become a stable sign because it recurs. It is used by convention like linguistic signs.

Another example this time from ancient Rome shows the same. The prodigy that the lances of Mars had moved in the Regia in Rome, meant that bulls should be slaughtered (Gel.4.6.2). This relation between omen and meaning is so conventional that we can track it through a period of almost 200 years[9]. There are several other examples of this kind. The interesting thing about these signs is that the relation between the sign and the referent can be arbitrary in a good old fashioned Sausurean sense. My guess is that they have started as association-based interpretations, but eventually the original association has become opaque.

A good example of how history can remove any apparent link between the sign and its referent comes from Caroline Humphrey: "[it is an] originally Indian Buddhist idea that the mongoose is associated with the god of wealth because it is the conqueror of snakes which are the guardians of

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[8] Just for clarification I do not think linguistic reference is similarity based; words do not resemble their referent. It is convention based. But what some words conventionally signify can have an analogy to what is signified in a given context. If I say the crown of the country was evil, I make a convention based relation to a crown and an analogical relation to the king, because he is synecdochically associated with a crown.

[9] In 218 (Liv.21.63), 214 (Liv.24.10), 181 (Liv.40.19), 117 (Obs.36), 102 (Obs.44), 99 (Gel.4.6; Obs.47) and 95 (Obs.95).

treasure; when Lamaism reached the Western Buryat in the late nineteenth century, the mongoose, which does not exist in the Baikal region, was depicted in icons as a pale, rat-like creature sitting on the left hand of the deity of riches; subsequently, the white mouse became an omen of foretelling wealth" (Humphrey 1976: 37-38). The relation between white mouse and wealth must have seemed arbitrary to most Buryat, but it originally had a connection to an association based interpretation.

The construction of context/joint attentional scene

The context is defined by the agent's concerns. In general I will assume that people's concerns are to achieve fortune and avoid misfortune (Lisdorf 2004; Lisdorf 2007). Fortune is any state of affairs associated with positive emotions[10], and misfortune is any state of affairs associated with negative emotions[11]. Some occurrences are naturally associated with something positive or negative like food (positive), pain (negative) and stress (negative), other occurrences are more malleable by the surrounding culture; it is for example varying what is associated with prestige, shame, pride and joy.

Concerns about fortune and misfortune will always be found at the bottom of any interpretation of omens. You will never find omens merely signifying how many trees are in the wood, or where three birches stand close to an elm tree and a wild goose has recently been, unless this information has some significance to somebody's life. By significance to someone's life I mean relation to fortune or misfortune in his life project. A quick glance at any collection of omens will reveal that they're typically related to life matters like death (Cannell & Snapp 1933: 20-24; Hansen 1957: 48-55, 94-122,137-167; Lingren 2003: 139-141; Lynge 1981: 126-141), marriage (Cannell & Snapp 1933: 14-19; Cielo 1918: 7-22; Hansen 1957: 35-47; Lingren 2003: 132-138), birth (Jastrow 1914; Lingren 2003: 124-131; Lynge 1981: 19). These matters are notoriously central parts of a life project (Bruner 1987; Settersten & Hagestad 1996; Sloan 1996).

So the context emerges from a human's life-concern. The actual interpretation of a sign may not occur immediately, it may be long time after it happened. An example from 19th century folklore collection from Denmark shows this: "On the church in Tjørring sat an owl and howled and Peter Christian thought: What is that – it must mean something – should I return? But he continued. When the next day he wanted to take a nap he said to his wife: Kræsten [his son] can come to me. The boy, who was two years old and ran in the kitchen, fell one moment later into a bowl of boiling hot brine, which the wife had put on the floor and he became terribly burned and died" (Hansen

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[10] Emotions of approach is the technical term in emotion research (Rolls 2000).
[11] Emotions of withdrawal is the technical term in emotion research (Rolls 2000).

1957: 9). The precise meaning of the sign was not clear until later. It had been a prediction of death in Peter Christian's family.

Another example where it is perhaps even clearer how the concern of an agent determines the context in which an omen is interpreted is from the same collection of folklore. In 1886 in Fanø, Western Denmark, a boy lived. His father had gone on a journey around the earth as a sailor, but it had been a long time since he had departed, so people started to speculate that he had probably died. A friend of the boy's took him into their house and showed him a jar in which there was water. In the water had been put the yoke of an egg and at the bottom something lay. The friend said that it signified that the sailor, the boy's father, had drowned. His mother and aunt had said so (Hansen 1957: 11). The context is here determined by the concern for the life or death of the boy's father.

The representation of the CIA

I have been arguing that in interpreting omens people represent some kind of agent who has intentionally produced the omen as a sign of something hidden, but related to their concerns for fortune in life. This is subconscious and hence difficult to prove. Often no such connection is made by people themselves, at other times omens are interpreted as stemming from ghosts, angels, gods or ancestors. In these cases my argument is clear enough.

A possible objection could be that it is ridiculous to assume that we interpret black clouds as omens of rain because we subconsciously think some agent used the clouds as signs of his intention to inform us that it will soon rain. Indeed I think so too, but that is because, black clouds as signs of rain are natural signs, not intentional signs. For a cloud to be an omen, that is, an intentional sign, it would have to be taken by an agent as somehow related to his concerns.

This leaves us speculating as to why humans would think that some more or less natural, chance occurrence was produced by an agent. Recent research has shown that humans are more than willing to represent agency when there is none apparent, especially in attention demanding situations where no other explanation offers itself (Barrett 2004; Guthrie 1993; Guthrie 1980). This research would indicate that it was a human disposition.

More relevant for the understanding of why unexpected occurrences are perceived as intentional signs is recent research conducted by Jesse Bering and Becky Parker (Bering & Parker 2006). Kids from ages 4 to 7 were given a task to find out in which of two boxes a ball was hidden. They should place the hand on the top of the box in which they thought the ball was and keep it there for 15 seconds. During the 15 seconds they could move the hand back and forth as many times as they

wanted, but by the end of the 15 seconds the position of the hand would count as the answer. The kids were assigned to either an experimental group or a control group. In the experimental group, after the explanation of the rules of the game, the children were taken aside and shown a picture of Princess Alice. They were told that Princess Alice was a magical princess who could make herself invisible. They were also told that Princess Alice really liked them and that she would tell them when they picked the wrong box. In the control group no story of Princess Alice was told. During some of the trials one of two unexpected events would happen, when the children had put their hand on the box. Either a picture of Princess Alice would fall from the door, or a table lamp would turn on and off twice in rapid succession. The results showed that the young kids did not react to the unexpected events, but the oldest group, who are closer to adults, responded by moving their hand. This indicates that they had seen the unexpected event as an intentional sign related to their concern, which was to win the game. It also shows how easily something unexpected can be interpreted as an intentional sign. There is one difference to omens though; the children were explicitly told that Princess Alice would communicate in this way, which is not the case for omens. A case could be made that in omen cultures a constant sensitivity to omens is present because of frequent stories of omens. These stories function in much the same way as the story of Princess Alice.

Summary

What happens when an omen is interpreted is the following:

An agent (sign-consumer) interprets a sign (a chance physical occurrence) with reference to his (or someone else on whose behalf he is interpreting) concerns (some hidden affair concerning fortune/misfortune with respect to his life project), which forms the context of the joint attentional scene in which a Counterintuitive Intentional Agent (sign-producer) is taken to be the producer of the sign. This producer is not represented to have the same restricted access to reality (such as humans' restricted access to the future).

 The occurrence of the sign and the concern may be removed in time and place, making the sign a prediction, retrodiction, or ex post factum prediction; the last option being far the most common.

The actual interpretation (relation between sign and referent) is not fixed. The context can make something a sign which was not initially taken as such. It can change in the course of time; e.g. the omen of the owl on the church roof, which was not interpreted as referring to the death of Peter Christian's son until after he had died. This example also shows how interpretations can change. At first he seemed to have interpreted it, as was its traditional interpretation, as a sign that he himself would die if he carried on his journey.

A method follows from this theoretical outline: A way to analyze omens would be to look at the omen, its result, its possible explanation, but these are just the strictly literary parts. The analysis must also include an agent with some concerns forming the context of the interpretation:

        Agent with concerns

        Context

Omen   Meaning

        (CIA)
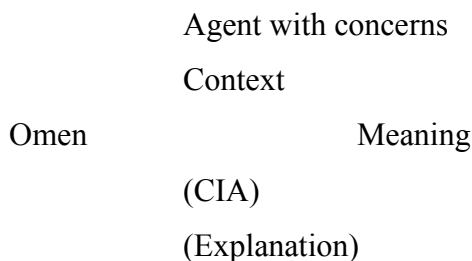
        (Explanation)

The CIA can be explicit or implicit. If explicit it will be revealed in the explanation of the relation between omen and meaning: e.g. evil spirits made the dogs bark, or the gods moved Mars' lances to inform us that a sacrifice is needed.

I have in this essay attempted to sketch a way of analyzing omens taking into account a human embodied agent situated in an environment. This human agent is equipped with some basic cognitive mechanisms for interpreting his environment. These have been produced through natural selection, so as to render the human better equipped to survive in this environment. Among these evolutionarily adapted mechanisms is one which all living creatures have, namely one for optimising its own living conditions. For humans this is expressed as concern for their own and others lives. This is in part modulated by local environmental and cultural conditions. Thus the detection and interpretation of omens stem from cognitive mechanisms designed to enhance human survival, not from any innate longing to explain nature, as Victorian anthropology assumed. This led to a misinterpretation of omens and divination as pseudo science. If anything pseudo, it is more like pseudo communication.

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