Chapter 3

A semiotic account of interpretation processes

In this chapter we will flesh out the consequences of the assumption that it makes no sense to distinguish aspects of a sign if those aspects do not play a role in the process of interpretation that leads to the generation of a new sign that must, by definition, have the same sign aspects as the original sign. That interpretational process is described by Peirce in terms of different kinds of interpretants. So, as a first step the different sign aspects will be matched with the different interpretant aspects. It will be shown in Sect. 3.1 that some sign aspects are not covered by interpretant aspects. If, as we assumed, it makes no sense to distinguish aspects of a sign if those aspects do not play a role in the process of interpretation, we need to find a way to introduce them. In Sect. 3.2, we propose the semiotic sheet as a means to focus on specific processes of interpretation by interpreting systems. In Sect. 3.3 we will introduce corresponding interpretant aspects for the remaining sign aspects.

3.1 Matching sign aspects with interpretant aspects

In Chapter 1 nine sign aspects were introduced and in Chapter 2 six kinds of interpretants. Figure 3.1 summarizes the results.\footnote{This arrangement was first presented by van Driel (1993).} Note that the names \textit{interpretant}, \textit{energetic interpretant} and \textit{logical interpretant} only serve as class names. We left them because in secondary literature and in applications of semiotics they may be used.

A basic rule of semiotics states that an interpretant sign only relates to its object through the sign of which it is an interpretant, and never directly. So, any mismatch between sign aspects and interpretant aspects cannot be resolved
by an appeal to a direct relation between interpretant and object. Having said this, can we match the terms and if so how?

At first sight the emotional interpretant does not match with the qualisign because a qualisign, as the name already indicates, has signifying possibilities due to the quality it has, while an emotional interpretant is a feeling that cries for resolution in the face of unanalyzed impressions. If, however, we realize that qualisigns can only be found in their realization in instances and never in themselves, the feeling indicating the presence of qualities that seek to make themselves known appears as a reasonable substitute for the qualisign aspect. Assumed by the notion emotional interpretant are the qualia in their unanalyzed form. Filling in a field in a web application may serve as an example. The ‘mind’ of the application (interpreting system) extends to your screen. You scribe characters on this interface. But until you hit the enter key, it does not matter to the system that something is written. After hitting the key the first action the system performs is the acceptance of input in order to determine the input type in a subsequent stage, i.e., is the input of the right type? The relation between the feeling and the impressions in their unanalyzed form is like the relation between the enter key and the input. In both cases the demand is: if possible, make sense of the input!

The mental energetic interpretant, regarded as the modification of the inner world, can directly be matched with the icon aspect, since it consists in giving shape to the unanalyzed impressions. The physical energetic interpretant, regarded as existence, can equally easily be matched with the sinsign aspect. All in all, by now we have a match between a sinsign and icon in which qualities are realized and organized in a form on the one hand, and an energetic physical and mental interpretant as a one time occurring shape in which the impressions become organized on the other. In terms of the field-to-be-filled example this moment in the process of interpretation is equal to making up the format of the input (the token) and the acceptance of it in working memory without at that point having judged whether the input is of a valid type.