

A Study on the Dialectical Unity of Linguistic Signs' Arbitrariness and Iconicity

Mengwei Wei^{1, a}

¹School of Foreign Studies, Anhui Normal University, Wuhu, Anhui, China

^aahnudavid2001@outlook.com

Abstract

For a long time, the linguistic community both domestically and internationally has been engaged in ongoing debates regarding the issues of linguistic signs' arbitrariness and iconicity. Some linguists, starting from the perspective of iconicity, have questioned and even denied that arbitrariness is the primary principle of linguistic signs. This paper elaborates on the key points of arbitrariness and iconicity in Saussure's semiotics and Peirce's semiotics, and argues the relationship between linguistic signs' arbitrariness and iconicity, concluding that the relationship between linguistic signs' arbitrariness and iconicity is dialectically unified.

Keywords

Linguistic Signs; Arbitrariness; Iconicity; Saussure; Peirce.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* was published, marking a foundational work in modern linguistics. Saussure, known as the father of modern linguistics, proposed the first principle of linguistic signs—arbitrariness—when discussing the nature of linguistic signs. Since then, the issue of arbitrariness has gradually gained attention among linguists and sparked intense debates. Some linguists have raised the issue of iconicity as a counterpoint, and the relationship between arbitrariness and iconicity has attracted widespread attention from linguists both domestically and internationally. Regarding the debate on arbitrariness and iconicity, the academic community has primarily formed three viewpoints: first, linguistic signs are arbitrary; second, linguistic signs are iconic; and third, linguistic signs are both arbitrary and iconic [1]. To study this relationship more objectively and in-depth, the author, building on previous research, elaborates on the meanings of arbitrariness and iconicity, respectively, and demonstrates the relationship between them. The conclusion is reached that arbitrariness and iconicity of linguistic signs are not in opposition but rather complement each other and exist in a dialectical unity.

2. Saussure's Principle of Arbitrariness

2.1. Absolute Arbitrariness

In his work *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure introduced the important theory of linguistic sign arbitrariness. Saussure stated: "The linguistic sign is a two-sided psychological entity [2]." He viewed the linguistic sign as the combination of two associated elements in the mind, or the union of a concept and an auditory image, both of which he considered to be psychological. Saussure later replaced the terms "concept" and "auditory image" with "signifier" and "signified," respectively. Saussure argued that "the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary [2]," further illustrating the dialectical unity between these two elements.

Saussure also proposed that, on one hand, linguistic signs are arbitrary or conventional, and on the other hand, these signs must be constrained by temporal factors [2]. That is, they are determined through usage over time. In other words, although the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, this arbitrariness is not subject to human will and requires the support and recognition of the majority of users during its use. The sign is further solidified in this process.

2.2. Relative Arbitrariness

On one hand, Saussure emphasized the strong universality of linguistic sign arbitrariness, but on the other hand, he also noticed that not all signs are arbitrary. Saussure explicitly acknowledged that "one of the characteristics of signs is their non-complete arbitrariness [2]." He further explained that "signs are not empty because there is a residual natural connection between the signifier and the signified." Thus, by making this statement, Saussure effectively acknowledged that there is a degree of iconicity between the signifier and the signified [3].

In further explaining the mechanisms of language, Saussure proposed that "the principle of sign arbitrariness does not prevent us from selecting from each language what is completely arbitrary, i.e., unmotivated, and what is only relatively arbitrary [2]." Therefore, Saussure introduced two new concepts: absolute arbitrariness and relative arbitrariness. Absolute arbitrariness refers to the creation and use of linguistic signs without any motivation; relative arbitrariness refers to the creation and use of linguistic signs with some degree of motivation, hence the concept of motivation is a relative one.

3. Peirce's Theory of Iconicity

The theory behind iconicity is that linguistic structures reflect the structure of human experience in certain aspects [4]. This means that iconicity is manifested in a natural connection between linguistic structures and experiential structures [5].

Iconicity originates from the semiotic theory of the renowned American philosopher Peirce, and it is defined as the phenomenon of similarity between linguistic signs and their referents. Peirce classified signs based on the different relationships between signs and their referents, and he conducted a profound analysis of the characteristics of each category [1]. According to his theory, signs can be divided into three categories: "icons," "indices," and "symbols."

When a sign shares similarities or common features with the object it represents in certain aspects, such signs are called icons, such as pictographic characters in Chinese, like "chuan" (river) and "shi" (stone). When there is a correlation or causal relationship between a sign and its object, such signs are called indices, such as chalk writing on a blackboard. The term "chalk writing" is an index because it can evoke associations with a classroom setting. Symbols, on the other hand, have no inherent relationship with their referents; instead, their relationship is established by convention. Symbols exhibit a strong degree of codification (symbolization), such as linguistic signs. In summary, Peirce's classification of signs indicates that the relationship between signs and the entities they represent is one of reference, either through similarity (icon), correlation (index), or conventionality (symbol).

From the above perspective, we can observe that iconicity, as a general and imprecise concept, is ubiquitous in language. These iconic phenomena consist of two parts: one is iconic signs, such as pictographic characters, interjections, and onomatopoeic words. These iconic signs have a characteristic of being few in number and not genuine, thus not being the main components of the linguistic system. The second part is sign combinations or linguistic structures, such as pictures, formulas, sentences, and texts. In conclusion, in the linguistic system, the number of individual similar signs is small, but iconic phenomena appear to be more common in sign combinations or linguistic structures.

4. The Dialectical Relationship between Arbitrariness and Iconicity

Currently, the debate over the essential characteristics of linguistic signs remains intense both domestically and internationally. Therefore, it is crucial to further examine the relationship between the arbitrariness and iconicity of linguistic signs in an objective and rational manner.

Zhu Yongsheng states: "To question any individual's viewpoint, one must first understand the perspective from which they are considering the issue [3]. Without this, one may misinterpret their original intent and add content that was not originally intended." Thus, it is essential to clarify the perspective from which the problem is being analyzed as the first step.

Through the introduction and analysis above, we understand that the concepts of arbitrariness and iconicity originate from Saussure's semiotics and Peirce's semiotics, respectively. These are different theoretical frameworks, each with its own concept of "sign," and their respective "iconic" signs also have different concepts [7]. Therefore, we should analyze the theories of "arbitrariness" and "iconicity" from each perspective and their relationship, rather than refuting Saussure's theory of arbitrariness with Peirce's concept of iconicity, as this would be a misdirection in the analysis.

For Saussure, he proposed the theory of sign arbitrariness but seldom discussed iconicity. For Peirce, he developed a comprehensive theory of iconicity, yet he did not reject Saussure's theory of sign arbitrariness. Peirce considered symbolic signs (symbol) as a primary form of sign, and social normativity as the foundation upon which signs depend [7]. Therefore, Peirce's views on certain principles of signs are quite consistent with Saussure's [8]. In summary, the relevant theories of Saussure and Peirce are not only non-conflicting but also complementary.

Furthermore, in addition to viewing the issue from different perspectives, we should also study it at different levels. As mentioned earlier, Saussure distinguished between absolute arbitrariness and relative arbitrariness, noting that words in language possess absolute arbitrariness, while the composite forms of words, as combinations of simple forms, exhibit relative iconicity. At the same time, Gu Jiazhu noted: "Saussure's explanation of relative demonstrability is within the linguistic sign system, but he did not extend it to the syntactic level. However, we see that Peirce proposed that language syntax has iconicity [5]." Therefore, the arbitrariness of linguistic signs that Saussure referred to is not the arbitrariness between the sign structure and the object it represents, but rather the arbitrariness between the signifier and the signified within a single sign. Further, we can understand that Peirce's theory provides a strong supplement and extension to Saussure's sign theory.

In conclusion, the essential characteristics of linguistic signs include not only arbitrariness but also iconicity, which coexist and complement each other, forming a unified whole. The principle of arbitrariness is mainly manifested in individual linguistic signs, while the principle of iconicity is primarily reflected in the combinations of linguistic signs or linguistic structures. The two principles work together and interact, making language not only full of variations but also governed by certain rules. Therefore, although the relationship between linguistic sign arbitrariness and iconicity appears to be contradictory on the surface, in reality, they are dialectically unified and together constitute the essential characteristics of linguistic signs.

5. Conclusion

Through the analysis and study of Saussure's theory of linguistic signs and Peirce's semiotics, we can discern that arbitrariness elucidates the relationship between the signifier and the signified within a sign, while iconicity explains the relationships between signs or between signs and the external world. These represent analyses and interpretations at different levels, which can complement and unify each other. In addressing the issue of linguistic sign arbitrariness and iconicity, we must adopt a dialectical perspective and not use one theory to

oppose the other, as they exist in dialectical unity. This approach will not only further clarify the relationship between the two but also promote further research and development in the field of linguistics.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I extend my sincere gratitude to all those who have provided assistance in the completion of this paper.

My profound and sincere thanks are directed, in the first place, to my supervisor. His insightful suggestions and continuous encouragement have significantly enhanced my understanding of these linguistics studies. It has been an immense privilege and pleasure to conduct my research under his expert guidance and supervision. Moreover, I am honored to have been influenced by his remarkable personality and unwavering diligence, qualities that I will cherish throughout my life. My indebtedness to him is immeasurable.

I am also deeply grateful to all my friends and classmates who have graciously offered their help and companionship during the process of preparing this paper. Additionally, I express my heartfelt thanks to my family for their unconditional love and steadfast support.

Finally, I am truly appreciative of all those who have dedicated their valuable time to reading this thesis and providing me with constructive advice, which will undoubtedly be of great benefit to my future academic pursuits.

References

- [1] Ying Xuefeng. A Re - understanding of the Relationship between Arbitrariness and Iconicity from the Perspective of Prototype Theory[J]. Journal of Zhejiang International Studies University, 2013(5): 1 - 6.
- [2] Saussure F. de. 1916. Course in General Linguistics [M]. Tr. by Wade Baskin. London: Peter Owen Limited.
- [3] Zhu Yongsheng. On the Arbitrariness and Iconicity of Linguistic Signs[J]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 2002, 34(1): 2 - 7, 80.
- [4] Croft W. Typology and Universals [M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990.
- [5] Gu Jiazuo, Wang Jing. Language is Both Arbitrary and Non - Arbitrary: On the Complementary Relationship between the Arbitrariness and Iconicity of Linguistic Signs[J]. Foreign Languages and Their Teaching, 2004(6): 6 - 10.
- [6] D.S. Clarke Jr. Sources of Semiotics: Readings with Commentary from Antiquity to the Present [M]. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press 1991.
- [7] Wu Yan. On the Essential Characteristics of Linguistic Signs: The Unity of Arbitrariness and Iconicity[J]. Journal of Hubei University of Economics(Humanities and Social Sciences Edition), 2009, 6(7): 133 - 134.
- [8] Zhou Xiaofeng. Semiotic Aesthetics of Modern Poetry[M]. Chengdu: Chengdu Publishing House, 1995.