The Dialectical Relationship of the Arbitrariness and Iconicity of Linguistic Semiotics

Lyu Lirong[1]

[1]Department of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolia Honder College of Arts and Sciences, China
*Correspondence: Department of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolia Honder College of Arts and Sciences, China

281490089@qq.com

Abstract: The enduring debate surrounding the arbitrariness and iconicity of linguistic signs centers on the relationship between form and meaning, or signifier and signified. This study aims to clarify the dialectical relationship between these two foundational principles in linguistics. Historically, arbitrariness, as proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure, posits that the connection between a linguistic sign's form and its meaning is conventional and lacks inherent justification. Conversely, iconicity suggests a natural or motivated connection between form and meaning, a view supported by cognitive and functional linguistics. This paper critically reviews the historical and contemporary arguments from both camps, highlighting significant contributions from scholars such as Saussure, Peirce, and Haiman. Through a comprehensive analysis, it is demonstrated that arbitrariness and iconicity are not mutually exclusive but coexist at different levels within language systems. The paper argues for a nuanced understanding that considers both synchronic and diachronic perspectives, ultimately suggesting that these two principles can complement each other, providing a deeper insight into the nature and function of linguistic signs. This study contributes to the broader discussion on the inherent characteristics of language, with implications for linguistic theory, language teaching, translation, and cognitive science.

Key Words: arbitrariness; iconicity; dialectical relationship

Introduction

The debate regarding the arbitrariness and iconicity, or arbitrariness and motivation, of language signs has been ongoing for a long time, and no definitive conclusion has been reached thus far. This debate centers on the relationship between form and meaning, or signifier and signified, questioning whether there is a justification between them. This issue has been a significant topic in philosophical and linguistic discussions. Throughout the study of philosophy and linguistics, two main camps have emerged on this issue: iconicity and arbitrariness, representing different views of signs and language. Theories supporting iconicity include the naturalism of Cratylus, the essence of Stoics, and modern cognitive and functional linguistics. Theories supporting arbitrariness include Hermogenes' statute theory, Locke's experience theory, Saussure's principle of arbitrariness, and Chomsky's syntactic autonomy theory.

Iconicity, or essentialism, holds that the external form of language reflects the intrinsic universality of human nature, and many aspects of language signs and behavior are marked by natural limitations. Arbitrariness, on the other hand, posits that language and reality are independent of each other, and there is no inherent similarity between them. Therefore, if language is not arbitrarily constructed, its function is significantly limited.

From the early 20th century to the 1960s, the renowned Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure proposed the arbitrary relationship between the "signifier" and "signified" of language signs, asserting that arbitrariness is the fundamental principle of language signs. This theory had a significant influence and triggered a debate on the arbitrariness of language signs for more than half a century. During this period, arbitrariness, though questioned, remained the dominant view. However, since the latter half of the 20th century, with the development of cognitive linguistics, many linguists have developed a new understanding of the relationship between the formal and content levels of language signs. Linguists such as S. Ullmann, J. Haiman, and D. I. Slobin argue that the iconicity of natural language is universal and occupies a dominant position in language. Consequently, Saussure's principle of symbolic arbitrariness has been severely challenged, leading to numerous debates about arbitrariness and iconicity, some of which have been constructive.

The persistence of this debate stems from its engagement with fundamental problems of humanity — problems of philosophy, logic, and language itself. Therefore, research on arbitrariness and iconicity is of great practical significance. However, by reviewing studies on the arbitrariness and iconicity of language signs, we find that scholars primarily focus on either the single study or the opposing study of these concepts, with few in-depth examinations of their relationship. This study aims to address this gap through an in-depth analysis and investigation of both theories. It concludes that, from a synchronic perspective, the arbitrariness and iconicity of language signs are not mutually exclusive but coexist at different levels.

Literature Review

Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, first proposed the arbitrariness of language signs. He believed that the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and there is no internal connection between the two, and

there is no internal connection between the signifier and the signified. For example, English speakers use the word "book" to collectively refer to books (bound books), Chinese speakers use "shu", Japanese speakers use "hon", and French speakers use "livre", which is so-called conventional, and there is no direct causal relationship. He takes arbitrariness as the first principle of language sign. Since then, the principle of arbitrariness has become the object of study. The research on the principle of arbitrariness is generally divided into two camps: support and opposition.

Consistent with Saussure's view, the foreign representatives who agree with the arbitrariness of language signs include Whitney and Meyer. "There is no intrinsic, fundamental relationship between words and ideas in any language in the world," Whitney says in his book named *Language and Language Studies*. And as the French linguist Meyer put it, "the language sign is arbitrary: it has meaning only by the force of tradition... it is only because of this completely arbitrary nature of linguistic symbols that the method of historical comparison that is now needed for research is possible ." [1]

In China, the arbitrariness principle has been supported by many scholars, among which Suo Zhenyu, Wang Dechun, Guo Hong and Zhang Shaojie all believe that Saussure's arbitrariness is correct and primary. Suo Zhenyu reiterated Saussure's viewpoint in his article entitled *Saussure's Principle of the Arbitrariness of Language Signs Is Correct* and further emphasized the arbitrariness of language signs: the connection between signifier and signified of signs is arbitrary, and the sign is not demonstrable, that is, it is arbitrary for signified which does not have any natural connection with the signifier in reality.[2] Wang Dechun put forward two points in his article *on Arbitrariness and Motivation of Linguistic Units: A Commentary on Wang Yin's Iconicity of Linguistic Signs:* First, the relation between language sign and object is arbitrary; Second, the motivation itself is arbitrary. Therefore, the language sign and its motivation have no necessary and essential connection with the object.[3] Guo Hong in his *When Saussure's Principle of Arbitrariness of Language Signs was Established? -- Discussion with Professor Wang Yin* insisted on the arbitrariness and lineality proposed by Saussure and argued that "So far, there are no facts that can prove that the arbitrary theory is not valid."[4] Ma Zhuanghuan also wrote that "the existence of non-arbitrariness cannot constitute a negation of arbitrariness, because they belong to different levels and exist in different degrees - arbitrariness is an essential attribute of language."[5]

However, there are some scholars who oppose the arbitrariness principle, arguing that linguistic signs are iconicity rather than arbitrary. Jakubinski was the first person to criticize Saussure's arbitrariness, pointing out that Saussure did not take into account the contradictions of linguistic signs, and that the connection between signifier and signified is inevitable rather than arbitrary. Halliday held the same view, arguing that symbols are not arbitrary, but prescriptive. Among domestic scholars, Xu Guozhang was the first to question the principle of arbitrariness, and he listed seven reasons to explain that language itself is "motivation behavior" and therefore does not contain arbitrariness.[1] Li Baojia sharply criticized the three major mistakes of the arbitrariness principle in his *On the Errors and Restoration of Saussure's Principle of Sign arbitrariness*.[6] While questioning the principle of arbitrariness, the research on the principle of iconicity continues to deepen, and we will make a brief review in the following.

The problem of iconicity was first interested in philosophers and semioticians, and the rise of cognitive linguistics has further promoted the study of iconicity. The famous philosopher C.S. Peirce, who was the founder of American pragmatism and semiotics at the same time as Saussure, named the replicable symbol as icon when classifying the symbol. An icon means "portrait". A portrait is a copy of the person, of course, like the person. Wang Yin translated icon as "likeness" in his book based on this likeness.[7] And some other domestic and foreign scholars' studies on "likeness of language signs" also originated from Peirce's view.

The famous philosopher C.S. Peirce, founder of American pragmatism and semiotics, divided symbols into three categories from the perspective of the relationship between signifier and signified: icon, indicator and symbol. He considered more comprehensively the three possible referential relations between signifier and signified, one of which is the iconicity. According to the degree of abstraction and the proportion of various similar features (including imitation, analogy and correspondence), he divided the iconography into three categories: image, diagram and metaphor. He made a great contribution to the study of iconicity. Haimna also believed that linguistic iconicity refers to the similarity of a linguistic expression when there is parallelism between the shape, length or composition of various relationships and the encoded concepts or communicative strategies. Hyman also pointed out that image symbols in natural language are actually dominated by images and diagrams, so he simplified the iconicity of Peirce and formed image iconicity and graphic iconicity, and the most typical image iconicity should be onomatopoeia and interjection.[8]

After that, through observation, summary, induction and research, linguists find that there are many inevitable connections between phonetics and meaning, morphology and meaning, and even syntactic structure and meaning and conceptual structure, and there are many justifies to be found. Some scholars have pointed out that the relationship between the signifier and the signified of imago iconicity is not necessary but probable, otherwise we cannot explain the inconsistency of human lexical phenomena[9]. The general view of cognitive linguistics is that there is an inevitable connection between the signifier and the signified, that is, between the form and the content of the language, that is, the relationship between the two can be demonstrated and justified. Representatives of iconicity research in China include Shen Jiaxuan, Yan Chensong and Wang Yin.

Shen Jiaxuan elaborated on iconicity in his book *The Iconicity of Syntax*.[10] Yan Chensong called the relationship between language form and content as "replicability" in his article named *An Overview of Language Replicability*, and believed that language structure reflected the world structure experienced by people to some extent.[11] Professor Wang Yin has made a detailed discussion on the iconicity of language signs in his monograph *On the Iconicity of language Signs: Challenges and Supplements to Saussure's arbitrary Theory*, and believes that iconicity is the biggest challenge and powerful supplement to arbitrariness.[12]

In summary, the research on arbitrariness and iconicity at home and abroad mainly focuses on individual studies or oppositional studies of the two, and relatively few or not in-depth studies on the relationship between them. The relationship between the two will be briefly discussed in the following section. In general, through in-depth analysis and investigation of arbitrariness and iconicity, we can better understand the nature and characteristics of language, and also provide a useful perspective for language teaching, translation, and language learning. At the same time, we also need to pay attention to the connection and transformation between arbitrariness and iconicity, and respect and utilize their respective advantages in language use.

Discussion

From the previous research, we can see that the affirmation of arbitrariness seems to be the negation of iconicity, and the affirmation of iconicity seems to be the challenge of Saussure's so-called arbitrariness, that is, the first principle of language sign.

It is worth noting that the relationship between arbitrariness and iconicity is not an unchangeable dichotomy. The arbitrariness-iconicity continuum has an important position and influence in the field of linguistics, and the connection and transformation between the two cannot be ignored.

First of all, we need to understand that arbitrariness and iconicity are the two basic characteristics of language proposed by linguistics scholars. The arbitrariness of language refers to the fact that there is no necessary logical connection between the form of the language sign (phoneme, word) and its meaning. For example, the pronunciation of the Chinese word "ma" has nothing to do with its meaning. The iconicity of language refers to the fact that the form of the language sign and its meaning have some natural or conventional connections. For example, some words may be related to their meanings by resemblance, such as "tiger" and "wolf".

Secondly, in synchronic terms, both arbitrariness and iconicity of language signs exist simultaneously at different levels. Although language is arbitrary in form, iconicity can also be found in meaning, and iconicity can also be found in form. For example, there are some similar expressions between languages, such as "white as snow", "angry as a lion", which show the iconicity of language in meaning.

Finally, the relationship between arbitrariness and iconicity is a complex and diverse one. It is not only a question of whether language signs are arbitrary or iconic, but also a question of the degree and scope of their manifestation. In different language expressions and language systems, the relative importance of arbitrariness and iconicity may vary, and in different language uses and language functions, these two characteristics will also play different roles.

In fact, the two coexist without negating each other. Saussure emphasized that the value of language symbols lies in the relations between symbols within the system, ignoring the external factors, and believed that symbols are related to concepts rather than things, so there is no problem of resemblance to objective external things.[13] While Peirce's rule of thirds is preliminary, he did not talk about the signal-like sign, let alone the second signal as a language sign. Therefore, the iconicity of the sign he said and the arbitrariness of the language sign said by Saussure are two different things, which cannot be denied.[3] However, it is inappropriate for the later researchers to use iconicity to deny arbitrariness. The author believes that iconicity is universal, but it is not a negation of arbitrariness, which is still the basic feature of language signs. We believe that iconicity (which can be regarded as a kind of motivation) exists objectively, arbitrariness can not be ignored, and language has iconicity/arbitrary duality. The scope of action of motivation and arbitrariness is different, and they are a pair of laws that contradict each other but do not conflict.[14] As for the discussion of iconicity, we agree that "for language signs, iconicity is both a problem of 'universality' and a problem of 'individuality', which can be reflected to different degrees in different languages and at different levels of the same language".[15]

In fact, Saussure's so-called arbitrariness is in terms of the synchronic dimension, while iconicity is basically in the historical dimension. The two are in different levels of coexistence. In fact, when we examine whether language is arbitrary or similar, it is inevitable that we first consider whether we should proceed from consensus or from diachronic. Of course, no matter how we look at it, we still need to get rid of our senses. For example, when we see "chaos", we always have the impression of chaos, which does not know that it is originally "not chaos", which shows that iconicity is not the decisive attribute or the only attribute of language symbols. Another example is the similarity between "horse" and horse in oracle bone inscriptions, but its similarity is only limited to the mark form and why the phonetic form "horse" is pronounced as "ma". We have no grounds. The above analysis shows that if we do not rely on the senses in the coordinate system of synchronic history, then the argument about arbitrariness and iconicity may be wrong. However, if we do not adhere to the same logic, it will also cause the illusion, resulting in a one-sided understanding of the problem.

Different perspectives and research methods lead to different conclusions. In fact, arbitrariness and iconicity coexist, that is to say, arbitrariness and iconicity can exist and sign at the same time. But the weight of the two is not the same: iconicity is the basis, between the signifier and the signified, and is the relationship between the two; Arbitrariness is beyond the symbol, that is, on the periphery of the symbol. Of course, we cannot rule out the possibility of arbitrariness between signified and signifier. [14]

From the synchronic diachronic dimension, iconicity is inevitable. But humans arbitrarily choose one of these symbols, and we also create arbitrary limits when we discuss why we choose this one and not that one, in other words, arbitrariness is not infinitely arbitrary. The concealment of linguistic motivation is inevitable in the development of language, for example, the word "horse" we just said, if we really can't verify its source, its motivation will be impossible to verify. At this time, the iconicity of symbols has no meaning for us, especially when conducting synchronic research, we must suspend the diachronic factor of language. The arbitrariness of language explains the important mechanism of the production of language signs, which has great epistemological and methodological significance for linguistics. Iconicity

explains the origin of words and the formation of some syntactic reasons, which can not be ignored. Therefore, we need to emphasize that it is unreasonable to deny iconicity by arbitrariness or to deny arbitrariness by iconicity.

Conclusion

To sum up, the arbitrariness and iconicity of language signs cannot be generalized. And we can not be bound by the senses to make one or the other one-sided judgment. We should take the scientific angle of view, adopt the appropriate research method, and make the objective dialectical thinking on the arbitrariness and iconicity of language signs. In this paper, the arbitrariness and similarity of language signs are viewed from the perspective of synchronic history, and the arbitrariness and similarity of language signs are not mutually negative, but coexist at different levels. Due to the limitations of capacity and data collection, there are still some shortcomings in this paper. Scholars can learn from it and hope to make some contributions to future research.

REFERENCES
[1] Liu Yuan. *A Survey on the Arbitrariness of Language Signs*. Jin Tian, 2014, (6) , 304-305.
[2] Suo Zhenyu. *Saussure's Principle of Arbitrary Language Signs Is Correct*. Application of Language and Characters, 1995, (2): 74-76.
[3] Wang Dechun. *On the Arbitrariness and Motivation of Linguistic Units -- A Commentary on Wang Yin's on the Iconicity of Linguistic Signs*. Foreign Languages, 2001, (1), 75-77.
[4] Guo Hong. *When was the Arbitrariness Principle of Saussure's Language Sign Established? Discussion with Professor Wang Yin*. Foreign Language Studies, 2001, (1), 46-49.
[5] Ma Zhuanghuan. *Arbitrariness: the Fundamental Attribute of Language*. Foreign Language Studies, 2002(4), 10-13. (in Chinese) Journal of Anhui University of Science and Technology, 2010, 24(4).
[6] Li Baojia. *On the Error and Restoration of Saussure's Principle of the Arbitrariness of Signs*. Application of Languages and Characters, 1994, (3), 23-25.
[7] Wang Yin. *On the Iiconicity of Language Signs: A Challenge and Supplement to Saussure's Arbitrary Theory*. Beijing: Xinhua Publishing House, 1999.
[8] Zhou Jianjun. *Discussion on the Arbitrariness and Iiconicity of Language Signs based on English Neologism translation*. Journal of Kaifeng Institute of Education, 2014, 34(1), 55-56 .
[9] Wang Yin. *Marker iconicity*. Journal of Foreign Languages (Journal of Heilongjiang University), 1998, (3).
[10] Shen Jianxuan. *The Iconicity of Syntax*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 1993, (1), 2-8.
[11] Yan Chensong. *An Overview of Language Replicability*. Contemporary Linguistics, 1997, (3), 21-22.
[12] Mao Ping. *On the Arbitrariness and Iconicity of Language Signs: A case study of English "UP/DOWN" and Chinese "up/down"*. Journal of Anhui University of Science and Technology, 2010, 24 (4), 82.
[13] Zhao Liang. *Semiotic Analysis of Language Iconicity*. Foreign Language Teaching, 2006, 27(5), 19-21.
[14] Zhao Yanchun. *Cognitive Linguistics: Criticism and Application*. Tianjin, Nankai University Press, 2014.
[15] Wang Mingyu. *Language Semiotics*. Beijing: Beijing Higher Education Publication, 2004.