

Iconicity: the semiotic-psycholinguistic interface

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1.0. The term iconicity in current linguistic inquiry refers to the relation between language form and represented content, an age-old question in the history of Western thought, and posits an identity value of some sort between structural properties and their meanings. The following statement by Bolinger (1977) is often used to summarize this correspondence between the code and the encoded: «...The natural condition of language is to preserve one form for one meaning, and one meaning for one form...»

1.1. The icon as a theoretical category emerges forcefully in the semiotic orientation of the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, where it is defined as a sign representing its object by virtue of a similarity between the Representamen and the Object (Radwanska-Williams, 1994). Within the tripartite division of the Peircean sign system (icons, indices and symbols), an icon is defined as the type which signifies its object by resembling in some manner a quality or qualities of the object. As explained in Hiraga (1994), however, the icon is further divided into three sub-types (images, diagrams and metaphors), a distinction based on the type of **similarity relation** existing between the iconic sub-type and its object.

1.2. Identified and formulated as a problem of linguistic theory by Roman Jakobson (cf. Radwanska-Williams, 1994), iconicity has received the attention in the last decade of many scholars who have attempted to demonstrate its significant presence in language structure, consequently undermining the hegemony of the Saussurean position of arbitrariness (Waugh, 1994).

2.0. Linguistics has subsequently addressed the question of iconicity by looking for iconic traces in language structure. Since linguistics often poses its interrogative frameworks dichotomously, a sort of oppositional paradigm (iconic vs arbitrary or motivated vs unmotivated) has emerged in the most recent literature, which has led many scholars to reflect on foundational questions of linguistic theory.

2.1. Although the list of noteworthy contributions on this question is long, we can perhaps choose a comment made by Givon (1995: 49) as exemplary of the iconicity perspective in linguistics:

The most remarkable thing about an entity as complex and multidimensional as grammar is how its complexity is built up componentially, from a relatively small number of general, cognitively transparent iconic principles. In each grammatical domain, these principles then combine with more domain-specific — and seemingly more arbitrary — structural conventions. But even those arbitrary conventions tend to yield a measure of iconicity — either by themselves, or when combined with iconic elements in domain-specific contexts.

2.2. Whereas most of the major contributions base their description of iconicity in language

on an analysis of syntax (cf. inter alia Givon, 1985; Haiman, 1985; Landsberg, 1995, Newmeyer, 1992), others have demonstrated the iconic dimension in morphological structure (Bybee, 1985, Dressler et al. 1987; Waugh, 1994), and even in semantic structure (Wierzbicka, 1985). Waugh (1994) demonstrates how language displays varying degrees of isomorphic iconicity. In English, phonesthemes are found in words which all have the same semantic trait. The consonant cluster **fl-** for example seems to indicate flying movement in words like **flap, flare, fly, fling, flutter, flow, flip, flurry**); the consonant cluster **-mp** seems to indicate crashing movement in words like **dump, lump, thump, slump, chump, thump, bump**. According to Waugh, moreover, the principle, sameness of form signals sameness of meaning and difference of form signals difference of meaning, conforms to the expectations of speakers.

3.0. Now, how do linguists handle the inconsistencies in the iconicity argument? For example, how would one explain the existence of **fl-** words which do not express movement; eg. flat?

3.1. Some resolve contradictions by hypothesizing gradient norms. For example, Waugh (1994) argues that although there are cues for the meaning of a word in the specific sounds used to form that word, there are **constraints** on iconicity due to factors like the tendency within and across lexemes of polysemy. Radwanska-Williams (1994: 25) notes that the conception of arbitrariness includes a consideration of iconicity, quoting the following passage from Saussure (1966 [1916]: 133):

Everything that relates to language as a system must I am convinced be approached from this viewpoint which has scarcely received the attention of linguists: the limiting of arbitrariness. This is the best possible basis for approaching the study of language as a system. In fact, the whole system of language is based on the irrational principle of the arbitrariness of the sign, which would lead to the worst sort of complication if applied without restriction. But the mind conceives to introduce a principle of order and regularity into certain parts of the mass of signs, and this is the role of relative motivation.

3.2. The focus on iconicity has been greatly influenced moreover by the shift to the cognitivist stance in linguistics. Models of cognitive grammar posit an epistemological strategy based on «mapping» operations, whereby linguistic structure is shown to mirror human conceptualization (Langacker, 1987, 1991). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that the mind itself is metaphorical. From this point of view, the form of language would derive from the analogical operations which characterize cognitive processes. Language so to speak traces the mind's perception of similarity.

4.0. Behind the iconicity scholars, therefore, there seems to lie the conviction that language structure is somehow picture-like. This perspective hypothesizes a kind of image-making relation which somehow maps language onto objects in the real world, albeit mediated through an individual and/or social mental representation of it. I would like to critique this stance by suggesting that questions concerning imagery, similarity and mental representations are complex theoretical constructs, to which recourse for argumentative support of the iconicity perspective could be very risky.

5.0. Now what does psychology say about iconicity? How could a psycholinguistic perspective on iconicity contribute to our understanding of the iconicity-arbitrariness debate. Little research has addressed the question in the same terms. Psychology has always explored the nature of related questions: mental representations, gestures, spatial-temporal relations,

imagery, similarity, etc. Let us just mention two key aspects, that of *imagery* and that of *similarity*, which can perhaps help us reorient our perspective on the problem of iconicity.

5.1. Let us recall first of all the suggestion by Paivio (1980) that both imagery and verbal associations are cooperatively involved in language and thought. Paivio's dual coding system includes an imagery system which deals with information concerning concrete images and events, and a verbal system which deals with linguistic information. The two systems are independent but interconnected. Words can evoke imagery and images can invoke verbal descriptions. Imagery contributes to the speed of accessing long-term memory and to the flexibility of search for information. Although this would provide the basis of relevant interpretation, relevance is largely determined by the verbal system whose sequential nature contributes to the orderly, logical sequence in the flow of ideas. It is the verbal system which keeps the process on track.

5.2. According to Paivio (1980), the basis of similarity continues to be a theoretical puzzle. Operational definitions of similarity depend on an identity relation, the number of elements shared by a set of stimuli. However, as noted by Cacciari (1995), serious scientific problems still remain: how visual similarity is computed in the brain; what mechanisms are responsible for it; how similarity is mentally represented; what kind of relationship holds between literal and figurative similarity, etc.

5.3. Moreover, we can note the following: – that similarity is itself possible only in relation to the perception of differences, that we may see things as similar because we classify them together and not viceversa, that people from different cultures disagree on their similarity judgments, that similarity is constrained by contexts which are all receptive, productive and interactive processes of human language and cognition (cf. Slama-Cazacu, 1973). I would like to suggest accordingly that icons are decoded on the basis of textual frameworks which signal the reactivation of culture-specific real world knowledge, acquired via the socialized negotiation of meaning.

5.4. Furthermore, we can quote Culler (1976: 112) who comments:

If as Saussure writes the most precise characteristic of every sign is to be what the others are not, and a signified consists of traces of what contrasts with it, then one cannot speak of the presence to consciousness of a single autonomous signified.

To illustrate this, Culler (1976: 113-114), acknowledging the contribution of Attridge (1988), cites the following passage from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

And stand up tall! Straight. I want to see you looking fine for me. With your brandnew big green belt and all. Blooming in the very lotust and second to nill, Budd! When you're in the buckly shuit Rosensharonals near did for you. Fiftyseven and three, cosh, with the bulge. Proudpurse Alby with his pooraroon Eireen, they'll. Pride comfytousness, enevy! (1939: 620)

Meaning is triggered by traces that are multiple and ambivalent. On the one hand readers must choose what to pursue, what elements are to be attributed with significance. On the other hand, however, readers are subjected to a process of repetitions and echoes, where signs echo other signs.

6.0. Perhaps what signs represent are simply other signs. To the componentialist position we could ask «Is the text constituted by the meaning of the individual units? – or – is it the text that

conveys meaning to the units?" To the phonestheme argument, we could ask «Do words like **thump, dump, stump, clump**, or **fly, flee, flip, flare**, form a set because they all have a cluster which onomatopoeically imitates a sound in the natural world? – or –, has the set become associated with that reality because of the interplay of suggestions and repetitions, of echoes and polyvalences».

7.0. Summarizing this brief paper, we can note that research on iconicity tends to argue that language is more motivated than previously thought. Many areas of language seem to reveal an isomorphism between language and external reality, mediated through mental representation, and suggesting the picture-like nature of language structure. However, since the iconicity position relies heavily on concepts like imagery and similarity, I have suggested that research on iconicity should pay closer attention to how contributions stemming from research in psycholinguistics can shed light on some basic aspects of semiotic systems.

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