

Understanding the Principle of Arbitrariness From the Perspective of Saussure's Theory Linguistics

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Arbitrariness, one of the basic principles of language, is the basis of Saussure's theory of general linguistics. Comprehension of arbitrariness largely helps to have a better understanding of the design features of language, such as convention, variability and invariability, creativity of language, and language value. This paper explores the relationship between arbitrariness and these design features, aiming to shed light on the nature of language.

Keywords: arbitrariness, convention, variability, creativity, value

Introduction

Arbitrariness means that the connection between the two sides of linguistic signs, signifier (signal) and signified (signification), is arbitrary without any natural, inherent, or logical relationship. "The signal is unmotivated, that is to say arbitrary in relation to its signification, with which it has no natural connexion in reality" (Saussure, 2007, p. 69).

Arbitrariness, one of the two basic governing principles, is a fundamental property of the language system. All human languages have their unique way of classifying real entities and of associating sound images with abstract concepts respectively. If the formation of the two sides of linguistic symbols was not based on arbitrariness, one concept should have been symbolized by only one form of sound image without exception. In this sense, a concept could correspond to only one form of sound, and consequently there should exist only one language in the world. Thus, "the difference between languages and the existence of different languages" is the best proof of the principle of arbitrariness (Saussure, 2007, p. 69). Furthermore, if there was a natural connection between signal and signification of a linguistic unit, this one-to-one correspondence would have eliminated the existence of multiple meanings or homophones in a language (Ma, 2008).

There are some doubts about the truth of arbitrariness. One of the objections against this principle comes from onomatopoeic words and exclamations. Admittedly, onomatopoeia is not absolute arbitrary as the sound image and its concept (the authentic sound in nature) have some resemblance. But in any language onomatopoeic words and exclamations constitute an extremely small number, not enough to overturn the decisive significance of arbitrariness in language. Moreover, no onomatopoeic words or exclamations in any language are completely free from the basic principle of the arbitrariness of linguistic signs, i.e., they are not the exact imitation of the corresponding sound in nature, but "approximate". Their "choice is already to some extent arbitrary" (Saussure, 2007, p. 69). Otherwise, the onomatopoeic words or exclamations in any language would be identical.

Studies on linguistic resemblance claiming that resemblance is the “natural, native, and primary nature of linguistic symbols” (Wang, as cited in Ma, 2008, p. 51) are also considered as a challenge to Saussure’s arbitrariness in language. This is a one-sided understanding of Saussure’s view of arbitrariness. In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure (2007) clearly stated that

The basic principle of symbolic arbitrariness does not prevent us from distinguishing the radically arbitrary, i.e., non-arguable, from the relatively arbitrary in each language. Only some symbols are absolutely arbitrary; in others, there is a phenomenon that allows us to see that arbitrariness, though not abolished, differs in degree: symbols may be relatively arguable. (p. 130)

According to Saussure, “There exists no language in which nothing at all is motivated” (Saussure, 2007, p. 131), and relative arbitrariness and absolute arbitrariness are two extremes. The distinction between the two is a matter of degree, and all human languages move between them, languages focusing on vocabulary being more arbitrary while languages focusing on grammar being more motivated (Saussure, 2007). Besides different degrees of arbitrariness among languages, degrees of arbitrariness differ at levels of language system. There is a degree of non-arbitrariness at the grammatical, especially the syntactic level (Ma, 2008).

Understanding Basic Properties of Language From the Perspective of Arbitrariness

Arbitrariness and Convention

Arbitrariness does not grant individual language users to create any signifier to refer to signification at will. In other word, individual users of the language do not have the right and possibility to connect a sound image with a concept; instead, the connection “needs to be recognized by the majority of the society and reinforced by the test of time” (Dong, 2004, p. 15). It is “a completely conventional relationship” (Zhao, 2000, p. 3). Arbitrariness allows for the free choice of signifier for signification, but once the combination of the two is accepted by the public, individual language users cannot make any change. This is the power of convention. Convention guarantees the communicative function of linguistic symbols. On the basis of common knowledge of language it can be possible for language users to understand and be understood.

As Whitney points out, the only reason for a language learner to use this language symbol rather than that language symbol is that other people are using the same (Ma, 2008, p. 56). Saussure agrees on Whitney’s idea but argues that arbitrariness is different from other social conventions and humanistic institutions in the sense that the means and aim of other humanistic institutions need to match each other, and therefore are based to varying degrees on natural properties while language is not subject to any restriction in the association of any concept with any sequence of sounds (Saussure, 2007).

In short, Saussure recognizes the social nature of language and considers the linguistic symbol system as a product of social forces and obeys social convention, the latter being the result of the former. It is from arbitrariness that convention stems, and it is convention that makes language a social code to human communication (Zhang, 2005, p. 173).

Arbitrariness and Invariability and Variability of Linguistic Symbols

Saussure puts forwards that linguistic symbols are both invariable and variable. Invariability emphasizes the constant stable connection between signifier and signification and variability refers to the fact that the relationship between signifier and signification cannot keep stable in the long span of time. They seem to be opposite but

complement each other. Social properties of language, time, and the arbitrary nature of language jointed lead to invariability and variability.

Language is everyone's business and in this sense has clear social properties influenced by society and thus is resistant to change. Those changes initiated by individual speakers are often not accepted by the public and therefore cannot be incorporated into language system. That is to say, one reason why language remains stable is that it is tied to the collective (Saussure, 2007).

Time ensures the convention of language, allowing it to be passed on from generation to generation. On the other hand, as time changes everything, there is no reason for language to escape from time (Saussure, 2007). Examples abound in the comparison of the current state of any language with its historical state. For example, "thee" and "gane" in Medieval English have become "you" and "gone" in Modern English, voiced sounds in Indo-European language have become voiceless sounds, and the initial "s" in primitive Greek language has become "h".

It should be noted that both social convention and time have impact on language. Saussure explains that if language users are the only consideration, influence of convention on language will not be noticed without the influence of time. On the other hand, if time is the only consideration, language can remain stably invariable without language users involved.

In short, language is based on continuity, but is at the same time, in a state of flux though the change of language may be slow, imperceptible, or occur only at some level of the language system, though it begins as an accidental, individual phenomenon. The underlying reason for language change is arbitrary nature of linguistic symbols. The arbitrary connection between signifier and signification theoretically makes any new connection possible; nothing "prevents us from linking any concept with any sequence of sound" (Saussure, 2007, p. 78). As Harris explains, replacing X with Y does not make a difference, and the result is no different from keeping X unchanged (quoted in Ma, 2002).

But on the other hand, the arbitrary nature prevents language from any attempts to change. Changes often arise from the need to make the original more logical and nominalized. But for linguistic symbols, there is no logical or natural connection between concepts and sound images at all, so there is no need to make any change between them.

Arbitrariness and Language Creativity

In semiotic systems other than language, such as symbols, indices, or icons, there is always a logical or iconic connection between the symbol and the counterpart concept; that is, a symbol is associated naturally of the meaning or concept the symbol is intended to express. For example, a scale is chosen to symbolize laws because the scale reminds people of fairness and justice, which is exactly what the law should be, a slash on a picture of a cigarette is used to notify that smoking is prohibited, a one-way arrow pointing in different directions on a road indicates the direction in which a vehicle turns, a male and female avatar outside a restroom signify a male and female restroom respectively, and so on. This is not the case with verbal symbols. For example, the use of the sound image "ox" instead of other sound images is used to refer to the concept of "cow" which in English is not due to any natural or logical connection between the two.

Although these non-linguistic symbols are clear and easy to be understood, they cannot express abstract, complex thoughts, emotions, or concepts, or the not here-and-now entities. By contrast, language signs, a much more complex and extensive system, can be easily and freely expanded and changed to express richer more

diverse ideas and to accommodate the need of expressing new information as it arises. Theoretically, any new concept can either be expressed by an existing sound image, which gives rise to multiple meanings, or by a newly created sound image. In other word, language sign system becomes richer and more complex by coining a completely new word with new sound image and new concept, or by combining the existing words to form a new word by means of compound, derivation, blending, acronym, loan, back-formation, innovation, and so on. Of course, whatever the construction, it is based on the basic linguistic symbols, which are based on the principle of arbitrariness as a combination, from which arises the design features of creativity and productivity of language. It is arbitrariness of language that enables language users to “speak and think at an abstract level” (Hu & Jiang, 2005, p. 12).

A comparison between language sign system and non-linguistic symbols reveals that arbitrariness of language signs makes language a more capable system in realizing the aim of semiotics in idea expressing (Saussure, 2007). Language sign system built on the basic language principle of arbitrariness provides language with much freedom in combining signifier and signification, and grants language advantages in expressing meaning.

Arbitrariness, Opposition, and Value

Each sign with two layers of sound image and concept connected on the principle of arbitrariness is the basic unit of language system, and all language signs interrelate with each one another to form paradigmatic and syntagmatic relationships in language system. Such interrelationship net molds differences and oppositions between language signs. And values are generated in such differences and oppositions. In the chain of relations, arbitrariness is the basis for values in language.

According to Saussure, the two necessary factors on which value depends include a different entity that can be exchanged with a value to be determined and a similar entity that can be compared with a value to be determined (2007, p. 113). Value in language is no exception. Language value exists with two oppositions as precondition: the opposition between concepts and sound images within a language sign and the opposition between different signs coexisting in the same language system, the former containing the exchange relation between sound image and the concept, and the latter referring to the exchange relation between a linguistic sign and other peer linguistic signs.

According to Saussure, a sound image can be identified not because of its own acoustic characteristics but because of its acoustic differences from other sound images. In other words, a sound image of a language sign is not material, but in essence the result of comparison and opposition. The same is for concept. In short, opposition makes value while arbitrariness and the opposition are related in the sense that one is used to explain and to help understand the other. And. In the sense arbitrariness makes value possible.

There are no identical values in different language systems (Zhang, 2005, p. 124). Saussure cites the example of “sheep” in English and “mouton” in French. The two words share some common idea but have different values. The meaning of “mouton” in French is “sheep, mutton” while the meaning of “sheep” in English is sheep and “mutton” in English is mouton. The opposition of English “sheep” and the opposition of French “mouton” are different in their respective language systems.

In general, what constitutes the two layers of linguistic signs is the opposition between sound images and concepts in a language system, and what constitutes the value of the linguistic system is the opposition between linguistic signs. That is why Saussure suggests that value is a product of language system and derives from the arbitrary relations of oppositions.

Conclusion

The principle of arbitrariness is one of the core concepts in understanding Saussure's viewpoint of basic language features. In Saussure's exploration of general language principles, synchronic and diachronic linguistics, almost all the key concepts and features of language arise from or largely depend on arbitrariness. After his detailed analysis of the relationship between sound image and concept, the linear character of the signal, the internal duality of language, the syntagmatic and associative relations, the relationship between creativity, convention, and arbitrariness, Saussure has provided persuasive and abundant information for his viewpoint that arbitrariness is an "obvious truth" beyond any doubt and is the fundamental property of Saussure's synchronic linguistics.

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