



Iconicity

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Part 1 What is iconicity?

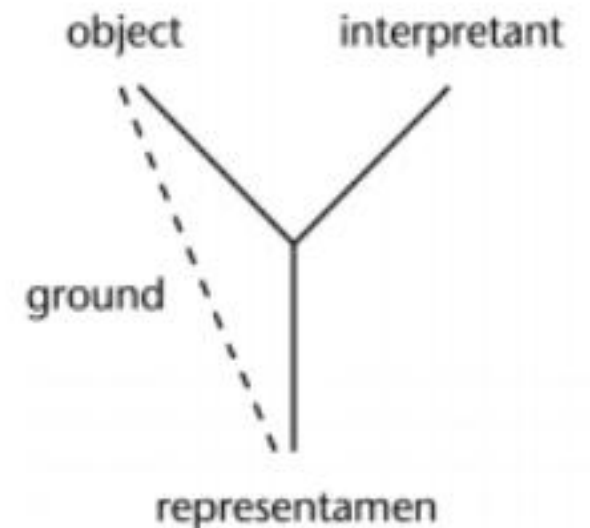
- The earliest study can be traced back to Greece in Plato's famous dialogue *Cratylus* (Ahlgren, F. & Zlatev J. 2010). There arose the debate on whether language is either given by nature represented by Cratylus or by convention from Hermogenes. Cratylus argued that a natural relationship exists between sound-form and its meaning. The essence of the argument is the very question whether language is iconic.
- In the early 20th century, Ferdinand de Saussure (1965) claimed that linguistic signs and their corresponding meanings are arbitrary to a larger extent, which was challenged by Charles Sanders Peirce in 1940s, and Göran Sonesson later.



- The following is one of C.S. Peirce's famous central concepts:
- *A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen.* (Peirce, 1955:99)
- Peirce put forward trichotomy of signs: iconic, indexical and symbolic sign. The representamen and object share some similarity in **an iconic sign**. That's to say the ground is that of similarity.

Iconicity refers to a resemblance between signs and signified.

(Felix Ahlner, Jordan Zlatev, 2010)



- Iconicity exists in sign or spoken language.
- Approximately half of the signs of American Sign Language, which is undoubtedly a conventional semiotic system, are judged to be iconic, that is, their shapes resemble their meanings (Woll, Kyle 2004).



*Image Courtesy of
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Part 2 Iconicity in spoken language

- **2.1 Iconicity in terms of sound;**
- **A: onomatopoeia:** *buzz, quack, cuckoo, bang, puff, woosh, woof, meow...*
- **B: Ideophones:** *the Japanese expressions **koro-koro** ‘small object rolling continuously’ and goro-goro ‘large object rolling continuously’ (Kita 2008).*
(sensory imagery)
- **C. Phonestemes:** The relation between meaning and form is apparent (Russo 2004), such as **gl-** “light and vision ” in the words ***gleam, glare, glitter, glow, glamour,*** and **fl-** “visual aspect of some moving objects” in words ***flow, flicker, flee, float, fly.***



D. Phonosymbolism

a correlation between a meaning and a sublexical unit that is established in a particular situational and textual context(Russo 2004).

- *And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting,
still is sitting*
- *On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my
chamber door;*
 - *And his eyes have all the seeming of a
demon' s that is dreaming,*
 - *And the lamp-light o' er him streaming
throws his shadow on the floor;*
 - *And my soul from out that shadow that lies
floating on the floor*
 - *Shall be lifted – nevermore!*
 - (1845. Alan Poe)

- 寻寻觅觅,
- 冷冷清清,
- 凄凄惨惨戚戚。
- 乍暖还寒时候，最难将息。
- 三杯两盏淡酒，怎敌他、晚来风急！
- 雁过也，正伤心，却是旧时相识。
- 满地黄花堆积，憔悴损，如今有谁堪摘？
- 守著窗儿，独自怎生得黑！
- 梧桐更兼细雨，到黄昏、点点滴滴。
- 这次第，怎一个愁字了得！
- 李清照《声声慢》



2.2 iconicity in terms of words (morphological iconicity)

- Pular endings illustrate an iconicity of quantity: longer expressions correspond to a larger quantity;
- Singualr/Plural forms of nouns can be viewed as iconic to lower/higher quantity.
- More commonly occuring types of word have shorter forms becaue of more economical. (Ahlner. F.&Zlatev J.2010)
- *Eg.: class-classes;*
- *220 sight words*

• Chinese words

• 一, 二, 三

• 木, 林, 森

• 人, 从, 众

• 火, 炎, 焱



2.3 Iconicity in Syntax and Discourse

- Diagrammatic iconicity, highlighting the fact that iconic words – in spoken as well as signed languages, can be seen as “diagrams” that provide schematic structural correspondences between forms and meaning(Dingemanse et al.2015). It refers to the resemblance between the structure of linguistic signs and that of human experience or concept, mainly in syntax and discourse.

•Snow-Flakes

- Out of the bosom of the Air,
- Out of the cloud-folds of her garments shaken,
- Over the woodlands brown and bare,
- Over the harvest-fields forsaken,
- Silent, and soft, and slow
- Descends the snow.

.....

(Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)



Part 3 Application of Iconicity in Language;

•A. Language Acquisition

Iconic words are not only easier to learn, but also facilitate language comprehension, (Ruiter et al.2018) and iconicity especially scaffolds the production and comprehension of spoken language during children's early development(Perry et al.2016).

•B. Communication Assistance

Iconic gestures with other visual representations significantly assist generalization and explanation in many different areas of life, from supporting everyday actions to more complex and complicated mathematics and pain sensations.

Iconicity has similarly been suggested to provide an advantage in conveying sensory information according to a study on doctor-patient interaction.(Dingemanse et al.2015)

• C. Cross-language studies&text analysis



Rationale :

- **Description:**

- The debate about the relationship between the signifier and signified is a heated topic discussed by cognitive linguistics. More and more linguistics described the relationship as iconicity, rather than the isolate arbitrariness. The theory of iconicity argues that the linguistic forms are in many ways iconically related to reality, experiential structure, cognitive ways, conceptual systems or what is expressed. The theory also holds that language is formed on the basis of bodily experience and cognitive process. The PPT presents a very brief historical and theoretical background of iconicity. Given the hand's potential for mimesis, it's unsurprising that there are substantial iconicity in sign language. Actually iconic phenomenon also exist in many unrelated languages, such as sub-Saharan African language, Australian Aboriginal languages, and Japanese and Korean and so on (Jones et.al 2014). In spoken language, iconicity can be seen in aspect of sound, for instance, onomatopoeia, ideophones, phonestemes and phonosymbolism. Besides iconicity in word level is also prevalent, such as the English plural forms and sight words. Iconicity in syntax and discourse is referred as diagrammatical iconicity, exemplified by the resemblance between the text structure and human cognitive experience.

- **Feelings:**

- I choose this topic because I have been intrigued by iconicity since I was a student in my graduate school. My master dissertation is about studies on iconicity in English poems. Later in the research iconicity were also found in Chinese literature, especially ancient Chinese poems. Thus more research and mounting reading are required to reveal its iconic color.

Rationale :

- **Evaluation:**

- The PPT just gives a very brief and general introduction into iconicity and its application. It just simply outlines the basic theory and exemplifies some of the most prominent features.

- **Analysis:**

- Though phonological iconicity is well presented, more detailed analysis should also be given to morphological and diagrammatical iconicity. More examples could be found in a large number of words with similar morphemes and similar meanings. The iconic experience in syntax and discourse level could be further analyzed through different kinds of literature works in detail, not just limited to poems.

- **Conclusion:**

- Though the claim of arbitrary attribute of language is dominant for many years, we still can't deny the iconic mapping between the language sound-form and meaning. Both sign language and human spoken language abound with iconic phenomenon. The uncovering the iconicity in language could reexamine human language acquisition process, hopefully give a new insight into early language development, support interactive communication.

Rationale :

- **Action Plan:**

- Further research could focus on how to apply the theory into practice, like how it could facilitate language acquisition, and text analysis, especially literature analysis. To be specific, how could iconicity shed light on vocabulary acquisition should be studied since so many Chinese students have been constantly complaining about English word memorization in my career. Furthermore, how to analyze traditional Chinese literature in the light of iconicity is one of my profound interest and also serves the mission of spreading Chinese culture abroad. Hopefully through the iconizing the literary texts and human cognitive experience, the literature texts could not only come alive, stop being “black marks on paper”(Ljungberg, 2010), but also be understood by more foreigners.



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