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PRINCIPLES OF ICONICITY AND LINGUISTIC CATEGORIES

Autonomy is death. Pattern coherence is required for life.

(Kenneth Pike)

1. Preliminaries

In most general terms, iconicity is defined as form miming meaning and/or form, or as meaning miming form – both in language and in literature.[1] The following discussion will focus upon certain manifestations of this relationship between form and meaning in the system of natural language and in language use. From the linguistic point of view, the form will then be naturally understood as the phonetic or graphic "shape" of linguistic signs on different levels of structural organization.

Basic definitions of iconicity, as well as its basic descriptions and proposed taxonomies, are generally recognized and accepted. What is less readily realized, however, is the double nature of the relationship: the "miming" is to be seen as either a *reflection* or a *creation* of a similarity and, in consequence, the similarity that underlies the iconic relationship can be either *recognized* or *created*. The difference between these two aspects of iconicity is significant for linguistic study, as it underlies the two general oppositions that condition the development of natural language: motivation as opposed to arbitrariness of linguistic signs, and conventionalization as opposed to innovation in language use.

"Miming" implies comparing, the cognitive operation recognized as one of the most basic and most universal activities of human mind; it underlies the process that Aristotle described as *mimesis*, and in her inventory of semantic

[1] See http://www2.rikkyo.ac.jp /web/iconicity/.

primes Wierzbicka (1996) lists the items LIKE/WAY as primes that represent the category SIMILARITY (cf. also Goddard 2002). Unlike in Aristotle, in modern cognitive science, and in cognitive linguistics in particular, similarity is considered to be intrinsically subjective. In order to come into existence, the relationship of similarity between entities has to be noticed; in other words, it needs an observer: Hegel's phenomenologist *observing reason*, or Peirce's semiotic *interpretant*. In this sense, the relation of similarity that holds between two entities is not tantamount to the relation defined in logic as equivalence – the relation that is symmetrical: (A ~ B → B ~ A), reflexive (A ~ A) and transitive (A ~ B and B ~ C → A ~ C). Unlike equivalence, the relation of similarity as a function of an "observing reason" is never complete, that is, it is perceived as compatibility of a certain number of shared features. The metonymy is reflected in dictionary explanations, which define the adjective "similar" as "of the same nature or kind."

As different from formal logic reasoning, in natural language communication similarity is intrinsically metonymic, with the selection of features being motivated by what in Ronald Langacker's theory of language is defined as *salience*, whereby feature(s) that the "observing reason" considers to be the most salient become(s) the means to mentally access an object, which is chosen for reference in either physical (concrete) or mental (abstract) space. Because of its subjective nature, the relation is context dependent: it is shaped according to the observer's particular point of view or perspective from which the entities in question are being observed. This type of context dependence relates to what in terms of visual perception of objects situated in physical three-dimensional space is defined as *projection aspects* (cf. Arnheim 1997 [1954]). In visual perception, depending on the particular point of view, the observer perceives an entity in a particular configuration, so that only some of its features can be seen (i.e., appear as salient) while others remain hidden from view (i.e., are not consciously perceived). Extended to mental perception of entities located in mental spaces, the context dependence conditioning particular choices of projection aspects means understanding similarity as being prompted by the nature of Husserl's *sociocultural lifeworld*, the social intersubjective reality of "natural" intercourse of people (cf. Husserl 1970 [1936]). Within this phenomenological framework the relationship of similarity is seen as subject to experiential (epistemic) objectivism, whereby perceiving things involves cooperation between properties of the object of perception and the nature of the perceiving subject. Therefore, ultimately, as a relationship that holds between entities, similarity exists in the eye (or in the mind) of the beholder and is (inter)subjectively perceived in the process of comparison.

The assumptions that underlie our discussion of iconicity as reflected in grammatical categories and the use of a natural language is neatly summarized by the following quotation, taken from a text appropriately titled "The ecological foundations of iconicity":

> It is a basic property of the Lifeworld that everything in it is given in a *subjective-relative* manner. This means, for example, that a thing of any kind will always be perceived *from a certain point of view,* in a perspective that lets a part of the object form the centre of attention. What is perceived is the object, though it is always given through one or more of its perspectives [...]. To Husserl, this seeing of the whole in one of its parts is related to *the etc. principle*, our knowledge of being able, at any one point, to turn the dice over, or go round it, to look at the other sides (Sonesson: online).

2. Interim conclusions

As discussed in Section 1 above, the precondition for iconicity is an observer's perception of similarity of things. It follows that, like similarity, iconicity is both subjective and metonymic. And if it is metonymic by definition, then it will naturally be a matter of degree, with the position on the scale depending on the number and extension of shared features. Indeed, we would intuitively agree that a photo of person X is more iconic than an impressionistic portrait of person X, but less iconic than X himself. Full iconicity would imply – as does logical equivalence – full identity: the most iconic image of person X is that person himself.

Moreover, as the iconic relationship between entities does not exist independently of an intelligence perceiving the similarity, iconicity is inherently subjective. However, the principle seems difficult to apply to the relationship between linguistic forms and linguistic meanings: linguists teach us that a natural language, defined as a system of signs serving the purposes of communication, cannot be subjective. How can this apparent paradox be resolved? The "objective" language would be a reflection of the objective picture of the world (notice the structuring of the label: the noun 'picture' does not implicate either the creator or the owner of the picture). Such a picture would be general (i.e., it would constitute the common property of all people), and if the principles of iconicity were to hold, its signs would have to be non-conventional, i.e., be based on natural similarity between things "out there" in the world and the linguistic signs that refer to them. This, however, is clearly not the case. On the other hand, the entirely subjective picture of the world (which might be called "the worldview," with the grammatical structure of the label implicating a particular observer) would indeed be the sum total of individual worldviews – individual perceptions of individually selected projection aspects of things. As an iconic reflection of such a worldview, the language would have to be purely conventional, as it would have to stem out of a multitude of individually perceived, subjective relationships of similarity. Clearly, this is not the case either.

The basic opposition between "the objective" and "the subjective", fundamental for all cognitive science, translates into the long-going dispute on the character and the location of borderlines that separate semantics from pragmatics. It is not our ambition at this point to resolve the opposing views taken by philosophers of language and linguists of varying persuasions. Steering the middle course marked out by cognitive linguistics means to assume that iconicity relates not to things as they *are* in the world "out there," but to things as they *are perceived* from a particular point of view. Thus in fact it involves not miming things themselves, but a specific way of looking at those things. But creating a system of signs, and linguistic signs in particular, requires changing the individual "I see what I see" into the general "I see what everybody sees." Therefore signs have to get the status of signs "by law," i.e., due to a *relevant convention***.** Conventions tend to unify the way of creating, and recognizing, images of things, and this principle holds for theories of visual perception (cf. Arnheim 1997 [1954]) as well as for semiotics (cf. Peirce 1977). In cognitive linguistics, it is reflected in Langacker's notion of *generalized observer* – the psychologically realistic version of Chomsky's *idealized speaker* (cf. Langacker 1991). In the process of diachronic development of language, with innovations changing into conventions and with conventions getting robust, Peirce's *icons*, signs motivated by similarity ("a mere community in some quality," Peirce 1998: 56) change into *symbols* ("whose relation to their objects is an imputed character," Peirce 1998: 56), with iconic features becoming impossible to trace. Once again, in linguistics the effect of this process is referred to as *lost motivation* (cf. e.g., Burling: online).

3. Reflection on linguistic iconicity

Since the time of de Saussure the assumption that the relationship between the form and the meaning of linguistic signs is arbitrary has been reigning supreme. Although it is admitted – in agreement with obvious linguistic facts – that some such signs and their designates indeed directly reflect "a community in some quality," manifestations of iconicity known as onomatopoeia (defined as "sound felt to be adequate to meaning") was generally considered as marginal: a small set of exceptions to the general rule of arbitrariness. Demonstrated mainly on the level of individual lexical items miming seemingly universal elements of reality – standard examples being the English 'cuckoo' vs. the Polish 'kukułka,' or the Polish 'szeptać' vs. the English 'whisper' vs. the French 'chuchoter' – even the onomatopoeias were considered only partially iconic. With phonetic differentiation of cross-linguistic data resulting from differences in phonological systems of individual languages, the iconicity was questioned in view of discrepancies between languages.

Predictably enough, post-Saussurean structuralist linguistics largely discredited also the phenomenon of sound symbolism (phonaesthesia): purported association of certain sounds, or combinations of sounds, with certain meanings, like in the much quoted series of English words 'slippery', 'slide', 'slither', 'sloppy', 'slimy', 'sleazy' apparently connected with the unpleasant sensations of touching wet and greasy objects. Counterexamples (e.g., the adjective 'slim' or the verb 'sleep') raised doubt, as did, once again, cross-linguistic differences.

The issue becomes more pertinent – and less banal – when the trivial principle governing onomatopoeia and phonaestesia becomes extended to reveal meanings of names of things in the world as reflections of conventionalized ways of looking at those things (from certain points of view, and thus reflecting certain projection aspects). To use yet another standard example, those who first named the table 'table' must have considered the flat upper part (the Latin 'tabula') as the most significant feature of the object, considering it as being conceptually similar to a plank or board. And those who called an analogous object 'stół' might have selected as the most salient the legs on which the top rose, making the thing similar to a rise (PIE '*sta-'). Are these two names arbitrary or cognitively – iconically – motivated?

Refuting the structuralist principle of arbitrariness of linguistic signs is not tantamount to yielding to what has been called the "natural language fallacy," i.e., the assumption that "<nature> has established a **real** connection between signs and things they signify"(Fischer and Nänny 1999: xv). There are many arguments for steering a middle course between the two extremes. There is much to be said about iconicity as a property of the verbal code. Unlike in logic, there is an obvious tendency to adapt the properties of linguistic form to the properties of the linguistic function or the meaning of such forms. Before examples of different types of iconicity are given below, it seems proper to state that two basic grammatical categories, which cognitive linguistics claims to be universal across natural languages of the world, are an iconic reflection of the fundamental structure of the world as we know it. It is the most basic experience of the human body and mind confronted with the surrounding reality to perceive three dimensional objects (things, "nouns") entering into mutual relationships (relations, "verbs") within the three dimensional physical space. Accordingly, irrespective of typological differences, natural languages iconically reflect that duality by employing two basic categories of signs, corresponding to what traditional grammars call nouns and verbs.

4. Principles of iconicity at work

4.1. Quantity – systemic and contextual

As is well known, in its simplest form the iconic principle of quantity can be summarized in the slogan "more form, more meaning." Examples are easily found. For instance, on the level of phonology, there is the categorial opposition which learners of English know as the opposition between strong (stressed) and weak (unstressed) forms of personal pronouns. While the strong form, as in:

(1) Please take HIM with you

performs the functions of identifying the object and then making reference to it, the function of the weak form, as in:

(2) Please take him with you

is that of reference alone, following earlier identification. Contrary to what Polish learners of English might believe, the same principle is used by Polish, which deletes the pronoun when identification of the referent is ensured , as it had already been achieved by other contextual means, as in:

(3) Nie wiem czy pamiętasz, co powiedzieli.
'[I] don't know if [you] remember what [they] have said.'

or in French, where the coreferential anaphoric pronoun appears in the weak form, as in:

(4) …. moi, *je* ne sais pas.
'As for myself, I don't know.'

On the level of morphological structure, certain languages implement the iconic principle of quantity by using reduplication – either in the derivation, as in the Tok Pidgin word for 'bicycle', 'wilwil', where the repeated morpheme (from the English 'wheel') reflects the physical construction of a bicycle, or in flexion, with reduplication marking the plural number of nouns, as in the oppositions 'pingan' ('dish') vs. 'pingpingan' ('dishes') or 'talon' ('field') vs. 'taltalon' ('fields') in Ilocano, one of the languages spoken in the Philippines. However, one should be careful not to make sweeping generalizations: as is the case with other devices and strategies, languages differ as to the extent to which they employ iconicity, and the differences are seen both across languages and within particular systems. Thus, although even in those languages that do not use reduplication in flexion the plural is regularly formed by adding an ending to the singular stem, the rule "the more objects of reference, the more form to refer to these objects" is easily undermined by counterexamples.

In reference to grammatical categories, the principle of iconic quantity helps to explain systemic phenomena that are otherwise difficult to deal with. To quote just one example, the claim made by some linguists that excludes the category of *middle voice* from languages like Polish must be refuted when the difference between the weak form of the reflexive pronoun 'się' ('oneself') is considered in opposition to the strong form 'siebie' ('one's own self'). The two are sometimes classified as a case of free variation. However, investigated with relation to iconicity, they prove to be cases of the quantity principle at work: used with transitive verbs, the weak form expresses the *reflexive voice* proper, or a single participant event, as in:

(5) Nie widzę *się* w tej sukni.
'I don't envisage myself wearing this dress.'

as opposed to the strong form, which implies a sort of "split personality," or taking the point of view that enables casting the single participant of the event in two semantic roles (cf. Tabakowska 2003: 389), which is exemplified by:

(6) Nie widzę *siebie* na tym zdjęciu.
'I do not see me in this picture.'

The principle "less form, less meaning" underlies most cases of grammaticalization, with lexemes or phrases losing part of their meaning and being reduced to grammatical markers. In the process they undergo phonetic reduction and lose semantic transparency. To quote a well known example from Polish, the particle 'przecież', which comes from the prepositional phrase 'przed się' ('in front of oneself') and which in its contemporary form is used to draw attention to the speaker's justification of an earlier utterance or a general context of the ongoing discourse, has lost direct reference to the iconic picture of the interlocutor putting the meaning of that utterance or that context "in front of themselves" in order to be able to inspect them more closely.

Yet another manifestation of the iconic principle of quantity at work is the so-called politeness strategy: the length of an utterance is directly proportional to the metaphorically extended social distance between the speaker and the interlocutor. Thus, for instance the utterances (7) and (8) are more polite than the utterances (9) and (10), respectively:

(7) I wonder whether you might be willing…
(8) Visitors are kindly requested to refrain from smoking in the corridors.
(9) Can you…?
(10) Don't smoke in the corridors.

By the same token, in languages like Polish, which do not use length of sounds on the phonemic level, lengthening of vowels and/or sibilants signals emphasis, as in *To trwało* ***sstraszszsznie*** *dł****uuu****go* – 'it lasted for a terribly long time.'

The same strategies can appear in context dependent uses of language. The best known case is that of rhetorical repetition (structural parallelism), employed both in everyday communication, as in (11a) and its Polish counterpart in (11b):

(11) a. It is a very, very difficult problem.
b. To bardzo, bardzo trudne pytanie

and in more refined discourse, illustrated in (12):

(12) So are they all, all *honourable* men.
…………………………………….
But Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is a *honourable* man. (*Julius Caesar*, III.ii)

or, finally, to mark a series of differing projection aspects – a metaphor for showing an entity from different points of view, as in:

(13) I swear by Almighty God that what I am about to say is *the truth*, *the whole truth* and nothing but *the truth*.

Sound symbolism, discredited as a systemic property of language, becomes manifest in creative uses that go beyond the limits of paranomasia:

(14) People took pride in the peruque and the puffed petticoat, in the landscaped park, in painted porcelain and the powdered pudendum (Norman Davies, Europe. A History, 1996: 595).

It might be sensibly claimed that the accumulation of the sound 'p' mimes the affluence and excess of rococo, which is the object of the description in (14). If, in addition, the idea of sound symbolism were to be taken seriously, it could further be claimed that the pejorative association of the sound iconically reflects the narrator's negative attitude towards the style (the supposition that is actually confirmed by the verbal context of (14) and by the discussion of the symbolism of 'p/f' in Wierzbicka's (1991: 83) description of emotive interjections 'fe' in Polish and Russian, 'phew' in English, 'feh' in Yiddish).

4.2. Proximity

The formulation of the iconic principle of proximity goes back to Otto Behagel's *First Law*, which states that "das geistig Zusammengehörige auch eng zusammengestellt wird": entities that are close in mind tend to be close in linguistic expression (cf. Behagel 1932).

Examples of its systemic manifestations can be found on all levels of linguistic structure. It underlies the creation (and subsequent conventionalization) of blends, with phonetic (and graphic) changes following the reduction of conceptual distance, as in English 'brunch' and 'motel,' or Polish 'żywopłot' ('hedge', lit. living-fence) or 'serwomechanizm' ('servomechanism'). On the level of syntax, the principle may be exemplified by the so-called Dative Shift:

(15) a. He bought a dress *for Mary*.
b. Kupił sukienkę *dla Marysi*.

implying that Mary has not (yet) got the dress, i.e., the two entities are (still) "far from each other," as opposed to:

(16) a. He bought Mary a dress.
b. Kupił Marysi sukienkę.

which implies that the gift had actually been passed on to the recipient.

In actual use, the principle of proximity is at work when the order of adjectives within nominal phrases suggests stronger or weaker bounds, Behagel's *Zusamenstellung*, as in:

(17) a beautiful close fitting emerald green silk dress

where "being made of silk" is an inherent property of the dress, while its beauty is only a matter of individual subjective judgment.

4.3. Sequentiality

The principle of sequentiality is best known as *ordo naturalis*: the structuring of an utterance that directly reflects the ordering of things or relationships between things occurring in extralinguistic reality. The best known example, discussed in Jakobson's seminal article on "the essence of language" (1965), is Julius Caesar's famous 'veni, vidi, vici.' Aptly named *experiential iconicity* (Enkvist 1990), the same principle underlies adverb or adverbial fronting in sentences prototypically building up such text categories as cooking recipe, guidebook, or chronicle:

(18) a. In a large pan, melt 3 oz butter.
b. On the right, there is a sculpture by…
c. In 1795 the king and his court…

The principle itself is so strongly conventionalized that the coordinate conjunction 'and' (as well as its counterparts in other languages), which in logic marks a symmetrical relation, is interpreted as 'and then':

(19) a. She got up and had her breakfast.
b. She had her breakfast and got up.

In actual context-bound language use sequentiality is the means to realize the pragmatic principle called *me first*, whereby linguistic expressions referring to elements of reality are ordered so that those closest to the speaker come first, as in the set expressions listed below:

(20) come and go; this and that; here and there

On the level of sentence and text structure the principle of sequentiality governs the ordering of constituent parts that corresponds to the emotional load; the *emotional syntax* (term from Lecercle 2000) requires that elements that are most "loaded" emotionally come first, as in:

(21) Moi, madame, votre chien, si ça continue, ce n'est pas dans son cul a lui que je vais le mettre, le mien, de pied (Lecercle 2000: 391).

In literary narrative the principle is employed in the structuring of the text: the order of presentation of events in the narrative is by default understood by the readers as rendering directly the order in which the events actually happened in the represented world (cf. e.g., Paprotte 1988).

5. Conclusions

Manifestations of iconicity are visible on all levels of language and linguistic structure – both as systemic properties and as conventionalized or innovative instances of context dependent language use. Iconicity at work can be discovered everywhere – from phonetics to morpheme to text and discourse. Grammar can be seen as embodiment of conventionalized iconicity. Even though diachronic development of languages shows that iconic motivation of linguistic signs might have been more important at earlier stages than it is today, we can still trace iconic motivation more easily and more frequently than it might seem. But, in conclusion, a word of warning seems in order: 'frequent' does not mean 'ubiquitous,' and (probabilistic) principles are not (normative) rules.

It is quite often the case that iconic motivation becomes overridden by some structural or communicative factors, like when one chooses to give priority to economy over politeness, and instead of marking the social distance with a long chain of words says briefly: Iconicity? Watch out!

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