

Arbitrariness of Linguistic Signs and Saussure's Philosophy of Language

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Abstract: This study examines Saussure's arbitrariness of linguistic signs from the perspective of philosophy of language through analyzing texts from *Course in General Linguistics* and *Writings in General Linguistics*. As the first principle of Saussure's general linguistics, the arbitrariness of linguistic signs has aroused persistent interests among scholars from different fields, but many scholars have tended to isolate the Principle of Arbitrariness from the whole system of Saussure's thoughts, and therefore problems and even misunderstanding of different types have occurred. Thus, it's of great significance to make a study of the arbitrariness of linguistic signs from the philosophical angle.

Keywords: Linguistic sign, absolute arbitrariness, relative arbitrariness, philosophy of language

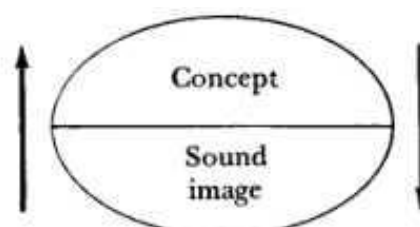
1. SAUSSURE'S DEFINITION OF THE ARBITRARINESS OF LINGUISTIC SIGNS

Saussure puts forward the definition of arbitrariness through criticizing nomenclaturism, i.e., the view that language is essentially a naming-process only — a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names (CLG: 65). For example:

Objects	Names
	arbos
	equus
	etc.

In Saussure's Third Course of Lectures on General Linguistics, he points out that it has often been mistakenly supposed that in language there is only a nomenclature (tree, fire, horse, snake), when the content of the language is reduced to its essential features. For Saussure this view is seriously mistaken because of the following reasons. It assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words; it does not tell whether a name is vocal or psychological in nature; finally it lets us assume that the linking of a name and a thing is a very simple operation — an assumption that is anything but true (CLG: 65).

After criticizing nomenclature, Saussure (2011/1959: 65) says that this rather naive approach can bring us near the truth by showing us that the linguistic unit is a double entity, one formed by the associating of two terms and that the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The linguistic sign is then a two-sided psychological entity that can be represented by the drawing:



Saussure (2011/1959) emphasizes that the signified (concept) and the signifier (sound-image) involved in the linguistic sign are psychological and are united in the brain by an associative bond. Since the associative bond between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, it can be simply said that the linguistic sign is arbitrary (CLG: 67).

From the above analysis, we can conclude that Saussure puts forward the Principle of Arbitrariness through criticizing the view that language is a naming-process.

2. ABSOLUTE ARBITRARINESS AND RELATIVE ARBITRARINESS IN LANGUAGE

Saussure (1993: 85a) makes some additional remarks on arbitrariness, pointing out that in every language, we must distinguish between what remains radically arbitrary and what can be called relative arbitrariness. The fundamental principle of the arbitrariness of the sign does not prevent our singling out in each language what is radically arbitrary, i.e. unmotivated, and what is only relatively arbitrary, i.e. motivated (CLG: 131).

There are cases where the link between the signifier and the signified is relatively motivated. For example, both *vingt* 'twenty' and *dix-neuf* 'nineteen' are unmotivated in French, but not in the same degree. In *vingt*, it is absolutely unmotivated. *Dix-neuf* is not completely unmotivated, for *dix-neuf* suggests its own terms and other terms associated with it (e.g. *dix* 'ten', *neuf* 'nine', *vingt-neuf* 'twenty-nine', *dix-huit* 'eighteen', *soixante-dix* 'seventy', etc.). In the same way, *poirier* (pear-tree) is relatively motivated since it evokes the coexisting term *poire* (pear) and through its suffix, it recalls *cerisier* 'cherry-tree', *pommier* 'apple-tree', etc. A word like English *ships*, which contains the idea of ship and the idea of plurality, suggests through its whole formation a whole series: birds, flags, books, etc. If we take the word *men* that also implies the idea of plurality, it relates to nothing.

From these contrasting examples of various considerations, we can catch a glimpse of absolute arbitrariness and relative arbitrariness, which is really the prime characteristic of the linguistic sign. Obviously, the fundamental fact about the linguistic sign is arbitrariness and the Principle of the Arbitrariness of signs has a universal scope.

The importance of the notion of relative motivation lies in the approach that language is seen as a system instead of a mass of signs. Although arbitrariness is really the prime characteristic of the linguistic sign, it should not be applied without any limitation; otherwise language would only be a mass of signs. 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 contrives to introduce a principle of order and regularity into certain parts of the mass of signs, and this is the role of relative motivation (CLG: 133). Therefore, the notion of relative motivation is the best possible basis for approaching the study of language as a system.

3. PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

Before clarifying the relationship between the Principle of Arbitrariness and Saussure's philosophy of language, we should first know what is philosophy of language. It is generally acknowledged that philosophy of language comes into existence when language begins to dominate philosophy and is seen as the primary means of both understanding and solving philosophical problems, including reality and thought. Baghramian (1999: xxviii) defines philosophy of language as an attempt to understand the nature of language and its relationship with speakers, their thoughts, and the world. Thus, the analysis of the relationship between language, thought and world constitutes the core dimension of the philosophy of language. Concern with questions of meaning and meaningfulness is the defining feature of philosophy of language (Baghramian 1999: xli). The defining feature of philosophy of language is the concern with questions of meaning, because the study of the relationship between language, world and thought is based on the meaning of language.

Theories of reference, the basic assumptions of analytic philosophy of language, play an essential role in explaining the relationship between language and the world. Thus, theories of reference play an essential role in explaining the source of meaning. If philosophers can explain the relationship between names and their bearers, the most basic and crucial step in understanding the connection between language and the world has been taken (Baghramian 1999: xxviii). That is why theories of reference set out to explain how particular components of any given language link up with the world. The most basic link is through names that stand for, or pick out, objects, which is seen as fixing the

meaning of names by philosophers. If a name does not stand for or pick out any thing in the world, then we can not fix the meaning of this name; if a sentence contains this name, we can not fix the meaning of this sentence either. Both 'the problem of existence' and 'the problem of identity' arise from the theories of reference.

In conclusion, the meaning of words and sentences comes from the outside world or reality, which is the basic assumption of analytic philosophy of language.

4. ABSOLUTE ARBITRARINESS IS THE STARTING POINT OF SAUSSURE'S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

It is certain that Saussure does apply himself to philosophical issues and that Saussure's thoughts about the philosophy of language begin with his objection to nomenclaturism. Obviously, what Saussure objects to is the basic assumption of analytic philosophy of language. We should not forget that after criticizing nomenclaturism, Saussure (2011/1959: 65) says that this rather naive approach can bring us near the truth by showing us that the linguistic unit is a double entity, one formed by the associating of two terms and that the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. Since the associative bond between the concept and the sound-image is arbitrary, it can be simply said that the linguistic sign is arbitrary (CLG: 67). Therefore, Saussure puts forward the Principle of Arbitrariness by rejecting the basic assumption of analytic philosophy of language. That's why absolute arbitrariness is the starting point of Saussure's philosophy of language.

Further, for Saussure, the referential view of word meaning is seriously mistaken because of the following reasons. What is implicit in this is a certain way of conceptualizing the definitive nature of language which we should not allow to pass: that is, language as a name of object tells us that objects are given beforehand and the sign comes later (WLG: 162). It assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words; it does not tell whether a name is vocal or psychological in nature; finally it lets us assume that the linking of a name and a thing is a very simple operation — an assumption that is anything but true (CLG: 65).

Saussure says that the view would be inadequate that one might think that it deals especially with phonetic changes undergone by the signifier, or perhaps changes in meaning which affect the signified concept (CLG: 75). Actually, regardless of what the forces of change are, whether in isolation or in combination they always result in a shift in the relationship between the signified and the signifier (ibid.). In one way or another there is always a shift in the relationship between the signifier and the signified because of the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs, which the referential view of word meaning can not explain. Therefore, absolute arbitrariness is the starting point of Saussure's philosophy of language.

5. RELATIVE ARBITRARINESS IS THE ESSENCE OF SAUSSURE'S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

Saussure presents lots of his opinions about meaning in Writings (Saussure, 2006). The meaning of each particular form is the same as the difference between the forms; meaning is difference in value (WLG: 13). Meaning in language is the union of the difference or identity of the idea in the signs (WLG: 48). Meaning simply must be a function of the purely negative fact of opposing values (WLG: 52). We can see that Saussure's theory of meaning is closely related to the key words — difference, negativity, opposition and value. Actually, meaning equals value, because the value itself implies difference, negativity and opposition. Therefore, when we talk about the value of linguistic signs, we are actually talking about the meaning of linguistic signs.

To understand Saussure's opinions about meaning, it is necessary to understand the key words — difference, negativity, opposition and value. When we compare signs— positive terms — with each other, we can no longer speak of difference; the expression would not be fitting, for the difference applies only to the comparing of two sound-images, e.g. father and mother, or two ideas, e.g. the idea "father" and the idea "mother"; two signs, each having a signified and signifier are not different but only distinct; between them there is only opposition (CLG: 121). Although both the signified and the signifier are purely differential and negative when considered separately, their combination is a positive fact (CLG: 120). The statement that everything in language is negative is true only if the signified and the signifier are considered separately (ibid). Therefore, when the sign is considered in its own totality, it is positive in its own class; when it is considered in opposition to other signs, it is only distinct; when the signified and the signifier of the sign are considered separately, it is negative or differential.

What is commonly referred to as a “grammatical fact” always expresses an opposition of terms. For example, the formation of the German plurals of the type: Nacht: Nächte expresses a particularly significant opposition of terms (CLG: 121-122). Each term presents in the grammatical fact the singular without umlaut of final e in opposition to the plural with umlaut and -e consists of the interplay of a number of oppositions within the system (CLG: 122). Synonyms, like the French *redouter* ‘dread’, *craindre* ‘fear’, and *avoir peur* ‘be afraid’, have their values only through their opposition: if *redouter* did not exist, all its content would go to its competitors; conversely, some words are enriched through contact with others: e.g. the new element introduced in *décrépiti* results from the coexistence of *décrépiti* (CLG: 116). This reminds us of the associative relations discussed in Chapter Three, for the opposition results from some similarities between different signs. Saussure also holds that opposition results from a set of relations. When isolated, neither *Nacht* nor *Nächte* is anything: thus everything is opposition; put another way, the *Nacht: Nächte* relation can be expressed by an algebraic formula a/b in which a and b are not simple terms but result from a set of relations (*ibid.*).

As for difference or negativity, it is obtained from the syntagmatic relations discussed in Chapter Three. When distinguishing signification from value, Saussure explains the relation implied by difference or negativity clearly. Put another way, signification comes from the positive relation represented by vertical arrows and value comes from the negative relation represented by the horizontal arrows (CLG: 115). Here the negative relation refers to syntagmatic relation, which will be explained in detail later.

Having known the key words — opposition, difference and negativity, we can reach the conclusion that Saussure's theory of meaning is actually based on the Principle of Arbitrariness. Meaning simply must be a function of the purely negative fact of opposing values (WLG: 52). The entire mechanism of language is based on oppositions of this kind and on the phonic and conceptual differences that they imply (CLG: 121). That is to say, meaning is determined by syntagmatic and associative relations implied by relative arbitrariness. Holdcroft (1991: 132) says that the value of a linguistic item is determined by the set of syntagmatic and associative relations that it enters into with other items in a language system.

Therefore, the relative arbitrariness of linguistic signs reflects the essence of Saussure's philosophy of language.

6. SUMMARY

For the first research question, “In Saussure's opinion, how is arbitrariness defined in CLG?”, it's found that the signified and the signifier involved in the linguistic sign are united in the brain by an arbitrary associative bond. Since the associative bond between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, it can be simply said that the linguistic sign is arbitrary. Besides, we must distinguish between what is absolute arbitrariness and what can be called relative arbitrariness. The role of relative motivation implies both the syntagmatic relation and the associative relation, which function simultaneously in the language system.

As for the second one, “Why is the absolute arbitrariness seen as the starting point of Saussure's philosophy of language?”, the finding is that the background of the Principle of Arbitrariness is closely related to Saussure's concern of addressing philosophical issues. Specifically, the nomenclaturism or theory of reference that Saussure rejects plays an essential role in explaining the source of meaning within the framework of analytic philosophy of language. Therefore, absolute arbitrariness is the starting point of Saussure's philosophy of language.

With respect to the third research question, “Why is relative arbitrariness seen as reflecting the essence of Saussure's philosophy of language?”, the answer is that the syntagmatic and associative relations which relative arbitrariness implies are what determine the meaning. Against this conclusion, it is found that relative arbitrariness reflects the essence of Saussure's philosophy of language.

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