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The Quasimorpheme and Iconic, Deictic, and Symbolic Aspects of Linguistic Semiotics

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Since the age of the Greek philosophers, determinism versus arbitrariness has been an issue of debate in the study of language. Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus* portrays two thinkers, Cratylus and Hermogenes, divided over this issue. Cratylus asserts that language attaches form to content “by nature.” To Hermogenes, this attachment seems to be purely the result of convention. Socrates, who is the moderator of the dialogue, admits that the idea of naturally determined language is attractive and that it occasionally occurs, but he finds that most of the evidence supports Hermogenes’ view that the form of language is largely determined by arbitrary association.

Following the precedent established by Plato in this dialogue, influential linguists such as Dwight Whitney and Ferdinand de Saussure expanded and solidified conventionalism as the favored approach to linguistic inquiry. Thus, the study of non-arbitrary aspects of semiotics fell out of fashion. Saussure’s statement (Jakobson 1971, 349), “The entirely arbitrary signs are the most appropriate to fulfil the optimum semiotic process,” epitomizes the direction that much of linguistic semiotics has taken.

Indeed, as Aristotle concluded, it seems that arbitrary symbolism is the most common semiotic method in language. But does the fact that it is the most common necessarily mean that it is the best for all situations? Even if this were true, would it be right for linguists to ignore other semiotic processes that exist in language, simply because they are not “optimum?” Should it not be our linguistic and analytical responsibility as students of language to seek truth, whatever that truth may be? Regardless of how one might answer these questions, the fact remains that although Saussure has claimed symbolism to be “optimum,” it is not the only process at work in language.

The fact that all linguistic signs are not symbolic does not display a weakness in language’s ability to convey meaning; rather, it shows symbolism’s lack of power to meet the semiotic demands of language in all situations. To understand why symbolism is not optimum, it is necessary to understand the different kinds of possible signs, how they work, and how they are manifest in language. Perhaps no one inside or outside the field of linguistics has done as much work describing the nature and function of signs as C. S. Peirce.

Peirce explains a triadic view of the sign that allows for, and even asserts the existence of, the iconic and deictic as well as symbolic nature of signs. Unlike Saussure, Peirce does not hold one process to be better than all others in all situations; rather, he suggests that different situations call for different semiotic processes. To Peirce, whatever process best conveys meaning in a given situation is “the optimum semiotic process.” An appreciation of Peirce’s ideas sheds great light on linguistic semiotics and the relationship between phonetics, morphology, and semantics. It also helps one understand why symbolism has not completely eclipsed all other forms of semiotic mediation. At this point, an overview of what Peirce meant by symbolic, iconic, and deictic would be helpful.

Peirce said, (1931 1.347) “Now a sign is something, A, which denotes some fact or object, B, to some interpretant thought, C.” He continues:

There may be a mere relation of reason between the sign and the thing signified; in that case the sign is an *icon*. Or there may be a direct physical connection; in that case, the sign is an *index*. Or there may be a relation which consists in the fact that the mind associates the sign with its object; in that case the sign is a *name* [or symbol]. (1931 1.372)
Since symbolic signs are the most familiar part of Peirce’s triad, we will look at them first. Symbolic signs are non-contingent and non-representational. They rely on purely arbitrary association and habitual recognition to convey their meanings. Consider the sign *chair*, for instance. There is nothing about the object “chair” which necessitates the use of the word *chair* to denote “an object for sitting.” The word does not sound like any noise a chair might make, and the mouth, in articulating the word, does not approximate any action a chair might take. The word *chair* mediates the concept “chair” only because the speech community has arbitrarily agreed to interpret it to mean such. To use *chair* to mean “an object for sitting” is necessary only because to use another word, such as *bowling-ball*, would cause great confusion.

Second in the triad are icons. In contrast to symbolic signs, iconic signs mediate meaning by resembling the idea that they represent. Onomatopoeic words are prime examples of iconism. For instance, the word *splash* approximates the sound of the event it describes. Most words for animal sounds also fall into this group. What could be more efficient than mimicry to cause instant recognition of the concept behind a certain natural sound? To use symbolism for this purpose would require the listener to do more cognitive work than is absolutely necessary. Another benefit of the iconic nature of animal sounds is their almost universal recognizability. The *kurikiku* spoken by a Russian child could probably be understood by anyone anywhere who had ever heard the sound of a rooster.

Though acoustic mimicry is the most recognized manifestation of iconism, iconism is not limited to mimicry alone. Syntax can be iconic when grammatical word order imitates an actual sequence of events. In the sentence, “I got up, brushed my teeth, ate breakfast, and went to school,” the words in a different syntactic order while still mediating the same actual order of events would not be simple. For instance, “Before I brushed my teeth I got up, and after I was done with both I went to school” requires several more words and a more complex syntax. By relying on iconism for this purpose, much of the syntactic and lexical “extra baggage” that would be necessary in a purely arbitrary symbolic system is avoided.

The third part of this triad is deixis or indexicalism. It differs from both symbolism and iconism in that it mediates meaning by establishing a contiguity between ideas. Deixis resembles a pointing gesture. It works in the way the index of a book does, pointing to the page where a reader may find a particular bit of information. In language, personal pronouns work mainly through deixis. They establish contiguous relationships between their users and the speech-act--either transmitting (first person), receiving (second person), or not participating in the speech-act (third person). The meanings of personal pronouns are not arbitrarily symbolic, nor are they duplicatively iconic; instead, the meanings of pronouns vary depending on who is using them. If John says “I,” then “I” means “John.” If Susan says “I,” then “I” means “Susan.” The word “I” establishes a reflexive contiguity between the transmitter and self, “you” establishes a contiguity between the transmitter and the receiver, and “he,” “she,” “it,” etc. establish a contiguity between the transmitter and someone outside the speech-act. The meaning of personal pronouns are in a constant flux as the participants change roles and as they enter and exit the speech act. Symbolic words by habit, and iconic words by nature, are much more rigidly attached to the ideas they signify than are deictic words. Imagine the feasibility of a pronoun system based on the “optimum” symbolic sign. Perhaps a solely symbolic system of signs would not be as ideal as Saussure suggests since a function as fundamentally necessary as a personal pronoun system could not exist without deixis.

If iconism and deixis are such important parts of language why are they not given more credit for the role they play? Perhaps, our reluctance to seriously study any semiotic process other than symbolism stems from our long evident need in art, philosophy, religion, and elsewhere to validate humankind’s unique nature as sophisticated, rational, sentient beings. Seemingly, iconism requires nothing more than the simple mental task of mimicry, and deixis is little more than linguistic “finger pointing.” Why,
even parrots are capable of mimicry, and caged
gorillas can point at bananas they want to eat.

It would be comforting to prove that human-
kind’s greatest achievements had been accomplished
by employing more developed cognitive processes
than mimicry and pointing one’s finger at things. It
is understandable then that linguists, just as many
other thinkers throughout the ages, would want to
study those linguistic phenomena that reassure
humanity’s fragile ego. This reassurance is found in
our ability to arbitrarily attach a sign to an idea
because it demonstrates a capacity for more
developed thought than does mimicry or pointing.
Even though aversion to iconism and deixis is
understandable, would it be intellectually honest to
continue to avoid them when they actually exist and
exert a profound influence on the shape of language?

Whether or not this view of the cause of icon-
ism’s and deixis’ neglect is accurate, the fact
remains that they have been neglected. If they are
ever to become areas of linguistic interest, evidence
for their significance must be provided. A few
examples of how onomatopoeia, syntax, and
pronouns embody iconism and deixis have already
been shown. Interestingly, their is a particular
linguistic phenomenon which has been overlooked
that provides concrete examples of all three meaning
mediating processes. I call this linguistic system the
quasimorpheme. I define quasimorphemes, for
English, as word initial consonant sound clusters
that bear a certain meaning. They differ from tradi-
tional morphemes in that they are not as discrete of
units. They do not leave morphemes behind when
detached from a word, and therefore, they are
considerably more difficult to identify.

An example of a quasimorpheme would be the
sound cluster {fl-}. Words beginning with {fl-} are
very likely to fall into a certain semantic category.
Consider these words: flip, fling, flipper, flutter,
flit, and flick. There seems to be a certain
onomatopoeic quality in {fl-} that resembles a light,
quick, and perhaps sharp stroke. This onomatopoeic
quality makes {fl-} initial words very likely to
belong to semantic categories related to light, quick
strokes and restricts them from belonging to other
semantic categories. It seems unlikely that the sign
flute could refer to a heavy, slow, and loud percus-
sion instrument, but it “sounds right” for a light and
quick woodwind. {fl-} is just one iconic example of
many iconic, symbolic, and deictic quasimorphemes
in English. Later in this paper I will discuss some
more examples of quasimorphemes which display
each of these characteristics.

Because quasimorphemes dwell in limbo
between phonemes and morphemes they have
become easily forgotten, being without a convenient
pigeon hole. Referring to linguistic descriptions of
other languages, Roman Jakobson (1971, 483)
made a statement that applies equally well to the

treatment of quasimorphism in our own language:
“When a native of the far North saw a camel for the
first time, he put it down as a distorted horse.
Similarly, we are subconsciously inclined to take
unfamiliar, remote linguistic structures as backward,
defective, or perverted.” The attitude toward quasi-
morphemes in our own language has been to ignore,
trivialize, or be oblivious to them.

Consider this except from Victoria Fromkin and
Robert Rodman’s book, An Introduction to
Language (1988, 7):

Sometimes particular sound sequences seem
to relate to a particular concept. In English
many words beginning with gl relate to sight,
such as glare, glint, gleam, glitter, glossy,
glaze, glance, glimmer, glimpse, and glisten.
However, such words are a very small part of
any language, and gl may have nothing to do
with “sight” in another language, or even in
other words in English, such as gladiator,
glucose, glory, glycerin, globe, and so on.

The authors seem to be saying that the
occurrences in which {gl-} is related to sight are
moost because: 1) there are {gl-} words that do not
convey a sight related meaning, 2) the {gl-} words
that relate to sight are less numerous than other {gl-}
words, and 3) that {gl-} may not have the same
meaning in other languages that it does in English.
Throwing out {gl-} as an example of a noteworthy
linguistic phenomenon on this basis is not unlike
throwing out {-ed} as a meaning unit because the [-
ed]’s that end bed, red, and sled are not morphemes
as they are in the word jumped, or because {-ed}
might mean something else in Swahili.

It is true that most {gl-} words do not relate to
sight. However, the dictionary reveals that {gl-}
words having sight related meaning are far more
numerous than any other group of \{gl-\} words that belong to any other semantic category. Furthermore, the dictionary shows that a higher percentage of \{gl\} words have a sight related meaning than does any other group of words beginning with any other sound cluster.

One would expect that if quasimorphemes really do act as meaning bearing entities, then one ought to be able to test for their saliency in the minds of language users. To check the hypothesis that certain non-morphemic sound clusters bear meaning, I distributed a questionnaire (see appendix #1) designed to see if the mind recognizes quasimorphemes as meaningful entities. In the questionnaire the respondents were asked to circle the made-up word they felt “fit best” with the definition provided. Here are some examples of the kind of questions that they were asked:

- glafe / stafe “shiny and bright”
- crund / slund “an oozing liquid”
- scrake / frake “a grating noise”
- flink / grink “a light, quick stroke”
- glook / stook “a long rigid beam”
- tref / spef “a passageway”

In all cases, the data show that a large majority of the participants preferred one word in a pair over the other. Seventy-four percent of the respondents chose glafe, which has the same initial sound cluster as gleam, gloss, and glitter, over stafe to mean “shiny and bright”; 94% chose scrake (scratch, scrape, scrawl) for “a grating noise”; 86% percent chose slund (slime, sludge, slip) for “an oozing liquid”; 91% chose flink (flit, flutter, flap) for “a light, quick stroke”; 76% chose stook (steeple, stand, stem) for “a long rigid beam”; and 75% chose tref (trek, truck, transport) for “a passageway.” For further data from the questionnaire see the graphs in appendix #3.

After the participants finished their questionnaires, they were asked if they had grasped the purpose of the study. Only one participant mentioned that he wondered if the survey was related to initial sound clusters carrying meaning. All of the others said that they chose their answers simply because it “felt right” or “sounded good.” For a few participants who showed interest in the survey, I explained my hypothesis that people associate meaning with certain word initial sound clusters. The usual reaction was, “Oh, I didn’t even know that I was doing that!” This seems to indicate that quasimorphemic awareness and processing is not at a conscious level.

The quasimorphemes used in the survey range from the very iconic to the very symbolic. For example, at one end of the continuum are such quasimorphemes as as the \{skr-\} in scrawl, scratch, and scrape which sounds very much like the kind of noise scraping or scratching might produce. On the other end are quasimorphemes such as the \{tr-\} in travel, transport, and traffic which has no apparent similarity to any sounds that might result from the articulation of these words. Evidence from the questionnaire indicates that the words beginning with more mimetic quasimorphemes were more likely to be chosen as the word which fit the definition. On the other hand, the words beginning with more symbolic quasimorphemes were less often chosen. It is surprising, however, to find that even words beginning with symbolic quasimorphemes were chosen by an impressive majority over the non-quasimorphemic words. The graph below shows the percentage of respondents that chose the hypothetical quasimorphemic for six of the twelve minimal pairs on the questionnaire.

This graph shows a wide spread between mimetic and non-mimetic quasimorphemes. Their position on the graph seems to indicate that \{fl-\} and \{sl-\} are less mimetic quasimorphemes than \{skr-\}. The reason may be that they are not as onomatopoeic as \{skr-\} is. Instead, they are articulatorily iconic rather than acoustically iconic. The speaker makes a quick stroke of the tongue and a sudden, sharp release of air to produce \{fl-\}. With \{sl-\}, the speaker lets air ooze out laterally from the tongue while sliding it forward. Consider the similarity between these articulatory actions and the meaning of many words that begin with \{fl-\} and \{sl-\} such as flip, fling, and flit or slide, slip, and slither. The fact that \{fl-\} may actually sound more like the concept it represents than does \{sl-\} could account for its position on the continuum, closer to the mimetic end of the graph.
Quasimorphemes such as {st-}, (steeple, stand, stalk); {tr-}, (travel, truck, tram); and {gl-}, (glow, gleam, glare) are non-iconic in that neither their manner of articulation nor their acoustic qualities reflect their meaning. As well as having a lower recognition factor in the survey, phoneme clusters that are less, or non-iconic, seem to be less likely to function quasimorphemically in a given word. For example, most {skr-} words such as scrape, scratch, and scrawl are mimetic, and the sound cluster {skr-} almost always functions as a quasimorpheme. On the other hand, the {gl-} sound cluster does not function quasimorphemically in many words because they are not as iconic. Hence, there are many words beginning with {gl-}, such as gladiator, glucose, and globe, that do not have the “sight” connotation that other {gl-} words have. In these cases {gl-} is non-quasimorphemic just as {-ed} is non-morphemic in words like sled or bed.

Moving on from the questionnaire and jumping out of the iconic/symbolic quasimorpheme continuum we find a special quasimorpheme that demonstrates a profound deictic quality. Unlike most quasimorphemes, {~} is a single phoneme, and not a cluster of two or three phonemes. But, like most quasimorphemes {~} exists as a quasimorpheme only in word initial positions. In fact, so powerful is {~}’s deixis that there seem to be no examples of English words that begin with the sound /~/ that do not have a deictic meaning as do the, this, and there. In all other situations, such as in the middle of a word, rather, or at the end of a word, bathe, it seems to have a purely symbolic phonological duty.

Roman Jakobson in *The Sound Shape of Language* (1979, 55) discusses English words whose meanings, as Leonard Bloomfield (1939, 105-115) said, “resemble that of a pointing gesture.” *This, these, that, those, they, them, themselves, their, theirs, then, there, therefore, thus, than,* though, and the as well as some archaic forms such as, thee, thou, thy, thyself; and thine are a few examples. Another example given by Jakobson of a deictic English sound cluster is /hw/, which is often present in words that introduce questions such as what, when, where, and why.

{~}’s deictic nature exists in the purview of the speaker and “points” to a predetermined, specific idea, either realis or irrealis. In {~} initial words, a contiguity is established between the speaker and the idea or object that the word refers to. If a disembodied voice were to say, “Look at the chair,” we would simply gaze about the room until we found a chair. However, if a disembodied voice were to say, “Look at that” we would first look around to find who had spoken, and then see what the speaker was pointing to. The meaning of {~} words is very confusing unless we already have some understanding of the mind and location of the speaker.

{~} seems to act as a marker, cuing the language user that a word is going to be deictic. The remaining sounds in the word deliver the full meaning. For example, the sound group /-ls/ in the word this symbolically tells the listener that the speaker wishes to establish a contiguous relationship between self and a nearby object, while the /-æt/ in that causes the listener to conceptualize an object further away from the speaker. No locative relationship to the listener is implied.

The important quasimorpheme {~}, with its deictic nature completes this discussion of examples of quasimorphemes that display all three of Peirce’s optimum qualities of a sign. We have looked at quasimorphemes, which are a class of signs displaying symbolic, iconic, and deictic qualities. In fact, without an approach to language that appreciates the triadic nature of signs, it is easy to see how quasimorphemes would seem “a very small part of language” and be overlooked. Furthermore, by
studying quasimorphemism in the light of Peircean semiotics, quasimorphemes no longer seem to be a trivial part of language but a rich and relevant phenomenon. Likewise, the study of quasimorphemes has proven to be a useful tool toward the better understanding of how Peircean triadic semiotics are manifest in language.

WORKS CITED


This questionnaire is for a research paper for a linguistics class I am taking at BYU, so thank you very much for your help!

Say each word out loud to yourself then circle the word that sounds like it best fits the definition. There are no right or wrong answers. These are not even real words. So just go with your gut feeling and what you think sounds the best.

If you do not understand the definition or you do not feel that one word is any better than the other do not circle either word.

glafe / stafe  “shiny and bright”
frant / crant  “to squeeze or tighten”
crund / slund  “an oozy liquid”
slact / spact  “an energetic dispersal”
scrake / frake  “a grating noise”
flink / grink  “a light, quick stroke”
glook / stook  “a long rigid beam”
tref / spef  “a passageway”
fronid / bronid  “a cold pool of water”
freem / sweem  “to slide back and forth”
dralk / snalk  “to hang or dangle”

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APPENDIX #2

The survey participants

- Number of Engineering majors: 53
- Number of miscellaneous majors: 45
- Number of English majors: 27
- Number of Linguistics majors: 13
- Number of pre-college age people: 8

- Number of male participants: 85
- Number of female participants: 61

Total number of participants: 146

APPENDIX #3

The following graphs show the choices that the respondents made for each minimal pair. They are ordered from the least to the most iconic.

- "to hang or dangle"
  - no answer: 19
  - "snaik": 33
  - "draik": 94
  - Total is: 146
  - Examples: drap, drool, drop, drizzle, drip, droop, dribble

- "a cold pool of water"
  - no answer: 10
  - "bronid": 39
  - "fronid": 97
  - Total is: 146
  - Examples: freeze, frigid, frost
"shiny and bright"

- no answer: 8
- "stafe": 30
- "glafe": 108

Total is 146

Examples:
glare, glaze, glisten, glow, gleam, glitter, glimpse, glance, glory, glimmer

"a passageway"

- no answer: 14
- "spef": 22
- "tref": 110

Total is 146

Examples:
traverse, travel, truck, traipse, transport, trail, trip, train, traffic, trace, track

"a long ridgid beam"

- no answer: 12
- "glook": 23
- "stook": 111

Total is 146

Examples:
staff, steeple, stick, stand, stake, stem, straight, stout, stilt, stalk
Examples:
sway, swagger, switch, swing, swab, sweep, swap, swivel, swizzle-stick

Examples:
slime, sludge, slick, slip, slither, slush, slurp, slink, slug, sluice,

Examples:
spark, spew, spit, sputter, sprout, spray, spatter, spasm, spring, speckle
Examples:
flit, flutter, flicker, flip, flop, flap, fling, flee, flash

Examples:

Examples: