

## On the Arbitrariness of Linguistic Sign: A Brief Commentary on de Saussure's Argument of Arbitrariness

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### Abstract

Ever since Ferdinand de Saussure pointed out the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, some linguists have accepted and agreed to this assertion, others have aired challenging views from the perspective of iconicity. This paper attempts to analyze this question and prove that the linguistic sign is arbitrary, and iconicity is also a characteristic of language. It can complement rather than replace the principle of arbitrariness.

**Key words:** Arbitrariness; Linguistic sign; Iconicity

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### INTRODUCTION

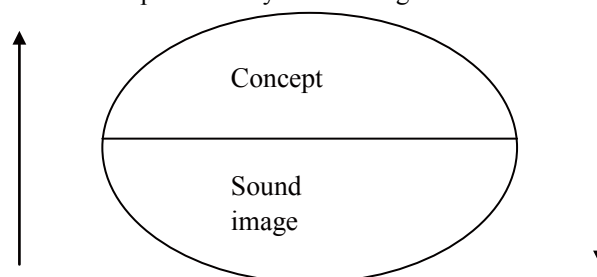
History was to prove Saussure right (Harris, 1987, vii). Ever since *Cours de linguistique générale* was published in 1916, the principle of arbitrariness of linguistic sign has influenced several linguistic schools. The issue of arbitrariness of linguistic sign is always in hot dispute. Some linguists advocate it, others disagree and challenge it from the perspective of iconicity of linguistic sign. This paper will present and analyze the following questions – 1) What does Saussure mean by 'arbitrariness'? 2) What are the major arguments of the critics of Saussure? 3) What kind of attitude should we adopt?

### 1. THE DESCRIPTION OF ARBITRARINESS OF THE LINGUISTIC SIGN BY SAUSSURE

This section will elaborate Saussure's idea about the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign. Through the analysis, Saussure's major points on this issue can be seen.

#### 1.1 What Does Saussure Mean by 'Arbitrariness'?

According to Saussure (1916, p. 67), the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. The linguistic sign is arbitrary. This is the first principle of linguistics. The linguistic sign is then a two-sided psychological entity that can be represented by the drawing:



**Figure 1**  
Constitution of a Linguistic Sign

The two elements are intimately united, and each recalls the other (Ibid, p. 66). In Saussure's (Ibid, p. 67) opinion, the combination of a concept and a sound-image is a sign. Concept and sound image are respectively replaced by signified (signifié) and signifier (signifiant).

In order to prove the point that the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, Saussure (Ibid, pp. 67-68) presents two examples. The idea of "sister" is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds *s-ö-r* which serves as its signifier in French; that it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by differences among languages and by the very existence of different languages: the signified "ox" has as

its signifier *b-ö-f* on one side of the border and *o-k-s* on the other.

According to Saussure (Ibid, pp. 68-69), the word arbitrary also calls for comment. The term should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker... he means that it is unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified. Meanwhile, Saussure (Ibid, pp. 69-70) gives two objections that might be raised to the establishment of Principle I: onomatopoeia and interjections and concludes that onomatopoeic formations and interjections are of secondary importance, and their symbolic origin is in part open to dispute. In the next chapter, i.e., *Chapter II: Immutability and Mutability of the Sign*, Saussure (Ibid, p. 74) adds the factor of time. Language is checked not only by the weight of the collectivity but also by time. These two are inseparable. We say *man* and *dog*. This does not prevent the existence in the total phenomenon of a bond between the two antithetical forces – arbitrary convention by virtue of which choice is free and time which causes choice to be fixed. Because the sign is arbitrary, it follows no law other than that of tradition, and because it is based on tradition, it is arbitrary.

## 1.2 Absolute and Relative Arbitrariness

Saussure (Ibid, p. 68) explains that one characteristic of the symbol is that it is never wholly arbitrary; it is not empty, for there is the rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and the signified. The symbol of justice, a pair of scales, could not be replaced by just any other symbol, such as chariot. In *Chapter VI of Part I: The Mechanism of Language*, Saussure (Ibid, pp. 131-134) further distinguishes the absolute and 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. Some signs are absolutely arbitrary; in others we note, not its complete absence, but the presence of degrees of arbitrariness: the sign may be relatively motivated. For instance, both *vingt* ‘twenty’ and *dix-neuf* ‘nineteen’ are unmotivated in French, but not in the same degree, 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.) Taken separately, *dix* and *neuf* are in the same class as *vingt*, but *dix-neuf* is an example of relative motivation. That is to say, it is not absolutely arbitrary. Instead, it shows that there exist rational factors in the relationship between the signified and the signifier.

In Saussure’s (Ibid, p. 133) opinion, 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. If the mechanism of language is but a partial correction of a system that is by nature chaotic, however, we adopt the viewpoint imposed by the very nature of language and study it as it limits arbitrariness. Saussure (p. 133) continues to say that there is no language in which nothing is motivated, and our definition makes it impossible to conceive of a language in which everything is motivated. Between the two extremes – a minimum of organization and a minimum of arbitrariness – we find all possible varieties. Diverse languages always include elements of both types – radically arbitrary and relatively motivated – but in proportions that vary greatly, and this is an important characteristic that may classify them. By analyzing Saussure’s words above, it can be found that Saussure uses the terms such as ‘relative motivation,’ ‘order,’ ‘regularity,’ ‘relatively motivated,’ ‘organization’ to show the relative arbitrariness and the rational characteristic of the linguistic sign. All languages bear the ‘radically arbitrary’ and ‘relatively motivated’ nature. According to Saussure (Ibid, pp. 133-134), languages in which there is least motivation are more lexicological, and those in which it is greatest are more grammatical. The two extremes are like two poles between which the whole system moves, two opposing currents which share the movement of language: the tendency to use the lexicological instrument (the unmotivated sign) and the preference given to the grammatical instrument (structural rules). Motivation plays a much larger role in German than in English. But the ultra-lexicological type is Chinese while Proto-Indo-European and Sanskrit are specimens of the ultra-grammatical type. Within a given language, all evolutionary movement may be characterized by continual passage from motivation to arbitrariness and from arbitrariness to motivation. Judged by Saussure’s criteria, motivation plays a much larger role in Proto-Indo-European and Sanskrit than in Chinese, while arbitrariness plays a much larger role in Chinese than in Proto-Indo-European and Sanskrit. Chinese tends to use the lexicological instrument (the unmotivated sign) and Proto-Indo-European and Sanskrit prefer to use the grammatical instrument (structural rules).

## 2. INFLUENCE OF SAUSSURE’S PRINCIPLE OF ARBITRARINESS AND DIFFERENT OPINIONS

In fact, Saussure’s principle of arbitrariness has a wide and great influence over the different linguistic schools and linguists such as Charles Hockett, Jakobson, Chomsky, and Halliday. According to the *Concise History of the Language Sciences – From the Sumerians to the Cognitivists* edited by E.F.K. Koerner and R.E. Asher (1995, pp. 236-237), it is one of the first views

of language to which budding linguists are exposed in introductory courses and textbooks, often as one of the design features of language identified in 1958 by Charles Hockett (b. 1916). Like most dogmas, the radical form of arbitrariness is counterintuitive and requires a certain faith beyond what reason can sustain. Also, it is not always observable in the practice of those who preach it, particularly because of the influence of Jakobson, who beginning in the early 1930s mounted a sustained attack on radical arbitrariness through his work on markedness, child language acquisition, and aphasia, which suggested that linguistic elements differ in naturalness. Jakobson was to have a significant impact on Chomsky, Joseph Greenberg (b. 1915), and many others, with the result that language is not treated as exhibiting anything like the radical arbitrariness of the dogma. Besides Jakobson, arbitrariness was problematized by Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1965), Emile Benveniste (1902, p. 76), and numerous others in a series of attacks on and defense of the Saussurean view (often poorly represented) appearing from 1939 to about 1947.

Charles Hockett (1960) interprets arbitrariness as non-iconicity. But Chomsky does not mention the term 'arbitrariness.' Anthropologist Claude Lévin Strauss (1977) believes that the linguistic sign is arbitrary *à priori*, and it is non-arbitrary *à posteriori*.

In recent 20 years, Peirce, Haiman, Givón and Halliday have much influence on this question. According to Peirce (1931, p. 58), sign can be divided into icon, index and symbol. For example, footprints, photos, and portraits belong to icons. He is an example for index. The rise and fall of the mercury in a thermometer indicates the change of temperature. As for symbol, different totems represent different tribes, and scale represents justice. Therefore it can be found that icon, index, and symbol all bear some kind of natural characteristic. But one thing must be pointed out here, they are not linguistic sign mentioned by Saussure (1916). So the three terms in semiotics are not applicable here. They ought not be confused with the linguistic sign. Haiman (1985) categorizes relational iconicity into several subtypes. But it can be seen that his starting point is not the specific components of the linguistic sign, i.e., the signifier and signified. Thus the theory of iconicity can't deny the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign.

According to Halliday's (1994) rank theory, it can be concluded that language is some kind of system which can be further divided into different ranks such as sentence, clause, group and word, etc. The 'rank scale' for the lexicogrammar of English is: (Halliday, 1978, p. 129)

It can be found that there are some rational factors in the syntactic level and textual level. But does this can deny the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign? The answer is negative because the linguistic sign and the syntax are two different things.

Since there are so many different ideas towards Saussure's principle of arbitrariness, a careful reanalysis

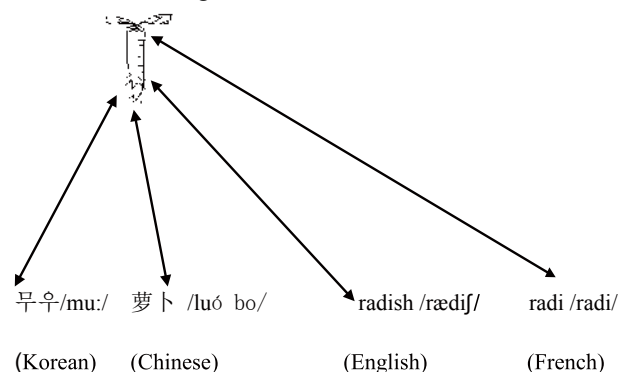
of this question should be done in the next part in order to see which argument is more scientific and convincing.

### 3. THE APPLICABILITY OF ARBITRARINESS ON DIFFERENT RANKS OF LANGUAGE

Actually the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign has been mentioned above. So here is only a brief and general repetition of Saussure's main statements of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. According to Saussure (1916, p. 67), the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. The linguistic sign is arbitrary. So it can be explicitly seen that the starting pointing of Saussure on this question is the specific linguistic sign instead of the other ranks of language. What's more, Saussure (1916, pp. 131-134) classifies arbitrariness into absolute and relative arbitrariness and declares that diverse languages always include elements of both types – radically arbitrary and relatively motivated. Language in which those is least motivation are more lexicological, and those in which it is greatest are more grammatical. Linguists who challenge Saussure's principle of arbitrariness either start from the level of syntax, the writing system or from the icons. Due to the different starting points, contradictory opinions always exist.

#### 3.1 The Arbitrary Nature of the Linguistic Sign Can Be Proved by Comparing Different Languages

It is my estimation that through comparing different languages that the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign can be seen. The same concept 'radish' has different signifiers in Chinese, Korean, English and French, which is shown in the Figure 2.



**Figure 2**  
**Signifiers of 'Radish'**

By comparing the different signifiers of the concept 'radish,' it can be easily concluded that the linguistic sign is arbitrary. Why? Because if it is non-arbitrary, i.e., it bears the natural and rational characteristic, how can the fact that there are so many totally signifiers for one concept be explained? Consequently it can be concluded that the relationship between the signified and signifier is arbitrary.

### 3.2 The Arbitrary Nature of the Linguistic Sign Can Be Proved Within One Language

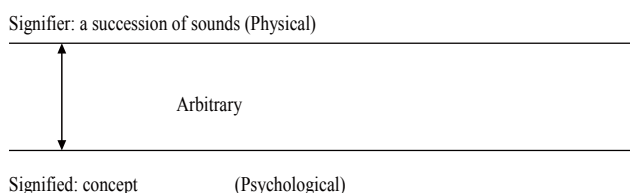
One possible objection towards the conclusion above might be the similarity of words in the same language family. there are indeed many families of language in the world nowadays such as Indo-European language family,

Uralic language family, Altaic language family, Caucasian language family, Dravidian language family, Munda language family, Sino-Tibetan language family, Mon-Khmer language family, etc. (Katzner, 1986, pp. 2-4) For instance, many words have the same origin in the Indo-European Languages.

**Table 1**  
**Comparison Between Indo-European Languages**

Languages	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	Sample 4	Sample 5	Sample 6
English	month	mother	new	night	nose	three
Welsh	mis	mam	newydd	nos	trwyn	tri
Gaelic	mí	máthair	nua	oíche	rón	trí
French	mois	mère	nouveau	nuit	nez	trois
Spanish	mes	madre	nuevo	noche	nariz	tres
Portuguese	mês	mãe	novo	noite	nariz	três
Italian	mese	madre	nuovo	notte	naso	tre
Latin	mensis	mater	novus	nox	nasus	tres
German	Monat	Mutter	neu	Nacht	Nase	drei
Dutch	maand	moeder	nieuw	nacht	neus	drie
Icelandic	mánuður	móðir	nýr	nótt	nef	þrír
Swedish	månad	mder	ny	natt	näsa	tre
Polish	miesiac	matka	nowy	noc	nos	trzy
Czech	měsíc	matka	nový	noc	nos	tri
Rumanian	lună	mamă	nou	noapte	nas	trei
Albanian	muaj	nënë	i ri	natë	hundë	tre, tri
Greek	men	meter	neos	nux	rhīs	treis
Russian	mesyats	mat'	novy	noch'	nos	tri
Lithuanian	mėnuo	motina	naujas	naktis	nosis	trys
Armenian	amis	mayr	nor	kisher	kit	yerek
Persian	māh	mādar	nau	shab	bini	se
Sanskrit	mās	matar	nava	nakt	nās	trayas

This objection lacks convincing proof and it can be easily denied. Firstly, if we use the same approach adopted in the part above, i.e., to compare the different signifiers of one concept among languages of different language families, the objection will be defeated by the comparison. Secondly, the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign can be proved within one language. According to Saussure (1916, p. 103), a succession of sounds is linguistic only if it supports an idea. Considered independently, it is material for a physiological study, and nothing more than that. Thus the signifier (sound image) can be interpreted into 'a succession of sounds,' and it has physiological nature. Strictly speaking, it is physical. On the other hand, a concept is totally psychological. Thus the relationship between the signifier and signified may be illustrated by the Figure 3.



**Figure 3**  
**Signifier vs. Signified**

### 3.3 Other Possible Objections

Other possible objections include: onomatopoeic words and regularity of morphemes, sound writing system and pictograms.

Firstly, in my opinion, even onomatopoeic words and interjections cannot deny the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign. For example, the English interjection 'alas /ələs/' means '哎呀 /āi yà/' in Chinese. It can be seen that the signifiers are different. Secondly, both the association of morphemes and sound writing system have certain regularities, and some pictograms reflect the concrete entities. But do they equal to the linguistic signs? The answer is also 'no.' So it will be ridiculous to criticize Saussure's principle of arbitrariness from other perspectives.

### 3.4 Arbitrariness on Different Ranks

According to Halliday's (1994) rank theory, it can be concluded that language is some kind of system which can be further divided into different ranks such as sentence, clause, group and word, etc. The linguistic sign is arbitrary. But Saussure (1916, pp. 131-134) himself also classifies it into absolute and relative arbitrariness. For example the words 'dix-neuf' and 'pear-tree' are less arbitrary and have some rational factors in them. As

a result, on the rank of word, the etyma are absolutely arbitrary, but the numerous compounds are less arbitrary and are more rational. Above the rank of word is the ranks of group, clause and sentence. According to Saussure (Ibid, p. 133), languages in which there is least motivation are more lexicological, and those in which

it is greatest are more grammatical. More influence of iconicity can be found on the level of syntax. Here is a case of Chinese-English translation. The ST is like this, ‘匪军所至, 杀戮人民, 奸淫妇女, 焚毁村庄, 掠夺财物, 无所不用其极.’ It can be functionally analyzed in the following way:

**Table 2**  
**Transitivity Analysis of ST & TT**

	匪军		所		至
Actor			Circumstance		Process:Material
Subject			Adjunct		Predicator
	杀戮	人民	奸淫	妇女	
Process:Material		Goal	Process:Material		Goal
Predicator		Complement	Predicator		Complement
	焚毁	村庄	掠夺	财物	
Process:Material		Goal	Process:Material		Goal
Predicator		Complement	Predicator		Complement
	无所	不	用	其极	
Goal			Process:Material		
Complement		Adjunct	Predicator		Adjunct

Similarly, the TT can be analyzed in this way:

Wherever			the bandit troops		went		
Circumstance			Actor		Process:Material		
Adjunct			Subject		Finite/Predicator		
	<b>they</b>	<b>massacred</b>	<b>and</b>	<b>raped</b>	<b>burned</b>	<b>and</b>	<b>looted</b>
Actor		Process:Material		Process:Material			Process:Material
Subject		Finite/Predicator	Adjunct	Finite/Predicator	Finite/Predicator	Adjunct	Finite/Predicator
	and		stopped				at nothing
Adjunct			Process:Material				Circumstance
			Finite/Predicator				Adjunct

By comparing the ST and TT, it can be found that both of them have six material processes. Besides the lack of finite in the ST, the only difference between the ST and TT is that there are five goals in the ST but there is no goal in the TT. Both the ST and the TT1 follow the same pattern of ‘Subject+Predicator+Complement’. The syntactic structure of the SL and TL is almost the same. Actually this viewpoint is also stated in *A History of Grammaticalization in Chinese – Motivation and Mechanisms of Evolution of Chinese Morpho-syntax* written by Shi Yuzhi and Charles N. Li. According to Shi Yuzhi and Charles N. Li (2001, pp. 6-8), the SVO pattern is the best and most economical optimal structure. The Proto-Indo-European follows the SOV pattern, but later it changes into SVO. Both English and Chinese follow

the pattern of SVO. Both the ST and TT1 and TT2 can be analyzed on the rank of clause. The functions of the different elements of the clause such as subject, predicator and complement are the same. On the other hand, there are some differences between the ST and TT. In the Chinese version there is no the element of finite but the TT has this element. Here is another example. The sentence ‘I am a student,’ can be translated into ‘我是学生’ (Chinese) and ‘私は学生です’ (Japanese). It can be found that English and Chinese adopt the sentence pattern of ‘S+V+O,’ while Japanese uses the sentence pattern of ‘S+O+V.’ The difference between the syntax patterns shows that on the rank of clause and sentence, there’re also some arbitrary factors.

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## CONCLUSION

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In conclusion, Saussure's assertion of the arbitrary principle of the linguistic sign is right. And his classification of relative and absolute arbitrariness is also scientific. But different ranks of the linguistic system have different degrees of arbitrariness. On the lexical level, arbitrariness is quite obvious. However, iconicity gradually increases on the phrasal level and syntactical level.

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