# On the Arbitrariness of Linguistic Signs

## SUR LE CARACTÈRE ARBITRAIRE DES SIGNES LINGUISTIQUES

### ZHENG Xiao-dan[1]

**Abstract:**  There are many different opinions on the arbitrariness of linguistic signs. This paper will review these different understandings of the arbitrariness and linguistic signs and some arguments of some famous linguists over the arbitrariness of linguistic signs. Although now we can not gain a final solution to these arguments, we can see that these arguments themselves are developing, improving and that they improve the theory of arbitrariness of linguistic signs as a whole. Holding a developing and philosophical attitude to the arbitrariness of linguistic signs, we can say that while the connection of sound to concept may have been arbitrary, the relationships between linguistic signs after they are made within a language system are not arbitrary.
**Key words**:  arbitrariness; linguistic signs; comprehensive view

**Résumé:** Il y a beaucoup d'opinions différentes sur le caractère arbitraire des signes linguistiques. Cet article passera en revue quelques conceptions différentes et des arguments de certains linguistes célèbres sur le caractère arbitraire des signes linguistiques. Bien que nous ne pouvons pas avoir une solution définitive à ces arguments, nous pouvons constater que ces arguments sont eux-mêmes en cours de se développer et s'améliorer et qu'ils améliorent la théorie de l'arbitraire des signes linguistiques dans son ensemble. En tenant une attitude philosophique en développement à l'égard de l'arbitraire des signes linguistiques, nous pouvons dire que bien que la connexion du son au concept pouvait être arbitraire, les relations entre les signes linguistiques après leur création dans un système linguistique ne sont pas arbitraires.
**Mots-clés:** arbitraire; signes linguistiques; opinion globale

Since very early times, human beings have paid attention to the arbitrariness of linguistic signs. In Ancient Greece, Aristotle pointed out "there is no natural relation between the sound of any language

[1] Beijing Normal University, School of Foreign Languages and Literatures,100875, China.
E-mail: zhengxiaodanbnu@163.com

and the thing it refers" (Chandler, 2002:26). Whitney once pointed out in *Language and Language Study* that every language is arbitrary, conventional signs. In the pre-Qin Dynasty period in Ancient China, there were debates on the relationship between signifier and signified. However, it is Saussure who first expounded the arbitrariness of linguistic signs systematically. The Swiss scholar Ferdinand De Saussure (1857-1913), who is considered to be the 'father of modern linguistics', first brought out a systematically understanding of arbitrariness and he held that arbitrariness was the first principle of language signs.

This theory is the foundational theory of Saussure's Linguistics. It greatly influenced the development of modern linguistics. Since then linguistics has won worldwide interest. The arbitrariness of linguistic signs is widely accepted. Many scholars support this theory of Saussure's and hold that arbitrariness is the first principle of linguistic signs, although some of them admit that there are other characteristics of linguistic signs. With the development of linguistics, many new findings have appeared in this area, and then many scholars have started to doubt this theory, question it or even oppose it. People begin to think deeply and carefully about the relationship between the pronunciation and the meaning of a linguistic sign. This inquiry has been going since Sassure, even since Plato, and it never ceases. We can see that the principle of arbitrariness proposed by Saussure has been argued for nearly half a century and different scholars hold different interpretations. They all have their own opinions about this theory. Based on these arguments, this paper has turned up a more comprehensive and philosophic attitude on the arbitrariness of linguistic signs to readers: the origin of linguistic signs is arbitrary, while they have been coined and then used within a language system that is not arbitrary.

# MEANINGS OF LINGUISTIC SIGNS AND ARBITRARINESS

In Saussure's works, linguistic signs do not stand for anything and they just show a sort of relationship of convention between two factors. In Course of Linguistics, he said "what linguistic signs link is not the thing and its name, but the concept and sound image" and "we call the combination of concept and sound image signs" (Saussure, 1980:101).

However, some scholars now divide signs into two kinds: the first one is pure sign; the second one is a compound sign. Compound words and phrases belong to compound signs.

Arbitrariness of linguistic signs was first discussed by Saussure. However, there are many explanations of arbitrariness besides Saussure's. In *Advanced Linguistics* (Hu, 2002:5), this theory is interpreted to mean that the forms of linguistic signs bear no natural relationship to their meaning. Saussure's initial definition of the principle of arbitrariness and its relationship to the sign is as follows: this link unifying signifier and signified is arbitrary or, even more, since we understand by the sign the total result of association of a signifier with a signified, we can say more simply: the linguistic sign is arbitrary (Saussure, 1959:100).

Based on that theory, there are many examples. For instance, we cannot explain why a book is called a /buk/ and a pen a /pen/ (Hu Zhuanglin, 2002:5).

Besides Saussure's own explanation, this principle has evoked various understandings and explanations of the natures of linguistic signs. Some scholars point out that Saussure's core insight lies at the heart of deconstruction and a host of related intellectual fashions. They say that he defines a linguistic sign as the combination of a signifier and a signified, that the signifier (which carries meaning) and the signified (the meaning which is carried) have no essential relationship (Saussure, 2001, p.67), thus the lack of relationship exposes the arbitrary nature of all languages and language-like systems (Hu Huiqin, 2007:3).

# SUPPORTERS OF ARBITRARINESS

Saussure's interpretation of arbitrariness contains four parts: first, it says that the component of arbitrariness is concept and the sound image, that is signifier and signified; second, the arbitrariness of linguistic signs are mainly shown at the level of signs, but not at that of syntax or grammar or anything else; third, languages have no relationship with the world; fourth, linguistic signs and their arbitrariness should be understood synchronically (WANG, 2006:3).

There is no doubt that Saussure himself always holds that linguistic signs are arbitrary and he also develops his theory to explain some problems of the arbitrariness

of linguistic signs and to defend his theory. For example, when some scholars take onomatopoeia and interjections as counter-examples of arbitrariness, Saussure thought that onomatopoeia word-construction was not an organic part of a language system…they were not only limited in number, but also the choice of word was somewhat arbitrary because they just imitated some sounds and these imitations were more or less conventional.(Saussure, 1980:69) For example, in English the word "bark" is used to describe the sound that a dog makes while in Chinese "wang" is used.

Mainstream linguists support this claim. The Formal linguistics school, which is led by Chomsky, also totally supports this claim. Chomsky developed Saussure's arbitrariness theory and made this theory more believable. The principle of arbitrariness is also supported by Hockett (1960), who regards arbitrariness as the basic principle of linguistic signs; by Lyons (1977), who believes that there are sixteen characteristics of linguistic signs, among which arbitrariness occupies the dominant position; by Culler (1976), who suggests "both signifier and signified are purely relational or differential entities" by Suo Zhenyu (1995), who believes that "Saussure's principle of arbitrariness is reasonable;" by WANG Dechun (2001) and Guo Hong (2001), who completely or partly agree on the point that linguistic signs are arbitrarily connected with the entities, etc. The principle of arbitrariness was once in a predominant position particularly before the 1980s until further study was conducted.  Some Problems and Doubts of These Claims

With deeper insight into the natures of languages, linguistic experts have found evidence against the arbitrary nature of languages, which has led them to propose new and different opinions. The most influential of these is that of Holdcroft (1991) who holds that the arbitrariness of linguistic signs is "a questionable idea". Halliday, who also questions the arbitrariness of languages, regards arbitrariness as a conflicting concept to functional linguistics (1985). According to Pierce, iconicity can account for some motivation in linguistic signs. According to Wittgenstein, the notion of "family resemblance" can account for some motivated linguistic signs. Other scholars, such as Wright (1976) and Noth (1990:254), propose different viewpoints against arbitrariness from various perspectives. D. Bolinger et al (1981:11) point out that nothing related to language is arbitrary, for any element in language has its non-arbitrary sources. For years, many Chinese scholars study semiotic theories in great detail. XU Guo-ZHANG argues that "since language belongs to rational behavior, how is it possible to be arbitrary" (1991:21-22). Li Baojia (1994) believes that the relationship between the system of linguistic signs and the objective physical world (including the mental world) is never arbitrary. Although opinions vary from individual to individual, they have something in common. That is, arbitrariness and motivation are considered as two conflicting concepts, indicating that linguistic signs are either arbitrary or motivated. Even when more and more linguistic signs serve as evidence to support motivation, the two conflicting concepts are confined to the viewpoint that those linguistic signs have to be one or the other.

In China, at the very beginning of 1990s, XU Guo-zhang, Shi Anshi and Li Baojia posed doubts of the arbitrariness of linguistic signs. WANG Yan, another linguist in China, takes Chinese hieroglyphs as an example to prove that arbitrariness of linguistic signs is not always the case. Sentences and compound words are not arbitrary, either. For example, this sentence "I have to go" cannot be changed into "I to have go" or "I go have to", and the word greenhouse cannot be changed into housegreen. For some single words, arbitrariness is not always suitable. Onomatopoeia is not arbitrary and its sound and its meaning have some relations.

XU Guo-zhang thought that the signifier and signified were linked by linguistic control and social control, so it could not be arbitrary. Yang Xinzhang criticized Saussure because his theory on arbitrariness dispensed with many important parts such as society, culture and politics. Fan Wenfang (2002) pointed out that arbitrariness could account for just some words, but the whole language system is

a motivated, multi-level system. WANG Yan (1999) thinks linguistic signs are phonemic iconicities, and in syntax arbitrariness is not suitable. Li Baojia totally opposes arbitrariness of linguistic signs. He thinks that Saussure ignores historical development. He gives many examples where one thing has more than one name and different names signify one thing to prove the nonarbitrariness of linguistic signs.

To sum up the points above, there are mainly two sides to challenge or oppose the arbitrariness of linguistic signs.

Firstly, some scholars hold that the phonemic iconicity of linguistic signs. There are many examples of this theory. Worker is consisted of work and –er and farmer is consisted of farm and –er; housewife is consisted of house and wife. These examples suggest that while the components are arbitrary, their combination in a compound word is not. Lysiposhen discusses the phonemic iconicity of linguistic signs in his famous work *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin*. He says the phonemic iconicity of linguistic signs exists in the usage and development of languages. Actually iconicity was first brought out by the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce. He classified linguistic signs and analyzed them deeply. According to his theory, he divided signs into three sorts: symbol, index and icon. He contributed much to the development of the phonemic iconicity of linguistic signs.

Secondly, many linguists believe in the motivation of linguistic signs but not the arbitrariness. Plato and Augustine began to notice the motivation of linguistic signs. However, the understanding of the motivation of linguistic signs is not developed much at that time and after that it developed quite slowly as well because of the unbreakable position of the arbitrariness of linguistic signs. Gradually, it develops and begins to catch the attention of linguists.

One why that linguistic signs may be motivated is that the pronunciation and the meaning of a sign can be related to each other. This is widely used by many poets and writers, such as Alexander Pope, Alfred Tennyson and James Joyce. They all notice the relations between sounds and meanings, and they make quite full use of this theory in their writing. In children's literatures, sound-meaning relations are very common, such as wham，ka boom，boff，chomp, power and gong ----they all usually appear in children's literatures. Now sound-meaning relations are used in naming some proper nouns. For example, Humpty Dumpty, Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Tarzan, Dumbledore, Ato/Nik, Mickey, xeon, Volvo, Pif-Paf and Kit-Kat are this kind of usage. Furthermore, it is widely used in English teaching. If we delete the borrowed words, compound words and words constructed by prefix or suffix, we have root words. Most of them are arbitrary in nature, but after one learns these words then it is helpful for him to learn other words related to the root word and those words are motivated in nature. We must admit that we just use the sound-meaning relation to help us remember glare，glow，gleam，glimmer，glint and bump, clump，chump，dump，hump，lump，Plump，stump，thump and groups of words like these. We can not use the arbitrariness of linguistics to negate the motivation of linguistic signs (Li, 2004:2).

# PHILOSOPHICAL ATTITUDE TOWARD THIS CLAIM

Although there are many scholars that support the arbitrariness of linguistic signs and many linguists oppose it, yet there are some scholars that take this claim philosophically. They think that both arbitrariness and non-arbitrariness exist in linguistic signs. They are two sides of linguistic signs and they are unified as a whole.

We all know that linguistic signs are not fragmentary, on the contrary, they form a close and strict unit and that is the language system. The language system contains many sub-systems and these sub-systems consist of different levels in the language system. The structure of each level is relatively independent as well as depends on one another. Every level has its own unit and category. Its specific internal relations, structural signs and the compound-conditions of signs form the regularities of language. Thus, arbitrary linguistic signs exist in the conditional and regular relations.

We see any natural relationship of signifier and signified independently, it is arbitrary. However, taken it within the whole language system, it is easy to find that the arbitrariness of linguistic signs is

restricted by other factors in the system to some degree. Let us take the word "red" as an example. When we say the word "red", we know that it stands for a specific color. At the very beginning, red was used to stand for the specific color and it is arbitrary. There is no reason for it. Nevertheless, after it is used since then, it becomes a convention and now when we use it, we have to consider its usage because it is used with other factors in the whole language system. We can say a red flag, a red flower, and they are acceptable. If we say red run or red jump, normally it sounds strange because it does not fit the convention. Red, as an adjective, can be used before a noun to describe the state of the noun. If it is used before a verb, it is unacceptable. Therefore, we can find that the combination of linguistic signs is not arbitrary and it is restricted by language regularities. Meanwhile, it is affected by word speeches and word orders.

In a word, both the arbitrariness and the non-arbitrariness exist in linguistic signs. The origin of signs is arbitrary. With the development of language, regularities appear to regulate language as well as provide us a way to learn language. If we completely agree that all linguistic signs are arbitrary, how can we explain the relationship between greenhouse and green and house? Moreover, let us suppose that if there is not any motivation which means linguistics is totally arbitrary and we can create any sign with any meaning, how can we learn languages and communicate with others?

# CONCLUSIONS

Taking all these interpretations together, we can find that originally linguistic signs were arbitrary. The focus of those who doubt or oppose this theory is not on the origin of linguistic signs but on other levels of linguistics, such as compound words. Let us take the language system as a whole, and we can see that because of the arbitrariness of linguistic signs, we can accept why book is /buk/; on the other hand, because of the nonarbitrariness of linguistic signs, we can learn of the motivation of linguistic signs, learning languages and creating new words based on these original words. To sum up, with the development of languages and linguistics, arbitrariness appears in different features on different levels of linguistics. The origin of linguistic signs was arbitrary, but after the arbitrary signs were used to signify a certain concept, they gradually became a convention and became non-arbitrary.

# REFERENCES

Bolinger, D. (1977). *Meaning and Form*. London: Longman.

Chandler, D. (2002). *Semiotics: the basics*. London: Routledge.

Culler, J. (1976). *Ferdinand de Saussure*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

GUO Hong. (2001). *Does Saussure's principle of the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs still hold water? —A discussion with Prof.*

FAN Wen-fang & WANG Ming-jie (2002), Reconsidering of Saussure's Opinions on Arbitrariness of Linguistic Signs. Beijing: *Foreign Language Teaching and Research, (3)*, 3－6.

FAN Wen-fang, WANG Qian & XU Ying. (2002). Discussion on the motivation of linguistic signs. *Journal of Qinghua University,* 88－91.

Halliday, Michael A. K. (1985). *An introduction to functional grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.

Hockett, C. F. (1960). The origin of language. *Scientific American, (203).*

Holdcroft, D. (1991). *Saussure: Signs, system, and arbitrariness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

HU Hui-qin. (2007). *Review of the studies on arbitrariness and motivation of linguistic signs*.USA.

HU Zhuang-lin. (2002). *Advanced Linguistics*. Beijing: Beijing University Press.

LI Bao-jia. (1994), On Saussure's mistakes in his arbitrariness of linguistic signs. *Applied Linguistics,* (3), 22-28.

Lyons, J. (1977). *Semantics (Vols. I, II)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Saussure, F. de. (2001). Course in general linguistics. Roy Harris (Ed. and Trans.). Beijing: *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*.

SUO Zhen-yu. (1995). The principle of arbitrariness proposed by Saussure is proper. *Applied Linguistics*, *(2)*, 73-76.

WANG De-chun. (2001). The arbitrariness and motivation of linguistic units. *Journal of Foreign Languages, (1)*.

WANG Yan. (1999). *On the Commonality of Linguistic Signs*. Beijing: Xinhua Press.

WANG Yan (2007). Arbitrary and Non-arbitrary Linguistic Signs: From an International Point of View. *Journal of Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics*.

WANG Yin (2002). Philosophical Basis of and Dialectical Relations Between Iconicity and Arbitrariness. *Journal of PLA University*.

WANG Yin. *Foreign Languages Research*, (1).

XU Guo-zhang (1991). *XU Guo-zhang's Viewpoint on Language*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

ZHANG Shao-jie. (2004). *Comments on Saussure's Philosophical Linguistic Thoughts*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.