Nature of the Linguistic Sign

Ferdinand de Saussure

(1907–1911)

Ferdinand de Saussure was a linguist working right around the turn of the twentieth century. He is credited with pointing out many important aspects of language, such as that it can be looked at not only historically (diachronically), but also synchronically. Language is an ordered system, a set of rules, but it is not a static entity. It is constantly evolving, and new words are constantly being added to the language. Saussure also introduced the concept of the signifier and the signified, which are the two parts of a word.

Reading Questions

1. What is the linguistic sign unit?
2. What are the two aspects of a linguistic sign?
3. How can looking across languages emphasize that fact?
4. What does Saussure mean by "the arbitrary nature of the sign"?

Sign, Signifier, Signified

Some people regard language as a tool that exists independently of human society. Others believe that language is a social construct that exists only within a particular society.

Vocabulary

arbitrariness
blending
closed-call system
comparative method
designed for
(d)esign features
discrete, discreetness
dissimilation
duality of patterning
extrageneric
hominal
morpheme
philology, philological
plasticity
primitive
productivity
protolinguistic
Proto-Indo-European
semantics
traditional transmission

Post-reading Questions / Activities

1. How has "traditional transmission" played a role in the development of human society?
2. What is the relationship between human language and nonhuman communication?
3. How does it impact your view of the relationship between language and real-world phenomena?

Suggested Further Reading


This conception is open to criticism at several points. It assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words...; it does not tell us whether a name is the result of biological evolution (or of some other, more complex, process).
The psychological character of our sound-images becomes apparent when we observe our own speech. With out moving our lips or tongue, we can talk to ourselves or recite mentally a selection of verse. Because we regard the words of our sound-images, we must avoid the words' "phonemes" that make up the words. This speaking of the "phonemes" is applicable to the spoken word only, to the realization of the inner image in discourse. We can avoid misunderstanding by speaking of the sounds and syllables of a word provided we remember that the names refer to the sound-image.

The linguistic sign is then a two-sided psychological entity that can be represented by the drawing:

![Diagram of a sign]

The two elements are intimately united, and each recalls the other. Whether we try to mention the feeling of the Latin word arbor or the word that Latin uses to designate the concept "tree," it is clear that only the associations sanctioned by that language appear to us to conform to reality, and we disregard whatever others might be imagined.

Our definition of the linguistic sign is not an important question of terminology. I call the combination of a certain sign, 

Principle I: The Arbitrary Nature of the Sign

The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Since I mean by sign the whole that arises from the associating of the signifier with the signified, I can simply say: the linguistic sign is arbitrary.

The idea of "sister" is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds s-i-t-er, which serves as its signifier in French. The French word could be presented equally by the signified ox as its signifier b-e-x on one side of the border and e-ox (Oxen) on the other. No one disputes the principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign, but it is often easier to discover a truth than to assign it to its proper place. Principle I dominates all the linguistic conceptions, and its consequences are unnumbered. It is true that not all of them are equally obvious at first glance; Principle I leaves all the latter consequences of the principle.

One remark in passing: when semiotics becomes organized as a science, the question will arise whether or not it properly includes modes of expression based on completely natural signs, such as pantomime. Supposing that the new science welcomes all phenomena that are characterized as signs, its main concern will still be the whole group of systems grounded on the arbitrariness of the sign. In effect, every means of expression is arbitrary by what is ety is based, in principle, on an arbitrary behavior or what amounts to the same thing—on convention. Polite formula, for instance, though often imbued with a certain natural expressiveness (as in the case of a Chinese word whose by his emperor by bowing down to the ground nine times), are nonetheless fixed by rule; it is this rule and not the intrinsic value of the gestures that obliges one to use them. Signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semiotic procedure that is why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is also the most characteristic; in this sense linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiotic, although language is only one particular semiotic system.

The word symbol has been used to designate the linguistic sign, or more specifically, what is here called the signifier. Principle I in particular weighs against the use of this term. One characteristic of the symbol is that it is not 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 a chalice.

The word arbitrary also calls for comment. The term should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker (since I am satisfied the individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community); I mean that it is unmovated, i.e., arbitrary, in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified.
PART 1 The Nature of Language

The psychological character of our sound-images becomes apparent when we observe our speech. With out moving our lips or tongue, we can talk to ourselves or recite mentally a selection of verse. Because we regard the words of our spoken language as sound-images, we must avoid the words of our phonetics in speaking of the "phonemes" that make up the words. This speaking of the spoken sound-image is applicable to the spoken word only, to the realization of the inner image in discourse. We can avoid that misunderstanding by speaking of the sounds and syllables of a word provided we remember that the names refer to the sound image.

The linguistic sign is then a two-sided psychological entity that can be represented by the drawing:

![Diagram of a linguistic sign]

The two elements are intimately united, and each recalls the other. Whether we try to meaning the Latin word arbor or the word that Latin uses to designate the concept "tree," it is clear that only the associations sanctioned by that language appear to us in conformity to reality, and we disregard whatever others might be imagined.

Our definition of the linguistic sign is not an important question of terminology. I call the combination of a concept and a sound-image a sign, but in current usage concept and a sound-image a sign, but in current usage concept and a sound-image a sign. As a sound, the question will arise whether or not it properly includes modes of expression based on completely natural signs, such as pantomime. Supposing that the new science of language is in its main current will be the whole group of systems grounded on the arbitrariness of the sign. In fact, every means of expression whatever is arbitrary. The sign isety is based on principles and behavior or—what amounts to the same thing—on convention. Polite formulas, for instance, though often imbued with a certain natural expressiveness (as in the case of a Chinese who greets his emperor by bowing down to the ground nine times), are nonetheless fixed by rule; it is this rule and not the intrinsic value of the gestures that obliges one to use them. Signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semiotic process. Only in the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is also the most characteristic; in this sense linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of a language, a system of signs, and not just the logical system of natural signs.

The word symbol has been used to designate the linguistic sign, or more specifically, what is here called the signifier. Principle I particularly concerns the use of this sign. 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 a chalice.

The word arbitrary also calls for comment. The term should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker (since I am satisfied with it), but simply because it only results from a natural bond between the signifier and the signified.

More Questions/Activities:

- Why was it important for Saussure to show that the relationship between sign and signifier is arbitrary? Can you think of an (unmentioned) argument that he is refuting?
- Why does he argue that onomatopoeias and interjections are not central parts of language? What do you have to do with his claims about arbitrariness?
- Pick an aspect of human behavior (clothing, food, art, film, etc.) and see how you might begin to look at it as a set of signs.
CHAPTER 4

How Language Works

Steven Pinker (1994)

Psychologist Steven Pinker has been interpreting and building on the ideas of linguist Noam Chomsky since the 1990s. This chapter comes from his book The Language Instinct, which introduces the notion of generative grammar. Chomsky showed in the 1950s and 1960s that language cannot be learned simply through imitation and repetition; children make errors they have never heard. Further, the words in a sentence are not simply equivalent. They form clusters that are regular components, such as the prepositional phrase up the creek. These components move as units.

One of the most important properties of language, according to this viewpoint, is its potential for infinitely new sentences, for productivity, for generating novelty. This novelty, however, is nonetheless intelligible.

For Pinker, and Chomsky, language is innate, and it is mental. Though there are clearly physical dimensions to speech, its interesting and important properties are entirely in the mind.

Though Chomsky's work relied on analysis of English, he claimed that all languages really embody the single principles of Universal Grammar.

Reading Questions

- What are the two "tricks" that allow humans to understand language? Which of Hockett's design features (Chapter 2) are these?
- Why does Pinker say it is important that humans can produce and understand a huge number of sentences? How does he explain this?
- Why is what he calls a "word-chain device" not an adequate model for how human language works?
- What are the "trees" that Pinker introduces? How are they related to ambiguous sentences (sentences with more than one meaning)?

Journalists say that when a dog bites a man that is not news, but when a man bites a dog that is news. This is the essence of the language instinct: language conveys news. The streams of words called "sentences" are not just memory prods, reminding you of man and man's best friend and letting you fill in the rest; they tell you who in fact did what to whom. Thus we get more from most stretches of language than Woody Allen got from War and Peace, which he read in two hours after taking speed-reading lessons: "It was about some Russians." Language allows us to know how octopuses make love and how to remove cherry stains and why Tad was heartbroken, and whether the Red Sox will win the World Series without a good relief pitcher and how to build an atom bomb in your basement and how Catherine the Great died, among other things.

When scientists see some apparent magic trick in nature, like bats homing in on insects in pitch blackness or salmon returning to breed in their natal stream, they look for the engineering principles behind it. For bats, the trick turned out to be sonar; for salmon, it was locking in to a faint scent trail. What is the trick behind the ability of Homo sapiens to convey that man bites dog?

In fact there is not one trick but two, and they are associated with the names of two European scholars who wrote in the nineteenth century: The first principle, articulated by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, is "the arbitrariness of the sign," the wholly conventional pairing of a sound