

ON THE LINGUISTIC RELEVANCE OF PHONETIC ICONISM

Norman Janis

In opposition to Saussure's doctrine that the linguistic sign is arbitrary, two independent assertions may be made: 1) that the connection between signans and signatum is not arbitrary, but necessary; 2) that this ⁿconnection is not always arbitrary, but may sometimes, and in important ways, be appropriate (or, in Peirce's terms, that the linguistic relation between sign and object may be iconic as well as symbolic). Each of these assertions, it may be noted, confronts a different aspect of the notion of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign.

Benveniste (*Acta Linguistica* I, 1939) and Jakobson (implicitly in various writings, explicitly in the "Retrospect" of 1962) have made the first assertion. The argument which supports it is that to regard the linguistic sign as arbitrary is to disregard "the differentia specifica that marks out any given feature with respect to all other distinctive features of the same language" (Jakobson, Selected Writings, p. 653). The relativity of linguistic values to one another implies their necessity (non-arbitrariness) within the system of a language. To object to Saussure's notion of arbitrariness on these grounds is, as both Benveniste and Jakobson emphatically state, not really to oppose Saussure so much as it is to correct him in the light of his own teachings. His doctrine of the relativity of linguistic values has been taken up and amplified; its amplification has revealed what Saussure himself seems not to have seen -- that this doctrine contradicts the doctrine of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign.

There is, however, an aspect to the notion of arbitrariness which the idea of the relativity of values within a linguistic system does not contradict. As his discussion of onomatopoeia (p. 101-2) shows, at least part of what Saussure had in mind in ^oproounding the notion of

arbitrariness is that signans does not resemble signatum, that the connection between signans and signatum is based not on likeness but on convention. In Peirce's terms, Saussure is saying that linguistic signs are not iconic but only symbolic.

(It is interesting that Benveniste, in his criticism of Saussure's doctrine of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, assumes that "arbitrary" must mean "non-necessary"; he explicitly dismisses as misguided the ^{idea} ~~possibility~~ that "arbitrary" means "non-iconic". He may be damaging Saussure a little with this dismissal. A case could be made for the compatibility of Saussure's notions of arbitrariness and relativity if we interpret "arbitrary" as "non-iconic". In fact, such an interpretation of Saussure's statements about arbitrariness strengthens his arguments for the relativity of values within a linguistic system: according to this interpretation, Saussure is insisting that the value of a linguistic sign resides only in its relation to other linguistic signs and not in any inherent, non-arbitrary connection with phenomena. In other words, it seems possible that for Saussure, "arbitrary" does not mean "non-necessary with respect to the linguistic system," but rather "non-appropriate, non-iconic with respect to phenomena." If this is so, then of the two assertions mentioned above, only the second is really in opposition to Saussure. The first is an assertion well worth making, but it clarified Saussure rather than contradicts him. The net effect of applying the first assertion to Saussure is that we can say that, if by "arbitrary" Saussure had meant "non-necessary with respect to the linguistic system", he would have been contradicting himself.)

Saussure's discussion of onomatopoeia is open to criticism on a number

of grounds. In order to deny the significance of the "sonerite suggestive" of such words as feu and glas (which, by the way, do not seem to be particularly cogant examples of suggestiveness), he argues that the Latin words from which these words are descended do not have this same suggestiveness. Such an argument surely violates the boundary which Saussure himself has set down between synchronic and diachronic views of language: the suggestiveness of words in their present phonological shape is a synchronic fact, independent of their history. Furthermore, Saussure seems to imply that the iconic suggestiveness of words is a subjective and perhaps accidental sort of thing ("Des mots comme feu ou glas peuvent frapper certaines oreilles par une sonerite suggestive...") There have been many studies of this question of suggestiveness, however, which seem to indicate that phonetic icons have an objective (i.e., commonly perceived; operative among speakers in linguistic intercourse and not merely present haphazardly and subjectively to the mind of an individual speaker insofar as he is isolated from other speakers) existence in language. (It should be noted that what is here called a "phonetic icon" is, for Saussure and most other linguists who have written about this question, a "phonetic symbol". The term "icon" is preferred here because it admits of more exact definition within the context of Peirce's terminology.)

Studies of phonetic iconism may, for purposes of discussion, be divided into three types. Studies of the first type begin with phonetic contrasts outside the context of any particular language and attempt to show that these contrasts have (metaphorical) meanings which are roughly the same for all human beings. One of the best examples of such a study is Sapir's "A Study in Phonetic Symbolism". There are several similar studies done by psychologists. Fónagy's book Die Metaphern in der Phonetik

may also be mentioned in this connection. Central to studies of this type is the concept of synaesthesia. The central thesis is that the human mind correlates contrasts in one sphere of sensation with contrasts in another (e.g., correlates seen dark vs. light with heard low vs. high) and that different human minds make such correlations with a great degree of sameness. If this thesis is correct, then words (or other linguistic units), since they must, in order to be understood by the intellect, also be perceived through one of the senses, are subject to synaesthetic associations and can be felt as more or less appropriate (icons^C) to their meanings. Such feeling of appropriateness are not, then, primarily subjective; phonetic icons cannot be dismissed as striking only certain ears.

Studies of the second type are concerned with these phonemic components of morphemes which may in themselves have some meaning or expressive power (e.g., the phonemic group /gl/ in English gleam, glimmer, glare, etc.). Some of these studies -- a good example is Marchand's "Phonetic symbolism in English word-formation" -- are mainly lists of such expressive sub-morphemes and attempts to specify their meanings. Others, like Belinger's essays in Language, Harris' remarks in Structural Linguistics, and Wells' and Kayser's The Common Feature Method, attack the question of how an entity such as /gl/ could fit into a morphemic analysis of English. These studies differ from the first type in that 1) they are not concerned with phonetic contrasts as engendering meaning, but only with empirically given meaningful sub-morphemes; 2) they ask grammatical rather than psychological questions. Such studies provide evidence that phonetic iconism in natural languages is not either so quantitatively limited that it can be dismissed from the consideration

of linguists. Stud

Studies of the third type are concerned primarily with the sorts of meanings which are expressible by sounds without morphemic status. Examples are Jespersen's chapter on "Sound Symbolism" in his Language, and Hiler's Schallnachahmung, Wertschöpfung und Bedeutungswandel.

It is still possible, all these studies of phonetic iconism notwithstanding, for a Saussurian to reject the investigation of phonetic iconism as irrelevant to the linguist. Many objections can be made to the sorts of evidence surveyed above. The psychological evidence for phonetic iconism, the fact that the elements of language are subject to synaesthetic association -- all this, the Saussurian could maintain, ^{is} as irrelevant to the linguist as numerology is to the mathematician. The fact that human minds can find extramathematical (e.g., mythological) significance in numbers does not change the character of numbers in their rôle in the mathematician's systems. So also with the elements of language, which are interesting to the linguist only for the rôles they play in the system of a language, not for whatever other kinds of significance they may have. That synaesthetic associations may in themselves be systematic does not mean they form part of the system of language.

As for the existence of expressive sub-morphemes, even if it cannot be denied, it is not at all clear to a Saussurian how such sub-morphemes fit into the system of a language. If one admits some the proposed expressive sub-morphemes into the system of the language, where does one draw the line which will exclude others? Or is every group of phonemes and even every single phoneme to be considered also as an expressive sub-morpheme? Wells and Kayser offer a list of all the English words beginning with /b/ which denote some sort of container, as if such a signification

could be a property of this phoneme in initial position. To make such a claim is to err not only in fact -- since there are, by informal count of the present writer, just about as many words in common current usage beginning with /p/ which denote some sort of container; and almost as many beginning with /k/ -- but also in principle, since to attribute absolutely a certain meaning to a phoneme is to deny the opposite, relative, and negative values of phonemes. The psychological evidence for phonetic iconism is based on phonetic contrasts and so seems at least to be dealing with the same sort of entities that a linguist deals with, but the evidence of the sub-morpheme analysts is based for the most part on absolute, isolated facts which do not function like the phonological and morphological entities of the linguist. Not surprisingly, Harris and Bolinger, at any rate, bring up the subject of such sub-morphemes only to decide finally that nothing can be done with them, that they are to be excluded from morpheme analysis.

Again, studies of the types of meaning which lend themselves to phonetic iconism may seem to the Saussurian to be analyses of reality -- what phenomena can be imitated in sound? -- rather than contributions to the understanding of linguistic structure. Thus a survey of studies in phonetic iconism, though it brings up some interesting facts and ideas related to language, seems to offer nothing substantial to the Saussurian who is concerned primarily with the structure of language.

The barrier which blocks the structural linguist from a proper appreciation and use of the facts of phonetic iconism (the existence of which he can not really doubt) is another of Saussure's doctrines, one which has been much criticized and revised by Jakobson, the doctrine that

synchronic means static. As long as he confines his investigations to a static langue, the synaesthetic value of phonemic oppositions means nothing to the linguist, for these phonemic oppositions, by his analysis, already have as much value as they need to build a language; the expressive value of phonemic components of morphemes counts for nothing, for there is no criterion by which it could be determined which of these components really function as sub-morphemes and which do not; knowledge of which meanings are imitable in sound is useless, since not the class of all possible denotations, but only the selection and structuring of denotations in *actual particular* languages is of interest.

The situation is quite altered if the dynamic nature of language, its functional differentiation through subcodes, is taken into consideration. If there is place in the linguist's ontology for such things as subcodes, and, in particular (for the purposes of the present paper), expressive subcodes, then there is also place to ask what distinguishes an expressive sub-code and puts it into opposition to a hypothetical principal (i.e., normal, central) code (the question of how a principal code can be defined remains to be answered and will not be discussed here). Surely one of the factors which distinguishes expressive subcodes from principal codes is the presence vs. absence (or functioning vs. non-functioning) of phonetic iconism. Just as ellipsis is a factor in the subcode which a speaker employs in a closed or intimate group when he wants to convey a message with greatest ease and speed and can take a good deal of contextual understanding for granted, so iconism is a factor in the subcode which a speaker employs when he wants not merely to convey a message but also to intensify the utterance and make it more expressive. One way to