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On Motivation/Iconicity and Arbitrariness of Idioms

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1. Introduction

In semiotics, a distinction is made between motivated/iconic and arbitrary signs (Cruse 2004:7). Idioms, however, are motivated/iconic *and* arbitrary and both aspects influence communication. The arbitrariness of idioms is underestimated as is considered a banality. But I will demonstrate that this is wrong and that the tendency to ban arbitrariness in favor of iconicity is dangerous as it has serious consequences, e.g. for the cross-linguistic treatment of idioms. For a more thorough discussion, see Farø (forthcoming)

2. Motivation and Iconicity

The notion of “motivation” has a wider function compared to the more technical “iconicity” which may be considered a special kind of motivation. Schippan (1992:167) considers motivation to be a relationship between the naming material and the content of the sign, whereas Barz (1982:8) equates motivation with «transparency». Iconicity, then, may be defined as *structural mimesis* between content and expression (cf. Hutton 1989:63). Idioms seem not only to be strongly motivated but sometimes also iconic. In recent years, a linguistic “Iconic Turn” has emerged whose follower “struggle against arbitrariness” (Simone 1995:ix) and strive to prove the “ubiquity of iconicity” in language (Nöth 2000). Important examples are Simone (1995) and Nänny & Fischer (1999). Motivation and iconicity are useful notions but they are also problematic as they are not objective entities.

3. Retrospective and Prospective Sign Analysis

Most writings on semiotic issues are *non-directional* as they do not specify the direction of the analysis. Two kinds of semiotic analyses exist, *retrospective* and *prospective*, going from content to expression and vice versa, respectively. What the retrospective analysis does not show is that it *constructs* a motivation as a subjective act. Therefore it is highly problematic to talk of “motivated signs”, as the actual motivation of lexemes is their place in the language system. That is why some phraseologists prefer to speak of *motivatable* signs. Idioms are retrospectively highly motivatable, but to be *motivated* they would also need to be so *prospectively*.

Today, “arbitrariness” is normally used as a scapegoat, legitimating one’s own (iconicistic) thesis. An often purported argument in linguistic works is that a certain phenomenon is, as it were, not arbitrary. Likewise, the idea that “arbitrary” and “non-motivated” are synonyms is widespread. Hence, Hutton (1989) states that “arbitrariness sits uncomfortably in the Western tradition, [...] for the notion of mimesis [...] remains dominant”.

Saussure pointed out, that arbitrariness is “the first principle of language” (1916:67) and to Hockett (1958) it is one of the “design features” of language. How come such an important principle seems to be about to be cast away?

4. Revitalizing Arbitrariness

There is no point in conserving the Saussurean concept if it does not serve its purpose. Because of the massive evidence of iconicity purported, it seems natural to de-emphasize or skip the notion of arbitrariness; however, it should rather be *radicalized*. When discussing arbitrariness, one should not necessarily strictly follow Saussure. Instead, one should consider the possible benefits of this notion. And the advantages of arbitrariness are too important to be rejected.

Saussure’s (1916) definition of the principle of arbitrariness is quite laconic: There is no “inner relationship” between the expression and the content plane of the sign. He also explains what is meant by this: (1) the content “could be represented by just another sequence”; (2) this “is proved by differences among languages”; (3) and signs are changeable. When speaking of “arbitrariness”, one should keep this whole complex in mind because “arbitrariness is rather more complex than [...] it appears to be” (Lyons 1977:101). It implies more than just “no connection between expression and content *whatsoever*.”

It is true that Saussure’s own examples of arbitrariness seem to indicate that it only holds for basic words. Likewise, he himself introduces *motivation* as a possible exception to the principle. But one should not overestimate examples as they do not always cover the whole object of interest. Saussure’s own discussion of motivation may actually be considered a fatal digression of his theory. He seems to have been unsettled about the status of “motivated” signs but why create this problem to the theory at all? The definition of arbitrariness mentioned above in fact applies to *all* kinds of signs, also idioms.

5. Idioms and Arbitrariness

Idioms are *functionally* and *cross-linguistically* arbitrary. There is no natural relationship between their expression and content. The relationship one may construct between the two is retrospective; it has no *prospective* explanatory power.

Functional arbitrariness means that there is no predictable relationship between idiom form and function. Lakoff (1987:380) states that “often the meaning of idioms is not arbitrary”, e.g. *spill the beans* is not, as “the beans correspond to information” and “[s]pilling corresponds to letting the information out” (ibid.:450). But this relationship is not systematic and certainly not natural. Rather, it is a psychological construction. It is impossible to predict the way this idiom is used from its expression plane.

Gibbs (1992) has argued that certain “anger idioms” are understood in terms of “conceptual metaphors”. But the understanding of idioms seems to depend highly on the mother tongue of the person interviewed. I asked a number of Danish native speakers who did not know the idioms, but the meaning of their components, what Gibbs’ idioms might mean. ‘Anger’ was mentioned only twice. Instead, *blow your stack* was associated with ‘empty one’s nose’, *flip your lid* with ‘greet sby’ and *hit the ceiling* with ‘be extremely happy’. These interpretations

could be explained by the existence of Danish idioms making it hard to maintain universal meanings based on idiom expression.

The *cross-linguistic arbitrariness* of idioms has been demonstrated by innumerable studies. Recently, Farø has pointed out that the seemingly large number of total idiom equivalents in Danish-German (Farø 2004a; Farø 2004b) must in many cases be revised, as “equivalence” often holds only in a coarse perspective not serving language production. *Granularity* is therefore highly relevant in studies of idiom equivalence: The more fine-grained the analysis, the more relevant the notion of arbitrariness. Ignoring granularity eventually causes everything to be the same (Chesterman 1998).

That they seem to be highly motivated is exactly what renders idioms problematic in interlingual communication as speakers therefore have difficulties handling them. Without any knowledge of arbitrariness it would be impossible.

Keysar & Bly (1995) have shown that “natural relations” between idiom expression and content is merely something learnt. Two separate groups were taught that the idiom *the goose hangs high* meant ‘sth is going very well’ and ‘very badly’, respectively. Soon the participants, when asked about a possible opposite meaning, stated this as “unnatural”. What looks like an “internal relationship” is in fact an arbitrary one.

All these idioms are *motivatable*, not *motivated*. In each case, the arguments for arbitrariness would fit in.

6. Conclusion

An attempt has been made to “save” the notion of arbitrariness by arguing that idioms – being highly motivatable and sometimes also iconic – are (functionally and cross-linguistically) arbitrary. This interpretation, however, demands a radical reading of “arbitrariness”. Arbitrariness does not deserve to be constantly under deconstruction. Motivation/iconicity and arbitrariness are coexisting rather than conflicting terms. Both perspectives are useful but the latter seems to have been somewhat lost out of sight. Maintaining that arbitrariness applies also to idioms is extremely helpful for critically handling hypotheses of cross-linguistic idiom equivalence: Many people consider the expression plane as the basis for deciding idiom equivalence but often the “iconicistic” idea of equivalence between HIP’s (Hypothetical Idiom Pairs) is ruled out by thorough empirical research. The principle of arbitrariness therefore constitutes a reminder that the expression is not a natural reflection of the content.

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