Reflections on the Arbitrariness of the Language from the Pragmatic and Cognitive Point of View

LI Jing [1, *]

[1] The Foreign Affairs Section of Department II of Nanjing International Relations Institute, Jiangsu Nanjing 210039, China.

ABSTRACT

The arbitrariness of language is proposed by Saussure. It arouses debate over the issues whether it is arbitrary to all the languages and in the levels of words or sentences. On the basis of the different viewpoints, in the frame of the pragmatic theory of adaptation and the characteristics of cognition, this essay is to point out that language is arbitrary in essence, but when it comes to the different languages in different areas or communities, it is not arbitrary. People incline to adapt their language to the environment and communication, which makes language arbitrary relatively. Besides, the human cognitive characteristics make the human study and use language in cognitive system. Cognition is different when people are exposed to different environment. Accordingly, languages to the same sign are different in terms of signifiers and usages. The relativity of language can be represented in three aspects: words level, syntactic level, and discourse level. They are not arbitrary absolutely but relatively, which is determined by many factors, such as cognitive characteristics, community cultures, and environment etc. The arbitrariness and non-arbitrariness complement each other. This also reflects that language is dynamic.

Key Words

arbitrariness, pragmatics, cognition.

Correspondence to:

LI Jing

East-unit Room 202, No.9,Tianmu Road, Gulou District, Nanjing city, Jiangsu province, 210097, China. Email: gmly1983@sohu.com (1983-, female, mainly engaged in Language Research)

Language is playing an increasingly important role in our modern life. Different researches on the language from different point of view are mushrooming. The design features of the language may be the basic researches to the language, of which the arbitrariness of language attracts the hot debate. Language is quite complex. We cannot give a definite answer to it, but we can observe its rules and its characteristics and try to account for it. In this paper, the arbitrariness is reflected on from the pragmatic and cognitive point of view. Pragmatics researches the exact use of language in communication, and cognition accounts for the language use scientifically. The two branches complement each other in the explanation for the language arbitrariness.

1. Different Ideas towards the Arbitrariness

Saussure(1959:100) held that the link unifying signifier and signified is arbitrary or, even more, since we understand by the sign the total result of the association of a signifier with a signified, we can say more simply: the linguistic sign is arbitrary. It can be understood that Saussure's claim is somehow reasonable, for example, in English, flower is called "flower", but in chinese people say "hua". The signified is the same, which is the flower, but the signifiers are different, pronunciations are different, as well as the spelling of words. It can be seen that language is semiotic sign. The signifier seems to have no relationship with signified. From this perspective, it is arbitrary. However, other linguists oppose it for different reasons. For example, French linguist Pierre Guiraud, proposed that different words could share the same meaning, how to explain? Like the words "smile" "laugh" "giggle" . Another linguist Halliday puts forth that syntax is less arbitrary than words. He agrees on the arbitrariness on the basic level, but not abousolutely.

2. The Adaptation Theory and Cognition Theory

2.1 The Adaptation theory

Jef Verschueren(2000:61) hold that adaptability is the property of language which enables human beings to make negotiable linguistic choices from a variable range of possibilities in such a way as to approach points of satisfaction for communicative needs. Adaptability makes people incline to choose the suitable expressions in accordance with the facing circumstance. This opinion is different from the universality, which believes that people is eqipped with an innate linguistic competence genetically and autonomously. Verschueren thinks that it is genetical but not autonomous. And at the same time, the expressions are shaped by the circumstance. So it is a dynamic process, not a quiet one. It is this characteristic that makes the language become more adapted and simplified to the environment. From Verschueren's view, it can be seen that language is developed and functioned in the communication, and it is the reflection of people's adaptation to the environment.and also the environment's influence on the language.

2.2 Cognition theory

Cognition is mental process that includes attention, memory, understanding language, problem solving and so on. F.Ungerer and H.J.Schmid(2005) introduce the cognitive theories, like conceptual metaphor, prototypicality, cognitive model, mental space, iconicity and so on. It involves different disciplines, such as psychology, philosophy, linguistics and cognition. When people study and use the language, the cognition is involved consciously or unconsciously. The cognitive linguistic research from

three ways: experiential view, prominent view and attention view. The experiential view describes objects not only from its referential function, but also provides vivid and natural description of its usages in social practice. For example, when people describe the a tourist spot, they may describe the beautiful scene and delicious food or disappointing scene and unfriendly local people,etc. The comment is given unconsciously, for this is natural for the human experience, making them compare and value the experience.People's cognition towards language has its own characteristics: people would like to learn and use the language to achieve their communicative aims; they assimilate the new language if it is convenient and suitable whereas they will give up the inconvenient and sophisticated ones. This is the economy principle. Besides, to understand and produce the new language, people have to understand the environment. Schmid has found that people perceive the world from the whole, and then their attributes. Of course it depends on the context and cognitive models and cultural models. For example, in terms of the flower, Japanese people would think of Cherry blossom as the prototype, while Chinese would think of Peonies or Plum Blossoms as the prototype.

3. The Account of Arbitrariness from the Pragmatic and Cognitive View

As said above, the arbitrariness of language is controversial. What is held is this essay is that the arbitrariness is relative, not absolute. This also reflects the language's dynamic characteristic. The most important thing is that people use language to serve for certain purpose, so it is related to the physical world, which is changing. The relativity is represented in the following ways:

3.1 Words Level

There are of course many words in different language that are arbitrary. Different language has different words for same thing in the physical world, but this does not mean that they are all arbitrary. For example, iconicity is the analogy between the sign and the object. As the words, "thunder", "click", "jangle", "pang", "babble", "roar" and so on. In such words, there is a relationship between the sign and the object or concept. This is contrast to the arbitrariness. The relationship is built above their similarities between the sign and the object, like the similar sound, as the "click", the similar phoneme "k". Besides, there are also

the difference, in chinese, it is expressed "kada", not "kaka", which proves that iconicity is not contrasting completely to the arbitrariness of language. They are in fact the two aspects of the language. That is, in the words level, language is arbitrary relatively, and it is not arbitrary as people all have the inclination to use language from the cognitive experience. When they choose to use language economically, conveniently, and vividly, it is not arbitrary. Just like our chinese, people from different areas in china may speak different dialects to refer to the same thing. They think it is very easy and convenient, and it is conventional, like it or not, they speak. Shanghainess say "nin" to signify the "ren"(person). What is the reason? In terms of the pronunciation, "nin" is more labor-saving than "ren". This is our human's inclination to save the labor and to be economical.

From the pragmatic point of view, both the arbitrariness and the non-arbitrariness grow up in the language communication. Without the communion, there will be no properties at all. People try to adapt their language to the communication, and also the language shapes their mind. For example, the creation of the new words or the borrowing of the new words to their own language system, like "tycoon" from China, referring to the rich and famous merchant or enterpreneur; "Kungfu"from China, due to the master Bruce Lee's achievement; "Tea" from Southern Fujian Dialect.This borrowed words not only convey the meaning, but also communicate the Chinese culture and spirit. The words I list above are created similar to its pronunciation in Chinese. For the English speaking countries, they are borrowed, so the arbitrariness of these words is not prominent. Therefore, we can see that the language is created and used for the needs of communication. It is related to the culture as well as the cognition.

3.2 Syntax Level

Syntax involves the sequence of the words order. It is also arbitrary relatively. When one says a sentence, he always tries to organize it beforehand in you mind. This is what our common people would like to do. What is conveyed is the meaning, not the sentence itself. Sometimes, sentences' sequence is arranged in different orders, but the meaning is not affected. In this case, it can be said that the syntax is arbitrary. For example, our chinese people would like to ask "whether you have eaten" as greeting, such as "Have you eaten?" or

"you have eaten?" "eaten, have you?", which have the same meaning "greeting". Here, the position of "you" does not affect the meaning in Chinese. Another example in English, "He danced and sang." And "He sang and danced". The sequence of the "dance"and "sing" does not affect the meaning,too. They all express the two actions simultaneously. So the arbitrariness of the synatax does exist in different languages.

Of course, it is not absolute.They are opposite. For example, when one says "He worked very hard and won the award" or " He won the award and worked very hard", the changing of the position of the two verbs makes the meaning different immediately. The former means he worked hard, so he won the award. The latter means that he won the award, which encouraged him to work hard. What makes this difference? The human epistemic experience and cognition requires our language to reflect the human cognitve experience. The language also is interpreted according to the human cognition and experience. What is worth notice is that the culture weighes great influence on the language use, just like the example given above, Chinese people's greeting is so different from the westers. "eating or not" is regarded as a warm greeting. It has deep relationship with our traditional culture, in which people attach great importance to the "eating" culture. Language is also changing, nowadays, young people would like to say "hello" as greeting.

The arbitrariness and the non-arbitrariness of the syntax also reflect people's adaptation to the environment. People would like to communicate the purpose clearly and appropriately. If you greet a close friend with the sentence "how do you do", or ask the supervisor "lend me a book", they all seem to be distanced and inappropriate. So the choice of the sentence structure reflects the people's choice and adaptation to the context and the relationship. Besides, the syntactic structure also reflects the speaker's and the addressee's speech focus. Just as the prominence and attention view, people would focus on the prominent information in the sentence, against the background information. For example, "He is fired by the boss." and "The boss fired him.". The two sentence almost means the same, but they have the subtle difference in emphasis or prominence. The former makes the addressee focus on "he", and the latter on the "boss". They have the different perspective. The former sentence may

want to tell us he was pitiful because he was fired, while the latter wants to say the boss made a decision, that is dismissing him. Which sentence is used depends on the needs for communicating purpose.

3.3 Discourse Level

In the discourse level, the arbitrariness is also relative. When people try to organize a text or discourse, they will try to employ different resources and skills to make it. During this period, all the resources and skills that are conducive to the discourse purpose could be pumped out. It can be arbitrary to some extent, and also determined by the style, the purpose and the environment of the discourse.

For example, Chinadaily news 2013, 10.3, Ttile:Retail therapy really DOES exist - and the desire to shop could be triggered by a fear of death.

Paragraphs: *It has long been hailed as the ultimate way to let off steam <u>by some members of the fairer sex</u>. Now, <u>U.S. scientists have discovered</u> that not only does retail therapy exist, but that it could be caused by an individual's fear of sudden death. <u>Researchers found materialistic people find terrorism and war</u> more stressful than others – and are more likely to spend compulsively to help them cope. <u>Psychologists believe</u> the rise of materialism around the world and its therapeutic effect on extreme stress might be a response to fear of death caused by acts of terrorism, disease and natural disasters. <u>The scientists from Michigan State University said</u> people with possession obsessions often have lower self-esteem than others so are more likely splurge in the wake of severe psychological trauma…*

In order to illustrate the point that retailing or buying can alleviate the fear for death. There are many examples given by the author to illustrate the point. The examples are convincing for the reason that they are said or proved by the famous scientist or authorities. The examples are given arbitrarily from the whole text. If one example is cancelled, it does not affect the convincing influence of other examples. Besides, if the orders of this examples are changed, it will also not affect the central point. Because the order of the several authorities have no inherent hierarchy, there are no ranks in order. At the same time, the author tries to convince the reader the opinion, giving as many example as possible to prove its universality. The arbitrariness in this level can be seen as the discourse arbitrariness.

Moreover, the non-arbitrariness is symbolized in its words choices, sentence structure and discourse structure. For example, what words should be used depends on the theme of the essay. In this text, the author wants to prove the point, so he employs many words like "said" "believed" "discovered", demonstrating others' opinion similar to him, arousing the reader's agreement. From another point, syntax, as we can see, it is a piece of news in the newspaper, different from the oral English, the formal sentence structure is preferred. In this news, the sentences are mainly formal and long, and all grammatical. From this aspect, it is not arbitrary. In a word, What should be taken into consideration is discourse style, environment and discourse purpose.

4. The Factors Affecting the Arbitrariness

Since the arbitrariness is relative, what can affect its relativity? There are three important factors, such as environment, cognition and the communicative purpose.

4.1 Environment

As we know, the arbitrariness is affected obviously by the physical world. Different countries have different signifier for the same signified, which is quiet arbitrary. However, language is related to the cultural environment, including the customs, habits, economy, social activities,etc. This makes language non-arbitrary, which also reflects the physical world. For example, nowadays,with the development of the economy and internet technology, internet languages are exploding. Many new words and sentences come out quickly and become fashionable, but the same fashion may not be the case in foreign countries. It is unique to the special culture, not to the human beings. For example, FYI (For your information), GGP (Gotta Go Pee), lol (laugh out loud), ttyl (talk to you later), s.s.s (sorry so sloppy), ty (thank you), ily (i love you), lyl (love you lots), bbl (be back later). For the economy, it is abbreviated, so as to make it more convenient to say and write. The changing of form does not cause misunderstandings, because they are gradually encoded in their culture and be integrated in people's language habits, as well as to people in other cultures. We are using the fashinable English internet language in our blogs and letters for the sake of convenience as well as communication.

The arbitrariness and non-arbitrariness also change the environment and people's mind. For example, the non-arbitrariness makes people take environment and communication into account when speaking. People form certain rules to govern their language use. Also, the acceptance of language implies the assimilation of the new culture.

4.2 Cognitive difference

As cognitive ability involves the human experience, language learning and creating need the cognitive engagement. Language arbitrariness and non-arbitrariness are judged by human experience and knowledge of the world and language signs. The human experience and knowledge include the practice experience, the acquisition of the knowledge, and the cognition of the nature. Just as the Chinese people have the word "Peng"(Chinese) for the English word "bang", the difference for the cognition of the same sound comes from the different cognition of the sound. So to different people, they may have the different language perception. The dialect may be the case in point. The different areas have their own dialects. The people in their community can understand each other, but we can't. We can't understand it for we have no cognitive experience towards those signs and sound.The long time exposure to the environment makes the local people adapted to those environment. Therefore, the people's cognition can account for the relativity of arbitrariness in some sense.

5. Conclusion

As a conclusion, I argue that the arbitrariness of language is relatively not absolutely existing. This admits the existence of the arbitrariness, and also points out the non-arbitrariness. Factors affecting the arbitrariness include cultural environment and cognition. Of course, there are still a lot to talk about as to this topic. For example, the extent of the arbitrariness, the detailed categories of the arbitrariness and so on.

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