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

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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.

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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 absolutely.

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 equipped 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
in the following ways:

different language that are arbitrary.

sound, as the “click”, the similar
the sign and the object, like the similar

words, “thunder”, “click”, “jangle”, “pang”,

and the object or concept. This is contrast
between the sign and the object. As 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 cognitive experience. The
language also is interpreted according
to the human cognition and experience.
What is worth notice is that the culture
weighs 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, Title: 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 by some members of the fairer sex. Now, U.S. scientists have discovered that not only does retail therapy exist, but that it could be caused by an individual's fear of sudden death. Researchers found materialistic people find terrorism and war more stressful than others - and are more likely to spend compulsively to help them cope. Psychologists believe 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. The scientists from Michigan State University said people with possession obsessions often have lower self-esteem than others so are more likely to 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 reader to illustrate the point. 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), tyl (talk to you later), s.s.s (sorry so sloppy), ty (thank you), lyl (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 fashionable 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.

References

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