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Coerced iconicity in writing and speech



Fig. 1. “The light descending (from the sun, moon and stars.) To be watched as component in ideograms indicating spirits, rites, ceremonies.” (Pound 1947)

Humans are iconophiles: we love to connect form and meaning, and do so even when it doesn't seem warranted. This holds for writing as well as for speech. The writing system of Chinese is a good example. Folk theories about Chinese characters have long held that they are like little pictures whose meaning can be “read off” from the strokes. The academic best known for debunking this popular misconception was John DeFrancis in his (1984) *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy*. He showed that the bulk of Chinese characters are phono-semantic compounds in which one element indicates (at most) a general category of meaning and the other suggests the pronunciation.

In this essay I draw a parallel between this ineradicable view of Chinese characters and the view that some spoken languages feature classes of words that are similarly “imitative” or “iconic”: ideophones. I argue that the picture in both cases is not as clear-cut as it has been made out to be; but rather than just do another round of debunking, I ask why we humans are so easily lured into thinking this way. I show that the process of depiction plays a key role, and that in some cases, the strong feeling of form-meaning fit we experience is best analysed as “coerced iconicity”.

The pictorial view

The roots of the “pictorial” view of Chinese characters in the Western world go far back. One of the driving forces behind it in the first half of the 20th century was the poet Ezra Pound. Over the years, Pound developed a fascination with the poetic affordances of logographic writing systems, especially Chinese (see Fig. 1). This fascination originated with his discovery of a theory of the Chinese character by Ernest Fenollosa [published in an edition by Pound in 1920], who argued that Chinese writing reflects etymology (‘true sense’) in a way that phonetic writing does not. For Pound, this rendered the Chinese character vastly superior to Western phonetic script in terms of picture-making. Soon enough however, scholarly studies of logographic writing systems showed that Chinese characters are semantic-phonetic compounds rather than transparent pictures, and Pound’s idyllic conception of Chinese characters as evocative ideograms was severely and justly criticized (Kennedy 1958; DeFrancis 1984).

The point is not that Chinese characters are never pictographic. Some clearly are — take 木 *mù* ‘tree’ or 爪 *zhǎo* ‘claw’. The problem arises when extrapolating from these clear cases to an inventory of several thousands of characters (tens of thousands if one includes variants from historical texts). Experimental studies of iconicity in Chinese characters invariably find that naive participants perform basically at chance level or only very slightly above it when they are asked to choose which characters go with which meanings. For instance, in a recent study, Xiao & Treisman (2012) found that naive English participants perform reliably above chance level for only 15 out of 213 characters (7%).

What is the link to ideophones in spoken language? Ideophones are marked words that depict sensory imagery. Found in many languages across Sub-Saharan Africa, South-East Asia, and the Americas, they have attracted the attention of linguists since the 1850s. One common claim about ideophones is that they are imitative words. For instance, one review article defines ideophones as “words or phrases that do the work of representation by phonetic means” (Tedlock 1999:118). As examples it provides the following words from Zuni, a language isolate spoken in New Mexico: *ky’alh* and *ch’uk’i-*. If the definition is correct, those of us who do not speak Zuni should be able to tell the meaning of these ideophones without any problem. Is this actually the case? (Readers can test their intuitions by referring to the definitions given in the notes section below.)

Again, the point is not that ideophones never are imitative — take relatively transparent examples like *gbuum* ‘heavy explosion’ or *tolontolon* ‘water dripping’ from Siwu, a language spoken in Ghana. But such words typically form only a small part of ideophone inventories: ideophones depict anything sensory from sound to smell, from taste to texture, and from colours to cognitive states. To represent all this as imitation is to simplify beyond recognition. In other words (summarizing an argument made in Dingemans 2011), there seems to be a parallel between Pound’s overeager “iconicization” of Chinese characters and our willingness to ascribe iconicity to ideophones.

Limits to lexical iconicity

We can start from the observation that in a language with thousands of ideophones covering a range of sensory domains, it would be very hard for all ideophones to be iconic to the same degree or in the same way. So there have to be different types of iconicity — different ways in which ideophones evoke sensory imagery. An empirical survey of a collection of Siwu ideophones (Dingemans 2011) yielded three basic, non-exclusive types of form-meaning mappings in ideophones: imagic iconicity, where sound imitates sound; Gestalt iconicity, where word structure resembles event structure; and relative iconicity, where related forms map onto related meanings.

That is still not sufficient, however. The problem is that even if we allow for different types of iconic mappings, certain ideophones do not actually seem to be that transparently iconic however you look at it. How does one iconically map colours, internal sensations, or cognitive states? Is iconicity really the point of ideophones like *fūrūfūrū* ‘seeing things in a blur’ in Siwu or Japanese *iya iya* ‘with a heavy heart’? It seems hardly likely. Have ideophone enthusiasts (native speakers as well as linguists) simply been over-eager in iconicizing ideophones — doing an Ezra Pound in the domain of sound? If so, it is important to understand why the form of ideophones is so often said to point directly to their meaning. I argue that it is their depictive nature.

Depiction

Depiction, rather than iconicity, is what invites people to treat the ideophone as a performance of sensory imagery. An analogy may help to explain this point. Consider paintings. Although we have a fair idea of what a prototypical painting is (a two-dimensional graphical depiction of some scene), in fact paintings vary quite widely in the degree to which they are iconic (i.e. show a perceived resemblance to what they depict). Compare the three works in Figure 2 below: Vincent van Gogh’s *Almond Blossom*, Marcel Duchamp’s *Nu descendant un escalier*, and Piet Mondriaan’s *Victory Boogie Woogie*. And yet no matter how different these works are, there is a distinct interpretive frame we bring to all of them: we tend to view them as depictions rather than read them as texts (Gombrich 2002[1960]; Walton 1973).

On the face of it, this argument seems easier to accept for Van Gogh’s *Almond Blossom* than for Mondriaan’s *Victory Boogie Woogie*. But it is actually powerfully brought home precisely by how people treat the Mondriaan: they still tend to ask what it is supposed to depict, rather than, say, parse it as Morse code or mistake it for the wallpaper. This is not because it is iconic, but because it is framed (literally) as a depiction.



In a similar way, we may think of ideophones as being framed as depictions, inviting the listener onto the scene and invoking images of being there. How is this framing done? It is done in actual use, by a process called *performative foregrounding* (Nuckolls 1996). Basically, speakers make ideophones stand out from the rest of the utterance by producing them at utterance edge, at a markedly higher pitch, often set off from the clause by a little pause, and freely lengthened or reduplicated. ([Examples available here.](#)) The effect of all this is that the ideophone is “framed” as a depiction just like the Van Gogh, the Duchamp and the Mondriaan, inviting people to “see” something in it.

Coerced iconicity

Now, given this framing, some ideophones will be relatively transparent, with form-meaning mappings we can understand — the equivalent of a Van Gogh. Others are more abstract, more like a Duchamp; and others again make very little sense out of context — like the Mondriaan. If we want to invoke iconicity here at all, we should call it *coerced iconicity* (Dingemans 2011). The depictive nature of the ideophone coerces us into treating the word as an adequate rendition of the depicted event. Coerced iconicity is a useful concept in discussions of supposed iconicity because it describes a mechanism familiar to us all and realistically locates it in the eye of the beholder. In Peircean terms, it locates iconicity in the metalinguistic interpretations of eager observers rather than solely in properties of the sign-object relationship.

Why does the pictorial view of Chinese characters, thoroughly debunked as it is, keep coming back? Apart of course from the fact that we know that some myths keep being propagated whatever their truth value, one reason may be that there is some amount of truly pictorial characters that feed the imagination and that makes all Chinese characters look like pictures, especially to the untrained eye. An old estimate (dating back to an etymological dictionary by Xu Shen that appeared around 100 AD) is that about 4% of Chinese characters are simple pictograms. Add to these the characters that display *some* iconic principles (for instance in how they combine different concepts), even if not all of these are transparent to non-initiates, and we may have just enough of a critical mass of iconicity in the system to coerce some people into treating all characters as pictorial renditions.

Similarly, why do speakers tend to treat all ideophones as perfectly adequate depictions of sensory imagery? It is likely that here, too, a certain critical mass of transparently iconic items plays a role. Indeed, we know that all ideophone systems at least have a core of simple sound-imitative ideophones (onomatopoeia), and that beyond that, there is often another relatively concrete set of sound+movement ideophones (these stages are the first on the implicational hierarchy of ideophone systems across languages proposed in Dingemans 2012). For the remainder (for instance, ideophones for colour, smell, or cognitive states), the transparency of the iconic mappings trails off quickly. Still, people are coerced into treating them as good depictions, because they are framed as such.

Gibberish

Edward Sapir famously wrote that all grammars leak. Much the same holds for any theory of how linguistic signs —spoken as well as written— are motivated. All linguistic systems are the products of long term interactions of human communicative needs, intersubjective language use, modality-specific features, and the non-directed opportunism of evolution. Many forces are tugging at the form and meaning of ideophones. Although ideophones have often been cast as prototypically “iconic” words, on reflection, it is clear that the explanation is not watertight. Yes, there are clearly iconic structures in ideophones that help guide the imagination, perhaps somewhat like the lines and shading in a naturalistic painting. But some ideophones (many in some languages?) are more like abstract paintings: depictions that are invested with meaning by eager observers, not necessarily on the basis of information contained within their form.

Taking this explanatory leakage seriously is more realistic than sticking to a neat account and ignoring the periphery (Joseph 1997). As always, seeking regularity all the way leads to oversimplification. In some possible world, all Chinese characters are neat pictograms and all ideophones are transparently imitative words. That world is not ours however. Does that mean we can look away and pretend it’s arbitrariness all over, as some (e.g. Newmeyer 1992) have proposed? No. The more fruitful approach is to resist the beckoning of the extremes, and to investigate the manifold ways in which humans can connect form and meaning. It means understanding the processes —

of which *coerced iconicity* is one— by which users of language discern motivation in what to analysts may look like arbitrary gibberish. Gibberish. Hmm, let me frame that word for you so that you can experience some coerced iconicity on the way out. *Gibberish*.

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Notes

The two Zuni ideophones evoke “splash” and “sounds like that of eye popping out of its socket”, respectively — Tedlock 1999:119.

This guest column incorporates some text from Dingemanse (2011) and from a blog posting at *The Ideophone*.

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About the author



[Mark Dingemanse](#) is a research staff member of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen. Since 2007 he has been working with the Mawu people in Ghana, West Africa to document aspects of their linguistic and cultural heritage. His research focuses on ideophones and iconicity, language and social life, and the relation between mundane speech and verbal art. He holds a Leiden University MA in African Languages and Cultures (2006) and a PhD in Linguistics from Radboud University Nijmegen (2011).

Discussion

5 comments for “Coerced iconicity in writing and speech”

1. [...] And what have these two things got to do with the paintings of Van Gogh, Duchamp, and Mondriaan? Read all about it. Van Gogh, Almond Blossoms; Duchamp, Nu descendant un escalier; Mondriaan, Victory Boogie [...]

Posted by [New issue of SemiotiX | The Ideophone](#) | [September 5, 2012, 12:39 pm](#) | [edit](#)

2.



Very constructive contribution. I would suggest that we also ‘coercively’ frame metaphors with words like ‘as’ and ‘like’. In a

musical variation set which is formal enough to set a frame for attention to sameness and difference something similar happens, and in that frame likeness can be stretched further (towards unlikeness) without getting lost.

Posted by *David Lidov* | [September 20, 2012, 2:07 am](#) | [edit](#)



3.

In a musical variation set which is formal enough to set a frame for attention to sameness and difference something similar happens, and in that frame likeness can be stretched further (towards unlikeness) without getting lost.

Thank you! This helps make sense of our intuitive appreciation of likenesses — sometimes very stretched likenesses indeed — in music.

Posted by *Mark* | [September 27, 2012, 6:35 am](#) | [edit](#)



4.

A very clear analysis of iconicity in language, a nice way of explaining it as well with broader connections. You might be interested in the works of Göran Sonesson (if you don't know already), where he makes a similar distinction between primary iconicity (where natural iconicity itself is responsible for the interpretant) and secondary iconicity (where iconicity is discovered in the sign-relation post hoc) – Sonesson, 1994. When you add to it also an understanding of iconicity as involving a cultural frame the picture is very similar.

It seems to me that studies on iconicity (especially in areas further away from visual perception, as e.g. language) often suffer from this conceptual confusion, when iconicity is behaviourally measured as recognition rates by random „naive“ participants, where however iconicity as related to the development of semiotic systems (e.g. language) seems to most relevant and effective as apparent in the eye of the non-naive beholder (as an emic not an etic variable). For the lack of a better method however, the aforementioned studies are taken as exemplary and the conceptual distinction is lost.

Coerced iconicity, as you say, seems a much more interesting phenomenon to look at for me as it drops the assumptions of universality of this iconicity. Would you agree, and if so have you found any good tests by which the extent of coerced iconicity could be measured?

Sonesson, G. 1994. “Prolegomena to the Semiotic Analysis of Prehistoric Visual Displays.” In *Semiotica* 100.3–4: 267–331

Posted by *Peeter Tinitis* | [January 2, 2013, 3:29 am](#) | [edit](#)

5. [...] ———. 2012b. “Coerced iconicity in writing and speech.” *SemiotiX* XN-8. <http://www.semioticon.com/semiotix/2012/07/coerced-iconicity-in-writing-and-speech/>. Gelman, Susan A., and Paul Bloom. 2000. “Young children are sensitive to how an object was [...]”

Posted by *Description and depiction | The Ideophone* | [April 11, 2013, 10:06 am](#) | [edit](#)

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