

## Reflections on the Argument over Iconicity and Arbitrariness<sup>①</sup>

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**Abstract:** In the past two or three decades, one could witness a heated argument over iconicity and arbitrariness in China in journals and at conferences, however, I have found complexities of the matter and many problems waiting to be solved or clarified. Besides comparing and contrasting differences among arbitrariness supports and iconicity supports in terms of “sign”, “language”, and motivation, this paper also probes into the question of why this debate didn’t start earlier, into the two issues from the perspective of the Chinese language, and into a correct attitude toward the relationship between conventions and innovations.

**Key words:** arbitrariness iconicity sign

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**标题:** 对语言象似性和任意性之争的反思

**内容提要:** 近二、三十年来,国内就符号和语言的任意性和象似性问题时有争论。本文认为许多问题有待梳理和深入研究。例如:任意论者所谈的符号是语言符号,而象似性论者所谈的符号具有包括语言符号在内的元符号性质;就语言而言,前者着重语音和口述语言,后者还兼及文字和书面语言;就象似性而言,前者承认为数较少的高度的拟声性,后者扩展至拟象性、隐喻和有理据性。本文还进一步讨论了这场争论为什么迟至上世纪八十年代后展开,从汉语的发展重新解读索绪尔的语言任意性和线性特征,以及我们如何正确对待传统与创新的关系。

**关键词:** 任意性 象似性 符号 索绪尔 皮尔斯

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In the past two or three decades, one could witness a heated argument over iconicity and arbitrariness in China in journals and at conferences. I have been acquainted with scholars representing the two sides. Some are my teachers, some friends, the former represented by the late Professor Xu Guozhang, the latter to be named separately as iconicity supporters and arbitrariness supporters henceforth. Of course, one can always find some people who adopt the middle-road. In this argument, I used to keep quiet, because I was

influenced by Saussure’s arbitrariness when I first approached linguistics, and later I shifted to the view that one can find both iconicity and arbitrariness in language. Things have changed greatly after I was invited by Professor Bouissac, former president of the International Semiotics Association, to the 7<sup>th</sup> Symposium on Iconicity in Language and Literature held in Toronto this year last June. I gave him a proposal of three or four topics, from which I was asked to say something about iconicity in the Chinese language. Thus, in

the course of my literature reading and data collection, I have found complexities of the matter and many problems waiting to be solved or clarified. The following are some of my reflections.

### 1. Interpreting and defining “sign”

So far as sign is concerned, I have noticed that there is a wide difference between the sign in the eyes of iconicity supporters and that in the eyes of arbitrariness supporters.

I would start from Saussure (1857-1913), who argued that sign consists of “sound image” and “concept” and the relation between the two is arbitrary. This shows, what is meant by Saussure is linguistic sign, and consequently and logically, the relation between “signifier” and “signified” is also arbitrary (Saussure 66), because in this course book, Saussure did not illustrate his view of the “signifier” with anything other than the “sound image.” Saussure has also pointed out that “A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern.” (98) Thus, both “sound image” and “concept” are seen as psychological notions. In fact, an “object” and a “concept” are two sides of the same coin. When we talk about some object, it always suggests a reflection of something in our mind; and when we have something in our mind, it always refers to something in the world. The two co-exist. Anyway, the notion “concept” is acceptable, because the word “concept” can cover those ideas which are not physical objects, nor do they exist, such as “god,” “Almighty,” “paradise,” “hell.” Concept can also refer to those ideas which are abstract or invisible, such as “relation,” “value,” “time,” etc. Nevertheless, it was Saussure himself that sometimes made a slip by saying “On the other hand, the fact that its signs are arbitrary implies theoretically a freedom to establish any connection whatsoever between sounds and ideas (110).” Here, Saussure used the expression “sounds,” which runs counter to his former expressions, the psychological “sound image” or “sound pattern.” Even so, we will stick to Saussure’s arbitrary relation between “sound image” and “concept,” which is more representative.

In contrast, the sign discussed among iconicity supporters has a wider coverage. Peirce (1839-1914), who was of the same period with Saussure, was not interested in making a distinction between “word” and “sign,” but wanted to find out how meaning is expressed. He recognized three

elements of sign: object, concept, and the word (Peirce *Collected Papers*). Peirce has been praised for his observation of the fact that when people attempt to use one object to mean another object, the natural relation shows different degrees of closeness, namely, firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Following this manner, signs can be classified as icon (iconic sign), index (indexical sign), and symbol (symbolic sign). The iconic sign is totally based on its similarity to nature. Figure 1 shows a burning cigarette with a line in the middle, expressing the meaning of “no smoking” explicitly. The indexical sign is based on “contiguity,” which needs a certain degree of extension or logical reasoning. In Figure 2, there are two figures; male and female. With the help of one’s experience, one can find out this refers to a toilet nearby. Very often it also provides some additional information, the toilet for the males is at the left side, and that for female at the right side. The symbolic icon is to find relations of objects or events between two different domains. There is a scale in Figure 3, first suggesting the concept of impartiality in buying and selling, and then further suggesting the concept of impartiality in judicial cases. Based on Peirce’s triadic division of signs, terms such as iconic sign, diagrammatic sign, and metaphoric sign are used. Saussure also touched upon the image of the scale in Fig.3, but this has nothing to do with his view about language sign.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

From the above discussion, one can conclude that iconicity supporters’ sign has the property of “meta-sign,” including all the signs, not only the language signs, but also other signs. Seeing that this sort of sign was not the sign meant by Saussure, there is no point for arbitrariness supporters to deal with this problem, as Saussure has already made it clear that he is interested in language sign through the use of “sound image” in his binary approach. Consequently, it is wise for us to leave aside this sort of argument. Each side of this argument has the right to choose their own way in doing their research. It should also be pointed out here that although Saussure did not study sign in the perspective of semiotics, he did foresee the possibility of such a discipline, semiology, being established in the future. This new discipline will

study signs in our daily life, the nature of sign, and rules concerning the formation and use of sign. "It is therefore possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology." "It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready for it in advance (Saussure 33)." Maybe Saussure harboured the intention to extend his arbitrary model of language sign to the study of all signs. But I will leave this aside again.

It is clear now that Saussure's binarity and Peirce's triadiality is a matter of perspective, one seeing signs as language signs, the other semiotic signs. To be fair, if the two sides are going to argue, they should focus on the matter of language. On the other hand, if arbitrariness supporters attempt to go beyond this boundary, it would be easier for them to be attacked by their opponents.

## 2. Interpreting and defining "language"

Since there is different understanding concerning sign between iconicity supporters and arbitrariness supporters, can we confine the discussion down to "language" only? I did try to do so.

When discussing "language," we should first leave aside deaf-mute language, dance language, music language, math language, computer language, etc., and make it clear that we only talk about language in its literal sense, that is, the language spoken or written by humans in ordinary communication. Otherwise, there is no way for discussion to be carried out. For the moment, both iconicity supporters and arbitrariness supporters will agree to this requirement. For another thing, the notion of language we are going to talk about should not be restricted to English or French or German, or Chinese, because we are dealing with language from the perspective of general linguistics. Generally speaking, both sides will accept this requirement too. Regrettably, when we really get down to this notion of language, we still have to face the problem of what we mean by "language."

First, starting from the literal meaning of human language, we will find the word "language" has been defined differently at different stages. Its "signified" has varied at different periods of human development. Today, many scholars tend to divide human civilization into three periods, namely, the

period of orality, the period of literacy, and now, the period of hypertext. In fact, the guiding principle of dividing these three periods follows the choice of the mode of language by human beings. The language used during the period of orality was oral language, and human civilization was passed on from generation to generation through the movement of mouths. When it came to the period of literacy, the language used by human beings covers both the oral mode and the written mode. Because of the formation of the written language, we were able to store knowledge from our brains externally onto physical objects such as tortoise bones, bamboo slips, sheepskin, silk fabrics, paper, etc. Since 1989, we have moved to a new period. With the development of the Internet and electronic means, we are able to communicate not merely by means of spoken language and written language, but a variety of other means. For instance, when we turn on the computer, on the monitor screen we can immediately find dozens of icons. In all, we have different ways for communication (Ong, *Orality and Literacy*; Whitehead, *Orality and Hypertext*; Hu, "Orality, Literacy, and Hypertextualization").

For the sake of making our discussion convenient, we might start from the latest period to the earliest. In this case, the period of hypertext will not be considered, because both Saussure and Peirce passed away before the advent of electronic or digital technology, a period in which iconicity and motivation will be surely and highly strengthened.

The second period, the period of literacy, had a history of about 6,000 years. In this case, we have to clarify the point which sub-period of language is going to be talked about during these 6,000 years. Logically, Saussure emphasized synchronic linguistics. It is only under this condition that we are able to talk about the sign system together with the relation of opposites and values. Problem arises as we know that under this condition we will talk about language at three strata, that is, semantics, lexico-grammar, and phonetics/graphology. Then we will find Saussure's division of language sign in terms of "sound image" and "concept" is far from satisfactory to cover both the sound system and the writing system, which, as we know, both have the functions to express meaning. Even Saussure himself once argued that "the signs used in writing are arbitrary" (165). However, he did not bring this point further. What we can conclude is that this form or shape image is beyond his

“sound image.” In contrast, his observation seems implausible if the Chinese language is taken into account, which will be dealt with later. What is more, Saussure acknowledged that grammar and words are products of conventionality. This would be difficult for arbitrariness supporters to explain.

Seeing that Saussure's signifier is “sound image,” the best way for those arbitrariness supporters to follow is to refer it to the first period of human civilization, the period of orality, because it is accepted by all that speech appeared prior to writing. Therefore, those iconicity supporters, in addition to their studies in those fields such as syntactic iconicity, quantity iconicity, sequence iconicity, etc., should first answer the question whether iconicity came first in the formation of linguistic sign. They need to provide evidences to support their argument.

Problem lies in the fact that when we confine ourselves to the study of human “primitive language,” we know very little about human civilization 6,000 years ago, which lasted for as long as from 30,000 to 50,000 years. Consequently, the work done by iconicity supporters or arbitrariness supporters can only be “hypothesis” or “inferences.”

Saussure's argument for arbitrariness is based on his comparison between the English word “sister” and the French word “s-ø-r”, the English word “ox” and the French word “b-ø-f”, from which he concluded that “No one disputes the fact that linguistic signs are arbitrary” (100). It is on this very assertion that disputes have arisen, because what Saussure could do is merely a hypothesis, especially about the arbitrariness of English and French. Since historical-comparative linguistics has already proved that there are similarities in English, French, and other European languages, and finally re-constructed the proto Indo-European language, This suggests that Saussure can get better results by making use of these examples to illustrate how the proto Indo-European language was split into English, French, German, and some other languages in the course of time, or how the proto-Indo-European language differs from the proto-Chinese-Tibetan language, but it would be difficult for him to reconstruct the primitive language by way of the synchronous language systems. Even so, Saussure still had to face the problem of the origin of human beings, as this was related to the problem whether human beings spoke one language or several languages at the onset.

Iconicity supporters have also to deal with the

oral language in the period of orality. Although they have stressed the phenomenon of onomatopoeia in human languages, Saussure also noticed this phenomenon and acknowledged the existence of onomatopoeia and exclamations in languages, and made some changes of his wording accordingly. He said, “Not all signs are arbitrary” (181). Thus, the hypothesis of onomatopoeia has been accepted by both sides.

It has to be pointed out that apart from onomatopoeia and exclamations, iconicity scholars have contributed to the discovery of phonaesthemes and metaphors. As a result, they have contributed to the study of quantity iconicity, temporal iconicity, space iconicity, syntactic iconicity, distance iconicity, markedness iconicity, metaphor iconicity, textual iconicity, etc. However, they have to bear the following point in mind: in the course of arguing with arbitrariness views, they should make it clear what period of language they are talking about. This leads us to the following topic.

### 3. Iconicity and motivation

Strictly speaking, iconicity and motivation, are different concepts. Iconicity refers to natural similarity between the signifier and the signified, whereas motivation is used to account for the reason why there is such a relation between the signifier and the signified.

Iconicity supporters hold the view that there is motivation for human beings to construct signs, including language signs, for instance, the occurrence and existence of onomatopoeic words are motivated. Thus, iconicity supporters are ready to accept the view that sign presupposes motivation. In the course of time, iconicity and motivation seem to be synonymous. Yet, in the eye of arbitrariness supporters, (linguistic) sign is unmotivated. Saussure tried his best to give explanation to arbitrariness by saying that the term “sign” is arbitrary, but the terms “signal” and “symbol” are motivated. He said, “For it is characteristic of symbols that they are never entirely arbitrary” (101). Nevertheless, Saussure also said something which ran counter to his view of arbitrariness and made us feel at loss.

—The word *arbitrary* also calls for comment. It must not be taken to imply that a signal depends on the free choice of the speaker... The term implies simply that the signal is *unmotivated*; that is to say, arbitrary in relation to its signification, with which it has no natural connexion in reality

(101).

—The sign may be motivated to a certain extent (101).

—Not all signs are absolutely arbitrary (181).

—But motivation is always more marked if the syntagmatic analysis is more straightforward and the meaning of the constituent units more obvious (181).

—There exists no language in which nothing at all is motivated (183).

—Languages always exhibit features of both kinds—intrinsically arbitrary and relatively motivated—but in very varying proportions (183).

Following Saussure's constantly changing views, he seemed to make a distinction between arbitrariness and motivation, but he insisted on the fact that sign is not motivated and is sure not to be verified. Even so, Saussure's wording on page 185 that "This is not to say that 'lexical' and 'arbitrary' are always synonymous, or 'grammar' and 'relative motivation' either." made things contradictory again. It is sincerely hoped that arbitrariness supporters will clarify all these points.

Another trouble comes from Saussure's two features of sign: arbitrariness and linearity (101-103). Saussure's account of linearity is based on the fact that the linguistic signal "occupies a certain temporal space" and "this space is measured in just one dimension; it is a line." Saussure used this observation to show language sign is different from other signs, such as "ship's flags." "The elements of such signals are presented one after another. They form a line" (103). This leads to the feature of linearity. This shows that Saussure still made a distinction between linguistic sign and signs in other domains.

After studying this argument, I can't help thinking that Saussure's linearity here is, in fact, "iconic" in nature, because when one talks, one has to utter sounds one by one; when one hears, one has to catch sounds one by one; when one reads, one has to fix his eyes on the words and lines one by one; and when one writes, one has to put down the words one by one. Here, isn't it true that the feature of linearity is a reflection of human communication? Is it that it is not merely iconic, but also motivated? When using the language to talk about the world and the life, we need to use complex signs, and when signs are used in a cluster, they have to appear in sequence. In the meantime, anatomy has shown that a consecutive production of sounds can only be done following the

development of speech organs. Thus, linearity is motivated. It is not only motivated but also verifiable, as we can see with our own eyes, and witness the movements of sound waves with the help of modern speech analysers.

In this case, if my argument holds water, Saussure's two features of sign can only be reinterpreted as: (1) It is arbitrary in the sense of the relation between signifier and signified. (2) It is iconic in the sense of mode of presentation being adopted.

The iconicity supporters are not to shout their victory too early, because they are doing research on semiotic signs, which covers both linguistic sign and any signs of other modes. If we are talking about from the perspective of semiotics, then I hold the view that it is both linear and non-linear. During the period of orality, the primitive men were good at using both the linear signs and non-linear signs. When it came to the period of literacy, people got more used to the linear signs and formed the habit of making linear way of thinking. Today, the period of hypotext has also been called the period of secondary orality, and people have been encouraged to think non-linearly as well as linearly. This is because during the electronic period, we can communicate to each other in both ways. This will undoubtedly quicken the development of human civilizations (Hu, "Orality, Literacy, and Hypotextualization").

#### 4. Why didn't the debate start earlier?

Saussure's arbitrariness view of linguistic sign was formed at the beginning of the last century, so was Pearce's triadic view of sign. They lived in the same period, but we didn't find the two scholars arguing with each other openly and heatedly. For another thing, Saussure's arbitrariness of signs has dominated the linguistic and semiotic scholarship for almost a century, and no one challenged his views. Then, why, after 70 or 80 years, people have started to challenge Saussure's view of arbitrariness? This is a question which has haunted me lately. So far I have got the following reasons for explanation.

(1) After publication, Saussure's course book has won wide recognition in the linguistic profession, and helped with the development of many linguistic schools and theories, such as the Geneva School, the Prague School, the Copenhagen School, the London School, the Russian formalism, and American structuralism,

etc. Even Chomsky himself, had to resort to Saussure's concepts of "system" and "structure" developed from his linearity principle as well as the value system of language signs. That is to say, Saussure's modern linguistic theory has been in its prime, and met very few opponents.

(2) It was Chomsky's "revolution" that changed the whole picture. Chomsky behaved like China's "ultra-leftist," pushing forward Saussure's linguistic system based on language structures to the extreme, that "surface structure" comes from "deep structure," that "deep structure" comes from an innate "universal grammar," and that this universal grammar is born with sort of "language acquisition device (LAD)." This led to the disagreement of George Lakoff from inside the generativist camp, and scholars such as Brown, Berlin, Kay, Slobin, Rosch, Mervis, Barsalou, Devalois, McNeil from outside the camp. These young scholars hold in common the view that "words and concepts did not fit formal logic, but were fundamentally embodied and connected to human experience, ...." "Concepts are shaped by the sensory-motor system, by neural structures, and by bodily experience in the world." "Language is constituted by direct links between conceptual and phonological structures, each of which is embodied via the sensory-motor system, the emotional system, and so on" (Lakoff, "As Advertised"). These theories followed by experimental results have undoubtedly led to a legion of scholars' departure from Chomsky's yet to be verified hypotheses, and finally, led to the challenge of Saussure's view of arbitrariness (Kemmer, "About Cognitive Linguistics").

(3) In the meantime, American functionalists represented by Joan Bybee, Bernard Comrie, John Haiman, Paul Hopper, Sandra Thompson, Tom Givón, and others rose up and argued that language is a system for communication, which directly influences the conceptual structures. Besides, we can also find that the work of "grammaticalization" on the part of historical linguists such as Elizabeth Traugott and Bernd Heine did not support the view of arbitrariness. All this shows that language is inseparable from cognition, embodiment, and social context (Kemmer, "About Cognitive Linguistics").

(4) Ironically, it was Chomsky who pioneered the study of cognitive linguistics so as to verify his theories about language innateness and language acquisition device. In those literature introducing Chomsky's profile, one can find that he has been

recognized as "cognitive scientist," as he was the first to challenge behaviorism, and contributed to psychological revolution ("Noam Chomsky"). It was because of this Chomsky assigned Lakoff the task in 1977 to do research on "cognitive grammar" (Peeters, "Does Cognitive").

Things went contrary to expectation. These second generation cognitive linguists adopted the view that human beings acquire their knowledge about the world first through their bodies and then extend to things around their bodies, up and down, left and right, front and back, before and behind, .... Under this influence of new psychological view of experientialism, iconicity has exerted a great role in the field of semiotics and linguistics. When professionals are studying signs, from primitive signs (such as crying, shouting, dancing, keeping records by tying knots, ...) to primitive languages (such as onomatopoeia and exclamations), they have tried to explore the relation between signs and the world. Against this background, the debate between iconicity supporters and arbitrariness supporters began in the end of the last century. The second generation cognitive linguists challenged the first generation cognitive linguists.

In 2000, *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science* was published by MIT Press, the base of the first generation cognitive linguistics, in which none of the work of the second-generation cognitive linguistics was cited. This can be seen as a case that the first generation cognitive linguists initiated a counterattack on the second generation cognitive linguists. To express his dissatisfaction, Lakoff had to write an article and listed about 140 publications written by himself and scholars with similar views, questioning the validity and comprehensiveness and objectiveness of this encyclopedia (Lakoff, "As Advertised").

One thing which puzzles me a lot is that both iconicity supporters and arbitrariness supporters in China tend to relate iconicity to cognitive science and cognitive linguistics. As a matter of fact, what they mean about cognitive linguistics is second generation cognitive linguistics. Second, in the Chinese literature about arbitrariness, the scholars seldom talk about cognitive science and cognitive linguistics. Sure, they have the right to do so, to restrict the argument within the boundary of language sign only.

## 5. Iconicity and arbitrariness from the perspective of the Chinese language

At the time when iconicity and arbitrariness

have been involved in a heated debate, it is worthwhile rereading the article written by Professor Xu Guozhang in 1988. Xu said: “The traditional scholarship of language and writing in China has been centered on the rational relationship between the signifier and the signified.” It is based on this understanding that I presented my paper at the 7<sup>th</sup> Symposium on Semiotics held in Toronto (Hu, “Iconicity”).

As early as in the Zhou dynasty or in the pre-Qin period (1066B.C. ~256B.C.), the following words were recorded in *The Book of Changes*, “Baoxi was the king of the country. He looked above observing the astronomy of the heaven and bent his body observing the law of the earth; he observed the features of birds and animals in harmony with the earth. He started from those objects which were near his body and extended further to those in the distance ... so as to describe the states of myriads of objects.” In this sense, these words sound like what are uttered in experientialism as discussed by Lakoff and his colleagues of the second generation cognitive linguistics today. Later, one can find from the book *Six Scripts*, annotated in the Han dynasty, that among the 6 modes of the creation of Chinese characters, *xiāngxíng* (pictographic characters) and *xíngshēng* (pictophonetic characters) are totally based on the principle of iconicity, and the other four modes, namely, *huìyì* (associative compound character), *zhuānzhù* (mutually explanatory character), *chūshì* (self-explanatory character), and *jījiè* (phonetic loan character) are all either diagrammatic or metaphoric.

The arbitrariness supporters always quoted from Xunzi, a pre-Qin period scholar, the following four words: *yuēdìng shù chéng* (sanctioned according to popular usage) to support their view of arbitrariness. However, some contemporary scholars, including Xu Guozhang, managed to reinterpret Xunzi's ideas. They pointed out the word “sanctioning” presupposed regulations on the part of language users. Second, since only those signs agreed upon by the language users, can enter the network of signs and possess sign values, it follows that what has not been agreed upon does not possess the value of sign. Third, the arbitrariness supporters quoted only the four words from two sentences in Xunzi's writing and ignored the third sentence, which emphasized the importance of “appropriateness” for language users to reach consensus, that is to say, appropriateness is closer to iconicity rather than

arbitrariness.

Logically speaking, signs are by no means decided by free will. Signs possess value only when they are agreed upon. With this in mind, “sanctioning” presupposes rational selection. Because of variations in nations and cultures, the primitive men might vary in their cognition, but they would provide motivation to justify their proposals. Here, I would like to cite the fable of “The Four Blind Men and the Elephant.” It is about four blind men describing an elephant after each of them touched one of its legs. This fable used to be cited as a negative example, warning people not to draw their conclusion one-sidedly. However, I hold the view that there is some truth in this fable: the four blind men, though handicapped, managed to voice their seemingly subjective conclusion from their respective experience through the touching of their hands, and therefore, motivated experience. If they could overcome their weaknesses, with the help of healthy people, they could do it better. This fable can thus be used to explain the question why people say the same thing differently if the relation between the signifier and the signified is iconic.

The history of the development of Chinese characters does not help with Saussure's view of arbitrariness. Apart from his views mentioned above, he did comment specially on the Chinese language. He started first with the following saying: “There are, one might say, two opposite poles towards which the whole system is drawn, or two contrary currents sweeping through it. On the one hand, there is a tendency to use lexicological means, which favours the unmotivated signs. On the other hand there is a tendency to use grammatical means, which favours regular construction.” Then he mentioned “the ultra-lexicological extreme is represented by Chinese...” (Saussure 194) Obviously, Saussure acknowledged the motivation of grammar in language, but his comment on the Chinese language did not fit with reality. Those who know China's *Six Scripts* and *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* [Annotations of Etymology] would never agree with his views on Chinese etymology. Sure, Saussure might defend himself by arguing that there are so many languages in the world and we have to take Chinese as an exception. In this case, Saussure had to reword his definition of “general linguistics” by saying that Chinese and Japanese and others are not to be covered by his theory of general linguistics. We might further ask: how

many languages did Saussure really manage to draw his statement about arbitrariness upon? In all, Saussure left us with the impression that his viewpoint was somewhat Euro-centered.

At this point, I would raise a new question. Since iconicity has played an important role in the history of China's etymology, why has the view of arbitrariness dominated Chinese modern linguistic scholarship for as long as a century? This has to be answered by Chinese linguists and semioticians themselves. My primary observation runs like this: We did have some contemporary Chinese scholars sticking to the principle of iconicity, as represented by Professor Wang Li's compilation of *The Dictionary of Etymology*. He would never have completed this task if he did not believe in iconicity. For another reason, those scholars in China in the past century were influenced greatly by western linguistic scholarship, to say nothing of Saussure's status as "father of modern linguistics." The third reason seems to be the separation of Chinese linguists and those in the foreign language circle, the former knowing little about what has happened outside the country, the latter knowing very little about what was going on within the country.

To move a step further, I have the impression that in addition to the view of arbitrariness, the view of iconicity has also been regarded as something imported from outside China, a product of the second generation cognitive linguistics. This sounds like Bagua, being China's mental product has now become the national flag of our neighbor country, their "mental and cultural heritage." And now, in spite of the fact that China has been doing research on iconicity for at least two to three thousand years, this legacy has been wiped out in the face of the second generation cognitive linguists. This made me feel sorry in the depth of my heart.

## 6. Afterthoughts

Before bringing my paper to an end, I would like to add some points.

The first point is why I mentioned Saussure's name more often than Peirce's. I think the reason lies in the fact that Saussure has been honoured as the "father of modern linguistics" and Peirce did not enjoy this particular honour. Saussure's great influence has been highly recognized in western linguistic scholarship, especially his contribution to the development of structuralism, generativism, and functionalism, from which we can always find the doctrine of Saussure's. Thus, it is natural for

people to challenge his theory.

Second, what I'd like to emphasize here is our attitude toward a high-sounding theory, an epoch-making theory. We should recognize that it is very often for a well-established theory to undergo changes or splitting. In religion one can find the struggle between fundamentalists and those who argue for a new doctrine, such as the struggle between Xunzi and Shiye in Moslem, to the degree that sometimes they had to resort to suicide bombing. In politics, one can find the struggle between some once revolutionary theories and revisionists' theories, very often the latter being treated as "reactionaries" and having to be stepped down without any chance of revival. Then, in academic affairs, one can find the struggle between a once well-accepted theory and those theories of the new generation, as exemplified by MIT Press's counter-attack on Lakoff and others. In China, there has also been a tradition that a student should follow his teacher's doctrine all the time, otherwise he/she would be kicked out from the school, just like Aristotle being rejected to succeed the leadership of Plato's school! Now, time has changed. I hold the view that we should encourage various views on the part of young scholars to surpass their teachers and those masters should tolerate those voices which depart from the classics and rebel against the orthodoxy. Without Newton, there would have been no Einstein, but we can't ask Einstein to turn back for two or three hundred years. If Newton were alive today, maybe he would have done better than Einstein. For the same reason, if Saussure had the chance to hear more voices, and get access to more languages, he might have appeared with a new face. At this point, I have been attracted by Chomsky many times, for reason that he dared not only to challenge his predecessors but also to challenge himself, as manifested in his constantly revising his models, from the first version of his syntactic theory to his extended theory, from the theory of government and binding to the minimalist theory, so as to make his theory as perfect as possible. Therefore, I would like to call on those middle-aged scholars and young scholars in China to learn from their predecessors on the one hand, and, try their best to further develop the theory under concern to seek creation and perfection. The two Chinese idioms "the preserved ginger tastes hotter" and "we should hold the young in awe" did not come out of void. They came from life-long experience of our



predecessors. In this regard, I think we should learn from those Olympic athletes. They always bear in mind the motto: swifter, higher, and better! In a word, they should strive to break the old record. After all, if there are some new interpretations or comments on a hundred year old theory, there is nothing to be shocked. We cannot expect our predecessors to get all the problems solved at their time.

Finally, I think we should encourage cross-disciplinary research. The question of one discipline might be related to another discipline. We can get enlightenment from each other. The above mentioned coalition between cognitive science and linguistics or semiotics is a case in point. In addition to this, while studying the primitive language of human beings, the anthropologists have already reminded us that primitive man had to learn to stand up and then he was able to let air come out from the lung through his throat and mouth and then to talk. There is an old saying in China that "one does not hurt his waist talking in a standing position," which touches upon the same observation indirectly but scientifically. Again, biologists reported that man's ability to talk is related to the gene FOXP2 and reported that such genes have been found in the fossils of Neanderthal man. This can serve as a proof that the Neanderthal man possessed the capacity to use language ("The Primitive Neanderthal"). Whether the Neanderthal man, or the modern man, or homo sapiens, were their languages iconic or arbitrary? Did they start making sounds as exclamations or develop at the very beginning a system of sound images and concepts? Did they undergo a transitional period to perfect their language system? We could benefit from any progress in the discoveries of these disciplines. These are what I expect the iconicity supporters and arbitrariness supporters to keep in mind.

Let's work in pursuit of transgression, creation, and perfection!

## 【Notes】

- ① This paper was written in memory of the late Professor Xu Guozhang. The Chinese version of this paper appeared in *Journal of Peking University: Philosophy and Social Sciences*, No. 3 2009. Revision is made for this English version.

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