

Iconicity and Categorization in Signed Languages*

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Abstract

Iconicity is one of the most striking features of signed languages. In an attempt to characterize iconicity from the viewpoint of Cognitive Grammar, Wilcox (1993, 2002, 2004, 2018) proposes a model that he calls “cognitive iconicity.” After critically examining this model, this paper proposes an alternative, in which categorization as a general cognitive ability plays a crucial role in characterizing iconicity. It goes on to show that this model allows us to (i) explain why linguistic signs exhibit varying degrees of arbitrariness and iconicity and (ii) resolve the apparent tension between the arbitrariness of linguistic signs and the theorem of the ugly duckling.

1. Introduction

Signed languages (also known as sign languages) are natural human languages used by communities of deaf people throughout the world. There are significant differences among signed languages contrary to the common assumption that they are much the same across the world. Moreover, they are full-fledged languages with their own lexicon and grammar, rather than merely being signed versions of spoken languages.

One of the defining characteristics of signed languages is that they “can express concepts, relations and structures in an iconic way that cannot be paralleled by spoken languages” (Meir 2010: 866). Notable among the linguists investigating this characteristic is Sherman Wilcox (1993, 2002, 2004, 2018), who has addressed it from the perspective of Cognitive Grammar, advancing a model called “cognitive iconicity.” After outlining this model in 2.1, I will show in 2.2 that there are some conceptual problems with it. This sets the stage for section 3, where an alternative will be proposed that resolves those problems in a way that is both true to the spirit of Cognitive Grammar and likely to provide insight into the nature of iconicity in signed languages. Sections 4 and 5 will show that this alternative can adequately explain what is going on when we find something to be similar to something else. To conclude this paper, an attempt will be made

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in section 6 to answer the most important question: why iconicity figures as prominently as it does in signed languages.

2. Cognitive iconicity

2.1. What is it?

In linguistics in general, iconicity is defined as occurring when there is a similarity between the form and the meaning of a linguistic expression.¹ In signed language research as well, Sandler and Lillo-Martin (2006: 493), for example, views iconicity as “a direct or transparent relation between form and meaning.” Wilcox (1993, 2002, 2004, 2018) attempts to reveal the essence of this similarity from the standpoint of Cognitive Grammar, putting forward a model that he calls “cognitive iconicity.” Listed below are the claims of Cognitive Grammar directly relevant to this model:

1. Lexicon and grammar are fully describable as assemblies of symbolic structures (i.e., form-meaning pairings).
2. Semantic and phonological poles are conceptual entities in semantic and phonological spaces, respectively.
3. Semantic and phonological spaces are not disjoint; rather phonological space is a subregion in semantic space.

Thesis 1 is a succinct formulation of what is known as the “symbolic view of grammar,” which makes Cognitive Grammar stand out not just from generative grammar, with the thesis of autonomous syntax at its core, but also from most other theories of cognitive linguistics.

Cognitive Grammar considers linguistic meaning to be conceptual in nature. What, then, is a concept? Taylor (2002) characterizes a concept as “a principle of categorization”:

A concept is a principle of categorization. To have the concept [TREE] means to know what a tree is. In virtue of having the concept you are able to recognize a tree when you see one, you know what counts as a tree, and are therefore able to use the word appropriately of the object. (Taylor 2002: 43)

What the passage makes clear is that to have the concept [TREE] necessarily involves categorizing an object as a tree. To have the concept [TREE] and to see an object as a tree are two sides of the same coin. It is less commonly appreciated that categorization is also involved when one hears sounds (or sees gestures). For example, hearing the sound [d] means categorizing it as such. This shows that linguistic sounds are conceptual entities, which in turn indicates that it is simplistic to say that semantic and phonological spaces

¹ For detailed accounts of iconicity in spoken languages, see Haiman (1980, 1983), Ohori (1987), and Van Langendonck (2007).

are disjoint as shown in Figure 1(a). Rather, phonological space should be viewed as residing within semantic space, as diagrammed in Figure 1(b). Thus, a key claim of Cognitive Grammar is that phonological space is a subdomain of semantic space (Langacker 1987: 78-81).

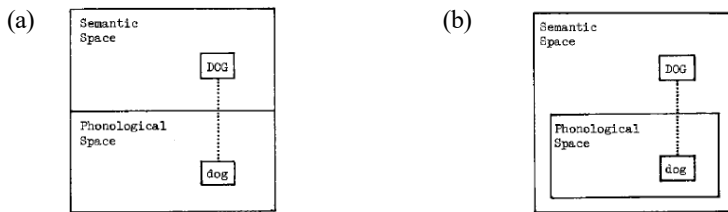


Figure 1: The symbolic structure of *dog* (Langacker 1987: 80)

Langacker (1987) maintains that we can adequately characterize onomatopoeic expressions by locating phonological space within semantic space, using *clang* as an example. The meaning of *clang* is the conception (or auditory image) of a particular metallic sound, so that its semantic pole is situated in phonological space as sketched in Figure 2(a). He goes on to argue that we can appropriately analyze the case where semantic and phonological poles are identical. Consider, for example, the sentence in (1), in which [NOISE] represents “any sound the speaker can create, linguistic or otherwise” (Langacker 1987: 80). In this case, the semantic pole coincides with the phonological pole as in Figure 2(b). “[A] phonological structure can be put in correspondence to itself and hence be self-symbolizing” (Langacker 1987: 91).

(1) The boy went [NOISE] (Langacker 1987: 80)

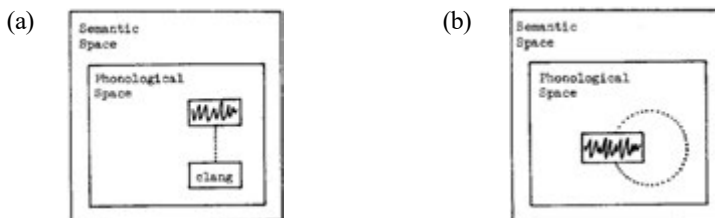


Figure 2: The symbolic structure of *clang* and [NOISE] (Langacker 1987: 80)

With all this in mind, let us see how Wilcox (2004: 122) defines cognitive iconicity: a distance relation between the phonological and semantic poles of symbolic structures. Wilcox claims that when “an expression is arbitrary” (Wilcox 2018: 71), “the semantic pole and the phonological pole of a symbolic structure reside in vastly different regions of semantic space” (Wilcox 2002: 263). The sound of the spoken word *dog*, for example, has little in common with its meaning. The phonological and semantic poles of *dog* are situated at a great distance from each other as in Figure 1(b). Alternatively, when a symbolic structure is iconic, its semantic and phonological poles reside in the same region of semantic space (Wilcox 2018: 71). Let us see Wilcox’s examples.

[...] in ASL² the sign is obviously iconically motivated: the sign *tree* [(2)] resembles the general shape of a deciduous tree ([Figure 3(a)]). The limiting case of pure self-symbolization is approached when the signer's hand is used to represent a hand. For example, if a signer wished to state that a soccer player had received an injury to his hand, she would use her hand to represent the player's hand. (Wilcox 2002: 264)

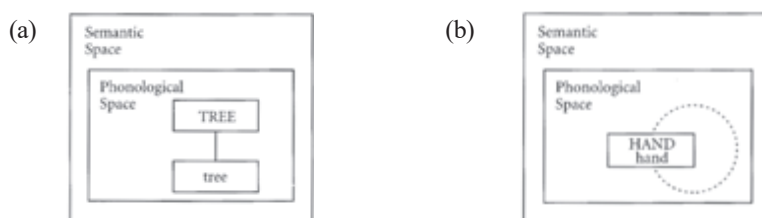
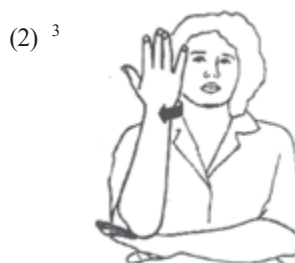


Figure 3: The symbolic structures of the signs *tree* and *hand* (Wilcox 2002: 264)







2.2. The problems

Is it really justifiable to place the semantic pole of the sign in (2) in phonological space? Relevant here is what is known as “encyclopedic semantics” in cognitive linguistics, according to which there is no specific boundary between linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge and “the meaning of a linguistic expression potentially reaches any aspect of a person’s conceptual life” (Taylor 2002: 590). From this point of view, the meaning of the sign in (2) would include not only its shape but also any aspect of a tree. For instance, it subsumes “physical properties (e.g., shape, height, color), biological characteristics (growth rate, root system, reproduction, photosynthesis, dropping of leaves), utility (wood, shade, food source), and numerous other specifications (forests, host for animals, how to cut one down, etc.)” (Langacker 1991: 4). If the whole semantic pole consisting of an open-ended body of knowledge were located in phonological space as in Figure 3(a), every aspect of a tree would be “iconically” reflected in the linguistic form of the sign. However, a look at (2) should make it abundantly clear that many aspects of the encyclopedic knowledge about trees have nothing at all to do with the form of the sign in (2), which means that those aspects are not iconically represented in this sign. The same can be said of the analysis of the symbolic

² ASL is an acronym for American Sign Language.

³ This picture is taken from *Random House Webster’s Compact American Sign Language Dictionary*.

structure of the signer’s hand. If it were self-symbolizing, all linguistically relevant aspects of our knowledge about the hand would be “iconically” symbolized by the linguistic form. However, a great many of those aspects are not reflected in the form of the sign for *hand*, such as the fact that we often beckon people by using our hands, that some people are ambidextrous, that soccer players are not allowed to touch the ball with their hands while in play.

The problem will become even clearer when Wilcox’s model is applied to a pictograph. Take  for example. It is apparent that this pictograph represents a bird. The form of  obviously resembles the general shape of a bird; hence the symbolic structure of  can be represented as in Figure 4 according to Wilcox’s model. The meaning of this sign, however, includes a large amount of our knowledge of birds (e.g., birds lay eggs, eat insects, build nests in trees) that is not in any way reflected in the form of .

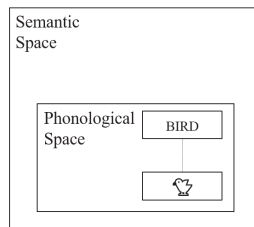


Figure 4: The symbolic structure of the pictograph 

In fact, Wilcox’s definition of iconicity fails to be a substantial improvement over the traditional one centering on similarity between form and meaning not least because the concept “a distance relation between phonological and semantic poles of symbolic structures,” on which it rests, is not characterized clearly enough.

2.3 A diagnosis of the problems

First, it seems that Wilcox goes too far in applying Langacker’s (1987) view to iconicity characteristic of signed languages. Langacker puts the semantic pole of *clang* into phonological space because he considers its meaning to consist in “the conception (or auditory image) of a particular type of sound” (Langacker 1987: 79). He does not go as far as to argue that the semantic poles of iconic expressions in general reside in phonological space. This, however, is exactly what Wilcox would say. As a consequence, the meaning of the sign in (2) ends up being only the shape conception. Second, Langacker himself may have oversimplified what onomatopoeia involves, considering what he says about the role that sounds (or auditory images) could play in linguistic meaning, taking *trumpet* as an example: “an auditory image is one facet of our conception of a trumpet—and thus part of the meaning of *trumpet* granted the encyclopedic view of linguistic semantics” (Langacker 1987: 112). It is clear from this passage that he views the sound conception as part of the meaning of *trumpet*, as shown in Figure 5(a). On the other hand, as we saw in Section 2.2, Langacker (1987) believes that the meaning of *clang* consists only in the conception of a particular type of sound, putting it within phonological space. If we follow this logic, we will have to do

the same with the sound conception as part of the meaning of *trumpet*, as shown in Figure 5(b). It is not clear how these two different models could be reconciled.

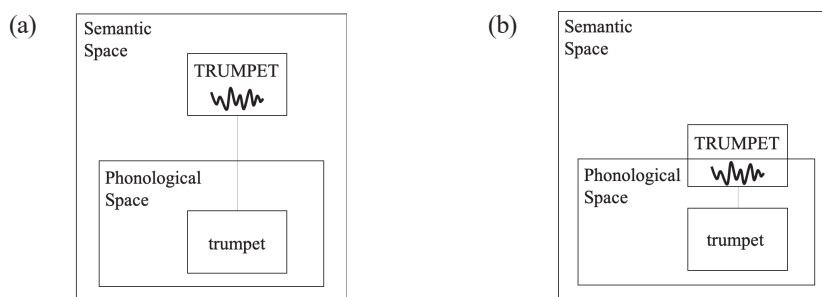


Figure 5: The symbolic structure of *trumpet*

To resolve this problem, we need to get back where Langacker originally defines semantic and phonological space. Before the publication of Langacker (1987), Langacker (1981: 85) says as follows: “symbolic units (which include but are not limited to lexical items) are bipolar, one pole consisting of a configuration in phonological space and the other a configuration in semantic space.” What has to be noticed is that the term “semantic space” here is used in its narrow sense to refer to the region complementary to phonological space (not to the region including it). This quotation evidently shows that semantic space was originally defined in such a way that semantic poles are all located in it, preserving phonological space for phonological poles. If we follow the original definition, then phonological space is no place for any semantic poles or part thereof, whose habitat is restricted to semantic space in the narrow sense of the term.

3. An alternative

In this section, an alternative to cognitive iconicity is proposed, one that leaves semantic poles in semantic space in the narrow sense of the term. Let us start with the following observation: Non-native signers often have difficulty in guessing the meaning of ASL iconic signs from their forms, but once they learn what those signs mean, they find it easy to see the connection between form and meaning (Taub 2012: 389). Let us now look carefully into this phenomenon, which I believe helps to reveal the essence of iconicity. When non-native signers first see the sign in (2), for example, they often cannot comprehend what it means. Once they learn its meaning, they activate a wide array of conceptions pertaining to a tree. Among these, the shape conception of a tree is activated to the highest degree, being used as a criterion to categorize that linguistic form.⁴ In this way, they connect the form and the meaning on the basis of the commonality extracted from the shape conception and the linguistic form, construing the sign as iconic.

⁴ As Toshiyuki Kumashiro pointed out to me, what the term “categorize” here means may not be clear enough. Specifically, it may be objected that a categorizing relationship cannot hold between a semantic pole and a phonological pole. My tentative response would be that I use the term “categorization” in the sense of Langacker (2008: 17): the interpretation of experience with respect to previously existing structures.

This process is represented in Figure 6. The circles each stand for a component of knowledge, of which the most highly activated one is represented by the thick circle. The arrow indicates that an activated component categorizes a form.

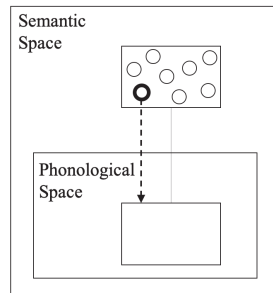


Figure 6: A component of knowledge categorizing a form⁵

What about native signers? They sometimes categorize a linguistic form in the same way as non-native signers. However, that is not necessarily the case; categorization can take the opposite path. Specifically, native signers occasionally use the linguistic form of a sign as a criterion to categorize a component of its semantic pole. Suppose that children encounter a tree for the first time after they have seen adult signers using the sign in (2). In this case, children use the form they already know as a basis to categorize the shape conception of the tree.

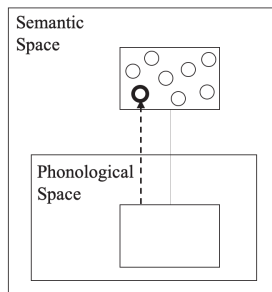


Figure 7: A form categorizing a component of knowledge

This line of reasoning is readily applicable to spoken languages. A spoken word is used iconically when a component of knowledge associated with the word categorizes its form or vice versa.

Based on the preceding discussion, we propose the definition of iconicity as stated in (3).

- (3) An expression is iconic to someone when he/she realizes that a categorizing relationship holds between its linguistic form and a highly activated component of the knowledge constituting its linguistic meaning.

⁵ The dashed arrow indicates extension. See Section 4.1.

This is diagrammed in Figure 8(a). When an expression is arbitrary, on the other hand, no such categorizing relationship can be established (Figure 8(b)).⁶

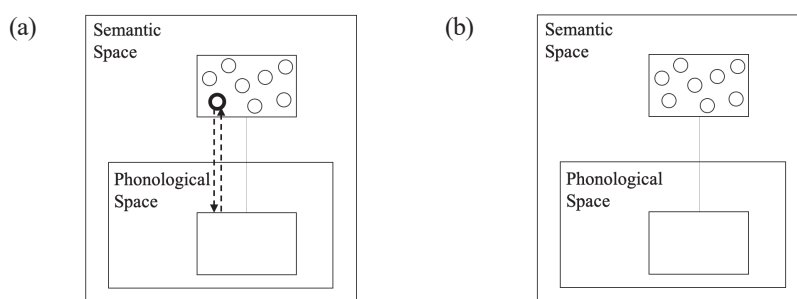


Figure 8: A categorizing relationship between a form and a meaning

Attributing iconicity to categorization, this alternative to cognitive iconicity fits in better with the fundamental tenets of Cognitive Grammar, which is committed to deriving language structure, insofar as possible, from more general psychological abilities such as perception, memory or categorization (Langacker 2008: 8). Moreover, the difficulty mentioned in Section 2.2 can be resolved by this model, in which semantic poles and phonological poles are located exclusively in semantic and phonological space, respectively. To be more specific, a sound conception as part of the knowledge associated with an expression and its phonological form are sharply distinguished. Thus, the symbolic structures of *clang* and the sign in (2) can be represented as in Figure 9.

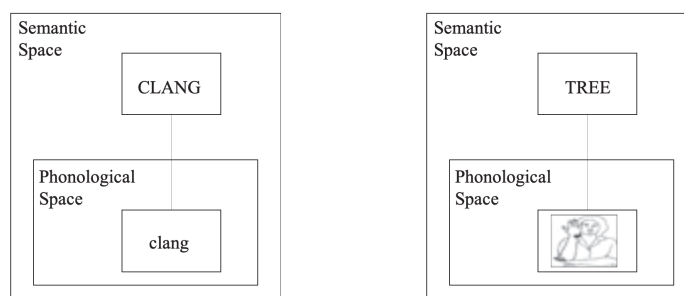


Figure 9: The symbolic structures of *clang*⁷ and the sign in (2)

4. How the new model works

4.1. Two types of iconicity

There are basically two types of categorizing relationships: **elaboration** and **extension** (Langacker

⁶ All the examples discussed in this paper are “images,” which constitute a subcategory of icon defined by Pierce (1931). I will leave for future research whether the other subcategories—diagrams and metaphors—can also be covered by the definition in (3).

⁷ Langacker (1987) seems to think that the semantic pole of *clang* consists exclusively of a particular type of sound. Since, however, encyclopedic semantics is adopted in Cognitive Grammar, the meaning of this word should include what kind of object makes such a sound, how people react to it, etc.

2008: 17-18). When structure A fully matches structure B but is specified in greater detail, A is an elaboration of B, or conversely B is a schema for A. On the other hand, A is an extension from B when A is not fully compatible with B but is related to A on the basis of similarity or association. This is illustrated in Figure 10, which shows a fragment of the structure of polysemy exhibited by the verb *run*. The solid arrows are for elaboration and the dashed arrows for extension. RAPID n-LEGGED LOCOMOTION, for example, is the schema extracted from RAPID 2-LEGGED LOCOMOTION and RAPID 4-LEGGED LOCOMOTION.

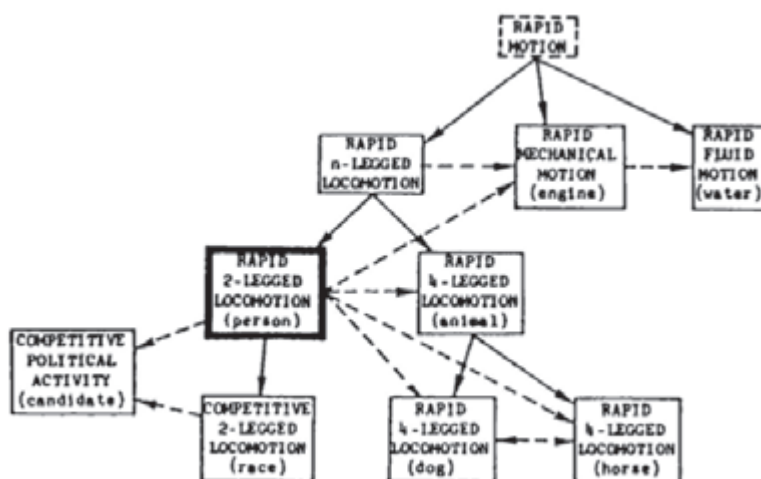
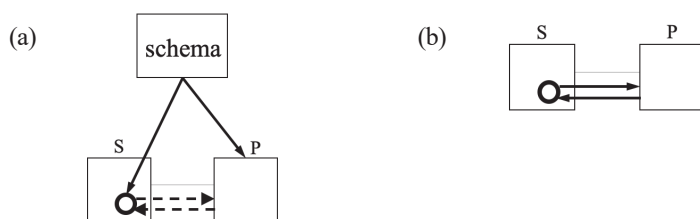


Figure 10: Two types of categorizing relationships (Langacker 1990: 267)

If our definition of iconicity in (3) is valid, there will be two types of iconicity corresponding to the two types of categorizing relationships. Examples of iconicity based on extension include the sign in (2)⁸ and *clang*. In this type of iconicity, since the linguistic form and the component of knowledge conventionally associated with it are incongruent in some respects, the categorizing relationship between them is accompanied by the extraction of a schema immanent in them both (Figure 11(a)). On the other hand, (1), (4) and the signer's hand in Figure 3(b) are good examples of iconicity based on elaboration. The linguistic form and the relevant component of knowledge perfectly match with each other for all intents and purposes.

(4) The boy went [GESTURE].

⁸ As Toshiyuki Kumashiro points out, the shape conception itself is a complex category containing a schematic shape, prototypical shapes, sub-prototypical shapes, and, strictly speaking, the form of the sign can only be considered to resemble one prototypical shape, whatever it is.

Figure 11: Extension iconicity and elaboration iconicity⁹

4.2. Iconicity-arbitrariness continuum

“[I]conicity is a degree concept” (Ohori 1987: 36). While with some lexical items we have little difficulty in determining whether or not they are iconic, we find others falling somewhere in between. Thus, instead of two distinct categories of iconicity and arbitrariness, there is a continuum consisting of degrees of iconicity and arbitrariness. Then, what is the nature of this continuum? And how can we describe it in this model?

The key to answering these questions is the degree of overlap between the schema and its instances (Tuggy 1993). As a matter of convenience, we represent this degree by the length of the arrows from the schema to its instances as in Figure 12. The more characteristics of a given instance the schema retains, the smaller is the distance between them. Instances, of course, can be identical. In that case, the distance is zero as in Figure 12(c).

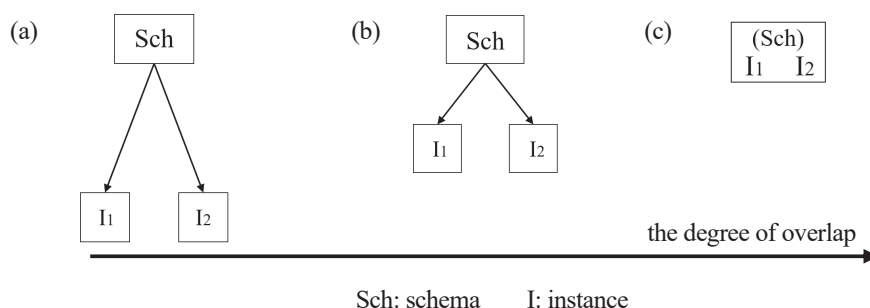


Figure 12: Degree of overlap between a schema and its instances

The degree of overlap is a parameter of the iconicity-arbitrariness continuum. Arbitrariness and elaboration iconicity are situated at opposite ends of the continuum, with extension iconicity in the middle (Figure 13). When an expression is arbitrary, a schema cannot be extracted from a form and a component of knowledge, resulting in a vast distance (Figure 14(a)). Elaboration iconicity obtains when the distance is zero (i.e. the form and the relevant component of knowledge are identical (Figure 14(c))). Different degrees of extension iconicity bridge the gap between these two extremes (Figure 14(b)).

⁹ Note that I will simplify diagrams, omitting the box surrounding a symbolic unit as a whole and some components of knowledge.

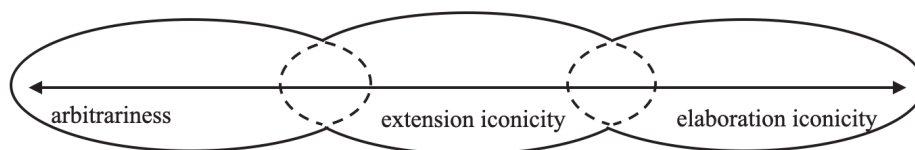


Figure 13: Iconicity-arbitrariness continuum

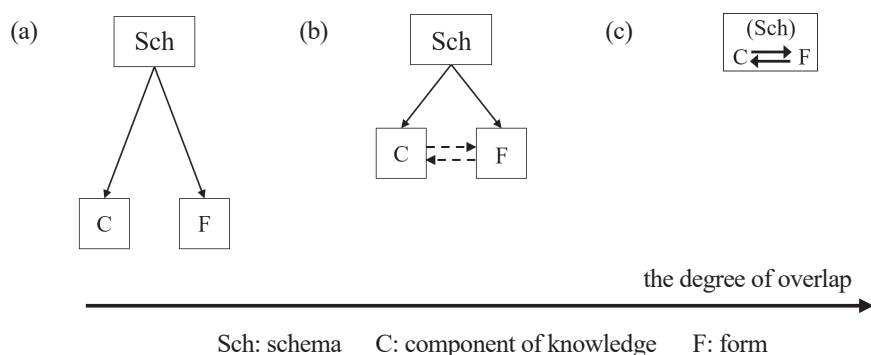


Figure 14: Arbitrariness, extension iconicity, and elaboration iconicity

5. How does the arbitrariness of linguistic signs avoid being invalidated by the theorem of the ugly duckling?

Watanabe (1991) proposed “the theorem of the ugly duckling,” which might appear to discredit our alternative model of iconicity.

The mathematical theorem shows that any two objects share the same fixed number of predicates if we consider all the possible logical functions that can be formed from the same fixed starting predicates (Watanabe 1991: 26).

According to this theorem, a duckling is just as similar to a swan as two ducklings are to each other. Hence the name of the theorem. If natural language were to fall within the scope of this theorem, any expression would be just as iconic as any other because the form and the meaning of any expression would be just as similar to each other as those of any other expression. But this, of course, is not what we find.¹⁰ Where, then, does this discrepancy come from? As a first step to answering this profound question, let us show exactly how iconic and arbitrary expressions differ from each other.

Crucially important in addressing this question are the Cognitive Grammar notions of domain and its centrality. A domain is any kind of conception or realm of experience which is invoked by a linguistic expression as the basis for its meaning (Langacker 2008: 44), and the centrality of a particular domain is the likelihood of it being activated when an expression is used on a given occasion (Langacker 2008: 48).

¹⁰ This is exactly what Watanabe wanted to bring home to us when he put forward this theorem.

The count noun *glass*, for example, evokes the following domains: (i) a specification of its typical shape; (ii) the conception of its typical orientation; (iii) its function as a container for liquid; (iv) its role in the process of drinking; (v) a specification of its material; (vi) its typical size; (vii) and numerous other conceptions (e.g., cost, washing, storage, possibility of breaking, position on a table during a meal, matching sets, method of manufacture). Among these, domains (i) to (vi) are so central that one can hardly use the word *glass* without evoking them. On the other hand, domains listed in (vii) are more peripheral for *glass*. (Langacker 2007: 434-435, Langacker 2008: 47-48).

While we find a glass and a paper cup to be similar, we normally do not feel the same way about a glass and a computer. Where does this difference come from? It seems to me reasonable to assume that **the greater the number of central domains two entities share, the more similar they are**. Consider Figure 15, which shows what it means to say that a glass and a paper cup are similar. An ellipse stands for a domain. A dotted line indicates that the two domains connected are identical. In the case of a glass and a paper cup, many of their central domains coincide (e.g., container for liquid, handy size).¹¹

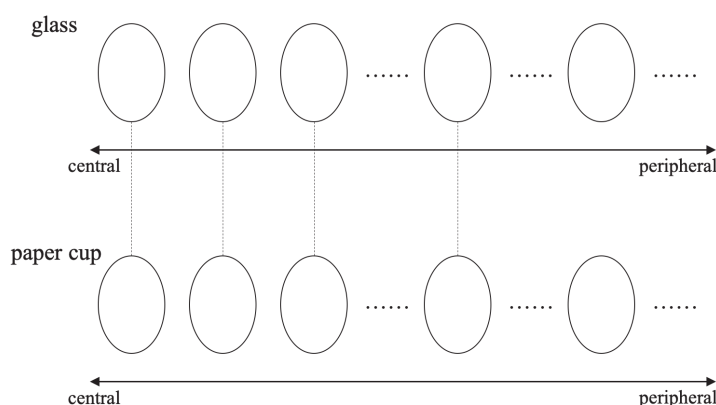


Figure 15: Domains of a glass and a paper cup

In contrast, there are few central domains a glass and a computer have in common. Admittedly, we could view a glass and a computer as similar if the condition in the theorem of the ugly duckling were to be met. Among the domains a glass and a computer share is one about fragility (i.e., they easily break when dropped). This domain is, however, too peripheral to make them similar from the viewpoint of their users.¹²

¹¹ The diagram does not reflect the different rankings for centrality that actually exist between a glass and a paper cup. This does not, however, affect the argument here.

¹² The same can be said for the relationship between the semantic and the phonological pole of a linguistic expression. Consider the word *dog*, for example. The barking of a dog (bow-wow) as part of its semantic pole and its phonological pole [dog] both have at least one plosive. It would be absurd, however, to take this to mean that *dog* is iconic.

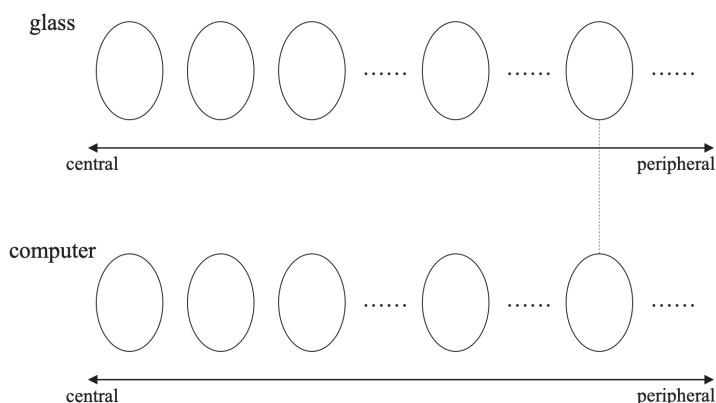


Figure 16: Domains of a glass and a computer

We can now propose an answer to the question that came up earlier: exactly how do iconic and arbitrary expressions differ from each other? The sign in (2) is iconic because the shape domain is central to both its semantic and its phonological pole. By contrast, the word *dog* is arbitrary because its semantic and its phonological pole have no central domain in common.

6. Concluding remarks: The ubiquity of iconicity in signed languages

In this paper, I started by reviewing Wilcox's cognitive iconicity, following which I advanced an alternative model, in which iconicity is grounded in categorization. There remains, however, a final question: Why is iconicity as pervasive as it is in signed languages? Let us devote a little more space to examining this point.

A prototypical noun that names a physical object is more likely to be iconic in signed languages than in spoken languages (e.g., the signs in (5a) and (5b) in Japanese Sign Language¹³). Since many objects we encounter in everyday life have certain characteristic shapes, it is natural for visual-manual languages (i.e. signed languages) to reflect the shape of such an object in a linguistic form. For much the same reason, a prototypical verb that designates a bodily action tends to be iconic in signed languages (e.g., the signs in (6a) and (6b) in Japanese Sign Language). The fact that the phonological poles of many verbs in signed languages include some elements that correspond to the participants in the actions they refer to can be regarded as part of this iconicity.

¹³ These four pictures are taken from *U-CAN Practical Dictionary of Japanese Sign Language*. (2nd edition)

(5a)



house

(5b)



dog

(6a)



drink

(6b)



eat

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手話における類像性とカテゴリー化

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キーワード：類像性 カテゴリー化 手話 オノマトペ 認知文法

要旨

Wilcox (1993, 2002, 2004, 2018) は、手話の最大の特徴の一つである類像性を認知文法の立場から分析し、「認知的類像性 (cognitive iconicity)」というモデルを提唱している。本稿はこのモデルを批判的に検討したうえで、類像性を一般的認知能力「カテゴリー化」の観点から定義する代替案を示す。さらに、(i) 言語記号が様々な程度に恣意的・類像的である理由を説明し、(ii) 恣意性と「醜いアヒルの子の定理」の間の矛盾を解消する。

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