

Re: The Myth of Arbitrariness

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- *From:* benlizross <benlizro@xxxxxxxxxx>
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Dr. Jamshid Ibrahim wrote:

>
> The first principle of Saussure's semiology is the arbitrariness of
> signs and linguists so far have claimed the lack of any intrinsic link
> or motivation between the linguistic sign and its referent or meaning.
> A popular example is given of our four-footed best friend called dog,
> Hund, chien, kalb, depending upon the language with no logical link
> between form and meaning in any of these languages.
>
> It is simply hard to believe names being given to forms at random and
> accepted by convention without any logical link. It looks as if when
> linguists can't provide an explanation for specific phenomenon
> arbitrariness proves to be the most convenient solution. Onomatopoeic
> expressions, (sometimes) etymology and metaphor contradict this view
> and show how labelling has always been associated with some picture or
> at least a coded message. Imitation or mimesis must have played a
> central role and provided a basis. New words sometimes were coined by
> mistake but there is always an explanation, a cause for an effect. If
> such labelling is arbitrary it is legitimate to pose the question how
> were these particular names then chosen (arbitrarily)? After all
> natural signs like coughing, sneezing, trembling are not conventional
> and cannot be arbitrary. If labelling is arbitrary it is then
> homo-centric and unnatural.
> Regards
> Jamshid

You appear to be confusing two quite different things: (1) the arbitrariness of the link between sound and meaning in languages as we know them, which is neither a "myth", nor a "claim" nor a "solution" to anything, but an everyday observed fact, as your "dog" example shows; and (2) some idea about how things _originally_ got their names. The fact is that we have absolutely no idea (and no hope of knowing) who first made up a word for "dog", or what that word was, or why they gave it such a name. Of course people do still make up new words for new things, using a number of principles, of which mimesis would be one. And you could argue that such acts of invention are not "arbitrary". But that's not what Saussure was talking about.

Ross Clark

- *Follow-Ups:*

- ◆ *Re: The Myth of Arbitrariness*

- ◇ *From: Dr. Jamshid Ibrahim*