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Iconicity

Iconicity is a relationship between a sign and its object (often a linguistic pattern or another sign) in which the form of the sign recapitulates the object in some way. Charles Sanders Peirce defined an icon as a "sign by virtue of its own quality and [a] sign of whatever else partakes of that quality." Even the most "natural" looking icon, though, is mediated through social convention and subject to the historically specific interpretative habits of its users. Consider the skull-and-crossbones, used for much of the last century to mark poisons. Some children interpreted the icon through an alternate set of conventions to mean "pirate food," and a concerted effort was made to replace it with another conventional icon, "Mister Yucky."

Peirce identified three main subtypes of icons: images, diagrams, and metaphors. Images "partake of the simple qualities" of their objects. They may be graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, or verbal—as W. J. T. Mitchell has observed—but what they have in common is that the form of the sign reflects its object directly and concretely. Sound images include verbal signs that are sometimes referred to as "sound symbolic" or "onomatopoeic." Diagrams are signs that represent the relations of the parts of their objects by analogous relationships among their own parts. It is commonplace in narrative, for example, for the order of narrative to diagram the order of narrated events. Metaphors are signs that represent "a parallel in something else," often through a vaguely sensed affinity. Constellations of words in which a similarity of form evokes a similarity of meaning, such as the *sl*-words in English (slip, slide, slush, sleaze, etc., described by Dwight Bolinger) are instances of metaphoric iconicity.

Iconicity has several key effects: It naturalizes one set of semiotic distinctions by referring it to another that is understood by the speakers to be more basic, essential, outside volitional control, or outside culture. It allows particular linguistic and cultural patterns to be referred to each other, such that they become mutually interpreting. Along the same vein, the alignment

of structural forms across distinct cultural domains unifies cultural patterns; a song can be iconic of a textile. It fits the form of a speech event closely to the specific contours of its setting, making it compelling to the participants and providing cues that they use to interpret it. Finally, by bringing distinct cultural and linguistic structures into structural alignment it enhances their cognitive retention by individuals, as Dedre Gentner has shown. As a form of structural alignment, iconicity is important in both the transmission and persistence of cultural forms.

When signs are taken individually, they seem relatively unmotivated. When they are seen as parts of larger clusters—actions, patterns, texts, conversations, grammars, cultures—iconicity, and especially diagrammaticity, looms large in understanding how they cluster and interact, as pointed out by Paul Friedrich. All three Peircian subtypes of iconicity figure in ethnographic analyses, from the macro-organization of social systems to the micro-organization of the lexicon. The examples below illustrate the pervasiveness of iconicity in language-and-culture.

Naturalizes one set of semiotic distinctions by referring it to another: It is common for political systems to naturalize a particular social order by laying it out territorially and in calendrical time. For example, the Inka capital Cuzco (in the research of Zuidema, Sherbondy, and Bauer) was organized into a nested system of hierarchically ranked sightlines radiating from the ritual center. Each node was associated with a specific social segment, ranked according to its position in the system. The sightlines defined a set of irrigation districts, determining each group's rights to specific sources of water (and hence to specific agricultural lands). Social segments were associated with sacred places ranked along the same sightlines and were responsible for tending them on specific ritual occasions, sequenced by position on the system of sightlines. In short, the spatial organization of Inka Cuzco was a diagrammatic icon of the relationships among social segments, irrigation rights, and ritual responsibilities. Similarly, Richard Parmentier shows that social segmentation and hierarchy in Belau were made to seem natural and inevitable through diagrammatic iconicity.

"Click" (velar) sounds entered the Nguni language of southern Africa, as discussed by Judith Irvine and Susan Gal, from neighboring Khoi languages, spreading through an Nguni speech register that expressed social distance and deference. Thus clicks came to be interpreted as icons of foreignness, both expressing the social distance implied by use of the respect register and naturalizing an essentialized social distance.

Allows particular linguistic and cultural patterns to become mutually interpreting: Among Kaluli in Melanesia, the *gisaro* ritual—discussed by Steven Feld and Edward L. Schieffelin—establishes a diagrammatic correspondence among a specific myth, the social orders of birds and humans, the ritual enactment of birdness by humans in the ritual. The tonal structure of song diagrams the calls of birds being enacted by ritual dancers. J. Becker and A. L. Becker showed that in Javanese the diagrammatic correspondence among melodic cycles, the organization of performance, and calendric cycles similarly unifies these domains. Barbara and Dennis Tedlock have shown

that Quiché Mayan textiles can be read intertextually as diagrams of verbal texts-narratives and of divinatory performances, and vice-versa.

The order of suffixes in the Southern Quechua verb (Mannheim) is a diagrammatic icon of the degree to which they express the subjective positions of participants in the speech event, such that the least deictic suffixes appear closer to the verb stem, with person and tense appearing near the end, and evidentials, which express the speaker's subjective orientation toward the message appearing at the very end of the verb. In historical linguistics, morphological changes are partly predictable as shifts toward a diagrammatic economy of representation in which relationships among forms come to diagram their semantic relationships (Andersen), as Watkins has shown for the history of the Celtic person system.

Fits the form of a speech event closely to the specific contours of its setting: In lowland Ecuadorian Quichua narrative, iconic aspectual expressions punctuate narrative, creating a sense of verisimilitude linking the performance of the narrative with the events being described. In Nahuatl narrative, specific socially located "voices" are marked with characteristic intonations that allow listeners to track the voices across the narrative and connect the voices to their social locations. Roman Jakobson suggested that as a pragmatic principle of language, the default (or unmarked) setting is to treat the order of events in narrative as a diagrammatic icon of their order "in the world"; any non-default interpretation requires special narrative devices. Similarly, the hierarchy of conjoined nouns—by default—reflects the presupposed hierarchy of their referents.

In short, iconicity can inhere in virtually any aspect of language, culture, and society, making reference to the world assumed to be outside of language; to aspects of the social situation; to crystallized patterns elsewhere in the language or culture; to essentialized social domains; and from one piece of a text or of a social performance and another. One analytic goal of linguistic anthropologists and other ethnographers is to make these iconic linkages explicit.

(See also *ideophone, indexicality, media, narrative, orality, vision, writing*)

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