

Samuel Butler And The Meaning Of Chiasmus

Semiotic Foundations of Iconicity in Language and Literature

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1. Introduction: arbitrariness vs. iconicity

In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure formulated his famous "first principle of the nature of the language sign", which states: "The linguistic sign is arbitrary" (1916: 67). According to this principle, there is nothing in a horse or in our mental image of a horse that explains why the English speaking world designates a mare or a stallion as *horse* and not as *cheval*, *Pferd* or *cavalo*.

For generations of scholars, this principle of arbitrariness had been a dogma of linguistics. However, this volume of collected papers on *The Motivated Sign* and other recent research testifies to a new research paradigm. More and more iconic features are being discovered in language and literature at the levels of phonology, morphology, word formation, syntax, the text, and in the domain of language change (Bouissac et al., eds. 1986; Waugh 1992; Landsberg, ed. 1995; Simone, ed. 1995; Anderson 1999; Nänny & Fischer, eds. 1999).

My own contribution to this volume deals with the semiotic foundations of iconicity in language and literature (see also Nöth 1990a, 1990b, 1995, 1994, 2000). After all, iconicity is a semiotic concept, and it was Charles Sanders Peirce who introduced it in the framework of his general theory of signs. What did the founder of modern semiotics mean by iconicity, how did he define the iconic sign in contrast to other signs, and to what extent is Peirce's theory of iconicity relevant to the study of language and literature? These are some of the questions I would like to discuss in section 2.

Section 3 will be dedicated to my own argument that iconicity in language goes beyond the principle of "form miming meaning", as Olga Fischer and Max Nänny put it in their *Call for Papers*. In

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