Arbitrariness in Language

In linguistics, the combination of a meaning and a form (e.g., a group of sounds) is called a **linguistic sign**.

**Arbitrariness** in linguistics refers to the fact that

- the meaning of linguistic signs is not in any way predictable from the form, nor is the form dictated by the meaning.

In the opposite case, if a symbol is **nonarbitrary**, then

- one should be able to deduce its meaning from the form of the symbol.

**Iconicity** describes the most extreme examples of nonarbitrary form-meaning connections, where

- the form is directly representational of the meaning.

One such example might be a “no-smoking” sign. The sign effectively “contains” its meaning in its form. There is a direct link between the sign and its meaning, that link being the shape of a cigarette. If cigarettes looked different, the sign would then also have to look different.

Another similar example is a deer-crossing sign, which is directly linked to the shape of deer.

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Human language is completely arbitrary with very few exceptions (to be mentioned shortly).

This is most clearly shown by the fact that there are so many different words with little or no similarity of form in different languages meaning the same thing.

(1) “tree”: French *arbre*, Russian *derevo*, Japanese *ki*, Korean *namu*, German *Baum*

Also, even within the same language, the form of words changes over time. We would not expect this if there was a direct link between a word’s meaning and its form, since the constancy of the meaning should prevent the form from changing. Conversely, we have words which change meanings over time, so that the same form comes to be associated with a different meaning, again making the existence of a link between the two highly unlikely.

(2) a. form changes: hus → house
   b. meaning changes: girl “child” → girl “girl”

The (partial) exceptions to the claim that human language is arbitrary fall under two restricted categories – **onomatopoeia** and **sound symbolism**.

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Onomatopoeia and Sound Symbolism

**Onomatopoetic** words have a definite relationship to what they represent, thus they are not entirely arbitrary. However, different languages represent the same natural sounds in slightly different ways, meaning that they are not completely nonarbitrary either. (If so, every language would have to have precisely the same word to represent the same natural sound).

**Sound symbolism** refers to the very vague, elusive way in which certain sounds “feel” more appropriate to describe certain objects. Thus in many languages the vowel “i” is used for “small” or “teensy” things, while a vowel such as “a”, “o”, or “u” is used for larger things. This is only a vague tendency, it is by no means a hard rule.

(3) a. teensy-weensy, leetle, wee, Tom → Tommy, squeak
   but small
   German: klein (*small*), winzig (*tiny*)
   b. large, humongous, mega- but big

Languages can also have particular sounds which have a certain feel for the speakers of that language.

(4) brightness: *gl*- glitter, gleam, glow, glint but glove, glue
(5) sudden action: -ash bash, mash, crash, flash

Why is arbitrariness a plus?

Because it frees a communication system to use the most convenient means available to communicate by removing the constraint that the form of signals must bear a relationship to their meanings. It also makes it much easier for a communication system to refer to abstract entities, since it is hard in any case to make a link between a symbol and an abstract meaning.
Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism

What is Grammar?

In linguistics, a grammar is the set of elements and rules that make up a language.

Linguists recognize three different things called grammar:

**Mental Grammar:** The mental grammar consists of those aspects of a speaker's knowledge of language that allow him or her to produce grammatical utterances - that is a speaker's linguistic competence.

**Descriptive Grammar:** Linguists attempt to describe the grammar of the language that exists in the minds of its speakers, i.e. the linguistic competence. Descriptive grammar describes your basic linguistic knowledge. It explains how it is possible for you to speak and understand and it tells what you know about the sounds, words, phrases and sentences of your language. Descriptive rules accept patterns a speaker actually uses and try to account for them. Descriptive rules allow for different varieties of a language.

Descriptive grammar is is created by linguists as a model of speakers' linguistic competence, i.e., their mental grammar.

**Prescriptive Grammar:** tells you how to speak or write according to someone's idea of what is "good" or "bad". Prescriptive rules make a value judgment about the correctness of an utterance and try to enforce a usage that conforms with one formal norm.

Linguists describe language.

This is as opposed to prescribing language, what most people think of as the task of linguists.

This is a misconception – as a science, linguistics is not in a position to make value judgments on language use – a prescriptive approach.

It instead analyzes how language is actually used and then attempts to describe this data.

Physicists don't complain that objects should fall up instead of down – they simply observe and describe the fact that gravity pulls things towards the earth. In the same way, linguists don't say that people shouldn't use the word "ain't", they instead observe the fact that some people do use it, without assuming that it is either good or bad.