ARBITRARINESS: THE FIRST PRINCIPLE OF LINGUISTIC SIGN

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Abstract

There are many different opinions on the arbitrariness of the linguistic signs. Although, mainstream linguists accepted and supported this theory, there are many other scholars who question, doubt and oppose it.

By adopting the Saussurean hypothesis, the current study attempts to introduces three models which are taken from language learning experiences to illustrates the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. It is mainly concerned with investigating the relationship between signifiers and signifieds. It also examine whether arbitrariness can only be applied to individual signs or to the whole sign system.

Keywords: Arbitrariness, linguistic sign, signifier, signified, sound image

1. Introduction

In any natural history of human species, a language would stand out as the outstanding trait that connects the members of a community into an information-sharing network with great collective powers. Language is not a naming-process only or a list of words, each corresponds to the thing that it names. it is the domain of articulations through which human beings can exchange knowledge, beliefs, opinions and feelings by establishing systems and rules that people learn. In short, language is the whole set of habits which enable speakers to understand and to make themselves understood.

Nonetheless, sometimes one may find it difficult to establish a relationship between a sound-image and concept. It is just an arbitary relationship that links them to each other to convey an intended meanings.

Ferdinand De Saussure, who is considered to be the father of the modern linguistics, was the first who explained the notion of the arbitrariness systematically. According to the Saussurean's legacy, the arbitrariness that Saussure claims is the arbitrariness of the relationship between signifiers and signifieds.

Accordingly, this paper aims at introducing and examining three models that are taken from language learning experiences to illustrate the arbitrariness of the linguistic sing. It is mainly concerned with investigating and discussing the following questions: How can the relationship

between signifiers and signifiers be an arbitrary one? Can arbitrariness only be applied to individual signs or to the whole sign system?

The framework of this paper is organized into two main sections: theoretical and practical. The theoretical section deals with two parts. The first part outlines what is the linguistic sign, while the second one discusses the arbitrariness as the first principle of the linguistic sign with a special focus on the relationship between signifiers and signifieds. After having done this, in the practical part, the current study introduces three models with detailed examples that are taken from language learning experiences to illustrate the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign: (1) the relationship between signifiers and signifieds; (2) one signifier for multiple signifieds and vice versa; and (3) sign system and sign structure.

Finally, the study concludes with important findings which are summed up in the conclusion.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The linguistic sign

In order to understand the concept of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, which is the concern of this paper, it should first of all have a clear and deep understanding of what a linguistic sign is.

A linguistic sign, as Saussure (2011:101) define it, is the mechanism by which meaning is created and conveyed. Other scholars (e.g. Counsell and Wolf 2006, Berger 2004) state that linguistic signs are the keys that unlocks the meanings of all things great and small. That's to say, without the help of signs people would not be able to make a clear-cut, distinction between two things. A sign is a combination of a "concept" and a "sound pattern", a union that cannot be separated in people's associative mind. It is a "form made up of something physical, sounds, letters, gestures, etc.", which Saussure called the signifier or "sound-image"; to stand for an object, image, event, etc., which he termed the signified or "concept" (Harris& Komatsu, 1993:74a).

It is worthwhile to note that the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce has a similar point of view. He declares that signs take different forms: words, images, sounds, acts or objects, and they become signs only when we use them to create meaning. He also emphasizes that "[n]othing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" (cited in Chandler 2007:16). In other words, anything can be a sign as long as it signifying, referring to or standing for something other than itself.

Another linguist's contribution to the understanding of the linguistic sign which is roughly corresponding to Saussure's *signifier* and *signified* and that can be seen as a development for them.

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The Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev, describes the linguistic sign as a "binary reality"; it is a combination of "*expression* and *content*", or "*substance* and *form*" (Barthes, 1964 :11).

Duan (2012:54), on the other hand, argues that a sign arouses a reflection of something in the mind of people, and when they have something in mind, it always directs their attention to something in the real world. People should thus be aware of the twofold nature of language; or more clearly, of the fact that when they communicate through the language they actually use sounds to convey meanings.

The most impressive and problematic thought that Saussure (1983:111) emphasizes is that language is a system of signs which are quite arbitrary and that can only be defined in terms of their relationship within the system. He furthermore stresses that sign is a "double entity", i.e. consists of sound and concept (signifier and signified) which are as inseparable as the two sides of a piece of paper (Holdcroft, 1991:48). In other terms, even though the relationship between them is arbitrary, they are intimately linked in the mind of people by an associative bond and each evokes the other..

Moreover, arbitrariness, according to Saussure, is not only one of the main characteristics; rather it is the first principle of the linguistic sign that received a great interest among scholars from different disciplines. The following part sheds more light on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign.

2.2. The arbitrariness of the linguistic sign

Human beings have, from very early times, noticed and paid attention to the arbitrariness of the linguistic signs. In the ancient Greece, for instance, Aristotle indicated that there is no natural connection between the sound of any idea and the thing that it signifies (Amaglobli, 2012: 38). Saussure (1983: 67-68) argues that linguistic signs do not stand for anything; they just show a sort of relationship of convention between two factors. That's to say, what a linguistic sign link is not the thing and its name, but the concept and sound image. A sign is therefore a combination of concept and sound image. For instance, the idea of 'sister' is not linked by any internal connection to the sequence of sounds **(S-I-S-T-E-R)** which acts as its signifier in English. The same idea could be equally illustrated by any other succession of sounds. This is demonstrated by differences among languages, and by the existence of different languages. In short, the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and unmotivated. As Saussure clearly expresses it,

> there is no logical basis for the choice of a particular signal to refer to a particular signification. It is not the inherent physical properties of a signal that makes it suitable for the representation of a signification (concept) and it

is not the characteristics of a signification that makes it choose a particular

signal to represent it. So the linguistic sign is arbitrary (ibid:69).

Likewise, Harris& Komatsu (1993:76a) emphasize that the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign that Saussure claims is the arbitrariness of the relationship between a signifier and signified, a sound-image and concept. It is arbitrary in the sense that there is no reason whatsoever for which a particular sequence of sounds should be associated with a certain meaning. Namely, it lacks motivation because the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary and unmotivated. In other words, there is no logical connexion between a word and concept or a concept and sound image. That's to say, there is no one-to-one relationship between them within one language or across different languages. For instance, there is no motivation why the letters **C-A-T** or the sequence of these phonemes produce exactly the image of a small and domesticated with four legs and tail animal in our minds. It is undoubtedly a matter of convention where speakers of the same language have agreed and learned that these letters or this sequence of sounds trigger that specific image.

With this in mind, it is important to note that after Saussure the arbitrariness theory greatly influenced the development of modern linguistics. This area, as Zheng (2009:87) puts it, has won a worldwide interest and the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign was widely accepted. Mainstream linguists support this assumption though they admit that there are other prominent characteristics of the linguistic sign. The Formal Linguistics School, which is led by Chomsky, totally support this theory. Chomsky developed Saussure's theory and made it more believable. Hockett (1960), Culler (1976), Lyons (1977), Wang Dechun (2001) and Guo Hong (2001) admit the principle of arbitrariness and agree that it occupies the dominant position among the other characteristics of the linguistic sign. In short, the notion of the arbitrariness was once in a predominating status particularly before the 1980s until further studies were achieved (ibid: 88).

However, with the development of linguistics and the new findings in this area, a considerable number of scholars has started to doubt this theory, question it or even oppose it. On the one hand, Wright (1976) and Nöth (1990), propose different viewpoints against arbitrariness from various perspectives. XU Guo-ZHANG (1991) argues that a linguistic sign cannot be arbitrary because language is a rational behaviour (ibid).

On the other hand, the French linguist and semiotician Émile Benveniste, who is best known for his expansion of the linguistic paradigm hypothesized by Saussure, announces that the connection between a signifier and signified is necessary. Because, whilst the former is the vocal

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representation of a concept; the latter is the mental counterpart of the signifier. They are together imprinted on people's minds, the two evoke each other because the mind does not contain empty signs nor concepts without names. Benvéniste equally emphasizes that a linguistic sign only seems arbitrary to someone "who limits himself to observing from the outside the bond established between an objective reality and human behavior and condemns himself thus to seeing nothing but contingency" (Benveniste, 1971: 41-45).

The fact of the matter is that Saussure (1983:130) does not deny the existence of motivation in language as he writes:

> The fundamental principle of the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign does not prevent us from distinguishing in any language between what is intrinsically arbitrary – that is, unmotivated – and what is only relatively arbitrary. Not all signs are absolutely arbitrary. In some cases, there are factors which allow us to recognize different degrees of arbitrariness, although never to discard the notion entirely. *The sign may be motivated to a certain extent.*

Saussure tries here to draw a clear distinction between a genuine and relative arbitrariness. He asserts that not all signs are completely arbitrary, but the sign may be motivated to a certain extent. For example, the word thirty is absolutely arbitrary or unmotivated while thirty-one is relatively arbitrary, because the former is unanalyzable and therefore evokes no association with other words but the latter evokes the words of which it is composed.

In light of the above stated arguments, the arbitrariness, as expressed by Zheng (2009: 91), seems closely associated with conventionality of language, it means that all the members of a speech community agree to use a particular signal to refer to a particular signification. Once a relationship between a signal and signification is established, it is not subject to any personal influence. That's to say, It is obligatory for the speakers of a particular speech community to follow in order to communicate with others and function in society (Chandler,2007:53). Because if someone completely agrees that all linguistic signs are totally arbitrary and anyone can create a sign for any object, how can people learn languages and communicate with others? Hence, both the arbitrariness and conventionality exist in linguistic signs. That is, the origin of signs is arbitrary but with the development of language, regularities appear to regulate language as well as provide people a way to learn language.

3. The arbitrary nature of linguistic sign: Some models

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To illustrate the idea of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, this section is concerned with discussing and introducing three models with a detailed explanation for each.

3.1. The relationship between signifiers and signifieds.

In general, when someone starts studying a new language; he/she may compare the new linguistic system to that one they are used to in their home language or in the other languages they have acquired or learned during their life. They may find some difficult or strange structures in the new language that probably require a long time of practice to be adapted with. Let us consider, for instance, the relationship between signifiers and signifieds.

To count and represent numbers, different cultures use different methods of counting. One of the most common ways is to use the fingers on hands, i.e. decimal or base 10 numeral system. Other cultures use both fingers and toes, i.e. they use the vigesimal or base 20 numeral system (Gaczynski, 2004: 19-20).

French, as notified by Eliasson (2006:96), stands out among other European languages such as Danish, Basque, Breton and Gaelic by applying the vegesimal system. Most linguists believe that the use of vegesimal base 20 numbering system in French comes from Scandinavian languages (through the Vikings) or from Celtic languages (through Gaullish). The Vikings or Gaullish, who relied on a basis of 20 (i.e. 20 fingers of the hands and feet) in their calculation system, has probably influenced a lot the French.

In consequence, the counting system seems therefore little bite complicated in French as it applies the vegesimal method on a group of numbers. The numbers from 1-69, except (17,18and 19), have a Latin origin on a decimal basis (that's to say about 10). Actually, there is no problem in writing or uttering theses numbers. The problem is with the vigesimal counting system, especially for the numbers from 70-99. These numbers can be resulted from operations of multiplication or addition for the numbers from (1-20). It is totally different of that methods students have used to in Arabic or even of that one they have studied in English. So, when counting the French say:

- *soixante – onze* (71); that is to say (**sixty+ eleven**)
- *soixante – dix-neuf* (79); that is to say (**sixty+ ten+ nine**)
- *quatre- vingts* (80); that is to say (**four** x **twenty**)
- *quatre-vingt-cinq* (85); that is to say (**four** x **twenty+ five**)
- *quatre-vingt-dix* (90); that is to say (**four** x **twenty +ten**)
- *quatre-vingt-douze* (92); that is to say (**four** x **twenty+ twelve**)
- *quatre-vingt-dix-neuf* (99); that is to say (**four** x **twenty + ten + nine**)

Each one of these numbers looks like an arithmetic equation. Simply, it seems as an operation of gathering numbers by a simple mathematical operations to indicate a given signified. The umber (**99**), for instance, is resulted from an operation of multiplication and addition (**4x20+9+10 = 99**) where both the decimal and vegesimal systems are involved.

Indeed, one may see that the relationship between the signifier *quatre-vingt-dix-neuf* (**four-twenty-ten-nine**) and its given signified (**99**) is arbitrary, since there is not a direct bond between the sound image *quatre-vingt-dix-neuf* (**four- twenty-ten-nine**) and the concept (**99**). In other words, "[t]here is no one-to-one link between [the] signifier and [its] signified" (Chandler, 2007:25). Further, the relationship here seems unmotivated; it is just an operation of placing sings side by side to indicate a specific concept. The Saussurean semioticians, who support the arbitrariness theory, emphasize that "there is no necessary, intrinsic, direct or inevitable relationship between the signifier and the signified" (ibid:26). It is just a choice made by the speaking community and should be respected to be able to communicate and function in society.

For the new learners of French, they may find this system very arbitrary, because there is not a clear connection between the signal and concept. Namely, The signifier *quatre-vingt-dix-neuf* (**four-twenty-ten-nine**) doesn't direct their attention to the signified (**99**). The relationship between the sign's elements seem unmotivated since they are not intimately united, and each does not evoke the other. Instead, the signifier *quatre-vingt-dix-neuf* (**four-twenty-ten-nine**), as the following diagram illustrates, directs the learners' attention to four different concepts: **4**, **20**, **10** and **9**. Hence, learners may need to make a simple mental operation of calculation to understand that the sound image *quatre-vingt-dix-neuf* (**four-twenty-ten-nine**) refers to the concept (**99**).
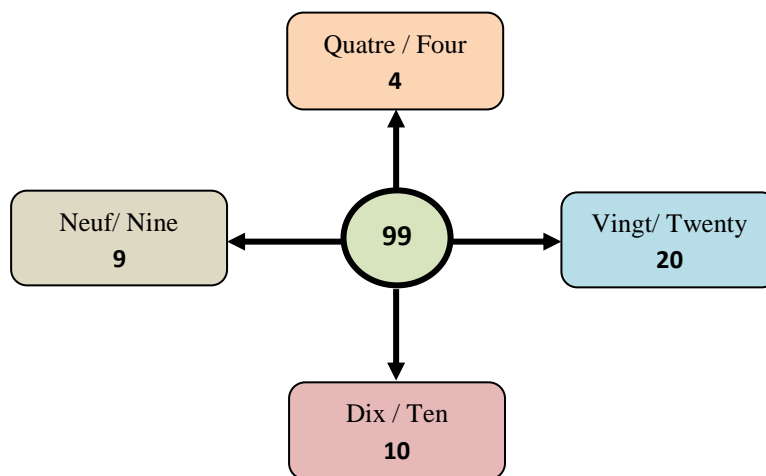

Figure (1): The relationship between signifiers and signifieds

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However, learners of French have to accept and learn this. Because they know that each language has its particularity of expressions and the relationship between signifiers and signifieds depend on the social and cultural conventions which have to be learned as part of language learning. Further, as noted by Levi-Strauss (1972), "the sign is arbitrary *priori* but cease to be so a *posteriori*" (Chandler, 2007: 27 italic in the origin).

Another important point, which support the idea of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign should be added here, the speakers of French in Belgium and Switzerland do not count the same way. Their counting system is much more logical and much easier for French learners. This is because they do not have the same story that the Gauls! Thus they count:

- **septante** for Seventy [70]
- **huitante** / **octante** for eighty [80]
- **nonante** for ninety [90]
- **nonante neuf** for ninety nine [99]

In this system, the sign's elements seem intimately united and each recalls the other. In the narrow sense, there is a direct link between the sound image and the concept. For instance, the signifier *nonante neuf* (**ninety nine**) directs the listener's attention to the pattern (**99**).

As a result and based on the discussion stated above, there are two signals or sound images that symbolize the concept (99), i.e. *quatre-vingt-dix-neuf* (**four-twenty-ten-nine**) and *nonante neuf* (**ninety nine**). This can be seen as another model that clarifies the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign from the perspective of multiplicity which is the concern of the following part. So, let us move on to have more explanation and details on this topic.

2.2 One signifier for multiple signifieds and vice versa

The role of linguistic signs is to identify things and concepts. In other words, a sing must direct the listener attention to a specific thing. Hence, the meanings of signs, as Shaumyan (2006:38)admits, must be identical for all individuals belonging to a speaking community, so that the possibility of communication between them is ensured.

Notwithstanding, in each signal language, there are different sound images or signals can be used to stand for the same concept. Let's, for instance, go back to the example that we have already discussed above, *quatre-vingt-dix-neuf* (**four-twenty-ten-nine**) and *nonante neuf* (**ninety nine**) mean exactly the same concept (**99**) except that they are used in different regions. The same thing can be said about **elevator** and **lift**, **fall** and **autumn**, and **sidewalk** and **pavement**. Each pair

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signifies the same thing. This multiplicity enhance the idea of arbitrariness as there are two or more sound-images within one language can be used to signify one concept.

In contrast, there are many other words with multiple meanings, i.e. different concepts can be symbolized by the same signal. They can stand for and signify different things. For example, the word **crane** as an acoustic image can stand for three different concepts:

- That bird is a **crane**.
- They had to use a **crane** to lift the object.
- She had to **crane** her neck to see the movie.

When a signal signifies two or more signifieds in the same time, its relationship to each one of them seems arbitrary. Further, to identify the meaning of a such sign it is undoubtedly depends on the other signs in the system. The relationship between the signifier **crane** and each one of its signifieds is a conventional one. The same thing can be applied on many other signs such as:

- **date**: Her favorite fruit to eat is a **date**.

    Joe took Alexandria out on a **date**.

- **right**: You were **right**.

     Make a **right** turn at the light.

- **type**: He can **type** over 100 words per minute.

     That dress is really not her **type**.

To understand what each signal exactly signifies here, sign structure should be taken into consideration because the meaning of each one of them depends on the other signs in the system

Another model can be useful here to illustrate the idea of the arbitrariness of the linguistic signs by using one signifier for multiple signifieds.

The acronyms (see table No.1) became nowadays an important part of any language. They are used to save space and to avoid distracting the reader by a needless repetition of words and phrases. There is absolutely a positive aspect which aims at facilitating signs and anchoring them in the mind of people. However, the similarities between these acronyms make people confused about what these symbols stand for. For instance, **USA** is a very known acronym refers to the United States of America. Yet, beside many others, this symbol is also used to refer to names such as:

USA - University of South Albania,

USA - United States Attorney,

USA - Union of South Africa

USA - United States Army

So, what does this acronym exactly stand for? In each case it has a different meaning. It seems that this acronym takes the position of an empty signifier by referring to different signifieds. Chandler (2007) notifies that "[s]igns have multiple rather than single meanings. Within a single language, one signifier may refer to many signifieds […]" (p.25) Hence, the relationship between the signal and each one of its signifieds is arbitrary and depends on the other signs in the system. This can be applied on a long list of acronyms as shown in the table below where one signal may signifies or stands for tens signifieds at the same time.

Table (1): One signifier for multiple signifieds

SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED	SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
USA	United States of America	NA	North America
USA	University of South Alabama	NA	National Association
USA	University of South Australia	NA	National Assembly
USA	United States Army	NA	Native American
USA	United States Attorney	NA	National Archives
USA	United Space Alliance	NA	National Academy
USA	United Soccer Association	NA	Naval Academy
USA	United Soccer Academy	NA	National Account
USA	Union of South Africa	NA	Network Analysis
USA	Under Secretary of the Army	NA	Naturally Aspirated
USA	Urban Service Area	NA	Network Administration
USA	Utah State Archives	NA	Nuclear Assault (band)
USA	Universal Service Agency	NA	Nigerian Army
UK	United Kingdom	NO	New Order (band)
UK	Unknown	NO	Number
UK	University of Kansas	NO	National Office
UK	Ukrainian (language)	NO	New Orleans
UK	University of Kentucky	NO	Norway
UK	University of Kerala (India)	NO	Network Operator
UK	University of Khartoum	NO	Navy Officer
UN	United Nations	UN	Union
UN	User Name	UN	Uranyl Nitrate
UN	University of Nebraska	UN	Uranium Nitride
UN	Unreachable (customer care)	UN	Un-Reachable Node
UN	User Network	UN	Ulnar Nerve (anatomy)

Our discussion so far dealt with individual signs where arbitrariness seems evident as there is not a direct or clear bond that links sound images to concepts. However, the question: can arbitrariness

only be applied to individual signs or to the whole sign system? still not answered. The following part examines and sheds more light on this topic.

2.3 Sign system and sign structure

Language is like everything in life; it doesn't still the same. It passed many periods of evolutions. In many countries, language spoken before 100 years is not the same that they are speaking today. Namely, many words and expressions have been added and many others words and expressions have been disappeared. Saussure was thus well aware that the relationship between the signifiers and signifieds in any language was subject to change over time (Chandler, 2007: 45).

Generally, beside the sign system in each human language, there is a structural system (syntax) that should be followed to connect any sign to the other signs in the system in order to get an intended meaning of a sequence of signs. This system should be respected and no one can accomplish any small change on any sign. In short, "[n]o individual is able, even if he wished, to modify in any way a choice already established in the language. Nor can the linguistic community exercise its authority to change even a single word" (Harris,1989: 48). Furthermore, a language, as it is known to all, is always an inheritance from the past and every society has no choice but to accept it. That is, any given linguistic state is always the product of historical factors. This undoubtedly explains the invariability of the linguistic sign but they do change.

Notwithstanding, the Turkish language, as Wing (2006:16) says, before less than 100 years ago is not the same today. When Mustafa Kemal Al-Deen Atatürk come to the power in 1923 and founded the new republic of Turkey, he ordered to form a linguistic committee to reform the Turkish language to be compatible with the new established political system.

The reform system included two axles: the first one focused on purifying the Turkish language of any Arabic or Persian words; even though they were part of it for centuries, and to replace them with old Turkish words. In other words, this axis, as Aydar (2006: 4-5) points out, concentrated on the turkification of Turkish language by reviving the old and disappeared words and expressions to be reused. On the other hand, the second axle was directed to change the whole alphabetical system of Turkish language from Arabic to Latin (Wing, 2006:16).

Taking all this into consideration, the question that can be raised here: is there anything rather than the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign? Because once language has selected and established a signal, it cannot be freely replaced by any other. Furthermore, excluding words and expression people used to use for centuries and replacing them with fallen or disappeared words, in addition to change the whole language system, is not an easy operation especially for speakers. This undoubtedly requires

many changes on the phonetic and syntactic levels. In other words, the change will cover all the dimensions of the linguistic sign. A new sign with new form and new phonetic and spatial order will certainly result a change in the relationships between signifiers and signifieds in the same system.

According to the Saussurean legacy of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, changing and replacing any sign depend on the speakers' will as species living in this world. In other terms, they can change or replace any sign they all agree upon, since "there is no inherent, essential, transparent, self-evident or natural connection between the signifier and the signified– between the sound of a word and the concept to which it refers" (Chandler, 2007:22). Therefore, there is nothing at all to prevent the association of any idea whatsoever with any sequence of sounds whatsoever.

From Plato's point of view in respect of the linguistic sig, he admits that whatever name people give to a thing is its right name, and they can change it when they want. Because, as Plato thinks, "no name belongs to a particular thing by nature" (ibid:23). That is, the origin of the linguistic signs, as (Zheng, 2009: 91) argues, is arbitrary, but after they were employed to indicate certain concepts, they gradually became conventional.

Similarly, Wittgensten (1965) admit that when people substitute one set of arbitrary signs for another set they may at first have some difficulty in linking the new set with the meaning of the old set (Harris,1989: 52). but since "[a] sign is variable and the meaning is constant. We can replace a given sign by any other sign, and its meaning will remain the same" (Shaumyan, 2006:14).

Accordingly and upon changing the whole sign system in Turkey by replacing it with a new one, it seems evident that arbitrariness can not only be applied to individual signs but also to the whole sign system.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, despite all the controversies and refutation, arbitrariness still holds a firm validity.

From the models discussed in the current study, the arbitrariness of linguistic signs seems evident because the relationship between signifiers and signifieds is unmotivated. In other terms, there is a clear bond or an immediate relation that links them to each other. It also reveals that the signal or sound image does not direct the people attention to the required thing or concept. In addition, arbitrariness can not only be applied to individual signs but also to the whole sign system because changing or replacing any sign will result a change in the whole sign system.

Finally, any sing seems arbitrary at the beginning, but cease to be so over time after getting its historical existence through its use in the linguistic system.

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