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# Is the arbitrary symmetrical?

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**Abstract:** Arbitrariness is commonly seen as a major concept in Saussure's thought, and it even receives the status of a "principle" in his theory. It is not only the characteristic feature of the relation between the signifier and the signified (the semiological relation is arbitrary), but moreover it is constitutive of this very relation (the relation is semiological *because* it is arbitrary; there is a so-called "semiological relation" established between a signifier and a signified because of the principle of arbitrariness). And when linguists and other Saussurean interpreters comment on the concept of arbitrariness, they usually imply a binary relation: the semiological relation is arbitrary due to the fact that the signifier is arbitrarily chosen vis-à-vis the signified, *and vice versa*. I will be questioning the latter assertion in this paper. In my opinion, the symmetry of the semiological relation has not been properly demonstrated. The signifier can be seen as arbitrary with regard to the signified, but no reason has been provided to recognize the converse. Instead a number of arguments can be put forth to see arbitrariness as a concept that implies a non-symmetrical relation.

**Keywords:** arbitrary, Saussure, semiological relation, nomenclature, symmetry

## 1 The principle of arbitrariness and the semiological relation

Arbitrariness is a concept that was applied to language well before Saussure's works. Yet in the *Logic* of Port-Royal (1662), the term is presented as a term uncommon usage in the discourse of logic, and yet as a problematic one: "Il y a une grande équivoque dans ce mot d'*arbitraire*, quand on dit que la signification des mots est arbitraire" (Arnaud and Nicole 1992 [1662]: 37). And when W. D. Whitney employed it later on, he attributed the source of its conceptualization to Plato's *Cratylus*: "The word exists *thesei* 'by attribution,' and not *phúsei* 'by nature'" (Whitney 1875: 19). Thus, it seems likely that Saussure inherited both the term and the concept from Whitney and, through him, from the "western tradition" (Toutain 2013: 98). Nevertheless, interpreters have often pointed out

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that Saussure has revised the concept, giving it a scope it never had before. Amacker (1975: 86), for instance, underlined the adverb *radically*, which is found along the adjectival form *arbitrary* in the students' notes of the third course but has disappeared in Bally and Sechehaye's edition: "Le lien unissant le signifiant au signifié est radicalement arbitraire" (Saussure 1967: 152B & E).<sup>1</sup> Even if Saussure used some strong expressions in his notes – and *radically* could just as well be one of them – Amacker took it in its etymological sense: *radically* would mean then "in its foundation." He had concluded from it that arbitrariness is at the foundation of language, and the original concept of Saussure's theorization.<sup>2</sup>

From this "radical" point of view, the principle of arbitrariness is built as a new beginning for the knowledge of language. It is an epistemological principle formulated to oppose the traditional view on language. What was this tradition saying? It was accustomed to seeing language as a collection of names serving as vehicles for external ideas. Language would thus be just a nomenclature. The conception of language's arbitrariness allows us to steer clear of this exactly. By doing so, the principle not only implies a new view of the knowledge of language, but it entirely renovates the status of linguistics amongst other sciences through its re-classification as a particular semiology. Moreover, it also implies the "semiologization" of psychology, which "s'aperceva que la langue n'est non pas une de ses branches, mais l'ABC de sa propre activité" (Saussure 1974: 38A).

As we can see (in Amacker 1975; and also in Bouquet 1997a; Utaker 2002; Bevidas 2015), interpreters did not hesitate to emphasize the role of arbitrariness in Saussure's thought. However, what actually *is* arbitrary is not so clear. When the scope of arbitrariness is highlighted, its theoretical function and its definition are rather minimized in the commentaries of these analysts.

The problem of arbitrariness requires both philological clarifications and theoretical discussions. These two aspects of the problem will briefly be presented here.

Indeed, the conception of arbitrariness emerges in Saussure's thought with a lot of terminological fluctuations. It is rather difficult to determine precisely what qualifies as *arbitrary* – a "link" (*le lien*; Saussure 1967: 152B & E as quoted above), a "relation" (*le rapport*; Saussure 1974: 32B), or a "character" (*le caractère*; Saussure 1967: 162B) – and also to identify to what purpose it is

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1 My quotations from the *Cours de linguistique générale* will always be cited from the critical edition by Rudolf Engler, which consists of six columns (column A: the Bally and Sechehaye edition, columns B to E: students' notes, column F: Saussure's manuscript notes).

2 See also Culler (2003: 52).

said to be so. A link or a relation supposes that the elements in presence can also be described as arbitrary. But the “arbitrary *character* of the sign” does not so easily imply this kind of projection on the elements. Besides, the elements of the arbitrary sign also pose a terminological problem. As the readers of Saussure’s manuscripts<sup>3</sup> are well aware, the terms “signifier” (*signifiant*) and “signified” (*signifié*) also came after a long string of terminological attempts: “sound” and “idea,” or “sign” and “meaning,” “form” and “idea,” “vocal figure” and “concept,” *some* and *contre-sôme*, or again *apossème* and *parasôme*, among other examples. In comparison, “signifier” and “signified” express their own conceptual functions: they are correlated on a common lexical base and by two opposite suffixes, one active-oriented, the other passive-oriented (as is also the case with the pair “perceiver” – “perceived” in Berkeley’s philosophy), or one outward-oriented, and the other inward-oriented (as “container” – “contained”). They appear to be relevant even if it is not certain that Saussure actually made a final choice among these terms.<sup>4</sup> However, they built with arbitrariness an opaque monolith. In other words, saying something like “The link that unites the signifier and the signified is radically arbitrary” is far more esoteric than saying, for instance, that names are conventionally associated with ideas in each natural language. Even the utterance “The linguistic sign is arbitrary” (Saussure 1967: 152A) is an obscure manner of saying it since the sign is no longer a sign *for* something but only the association of the signifier and the signified. One step further, and the statement would have resembled a logical one: if A is *f* and if  $A = B + C$ , then  $B + C$  is *f*.

This is how commentators generally slip towards the theoretical aspect of the problem of arbitrariness. Reducing the concept of arbitrariness to the concept of the relation described as arbitrary, they just define one by the other and vice versa: the semiological relation is based on the principle of arbitrariness, while the principle of arbitrariness requires a semiological relation. This definitional circle can still be virtuous if they both have the same object, i.e., the sign. But this is not quite the case. In his notes for an article on Whitney (circa 1894), Saussure expanded the semiological relation in such a way that it defines the concept of language: “... pour définir une bonne fois cette sémiologie particulière qui est le langage non dans un de ses côtés, mais dans cette irritante duplicité qui fait qu’on ne la saisira jamais”

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<sup>3</sup> My quotations of Saussure’s manuscripts will always be cited from *Science du langage*, René Amacker’s critical edition of Saussure’s writings discovered in 1996 (“Saussure 2011”), or from the second volume of the Engler edition (“Saussure 1974”).

<sup>4</sup> Fehr (2000: 127 n.3) put forward a precise dating for their appearance: May 19th, 1911. The most revealing fact is that Saussure was not bound by those terms, once introduced.

(Saussure 1967: 197F).<sup>5</sup> This not only implies an extension of the concept. For some commentators (Rastier 2003; Toutain 2013), the semiological relation should never apply to a single sign but always to signs in a system. Arbitrariness would therefore be the corollary of the concept of *value* (Bouquet 1997b).

Here comes the particular problem we will deal with in this essay into view: if the semiological relation does not apply to a single sign, it is no longer necessary for the arbitrary character of the sign to be projected onto its elements. Moreover, the symmetrical status that usually determines these elements into their “link” or “relation” can no longer be granted by default. Thus, we will have to examine if symmetry can be legitimized with some theoretical statements or if, on the contrary, an asymmetrical relation has to be put forward. This could have some significance, since the principle of arbitrariness, from the interpreters’ view, has been given as an epistemological argument against the nomenclaturist conception of language.

Concerning this discussion, the manuscripts compiled in *Science du langage* teach us another lesson, though uncertain or even contradictory, than the *Cours*. The following quotation shows that the semiological relation uniting the two faces of the sign could be seen as a simplification:

Il n’y a pas *la* forme et une idée correspondante; il n’y a pas davantage *la* signification et un signe correspondant. Il y a *des* formes et *des* significations possibles (nullement correspondantes); il y a même seulement en réalité des *différences* de formes et des *différences* de significations; d’autre part chacun de ces ordres de *différences* (par conséquent de choses déjà négatives en elles-mêmes), n’existe comme différences que grâce à l’union avec l’autre. (Saussure 2011: 104)

This simplification seems to be inevitable, because

sans cette fiction, l’esprit se trouverait littéralement incapable de maîtriser une pareille somme de différences, où il n’y a nulle part à aucun moment un point de repère positif et ferme. (Saussure 2011: 105)

In his third course, Saussure reiterated that discussion and even reinforced its negative connotation. It is not just a simplification anymore, nor even a fiction; it is a “paradox” and a “trap”: “Voici le paradoxe, en langage baconien la ‘caverne’ contenant un piège: c’est que la signification qui

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<sup>5</sup> Amacker, commenting on this quotation, pointed out that Saussure had not distinguished at that stage between *langage* and *langue*. I will render this distinction into English by using “language” versus “natural language.”

nous apparaît comme la contrepartie de l'image auditive [sic]" (Saussure 1967: 258E).

Seeing the signified as the counterpart of the signifier is an illusion, if we refer to the Baconian cave's allegory, due to *individual* representation, i.e., psychic representation in the mind of the individual. If you see instead, as a linguist does, language as an object in relationship to the "community of speakers" (*la masse parlante*), then the value of a word is also, and more deeply, the counterpart of the coexisting terms (Saussure 1967: 259B). So there is an implication between the principle of arbitrariness and the theory of value since one cannot explain the use of language by individuals if one does not presuppose what language is for the community.

To sum up, on the one hand, arbitrariness is for the interpreters the epitome of a "Saussurean epistemology" while, on the other hand, its functional place in the theory results from a simplified and abstract view whereby the sign is the relationship between a signifier and a signified instead of being a binary polarity in a system. Yet, there is nothing I would deplore or contest in the conjunction of those two assessments. With this brief overview, I have only intended to evoke the stage within which the pro and con arguments for and against symmetry in arbitrariness will resonate.

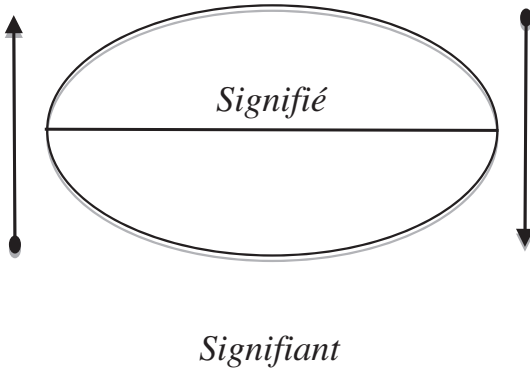
## 2 The orientation of arbitrariness

We will now examine those arguments as they appear in Saussure's work. Four aspects will organize the discussion. First, we will take a close look, though not exhaustive, on Saussure's sentences that include the word *arbitrary*. Second, we will go deeper into the conception of arbitrariness by retracing the genealogy of its emergence. Next, we will discuss examples. Finally, we will draw some inferences from the concepts that have been opposed to the concept of arbitrariness.

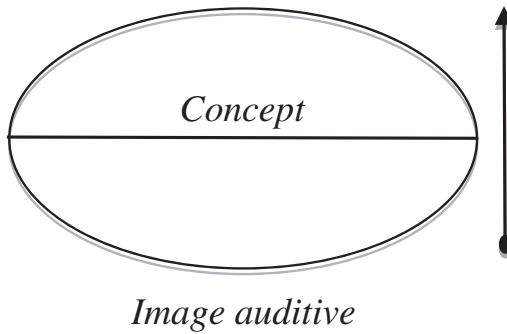
The most significant statement for the symmetrical conception of arbitrariness is expressed in a graphical representation, as it appears in the *Cours* (Saussure 1967: 258A; see Figure 1).

But this figure, just as it is, has been "corrected" by the editors of the *Cours*, Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, precisely on what concerns the bi-orientation of the arrows. The students' notes are all corroborating (Saussure 1967: 258B, C & E), placing only one arrow, not two, from the sound-image to the concept (Figure 2).

The most legitimate graph would thus be a strong argument against symmetry. The edited representation had, however, an extensive and lasting impact



**Figure 1:** The graphical representation of the sign in the *Cours*.



**Figure 2:** The graphical representation of the sign in the students' notes.

on Saussure's readers,<sup>6</sup> including some of its best known specialists (such as Godel and Engler).

The *Cours*, apart from this graph, offers arguments in favor of the non-symmetrical orientation of arbitrariness. Straight off in the first paragraph of the section “§2 First principle: The arbitrariness of the sign,” it clearly expresses a direction:

Le lien unissant le signifiant au signifié, ou encore, puisque nous entendons par signe le total résultant de l'association d'un signifiant et d'un signifié, nous pouvons dire plus simplement: *le signe linguistique est arbitraire*. (Saussure 1967: 152A)

<sup>6</sup> On Louis Hjelmslev and Luis Prieto, above all, and their followers, see De Palo (De Palo 2003: 246–247).

That formulation is supported by the students' notes: the link unites the signifier to the signified, or a given sound-image *with* a specific concept. A little after that during the third course, Saussure clarifies the meaning of the concept of arbitrariness, and again it is the signifier that is said to be "arbitrary":

Revenons sur ce mot d'*arbitraire*. Il n'est pas arbitraire au sens de: dépendant du libre choix de l'individu. Une société entière ne pourrait plus changer le signe une fois établi. Il l'est par rapport au concept, avec lequel il n'a aucune attache première. (Saussure 1967: 155D)

As we read in this note from Degallier, Saussure used the word *sign* from time to time to refer to the signifier. Then, when he said that the sign is arbitrary, one could get the idea of the association of the signifier and the signified, *or* one could just as well get the idea of the signifier, because it makes after all no difference here. In all cases, arbitrariness is given as an oriented, non-symmetrical relation.

Now we turn our attention to another aspect. One might concede that the formulation, as natural as it sounds, expresses an orientation from the signifier to the signified, and yet object by saying that the *concepts* of signifier and signified are committed in a non-oriented, symmetrical relation, i.e., a semiological relation. To answer that objection, we will have recourse to former Saussurean thoughts, as collected in *Science du langage*, from which a conceptual genealogy can be retraced. My purpose is to show that it is hard (though not impossible) to build arbitrariness as a symmetrical concept in Saussure's thought. A simple argument for this, and the most pragmatic one, is that Saussure showed very little interest in the signified itself.

Saussure introduced a distinction between two points of view, which were mixed up in the works of the Neogrammarians.

Le dualisme profond qui partage le langage ne réside pas dans le dualisme du son et de l'idée, du phénomène vocal et du phénomène mental; c'est là la façon pernicieuse de le concevoir. Ce dualisme réside dans la dualité du phénomène vocal COMME TEL, et du phénomène vocal COMME SIGNE – du fait physique (objectif) et du fait physico-mental (subjectif), nullement du fait « physique » du son par opposition au fait « mental » de la signification. (Saussure 2011: 86–87)

Neogrammarians dealt with vocal phenomena when they studied linguistic changes, but they also dealt with complex signs, at once vocal and conceptual phenomena, when some morphological or syntactical aspects are underlying the comparison of the linguistic forms. Saussure was concerned about the same problems, and not about meaning in itself, which was only considered a matter for psychology or philosophy. He wanted, as he wrote in a letter to A. Meillet, to show the linguists "what they actually do" ("*montrer au linguiste ce qu'il fait,*" Saussure 1964: 95), and his theory is built on that perspective. The very few

thoughts about ideas we can discover in *Science du langage* are hesitant. They express doubts, and even scruples. For instance:

Ce qui n'existe pas, ce sont a) les significations, les idées, les catégories grammaticales hors des signes; elles existent peut-être *extérieurement au domaine linguistique*; c'est une question très douteuse, à examiner en tous cas par d'autres que le linguiste. (Saussure 2011: 80)

Whatever they are, ideas should not concern the linguist once they are disconnected from signs. In his third course, however, Saussure allowed himself to go a little further:

Si les idées étaient prédéterminées dans l'esprit humain <avant d'être des valeurs de langue>, une des choses qui arriveraient forcément, c'est que les termes d'une langue dans une autre se correspondraient exactement.

français    allemand  
*cher*      *lieb, theuer* (aussi moral)

Il n'y a pas de correspondance exacte. (Saussure 2011: 86–87)

So the linguistic values would testify against the very possibility of an external determination of ideas. In all cases, the Saussurean view about ideas always comes as a sort of counterpart, or complement, to another more deeply discussed view: the one relating to signs. It is as if Saussure wanted to complete an unintended reasoning: (a) there is a semiological relation between sign and idea, signifier and signified; (b) the signifier is arbitrary to the signified; (c) would then the signified also be arbitrary to the signifier? Saussure might have answered: it should be!

Prior to the discussion of that hypothetical answer, I will add some examples extracted from the *Cours* to our dossier. The first one we can find is monolingual. It says that the idea of « *sœur* »<sup>7</sup> ('daughter') is not linked by any intern property with the sequence of sounds *s – ö – r*. Does that mean that « *sœur* » is arbitrary in regard to *s – ö – r*? Not quite, but the opposite is true, since « *sœur* » could be represented as well by any other sequence of sounds. Despite a formulation that stresses the signified, arbitrariness affects the sequence of sounds, which could be indifferently *s – ö – r* or anything else.

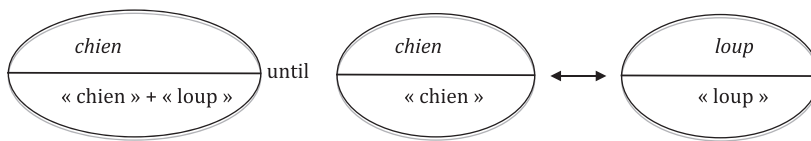
The second example is multilingual. The signified « *bœuf* » ('ox') has as a signifier *b – ö – f* in France, and *o – k – s* ('*Ochs*') in Germany. The reasoning is the same: two sequences of sounds, arbitrarily given to a sole signified.

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7 In the examples, I will use guillemets to designate a « signified », italics for a *signifier*, and brackets for their manifestation–execution, such as [« signification »] and [*vocal figure*].



Other case studies are called forth by interpreters (e.g., Amacker 1975; Bouquet 1997b) to exemplify arbitrariness as a “radical” concept. One of these came from Gauthier’s student notes during a lecture about the concept of value. It illustrates the assertion that the respective values of two synonyms depend on each other, and Saussure took the example of two words that are obviously *not* synonyms, *loup* (‘wolf’) and *chien* (‘dog’): “*chien* désignera le loup, tant que le mot *loup* n’existe pas” (Saussure 1967: 261C). The argument is *a fortiori*: if it is true for the respective values of *chien* and *loup*, it is especially valid in the case of all synonyms. The reasoning can be represented graphically as in Figure 3.



**Figure 3:** The values as counterparts of distinctive signifiers.

As we may notice, nothing is said about the signifieds here, because it is obvious – or, to put it better, it is supposed to be obvious – that if you have a signified « chien » and a signified « loup », you can also virtually have the sum of the two signifieds « chien » + « loup », and vice versa. The reasoning on arbitrariness as a principle depends only on the presence of one or two signifiers: first, the single term *chien*; then, both *chien* and *loup*. It is arbitrary that *chien* has to mean « loup » inasmuch as *chien* will no longer mean that while the word *loup* exists to “designate” the wolf.

Several commentators have stressed the peculiar aspects of these examples: they are all “onymic”<sup>8</sup>; they are supposed to have a corresponding entity in the world of objects. Would the principle of arbitrariness be diversely-oriented with more “linguistic” examples? Quite the contrary: from the example of synonyms *craindre* and *redouter*, that Saussure had given just before the one with *chien* and *loup*, he only said that they “n’existent que l’un à côté de l’autre; *craindre* s’enrichira de tout le contenu de *redouter* tant que *redouter* n’existera pas” (Saussure 1967: 261B). The demonstration of arbitrariness, through this example, depends on the existence of distinctive *signifiers*; without those signifiers, their respective values cannot even be mentioned.

Do we have to conclude that there is no means of saying something on the signified as a value through an example? We do not have to go that far. For instance, when Saussure put forward the example of the adjective *décérépit*,

<sup>8</sup> See, in particular, Curzio 2008.

which has a “new element” in its meaning because of the existence of the past participle *décrépi*, we can assert that there has been a change in the meaning of *décrépit*, and this is a positive observation. But this example could not possibly be an illustration of the principle of arbitrariness. On the contrary: as there is a reason, or rather there is a *motivation*, based on the resemblance of the two signifiers, *decrepit* and *décrépi*, that explains the change of meaning of *décrépit*. And this goes for any case of “relative arbitrariness,” as Saussure called it, i.e., the arbitrariness relativized by some degree of motivation inside the structure of language (morphology, syntax, or even lexicology, as in the latter example).

Before concluding this section, we will have a final and brief glance at the semantic oppositions around arbitrariness. As Suenaga (2005 : 154) summed up, there are at least two opposite concepts to arbitrariness: *naturalness* (in this case, arbitrariness means “by convention”), and *motivation* (then arbitrariness means “non-motivated”). How do those opposite concepts behave in regard to orientation? For naturalness, it is obvious that the concept is a non-symmetrical one: the Cratylist position does not refute the artifactual status of language; it just links the products of this artifact to nature. A “natural artifact” is still entirely an artifact, but with a natural cause, i.e., a link with nature and natural objects. As for motivation, it is also clear that the concept is non-symmetrical: if there is a relationship of motivation between two objects, there is always one which is motivating and the other being motivated; besides, there is no possibility of adding a “vice versa,” because this reciprocity would ruin the very conception of it.

Thus, the argument based on an examination of the opposite concepts of arbitrariness advocates clearly for its one-way orientation, from signifier to signified, and never the other way around. If arbitrariness is still expected to be a symmetrical concept, that means that it is twice opposed to its alleged opposites: in a semantic sense, as it does in common usage, but also in an epistemological sense, inasmuch as the way it is opposed to the concepts of naturalness and motivation would imply another theory of sign or another theory of language.

In this section, we have examined four arguments, based on (i) the Saussurean formulations, (ii) the theoretical situation of the concept, (iii) the examples, and (iv) the opposite concepts. None of them are decisive, but they help us to get an idea of the issue around the concept of arbitrariness: it is all about its orientation, either unidirectional (for a non-symmetrical relation), or bidirectional (for a symmetrical relation).

Maybe Émile Benveniste (1976 [1966]: 51) caught a glimpse of that problem when he maintained, against Saussure, that the link uniting a signifier and a signified is not arbitrary but necessary. Necessity would here be viewed as a symmetrical concept: if there is a signifier *A*, you will necessarily find a signified

*A, and vice versa.* That is why Benveniste, arguing for his assertion, took the Saussurean metaphor of a sheet of paper as an argument. Signifier and signified are just like the two sides of a sheet of paper: you cannot have one without the other, and vice versa.

### 3 Stakes of the arbitrariness viewed as an oriented concept

Before going forward, let us go over the major assertions the first two sections of this essay have attempted to establish.

- (a) The principle of arbitrariness implies a theory of values, that is to say, a theory of a double “structure,” a double chain of differences, opposed to a conception of language as nomenclature, as simple set of words. Nevertheless, it gives an illusory simplification of this theory.
- (b) Arbitrariness is easily explained (given the number of available textual attestations) and understandable if considered as having one direction: from signifier to signified. The relation from signified to signifier hardly appears in Saussure’s manuscripts.

Each of these points calls for further debate. Linked to a): How can the practical simplification due to arbitrariness be rightfully described (Section 3.1)? Linked to b): Is there a possibility of interpreting the so-called arbitrariness of the signified into the theory of values (Section 3.2)? Finally, we will examine if the hypothesis of an oriented theory of values still be able to resist a nomenclaturist conception of language (Section 3.3).

#### 3.1 From signifier –signified to form – substance

It is impossible to see what kind of simplification is involved in the principle of arbitrariness unless you specify what the signifier and the signified precisely are. Very little is said about them, though, in the *Cours*. They are both said “psychic” – we would more easily say “mental” nowadays. But of course, there is no novelty to claim that ideas are psychic. The novelty lies on the psychic status given to the signifier since, in an older and nomenclaturist conception, linguistic words were usually considered as material elements. The supposed simplification allows us to question the legitimacy of the “link” established between these two psychic entities.

If both the signifier and the signified are psychic or mental, we should be able to figure a mental representation. In what sciences in particular are we

dealing with mental representations? Typically mathematics and logic. So, language should be conceived as an *algebra*, since signs are mental entities.<sup>9</sup> Once we have admitted that, we should also be inclined to consider that all mental representations are arbitrary to what linguists attempt to study (by description, by analysis or by any other scientific procedure). In this subsection I will try to make that epistemological assertion clear.

Louis Hjelmslev had discovered in Saussure's work a tremendous illustration of that principle. It was tremendous because it proved that linguistics is actually the study of psychic objects. Here is what he found: in the *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes*, Saussure broke down sounds (namely, the Indo-European long vowels  $\bar{a}$  and  $\bar{o}$ ) into two mental representations. Hence he was able to find the equations:  $\bar{a} = *e + A$  and  $\bar{o} = *e + Q$ , where  $A$  and  $Q$  are "sonantic coefficients" in the primitive system of Indo-European language (Hjelmslev 1973: 167; see also; Béguelin 2003: 161). Saussure did so without the support of any empirical evidence that these "sonantic coefficients" would correspond to actual sounds (that support will be brought to light much later from Kuryłowicz's decoding of the Hittite language) because there was no need for it. His reasoning was purely deductive, just like an algebraic operation is. Actually, we still do not know today how exactly to pronounce the coefficient "A" – some laryngeal sound such as  $[h]$ .<sup>10</sup> So we can say, either that  $[h]$  was arbitrarily called  $A$  by Saussure, or that  $A$ , as a mental representation of a differential element in a linguistic system, is arbitrarily pronounced  $[h]$ , since there is no need to know its pronunciation to establish its algebraic function in the system. As Hjelmslev conceptualizes it, there is an arbitrary relationship between a *form* (a mental representation) and a *substance* (here, a pronunciation).

*Form* and *substance* are the terms that Hjelmslev has elected in his theory of language, but he found them in the *Cours*: "cette combinaison produit une forme, non une substance" (Saussure 1967: 254A; and again p. 276A). The students' notes have not confirmed that notorious quotation. No matter: these terms have an operative function; they just allow giving expression to the generalization Hjelmslev has drawn from Saussure's work.

Let us see how this generalization occurs. The same arbitrary relationship exists between a phoneme and a written sign. This is something Saussure himself has asserted in his second course:

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<sup>9</sup> "Il n'y a pas du tout d'expression simple en linguistique ; il ne peut pas y en avoir. L'expression simple sera algébrique ou ne sera pas" (Saussure 1974: 29).

<sup>10</sup> A synthesis on that matter can be found on *Wikipedia* in the entry "Laryngeal theory" (accessed 26 December 2015).

Dans [le] système de l'écriture, il y a [des] caractères qui montrent que nous sommes devant le même ordre de choses que la langue. Dans l'écriture on a: 1° le caractère arbitraire du signe (par exemple écrire  $\perp$  pour T); en soi pas de rapport entre le signe et la chose qu'il veut désigner. (Saussure 1967: 269E)

In that quotation, the sign (*signe*) holds a signifier, as another passage a little further in Constantin's notes may persuade us:

Dans ce signe je vois *P*; un Grec ou un Russe y voit *R*. C'est là la valeur oppositive. La valeur négative et la valeur oppositive se déduisent du point 1°. Puisque positivement, il n'y a aucun rapport entre [le] signe et [la] chose qu'il veut désigner, tout le reste se déduit *ipso facto*. (Saussure 1967: 269E)

The metalinguistic notation is a little bit confusing here. The students have probably seen Saussure marking a sign on a blackboard ("In *this* sign," he said). So, once again, arbitrariness is maintained between a substantial written sign and a formal one, defined by its value in a system of values. The sound-image *P* is arbitrarily written [*P*], since, for speakers of some other language, the actual sign [*P*] may designate another sound-image, i.e., *R*.

Now let us go back to the examples of *loup* and *chien*, and *bœuf* and *Ochs*. Can they be explained in a similar way as the above-mentioned cases? Yes, they can. Suffice it to say that the concept « loup » is arbitrarily manifested by the pronunciation [lu] since we could have had [ʃjɛ] instead (same with [bœf] and [ˈɔks]).

For a better understanding, we will look for a counter-example. Saussure has shown us where to find one: in languages viewed as nomenclatures. Take for example chemical formulas.  $H_2O$  and  $CO_2$  are certainly "arbitrary" symbols: they have been established by convention. But they are built up by nomenclaturist rules, in such a way that the *signifier*  $H_2O$  is linked with the signified « water » by common properties. In a symbolic language, the "relative arbitrariness" – that is to say, the internal, morpho-syntactical motivation that rules the coexistence of the signifiers – has an expansive role, while "absolute arbitrariness" is reduced to a minimum. In each of the written signs of a chemical formula, you can see the signified involved: *H* means « hydrogen » because it is the initial letter of that word, *O* means « oxygen » for the same reason, and so on. That is not possible with linguistic signs, because their concepts are determined *elsewhere*, that is, by their differentiation with other values in the linguistic system.

So, why is the principle of arbitrariness, in its formulation, an illusion or, at least, a simplification? The answer to our first point in discussion is that the link between a signifier and a signified is not direct; there cannot be any direct connection between these two mental representations except in the mind of individuals. In fact, in every case of plausible arbitrariness we have analyzed,

there is a realized vocal or written phenomenon (a *substantial manifestation of expression*, in Hjelmslevian terms) put in connection with a psychic image (a *form* of any kind: a signified, a signifier, or a phoneme). And there is no reason to pronounce or write this image *x* rather than *y*. The link between the substance and the form is arbitrary. Hjelmslev already affirmed that in 1938, and he got a strong epistemological conclusion out of it:

Die Form ist von der Substanz ganz unabhängig, und das Verhältnis von Form und Substanz ist ein ganz arbiträres und rein konventionelles. “Ohne Laute keine Sprache” hat sich als ein falsches Postulat erwiesen. (Hjelmslev 1973: 232)

[‘The form is completely independent from the substance, and the relationship between form and substance is completely arbitrary and purely conventional. “Without sounds, no language” has proved to be a false postulate.’]

### 3.2 The role of the meaning in the conception of natural language

What Hjelmslev did not say is that you cannot apply a similar reasoning when you instantiate a meaning instead of a vocal or written sign. The reason for this is simple: the meaning *too* is psychic; it belongs to the same order of things that includes linguistic images. So the relationship between a meaning and a psychic image cannot be arbitrary. For instance, there is a plausible reason for a peculiar meaning you have in mind to have a link with the conceptual image « wolf », even if your interlocutor brought in his/her speech a metaphor or a comparison (*hungry like the wolf*). The meaning is *motivated* by the value of « wolf ».

In addition, there is a strong reason for the meaning [« wolf »] to have a link with the sound-image *wolf*, even if your interlocutor made a slip of the tongue. The slip I had in mind was in French: *J’ai une faim de vous ... euh je veux dire de loup*; we could say in English: *I’m hungry like a womb, I mean wolf* – but I am afraid that it does not sound as good as it does in French. The point is that, even if you did not actually hear [wulf] at first, you will correct it *in your mind* by making a link with the proper meaning you are supposed to instantiate.

My conclusion is that, when the principle of arbitrariness is reformulated in terms of relationship from a substance to a form, the unidirectionality of its orientation is maintained. The instantiation of conceptual values as meanings *belongs* to the natural language, which in turn *depends* on it. But I would not add: and vice versa. Saussure would not either. He only had some doubt about it, as we have already seen it, and as he mentioned again in this quotation: “Si l’un des deux côtés du signe linguistique pouvait passer pour <avoir> une existence en soi, ce serait le côté conceptuel, l’idée comme base du signe” (Saussure 1967: 178F).

### 3.3 Non-symmetrical arbitrariness vs. nomenclature

What is at risk when we say that the linguistic system depends on meanings is that it could open the door to a characterization of linguistic concepts based on positive – i.e., physical as well as physiological – features. As a linguist must see that signifiers do not depend on positive characterization, he/she should also prevent from “outsourcing” linguistic concepts. How could that possibly happen, though? While there actually exists a possibility of characterizing a vocal figure from a non-linguistic point of view, why would the linguists concede the validity or even the existence of a non-linguistic point of view on concepts? Even if they were ready to admit it, why would they be afraid of a positive characterization? Let us read, once again, what Saussure had thoughtfully written on that question:

Quand un philosophe ou un psychologue, à la suite de ses méditations, par exemple sur le jeu de nos facultés, entre en scène avec un système qui fait table rase de toute notion précédente, il ne s'en trouve pas moins que toutes ses idées, si neuves, si révolutionnaires qu'elles soient, peuvent venir se classer sous des termes de la langue courante, mais en tout cas qu'aucune ne peut indifféremment venir se classer sous les mots existants, fussent-ils parfaitement arbitraires, comme *raison* ou *intellect*, ou sous celui d'*intelligence* ou sous celui d'*entendement*, de *jugement*, <de> *connaissance* etc.; et que D'AVANCE il y a un certain terme qui répond mieux que d'autres aux nouvelles distinctions. Or la raison de cette propriété, encore une fois, ne peut être que négative, puisque la conception qu'on y introduit date d'hier et que tous les termes en question n'étaient pas moins délimités le jour d'avant dans leur valeur respective. (Saussure 2011: 193–194)

The teaching I take from this hypothetical case is that there is no possibility of avoiding the negative nature of concepts.

Let  $\{a, b, c\}$  be a system of linguistic values at the time of the day before the emergence of a new idea (Figure 4).

Value $a$	Value $b$	Value $c$
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Figure 4: Linguistic system of values at  $T_{-x}$ .

Let  $x$  be a novel, revolutionary idea. At the time of its instantiation in speech, the linguistic system of values will look like as in Figure 5.

Value $a$	Value $b \approx x$	Value $c$
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Figure 5: Linguistic system of values at  $T_{+x}$ .

And never as in Figure 6.

Value <i>a</i>	Value <i>b</i>	Value <i>c</i>	Value <i>x</i>
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**Figure 6:** Invalid linguistic system of values at  $T_{-x}$ .

The reason is that the whole range of possible meanings, even those meanings that have not emerged yet, is always covered by a given natural language. A novel idea, even a revolutionary one, will always come into the value of a specific linguistic sign (“*se classer[a] sous [un] des termes de la langue courante*”). Between this sign and the new idea, there might only be an adjustment, in such a way that their negative value will be realigned with the others, be it as it may out of expansion or restriction. Actually it makes no difference (see Figure 7 & Figure 8).

Value <i>a</i>	Value <i>b</i> $\approx$ <i>x</i>	Value <i>c</i>
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**Figure 7:** Expanding the value *b* in the linguistic system of values at  $T_{+x}$ .

Value <i>a</i>	Value <i>b</i> $\approx$ <i>x</i>	Value <i>c</i>
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**Figure 8:** Restricting the value *b* in the linguistic system of values at  $T_{+x}$ .

This also applies if the idea has a new name, by a discursive operation of neologism. You would merely have then to consider the signifiers as well, with all the possible adjustments (see Figure 9 & Figure 10).

Signifieds	Value <i>a</i>	Value <i>b</i>	Value <i>c</i>
Signifiers	Signifier <i>a</i>	Signifier <i>b</i>	Signifier <i>c</i>

**Figure 9:** Linguistic system of values at  $T_{-x}$ .

Signifieds	Value <i>a</i>	Value <i>b</i> $\approx$ <i>x</i>	Value <i>c</i>
Signifiers	Ser. <i>a</i>	Ser. <i>b</i>	Ser. <i>c</i>

**Figure 10:** Linguistic system of values at  $T_{+x}$  with neologism.

In all cases, the “positivity” of one given idea will have to be “translated” in the negativity of the linguistic system of differential values. There is no alternative.



Lastly, I will comment on an example of my own. I find it has didactical virtues for the problem we are trying to deal with. I hope the reader will not mind the fact that I have taken my example from a Disney animation movie! It is the famous sequence when Bambi acquires language with his friend Thumper, the young rabbit. All of a sudden, Bambi sees a skunk amongst the flowers and names it *Flower!* Thumper laughs at Bambi's mistake, since the rabbit knows that a skunk does not smell like a flower. (Thumper has a nomenclaturist conception of language.) He is about to set Bambi right, as he did before when Bambi named *bird* a butterfly, and later *butterfly* a flower, when the skunk exclaims *That's all right! You can call me a flower if you want to!* Why does this reply sound so charmingly funny to the adult who had the alibi of accompanying his niece to the theater? It cannot possibly be because of the repetition of a nomenclaturist mistake, or because of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. It is funny because the oppositional values of « skunk » and « flower », according to the smell, fall within the competence of the community of speakers, so that there is some utopic wish to claim that Bambi, thanks to his instantiations, will change it “if he wants to.” It would be much easier if language was a nomenclature: conventions are made to be broken. Again, this example shows how negative values are instantiated in speech, not arbitrarily, but on the contrary with strong reasons to believe that they cannot be changed easily.

There is a non-symmetrical relation between the meanings of a natural language and its system of values. The meanings may be taken as positive units, like philosophical ideas, or they may even be motivated by real-world objects, as “referents,” that cannot change, in whatever way, the relation they have with the linguistic values, which are inveterate, and out of reach of any conventional act, in such a way that a natural language cannot be mistaken for a nomenclature.

## 4 Final remarks

The case of arbitrariness is already quite voluminous. One can certainly agree that the Saussurean notion of arbitrariness is a problematic one. Many kinds of answers have been brought forward to solve the problem of arbitrariness. I have roughly counted three.

1. The first solution is simply to object to the notion itself, as Benveniste did. There would be no such thing as arbitrariness in language.
2. The solution adopted by the “philologists” (Bouquet, Toutain) is to multiply the meanings of the term. There would be as many concepts of arbitrariness as there are terminological uses in Saussure's corpus.

3. The third solution, the most varied and complex one of the kind, consists in a “delocalization” either of the notion’s definition (Hjelmslev, De Mauro, Normand, ...) or of its justification (through comments on the examples, as Bally, Arrivé, and Suenaga did, among others).

Here I have proposed an alternative to this third option. I have restricted the notion, adding a characterization for its application: what can rightfully be called “arbitrary” is exclusively a vocal or written phenomenon vis-à-vis a linguistic value of any kind (signified, signifier, or phoneme). The extension of arbitrariness to the link uniting the signifier to the signified is only a simplification due to the individual.

However problematic the notion may be, arbitrariness still seems to be priceless for the theorization of language in the eyes of many interpreters. It is supposed to protect language from the nomenclaturist conception, although it has to be radically distinct from the concept of conventionality to play that role. More broadly arbitrariness would be an objection to positivism (Beividas 2015).

Apart from the philologists, who aim at some final truths about their master, we should admit that what we are looking for in Saussure’s work may no longer make part of Saussure’s own theoretical interests. As a semiotician, I suggest that a non-symmetrical concept of arbitrariness can have great significance. It throws into question the isomorphism between the expression and the content we have inherited from Hjelmslev’s theory. Besides, it allows to reconsider the discrepancy between arbitrary signs, like words, and “motivated signs” as pictures are supposed to be, especially if the Saussurean notion of arbitrariness is integrated into Peirce’s triadic theory of sign. I would suggest that pictures become meaningful when we see how arbitrary they are. A small square on a screen can be the manifestation of a ball, or a patch of red in a painting by Picasso the manifestation of a grey coat. This is all a matter of negative values in a differential system. The struggle against the nomenclaturist – childish but powerful – study of signs in social life still goes on.

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