Disputes over Arbitrariness of Linguistic Signs

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Abstract: In the book A Course in General Linguistics, Saussure put forward the principle of arbitrariness of language symbols. According to the author Saussure, the so-called symbol is the combination of signifier (such as concept) and signifier (such as sound image). The arbitrariness of language symbols means that the relationship between concept and sound image is arbitrary. There has been extensive discussion in the whole language academic circle. Mr. Xu Guozhang, Mr. Wang Dechun, Mr. Suo Zhenyu, Mr. Zhan Yong, Mr. Qian Yijun and Mr. Gao Mingkai respectively expounded their views on this issue. On the one hand, this article lists the representative views of the current academic circles on the principle of arbitrariness, and briefly puts forward the author's own views. The author believes that the initial generation of language symbols should also be non-arbitrary, once generated, no one can make any changes to it at will, that is, "post-non-arbitrary", and the generation of language symbols is increasingly moving towards the direction of "non-arbitrariness".

1.   On Saussure's Arbitrariness of Linguistic Signs

"The connection between signifier and signified is arbitrary, or because the symbol we refer to refers to the whole produced when signifier and signified are connected, we can simply say that the language symbol is arbitrary. "This thesis was first raised in Saussure's Course in General Linguistics. According to the author Saussure, the so-called symbol is the combination of signifier (such as concept) and signifier (such as sound image). The arbitrariness of language symbol means that the relationship between concept and sound image is arbitrary. For example, in French, "sister" is represented by the string of s-o-r sounds. There is no inherent and inevitable connection between the meaning represented by the word and the signified sounds used to make it. The word can also be expressed by any different voice. This problem can be proved by the difference between different languages and the synchronic existence of different languages: "Niu" can refer to b-o-f in one language while it is written as o-k-s in another language. On this basis, Saussure went on to show in greater depth that "arbitrariness" should be accompanied by an annotation: it should not remind people that signifiers depend entirely on the speaker's free choice (we will see below that after a symbol is identified in a language group, individuals cannot make any changes to it). What we mean is that it is not arguable, that is, it is arbitrary to the signifier that has no natural connection with the signifier in reality. "[1](p104)

On the basis of this understanding, Saussure further distinguished absolute arbitrariness from relative arbitrariness. He pointed out: "The basic principle of arbitrariness of symbols does not prevent us from distinguishing between fundamental arbitrariness, that is, what cannot be demonstrated, and relative arbitrariness in every language. Only some symbols are absolutely arbitrary; However, there is a phenomenon in other symbols that can make us see that arbitrariness cannot be cancelled, but there are differences in degree: symbols may be relatively arguable ". The relative arbitrariness of his explanation refers to "(1) analyzing a certain element to obtain a sentence-to-sentence relationship; (2) arouse one or several other factors, thus obtaining a kind of association relationship ". He gave examples such as French dix, neuf is not arguable, but dix-neuf is relatively arguable. That is, some synthetic morphemes or derivatives have a certain degree of

arguability. However, this demonstration is not absolute, but relative. He pointed out that "this is not only because each element of the symbol that can be demonstrated is arbitrary in itself, but also because the value of the whole element is not equal to the sum of the values of all parts". From this point of view, Saussure regards the principle of arbitrariness of linguistic signs as the fundamental principle, while the relative arguability is only relative.

2. Second, Many Debates on Arbitrariness

Mr. Xu Guozhang's Voice of Questioning in the First Round. In 1988, Xu Guozhang published an article on arbitrariness of linguistic signs-one of the explorations of linguistic philosophy in Foreign Language Teaching and Research, which first questioned Saussure's arbitrariness. He believes that language has three characteristics: systematicness, separability and learnability, of which systematicness is the most fundamental. "Linguists' discovery of the system of language is the discovery of human's rationality in his own behavior and the affirmation of the existence of rationality in speech acts. "[2] He believes that the rationality of language is mainly manifested in its pronunciation, grammatical system and its words can be objectively classified. "The so-called systems, rules, constraints, etc. just show that all language units are not isolated but exist in certain relationships. This relationship defines the functions of each unit, and each function can be verified. The exception to each explanation only illustrates the universal power of the general rule. "[2] As a result, Mr. Xu Guozhang can not help but voice doubts:" Language is a rational behavior, where is arbitrariness? "His questioning has since started a new round of academic debates on arbitrariness and iconicity.

Zhang Zhe has roughly divided the current domestic research on the argument of arbitrariness and iconicity of language symbols into three categories: the cognitive school represented by Wang Yin insists that "iconicity dialectic is superior to arbitrariness domination theory"; Represented by Wang Dechun, Guo Hong and Zhu Yongsheng, the theory of arbitrariness is unshakable. As well as any seemingly meaningless statement. On this basis, we will briefly list several typical and innovative viewpoints of representative figures. [3]

The arbitrariness of language symbols understood by Mr. Wang Dechun. He believes that language symbols closely related to human thinking have been abstracted from concrete things, and it is no longer possible to use every symbol to copy, mark and symbolize every object. Their connection with objects is not inevitable, but arbitrary, with little iconicity. We say that the connection between the language symbol and the marked object is arbitrary and has no essential and inevitable connection. It is believed that emphasizing "iconicity" can only be said as a supplement to "arbitrariness". Mr. Wang Dechun also put forward the new view that "motivation itself is arbitrary". He cited the example of "snow lotus" in Chinese. Different languages have different names and are all related to "snow", but they are different. This different motivation shows that motivation itself is arbitrary and has no inevitable connection with the essential characteristics of things. The development of language system follows the law of motivation, which does not violate the arbitrariness of the connection between language symbols and objects.

In his article "Saussure's Principle of Arbitrariness of Linguistic Signs is Correct", Suo Zhenyu criticizes the "fault theory" and "reversion theory" opposing the principle of arbitrariness of linguistic signs, pointing out that "in the synchronic system of languages, although relatively provable linguistic signs are in the majority, the principle of arbitrariness of linguistic signs cannot be damaged because their constituent elements are not provable; Although there are a few arbitrary language symbols, the most typical and important ones are root words and root words, which play an important role in word formation, occupy an indispensable position and ultimately determine the nature of language symbols. "[4] Mr. Suo Zhenyu's article is aimed at Mr. Li Baojia's" On the Error and Return of Saussure's Principle of Arbitrariness of Symbols ". I have to mention Mr. Li Baojia's point of view here. He thinks that Saussure's theory of arbitrariness of language symbols has three mistakes, that is, the relationship between signifier and signified is not historically discussed, but "arbitrariness" is used to sum up. The arbitrariness of the binding relationship between signifiers and signifiers in the same language system is proved by the difference between the binding

relationships between signifiers and signifiers in different language systems. The synchronic proportion is used to cover up the diachronic origin and confuse the historical evolution of symbols with the non-demonstration. He also put forward his "reversion theory", thinking that Saussure divided arbitrariness into two parts and that relative arbitrariness and relative arguability are the first step of reversion of arbitrariness principle to arguability principle. Explaining absolute arbitrariness as the transfer or loss of arguability is the second step of returning arbitrariness principle to arguability principle. Explaining the symbol of the internal evolution of language as a continuous transition from arbitrariness to arbitrariness and from arbitrariness to argumentation is a comprehensive return from arbitrariness to argumentability. Mr. Li Baojia's overall subversion of Saussure's views is biased, which has led to the opposition of many scholars, including Suo Zhenyu. Li's view that the language synchronic system can be demonstrated only by "tracing its history" is also open to question. Xu Hongliang also put forward his own views in his article.

In his article, Zhan Yong and Qian Yijun put forward the view that Saussure's principle of arbitrariness of language symbols is related to the combination of sound and meaning, and is not related to the combination of symbols for a single symbol. Therefore, the view of negating arbitrariness of symbols from the iconicity of combinations of symbols (such as compound words, sentences, etc.) is self-defeating. However, Wang Yilu also agrees with this point in his article. He thinks that Saussure's view is that only pure symbols are absolutely arbitrary, and composite symbols are "arguable". People are used to criticize Saussure's arbitrary remarks with the arguability of composite symbols, which is incorrect. But at the same time, he points out that "pure symbols are justified". "The relationship between sound and meaning of a single symbol is completely arbitrary" is a kind of prejudice. We should distinguish the motivation of the composite symbol from the internal formal symbol and the internal formal symbol from the zero internal formal symbol. We cannot think that the simple symbol has no internal form and therefore has no motivation.

Mr. Gao Mingkai's view is more objective. He thinks that the characteristics of the so-called language symbols depend on which aspect we understand them. "If we mean the relationship between language forms and meanings in the language components, then the structure of the language symbols is arbitrary, not symbolic." For example, "rocket" cannot be said to be "artillery". This is a combination of this meaning. The relationship between "fire" and "arrow" is not arbitrary. As far as the combination of the meaning of "rocket" and this sound is concerned, the relationship between signifier and signifier is still arbitrary. Mr. Gao said: "In fact, symbols can be divided into two categories. One is symbolic symbols, that is, non-arbitrary symbols. One is the informational symbol, that is, the arbitrary symbol. The relationship between symbolic symbols and their referents is reasonable, and plays a symbolic role: what kind of national flag is used to represent the country is not optional, but is determined through discussion and according to some similarity between the style of the national flag and the characteristics of the country. However, there is no reason to say the relationship between the informative symbol and its reference: why does a shot mean the start of the 100m race? I can't say why, it's just a people's agreement. It can be seen that arbitrariness is only the basic feature of signal symbols in symbols. General symbols are only characterized by their representative role in cognition. "

3. Third, My Opinion on Arbitrariness of Language Symbols

After Saussure put forward his arbitrariness, though he added further explanation. "It should not remind people that signifiers depend entirely on the speaker's free choice. What we mean is that he is not arguable, that is to say, he is arbitrary to what he refers to which there is no natural connection in reality. "We believe that it is not impossible to prove. We said that the initial generation of language symbols should also be non-arbitrary, once generated, no one can make any changes to it at will, that is, "post-non-arbitrary", and the generation of language symbols is increasingly moving towards the direction of "non-arbitrariness". These "non-arbitrariness" are mainly manifested in:

First of all, the meaning of any voice entering the language system is affected by the evolution of

voice and form, and is restricted by the nature of voice. The nature of speech itself is restricted, and sounds that cannot distinguish meaning cannot enter the speech system. For example, /p/ and /b/ cannot be used as Chinese pronunciation, but English pronunciation, because they can distinguish the meaning of language symbols in English.

Secondly, the restriction of the internal generation mechanism of language. We say that whether single or compound words, the human body itself restricts the choice of sound. "The human vocal organs and ear structure determine that we can only emit and capture a certain range of sounds. "These all show that some arguable factors are involved.

Xu Guozhang also said, "When human beings first created language and chose sound symbols-separable and clear sound-to transmit information, this choice itself has denied the' natural combination' or' natural connection' of language and things. Since' natural connection' does not exist, of course there is only' man-made connection'. Man-made connection is a connection restricted by both language and society, i.e. rational connection, not arbitrary connection. "

Finally, language symbols are limited in category, syntax and discourse, and are also challenged by onomatopoeia, derivatives and transliteration. All this shows that language symbols cannot be generalized simply as "arbitrariness". It must be analyzed in depth. We believe that motivation is also common.

However, in the process of questioning Saussure's theory, we seem to feel that there seems to be some difference between the two concepts of arbitrariness and motivation of linguistic signs. In other words, is arbitrariness equivalent to non-motivation? On the other hand, is it the same thing to claim that a language symbol has motivation as to say that it has non-arbitrariness? Here, we quote Balt and others to illustrate that there is indeed a difference between the two concepts. Barth pointed out that "onomatopoeia is the most motivational field of language" [9], motivation refers to the arguability of signifier and signified in the natural analogy relationship, that is, the relationship between language symbols and external things. When he added that "motivation is only limited to the scope of derivation or synthesis", motivation refers to the arguability of signifier and signified in the language structure, that is, the internal relationship of language symbols. It can be seen from this that this difference on motivation involves the discriptive level of argumentation, and thus also the discriptive level of arbitrariness. Further discussion on this issue will certainly help us to further explore the arbitrariness of language symbols.

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