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ICONICITY: MOTIVATIONS IN CHINESE GRAMMAR*

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1. Introduction

Iconicity in natural language is an important issue in the study of human language and mind. The existence of iconic patterns in human language constitutes a notable exception to an influential view held by Chomsky and his followers that the grammar of human language is autonomous and innate. As repeatedly pointed out by Chomsky, the 'innateness' of human language implies the 'innateness' of the human mind and hence the 'innateness' of human nature. The study of iconicity in natural language thus also has a direct bearing on the concept of human nature.

The dominant view among linguists and philosophers of language is that human language is essentially arbitrary and symbolic, which is in sharp contrast with the iconic nature of animal communication. For example, in his book *Language and Mind*, Chomsky (1972:69) states:

Animal language ... makes use of a fixed, finite number of linguistic dimensions, each of which is associated with a particular non-linguistic dimension in such a way that selection of a point along the linguistic dimension determines and signals a certain point along the non-linguistic dimension ... The mechanism and principle, however, are entirely different from those employed by human language...

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In his article "On the Representation of Form and Function", Chomsky (1981:3) states:

Our interpretation of the world is based in part on the representational systems that derive from the structure of the mind itself and do not mirror in any direction the form of things in the external world.

The two references cited above represent some examples of Chomsky's deliberation on the autonomy and innateness of human language. They are also in line with his rejection of functionalism in linguistics and his reservation on attempts to understand human language through evolution from pre-human to human (e.g., Chomsky 1979:85-88, 1988:150-170). It is necessary to note here that Chomsky's innateness hypothesis claims that human beings possess a language-specific faculty which is independent of their general cognitive capacities. He holds the position that the language-specific faculty cannot be derived from other cognitive systems of human beings.¹ Therefore, he considers functional and evolutionary explanations to be of little value to our understanding of the intrinsic structure of human language.

The dominant view that human language is arbitrary and symbolic has recently been challenged by Haiman (1980, 1983, 1985a,b), Hopper & Thompson (1984), Langacker (1987), Lakoff (1987) and others. They have demonstrated that linguistic structure, to a great extent, corresponds to our conceptual structure of the external world, and thus nonautonomous, nonarbitrary, and iconic. To the extent that linguistic structure can be shown to be iconic, corresponding to human's conceptual structure of the real world, Chomsky's innateness hypothesis must be more carefully examined than it has been. The main argument for the innateness hypothesis rests primarily on the evidence that grammatical rules are not random; rather, they are structure-dependent. The iconic patterns account for in part, if not in total, the nonrandomness of linguistic structure without recourse to the innateness idea. In other words, the structure-dependent nature of

linguistic rules can be derived from the natural correspondence between the composition of linguistic units and that of the conceptual world. As correctly observed by Campbell (1982), Chomsky's innateness hypothesis hinges upon the nonrandomness of linguistic structure. If the nonrandomness in human language can be accounted for otherwise, the appeal to innateness is weakened considerably.

The main purpose of this paper is to show the pervasiveness of iconicity in Chinese grammar. It aims to develop a nonautonomous view of linguistic organization in which Chomsky's innateness hypothesis can be more appropriately placed. This paper consists of three parts. Section 2 provides some background for Section 3. In 2.1, I will briefly discuss Saussure's arbitrariness principle in conjunction with his linearity principle, since the autonomous view of linguistic structure stands on the premise that linguistic structure is arbitrary. In 2.2, I will introduce the notion of iconic motivations in grammar as developed by Haiman. In Section 3, I will present some near universal iconic motivations as manifested in Chinese syntax. In Section 4, I will draw some conclusions and propose a nonautonomous view of linguistic organization.

2. Background

2.1 Saussure's two principles of the linguistic sign

In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure has postulated two basic principles for the nature of linguistic sign. Principle I states that the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. Principle II states that the signifier is linear in one single dimension. Both principles have been accepted in modern linguistics as self-evident. The acceptance of the two principles as truisms has led to some significant consequences for the development of modern linguistics as a science. The arbitrariness principle has justified the view that a linguistic system is a self-contained autonomous system independent of its function of representing the reality for communicative purposes. When a system is self-contained and autonomous, it can be properly treated as a mathematical system consisting of operations and mapping relations among elements and among sets of elements. Therefore, Saussure's Principle II has directed modern linguistic theories, especially syntactic theories, to focus on the abstraction of algebraic properties in natural language. This search for abstract, algebraic

¹Chomsky's view of human beings' innate language-specific faculty has been reiterated and more emphatically articulated in his latest books concerning language and knowledge, viz., Chomsky (1986) and (1988).

properties in human language has linked American structuralists from Bloomfield, to Hockett and Harris, and onto Chomsky.²

Saussure's Principle II is as fundamental as his Principle I. However, it is so obvious that many linguists find it too simple to be an interesting principle. But as Saussure (1916:103) has pointed out, the whole mechanism of language depends on it. Our visual world is composed of many three-dimensional objects in simultaneous groupings. Yet linguistic signifiers have at their command only the dimension of time. If we are concerned with the representation of reality by means of linguistic structure, linguistic inquiries should center around the question of how human beings represent the physical world in the single dimension of succession in time. To answer this central question, it is reasonable to start with the following three general assumptions. First, since language is used to represent reality, linguistic structure may reflect the structure of the physical world as human beings perceive it. Second, since human beings are capable of conceptualizing the same reality in different ways, linguistic structure may also reflect their different conceptualizations. Third, since language is used for communication in different societies and cultures, linguistic structure may likewise reflect different social structures and different cultural values.

In the *Course*, Saussure makes a distinction between absolute and relative arbitrariness. A sign is absolutely arbitrary if it is unmotivated; it is only relatively arbitrary if it is motivated. A sign is motivated if there is a natural connection between the signifier and the signified. In discussing the notion of motivation, Saussure seems to be more aware of the motivation in associative relations than the motivation in syntagmatic relations. Thus, most of the examples used by Saussure in his illustration of motivation pertain to word-formation. For instance, while French words *dix* "ten" and *neuf* "nine" are unmotivated, *dix-neuf* "nineteen" is relatively motivated,

²One might object to the grouping of Chomsky with the American structuralists before him, since he has launched a revolution against the structuralist paradigm. However, there are at least two senses in which he is very much part of the American structuralist tradition. First, he believes that a linguistic theory must be as scientific and precise as possible. And second, he believes that linguistics, being a science, should be concerned with form and pattern, and should leave aside meaning and use in context. See also Givon (1979) for a discussion of Chomsky as a structuralist.

for *dix-neuf* is composed of two elements, *dix* and *neuf*, which can also combine with other numbers. As pointed out by Saussure, French *vingt* "twenty" is in the same class as *dix* and *neuf* taken separately, yet it is unmotivated and arbitrary. In contrast, *ershi* (two-ten) "twenty" in Chinese is motivated.

While Saussure was clearly aware of the motivation in associative relationships, the motivation in syntagmatic relationships had somehow escaped his attention. Despite his own emphasis on the fundamentality of Principle II, Saussure was not able to see some of the very important consequences implied in this principle. First, at the most fundamental level, Saussure, perhaps because of his focus on Principle I, did not ponder sufficiently over the central question in syntax to which I noted earlier, namely, how do human beings employ the unidimensional linear linguistic structure to encode the multiple-dimensionality of the external physical world they perceive? Secondly, Saussure did not inquire whether or not there is an independently existing hierarchical syntactic structure which mediates between the multi-dimensionality of the external world and the unidimensionality of linguistic signs on the temporal dimension. Hence, he also did not raise the question of how hierarchical linguistic structure is to be expressed linearly. Indeed, the second question has been the central inquiry of modern as well as contemporary syntactic theories. But the first and most fundamental question has simply been neglected.³

2.2 *Diagrammatic iconicity and syntactic motivation*

The syntagmatic motivation was however clearly observed by Roman Jakobson (1971), Greenberg (1966), and others. Roman Jakobson has explicitly drawn attention to the syntagmatic motivation in various languages. Yet, it is John Haiman (cf. 1980, 1983, 1985a, b) who has systematically demonstrated the pervasiveness of the syntagmatic motivation across different languages. In Haiman's term, the syntagmatic motivation is one kind of 'diagrammatic iconicity'.

The term 'iconicity' itself stems from Peirce's (1932) taxonomy of signs in terms of 'icon', 'index', and 'symbol'. Peirce's taxonomy is

³This fundamental question was implied in the tradition of Boas-Sapir-Whorf in which linear linguistic structure is assumed to reflect human beings' conceptual structure in different cultures. The question has been made more explicit in the recent development of cognitive grammars, e.g., Langacker (1987) and Tai (1989).

