Ideophones, rhemes, interpretants

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This commentary considers the depictive quality of ideophones within the context of a general semiotic. I seek to expand the limited uptake of iconicity in linguistic theory from a resemblance between sign and object along Peirce's second trichotomy (icon, index, symbol) to discuss iconicity from the often overlooked perspective of Peirce's third trichotomy (rheme, dicent, argument). I examine ideophones as semiotic rhemes that affect iconic interpretants and suggest this shift in understanding iconicity unites lexical iconicity with depictive processes in interaction more generally, and beyond this with other rhematic linguistic signs. These parallels are illustrated by two examples of the expressive use of pitch, and throughout the discussion by reference to how the work of the authors of the present Special Issue help free a theory of iconicity from the bonds of it being considered a fixed, lexical relationship, to rather theorize iconicity as a poetic achievement designed for an interpreter's active reception.

Keywords: ideophones, depiction, semiotics, iconicity, Peirce, poetics, sound symbolism

In this commentary, I use the semiotic framework of Charles Peirce (1955) to examine ideophones as linguistic signs. Together with the other authors of this Special Issue, I suggest that scholarship engaging the use and production of ideophones in the world's languages can contribute to our understanding of grammar, expressivity, and interpretation in human language practice. I argue that the study of ideophones is not marginal to the concerns of grammarians; rather, in understanding the performativity of ideophones for the active reception of other speakers, we come to better understand the nature of language.

Perhaps a reason that we still have so much to learn from ideophones is related to the history of its marginalization in linguistics. In the background of research on ideophones is an historical ideology that has made for an uneasy uptake of this subject in linguistic inquiry. The history itself is one that includes the scientific racism of 19th century evolutionism in which, in a pseudo-reflexive construction

of the European colonizer's assumed superiority, the ideophones of many African languages were taken as examples of the inferiority of colonized peoples. The history of European colonial projects reveals clear examples of what Gal and Irvine (1995) term '*ideological erasure*' where, for example, missionaries' grammars and lexicons of African languages often neglected to represent these highly productive resources, and failed to recognize their linguistic patterning. But such ideological erasure is not simply a feature of colonial history. Several of the papers of this special issue show such processes to be recent or even current. For example, Katherine Lahti (this issue) points to the denial of the existence of ideophones in Indo-European languages in her study of ideophones in Mayokovsky's poetry. And Anthony Webster (this issue) mentions how the teachers of the Bureau of Indian Affairs ensured that the language of Navajo poets was cleansed of ideophones before publication in *Arrow*. In the revitalization of K'iche' (Barrett, this issue) and of Navajo (Webster, this issue), poets are asserting the value of their language and culture through the performative use of ideophones (against ideologies denying that ideophones are linguistic competence); likewise, the scholars in this Special Issue demonstrate the value of ideophones as central to theories of language. Further arguing for ideophones as linguistic competence, Nuckolls (this issue) shows how the study of ideophones problematizes a semantic theory which was developed without considering ideophones. Her essay, along with the other contributions to this special issue, show that ideophones are not *marginal to* linguistic theory, but rather *critical for* linguistic theory.

The uneasy uptake of ideophones in the linguistics mainstream also has its origin in the post-Saussurean doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign as the threshold for linguistic inquiry (Saussure 1966) – a view that has relegated non-arbitrariness to domains outside of linguistics like the ones dubbed "paralanguage" (Sicoli 2007). The effect of this arbitrary threshold has been to marginalize signs grounded in semiotic processes of indexicality and iconicity. While numerous critics have pointed out the commonality of icons and indices in human language – Emile Benveniste (1971) and Roman Jakobson (1960, 1965) being two prominent figures – the Saussurean bias remains a dominant influence on linguistic theory. In another framework, the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, contemporary with Saussure, developed a competing theory of the linguistic sign as part of a general semiotic which was not constrained by a doctrine of arbitrariness or limited in scope to a single, referential function of language. Within the scope of Peirce's semiotic, ideophones, as well as other often marginalized sign types like interjections, metalinguistic prosody, and even conversational sequence organization, are not outside of linguistic inquiry. Peirce's semiotic is organized on the phenomenological principles of Firstness (quality), Secondness (spatial or temporal contiguity), and Thirdness (convention, habit

or rule), with language exhibiting signs demonstrating each principle and various combinations, relying primarily on indexical and iconic modes. For example, quantifiers for Peirce are types of indexes, as are pronouns and interjections. Symbolic reference itself is not possible without invoking indexical and iconic modes of reasoning (Deacon 2001) and these modes are dominant in the use of ideophones, which must both be legitimated as ideophones and recognized as being depictive of perceived experience.

In one way or another, each of the authors of the present Special Issue have come up against the earlier mentioned arbitrariness threshold that is a legacy of Saussurean structuralism and find it, as the present issue's Introduction has it, "both damaging to language and expressive forms." Each of the authors, however, makes important moves to locate ideophones as linguistic competence in their performativity and (importantly) in the qualities of experience that ideophones bring about for competent interpreters.

Analyzing how the performative depiction of experience affects an iconic interpretation requires a more complex understanding of iconicity than does the traditional representation of ideophones as iconic lexica with fixed relationships between sound and meaning. Researchers investigating depictive sign modes are bound to encounter this more common understanding of an icon as a 'natural' and 'direct' relationship of qualitative similarity, fixed in a lexical mapping. Dingemanse (this issue) points out the limits of explaining ideophones through the simple imitation of what has been called the icon. He states that such an understanding of the icon is inadequate where ideophones depict colors or shapes for example, and argues that ideophones are taken to be understood as such because an interlocutor treats them as depictions (see also Dingemanse 2011). Here, we must seek to find the quality of the linguistic sign, not established as a fixed feature of the lexicon, but rather residing in the inferencing and intention reading of interaction, a sense that is parallel to the "felt iconicity" Webster (this issue) describes in experiencing the poetry of Navajo poet Rex Lee Jim.

In the rest of this commentary, I draw on Charles S. Peirce's philosophy, the papers of this issue, and my own work on the metalinguistics of pitch to articulate an argument that the more common understanding of icons as a fixed relationship between sign and object misrepresents the scope of iconicity as it was developed in the context of Peirce's semiotics – a misreading which has become prevalent in ideophone research as well as in sign language and gesture research. Turning to the phenomenology of iconicity in a general semiotic, I want to go beyond (or perhaps it's better to say 'before') the typology of Icon, Index, Symbol, productively introduced to linguistics by Roman Jakobson (1960) after his exposure to the writings of Peirce, to address the phenomenological principles from which Peirce derived the categories. In doing so, I also move from a linguistics

of lexical inventories and grammatical rules to a linguistics that understands the building of signs in dialogic interaction – an important perspective shift that is apparent in several works in this Special Issue.

As stated earlier, for Peirce the range of potential sign actions in semiotics is based on the categories of Firstness (quality), Secondness (contiguity or adjacency), and Thirdness (convention, rule, or habit). This yielded three trichotomies of Signs, among which the second (the trichotomy of *Icon, Index, Symbol*) was based on the perspective of the Secondness between a sign and the object it represents – the icon being a sign which shows a *formal* resemblance to its object. This second trichotomy is the one that has been most frequently picked up and circulated, generally decontextualized from the phenomenology and architectonic in which it was derived. Rather than representing a *formal* relationship between sign and object, the popular understanding has become one of a *natural* relationship, albeit fitted to the constraints of a particular linguistic system to explain cross-linguistic variation in the onomatopoeia of animal calls (compare, for instance, Tedlock 1999).

Recontextualizing iconicity, we must consider the linguistic sign with a focus on the phenomenological perspectives of the trichotomy. From the perspective of Firstness, there are *qualisigns*, in which a quality can act as a sign; Peirce often gives examples of 'the feeling of a color (like red)' or of an emotion, both of which resonate with the concerns of the papers in the present issue. From the perspective of Thirdness (on which I focus here), signs are considered not in themselves, nor, in relation to their objects, but rather in their *interpretants* – that what a sign-object relation gives rise to, which may, for example, be a feeling, an interjection, or a propositional response. In each case the interpretant is a more developed sign, both being related to the sign-object relation and (in part) construing it. While interpreting often is an internal experience, speakers and analysts can read this interpretation in interaction through signs made public by a speaker's next-turn or response (Kockelman 2010). This is a direction into which Dingemanse's ethnomethodological examination of ideophone creation in everyday conversation moves us (this issue). His analysis of ideophones in Siwu shows the creation of ideophones not as an end, but rather a first act in a dialog in which a depiction is responded to and evaluated by other competent members of a community.

In the Peircean trichotomy of *Rheme, Dicent, Argument* (based on the phenomenological principle of Thirdness), rhemes are signs whose interpretants represent them as being icons. This perspective importantly does not assume iconicity is a natural resemblance that binds sign to object (as in the case of the two parts of the Saussurean sign); rather, it consists in the regularity or habit of sense making in which a sign-object is taken-to-be an icon. I suggest that it is along this trichotomy (rather than that of *Icon*, *Index*, *Symbol*) that the depictive qualities of

ideophones unite both the generally accepted conventional resemblances of sound symbolism and the areas of performance and sensory evocations that Dingemanse (this issue) points to as lying beyond 'lexical iconicity' and which we can see in all the poets' work discussed in some of the issue's other contributions.

Iconicity is not merely lexical pattern; it is also present in depictions in which the addressee *must* – to borrow Katherine Lahti's (this issue) characterization of the ideophone as an "assault" on the senses – treat the sign as qualitatively or diagrammatically related to the experience, event, or cognitive process depicted. In the phonological forms, repetitions, and prosodies of ideophones we find not singular icons, but rather an array of diagrammatic features conventionally depicting perceptual events for interpreters who possess a cultural disposition to interpret and value them. Such a conception of iconicity has been taken up fruitfully in linguistic anthropology in explanation of what Gregory Bateson (1979) called "patterns that connect"; similarly, Gal and Irvine (1995), Kroskrity (1998), and others have engaged iconicity as a semiotic process of fractal recursivity important to understanding the reproduction of linguistic and cultural ideologies,whereby fractal recursivity projects pattern from one cultural domain to another, yielding socially recognized iconicities.

In illustration, I turn to the voice registers of Mesoamerica (Sicoli 2010) where performed voice qualities are taken as iconic of social relations. Falsetto voice in some Zapotec languages, some Mayan languages, and some varieties of Nahuatl is used as the voice of petition, of respect, and of deference. In contrast, low-pitched harsh breathy voices frame strong imperatives whose pragmatic effect is to exert authority over another's action (Sicoli 2010, 2007). I investigated the cultural use of voice quality in Lachixío Zapotec through examining conversational sequences in multimodal interactions, ethnographic interviews on the metapragmatics of voice, and through psycholinguistic tasks designed to elicit description of sound contrasts (high vs. low pitch, loud vs. quiet intensity, fast vs. slow tempo, etc.; see Levinson, Majid and Enfield 2007; Sicoli, Majid and Levinson 2009). Across languages, pitch is a domain with little dedicated vocabulary, where metaphors are extended from other domains to characterize the pitch continuum (Shayan, Öztürk and Sicoli 2011). Thus English, for example, uses a spatial metaphor to characterize pitch as either 'high' or 'low.' In my own field work, a pattern emerged in the way speakers of Lachixío Zapotec talked about both *pitch* and *social relations*; the pattern revealed a common semiotic ground for the social function of pitch and reference to pitch. Thus, Lachixío speakers described pitch with metaphors of size and thickness (not of height). High pitch was described as 'thin', *nelettze* and 'small', *me'e*; low pitch was 'thick', *nerokko* and 'big', *zxenne*. People's social statuses were likewise referred to as 'big', *zxenne* and 'small', *me'e*. *Benné zxenne* 'big people' are prototypically elder people who have done religious or

municipal service; the more service one has rendered, the bigger and more respected one is. At the other extreme, children are the best exemplars of smallness, with babies referred to with *mèʔ*, *endò mèʔ*.

The dimension of 'size' thus organizes both sound and social relations diagrammatically, the prosodic qualities co-occurring in concrete interactions with the social relationships (Shayan, Öztürk and Sicoli 2011). These qualities are formally enregistered in the sound symbolic use of the voice: showing respect is using the voice to depict oneself as smaller than the respected addressee, showing authority is using the voice to depict oneself as larger than one's addressee. The voice registers of respect and authority also illustrate gradients of iconicity in their use. In speech scenes where multiple addressees are of different rank, but both are of social categories requiring the honorific voice, gradient high pitch is used to show the respect differential with yet higher-pitched voices indexing the higher social status of one's addressee (Sicoli 2007, 2010). In this way, high and low pitch construct Zapotec relationships of respect and authority; their semiotic effect and interpretation relies on a patterning between diagrammatic iconicities: gradient high pitch, gradient low pitch, and gradient rank in social relations.

In these Lachixío voice registers, a contrast between large and small used in the linguistic categorization of sound is projected into the domain of social relations. That such iconicities are culturally recognized underscores the point that iconicity is a semiotic, not a natural relationship – the ground is not sign-to-(world) object, but rather sign-to-sign. Through the progressivity of semiosis, existing symbolic relations and indexical contrasts can be taken as semiotic Firsts to enter into new sign relationships. An interpretant yielded in one sign-object relation becomes a sign itself in a new order of semiosis (consisting in, and progressing through, relational events rather than structural relationships).

Illustrating such semiotic process and developing theory for its analysis, Paul Kockelman (2010) in his book, *Language, Culture, and Mind,* considers 'interjections' like the English 'oops' or Spanish '*ay Diós*,' as belonging to another area of language that, like ideophones, has been ideologically constructed as representing something less than language (Sicoli 2012). Lahti (this issue) points out that interjections also overlap with ideophones or can be ideophones themselves. Like in the case of ideophones, the meaning of interjections is generally vague and difficult to analyze, and therefore traditionally dismissed as emotional, not cognitive, and not on a par with the so-called 'truer' bits of language.

Kockelman's (2010) analysis of interjections considers them from Peirce's three phenomenological perspectives – through "the signs that express them, the objects they stand for, and the interpretants they give rise to" (2010: 200). Interjections give rise to interpretants: that is, "addressees and overhearers adjust their behavior upon hearing them" (2010: 169–170) – a perspective which the culturally

competent (and the analysts) can read as subsequent sign-action. Kockelman develops a framework in which interjections are signs that stand for things or events (2010: 168); thus, they are primarily *indexical*, but also clearly *conventional* ways to bring about joint attention and evaluation of an object or action. In another useful parallel, a function for ideophones in interaction is to bring participants into joint attention to some experience, not through the index of joint focus, but rather through the affective experience of sound impression.

Compare here also Nuckolls' statement (this issue) that "ideophones require energetic investment in an utterance, rather than a detached, descriptive attitude" and Childs' contention (this issue) that "being expressive requires expending more energy." When Mayakovsky treats everyday words as ideophones, Humberto Ak'ab'al treats arbitrary signs as expressive, and when Dingemanse's consultants deliver ideophones with the right prosodic qualities to match the cultural experience, the additional work of building this *rheme* evokes the subsequent sign action of the recipient taking the sign as showing iconicities depictive of qualities of experience. We also see this where Webster (this issue) writes that in Navajo poetics "[i]t is the ideophone that links meaning and creates connections." through "a felt iconicity across and through linguistic forms." Describing iconicity as "felt" is a move that forwards an understanding of iconicity in ideophones as grounded not in a fixed or natural relationship between the sign and its object, but rather in its effect – a subsequent relationship of the semiotic interpretant. In each of these examples of ideophones in interaction, we see additional effort being expended in not only producing an ideophone, but in performing it in order to be recognized as a rheme requiring some interpretive work by the recipient.

What these semiotic and interactional perspectives on ideophones point to is that to better understand these types of linguistic signs, we must approach language as joint activity, acknowledging both its performativity and its 'recipient design.' In *languaging* (to use the more active designator favored by Alton Becker, 1991), utterances are designed and performed assuming that listeners will make inferences about what a speaker is trying to do with his or her utterance. Voloshinov (1986: 117) recognized this as the "active reception of others' speech." Ideophones show their recipient design in the two levels of coding they display, serving at once their recognizability as ideophones, cued by their marked phonology and morphology and by a culturally recognized patterned depiction of qualia of experience. Childs (this issue) captures this dual function present in uses of ideophones as residing in the tension between their need to both "be different" and "be recognizably language." In addition to depicting experience through the sound pattern in the ideophone, the ideophone must at a more basic level be recognized as a token of a class of linguistic forms that use a depictive mode of semiosis requiring an iconic interpretant.

One lesson we learn about language from focusing on ideophones is that the two levels of sign action mentioned here are crucial in listeners' ascription of a meaningful action to a speaker's utterance. In the case of ideophones, the marked nature of their phonology and morphology cues the depictive mode of interpretation. This function is laid bare for us by the poets and lay speakers discussed in the present issue, who creatively make ideophones from non-ideophones by adding marked prosody and various multimodal features. But while ideophones clearly highlight these two orders of communication, involving both a metalinguistic frame for interpretation and the pattern to be interpreted, the phenomenon is not unique to ideophones; on the contrary, it pervades all language practice.

Thus, in metalinguistic prosody we can see the same duality of function, which I will briefly exemplify by reference to a study of the use of initial pitch in the design and recognition of questions with marked communicative function (Sicoli, Stivers, Enfield and Levinson 2014). In a study of initial pitch, we measured pitch at first prominence in questions occurring in large corpora of natural conversations across ten languages; we found that questions marked by an initial pitch value in the top 10% of a speaker's range were predictably functioning not in the canonical 'information seeking' function of questions, but rather to express evaluation. In such an interpretive frame, a question like 'Where are you going dressed like that?' is an admonition rather than a request for information. Like the marked phonology and morphology of ideophones, marked initial pitch works at two levels of coding: first, as an index, the high initial pitch co-occurring with the utterance makes it stand out from a speaker's median initial pitch; and second, the interpretant of this index is an icon interpreted as a qualitative parallel between marked form and marked function. With both ideophones and pitch framing, then, we see a performativity and design for active interpretation that highlights for us semiotic processes that are common and crucial to language practice but are not captured (or are even erased) outside of a semiotic framework. For both high initial pitch in questions and marked morpho-phonology in ideophones, the sound image communicates to an addressee that s/he must search for the meaning of a linguistic sign that is not grounded in an arbitrary sign mode. While ideophones and metalinguistic prosody function similarly as sign types, by contrast, ideophones are vastly more powerful as linguistic devices. This is in part because of their patterned and intertextual content through which, as Dingemanse (this issue) points out, ideophones "must be understood … in the context of the existing inventory of ideophones and practices of employing them." Initial pitch in questions only prompts an inferential, pragmatic search for non-literal meaning; by contrast, ideophones can code very specific relations among families of experience.

To close: In examining ideophones as semiotic rhemes that affect iconic interpretants I suggest we can unite our understandings of ideophones both as lexical

iconicity and as depictive processes in interaction more generally. Moreover, we discover something more pervasive about language in interaction which extends to other rhematic linguistic signs, from which I presented two examples of the expressive use of pitch. The focus on iconicity from the perspective of Peirce's *Rheme, Dicent, Argument* trichotomy (rather than of the more commonly referenced trichotomy of *Icon, Index, Symbol*) highlights for us the joint activity that language practice is in its performativity, design for active reception, and interpretability. Considering traditionally marginalized areas of language as objects of linguistic inquiry, ideophones and pitch symbolism take us far along in what Jakobson (1965) called the "quest for the essence of language." On this quest, the authors of the present Special Issue help free a theory of iconicity from a fixed, lexical relationship in order to rather theorize iconicity as a poetic achievement designed for an interpreter's active reception.

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