

From sign to signing

Iconicity in language and literature 3

Edited by Wolfgang G. Müller and Olga Fischer

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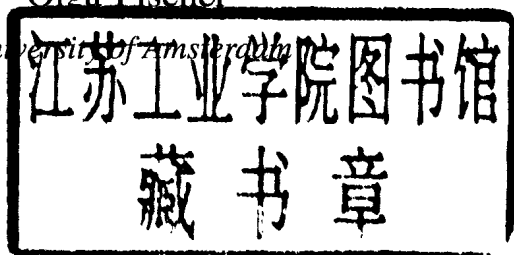
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Preface and acknowledgments

The studies collected in this volume represent a selection of papers that were originally given at the Third Symposium on Iconicity in Language and Literature, organized by the University of Jena in co-operation with the University of Amsterdam and the University of Zurich and held at Jena, 29–31 March, 2001. The essays included here exemplify a wide range of new approaches and new research material in iconicity studies both in language and literature. They show that iconicity remains an important and fruitful topic for interdisciplinary work opening up new fields for further research.

The organizers of the conference gratefully acknowledge the support of institutional sponsors such as the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the University of Jena and the 'Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen' of the University of Amsterdam. The University of Jena generously offered its facilities to the conference and gave logistic help. The symposium profited greatly from the competent and enthusiastic assistance given by Dr. Eva-Maria Orth and Jens Mittelbach. Jens Mittelbach's expertise on the computer also considerably lightened the burden of the organizers and editors. We are most grateful to Jens Mittelbach and Marlene von Frommannshausen for their technical assistance with the index.

Very special thanks go to Max Nänny of the University of Zurich, who helped to organize the symposium and whose expertise and knowledge of the field was invaluable to the editors in their selection of the contributions for the present volume. Max Nänny is the *spiritus rector* of literary iconicity studies and it is his enthusiasm and charisma which first started this series of symposia on iconicity.

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Introduction

From Signing back to Signs

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Iconicity is one of the few fields of research in which the disciplines of linguistics and literary studies — both of which have regrettably drifted apart as a consequence of specialization — can fruitfully co-operate. We see iconicity (be it of an imagic or a diagrammatic kind)¹ operating in everyday as well as literary language. And it is through the interdisciplinary nature of the iconicity symposia, through approaching iconic phenomena from both a linguistic and literary point of view, that we may develop a keener perception of the pervasive presence of iconicity in all forms of language. This will provide us with a better understanding of how language is structured and at the same time give us a deeper insight into the tools and methods used by poets and writers, leading to a fuller appreciation of the literary text itself.

In this third volume in the series, we find a number of new departures. One of these is the interest in gestures, and more specifically, in ‘signing’: the gestural mode of signed languages. The other is the concern with intermedial iconicity, which we shall discuss in connection with the contributions found in Part IV. The interest of scholars of signed languages in iconicity is fairly recent. Before the 1960s and up to the 70s, signed languages were generally regarded as rather primitive languages “devoid of prepositions, conjunctions and abstract words” (Eisenson and Boase 1950, quoted in Battison 2001: 6); languages that were “bound to the concrete” and “rather limited with respect to abstractions, humor and subtleties such as figures of speech which enrich expression” (Davis and Silverman 1970, in Battison 2001: 6). Signed languages only came to be seen as interesting in their own right after the Chomskyan ‘revolution’, that is, when transformational-generative linguists, with their mentalistic approach to language, focused on the machinery producing language rather than on the product itself.

This took the attention away from the still exclusive focus on aural and oral modes of communication and opened up possibilities for another channel, the visual one used by signers. Indeed, new research into signed languages, which was greatly inspired by the seminal work of W.C. Stokoe (1960), showed that signed languages “turned out to be organized and acquired like other languages” (Newport and Supalla 2001: 107). That is, just like spoken languages, they possess a ‘phonological’ system (‘phonemes’ in sign language are the smallest non-meaningful, visual elements), morphology and syntax; they have anaphors (cf. Wilbur 2001: 236) and even null arguments (cf. S. D. Fischer 2001: 204); and agreement in person and number may be signed onto the verb in connection with both objects and subjects (cf. Newport and Supalla 2001: 107–110) etc. In other words, the underlying abstract linguistic system is the same in both spoken and signed languages, only the tools with which the signs are made, necessarily, differ. This difference in tools offers opportunities as well as restrictions. It is not surprising, therefore, that linear order, tone and emphasis play an important role in spoken languages, while space, motion and location come to the fore in signed languages. Similarly, simultaneous activities can be quite easily expressed in sign language while in spoken language different means have to be resorted to (see also below).

It is noteworthy, however, that with the new interest in signed languages in the seventies, there was a move away from their iconic nature. The reason for this was, first of all, that the gestural mode of communication had marked off the language as primitive in the earlier days. Secondly, the new Chomskyan linguistics had elevated the arbitrariness of the sign almost to a first principle. Thus, iconicity had no place within this new research paradigm. It is only very recently that iconicity re-acquired a confident position in sign language research.²

There are a number of reasons why many more signs in signed languages “have iconic origins” and why the structure of signed languages “appears to [have] a higher degree of iconicity” (S. D. Fischer 2001: 206). The first reason is clear and may be expressed, as Fischer has done (*ibid.* p. 206), succinctly: “because it can!” Objects can be pictured much more easily and transparently by gestures than by sounds. It also explains why cross-linguistically, signed languages are typologically much more alike than spoken languages. For a similar reason it is not surprising that a higher degree of iconic types has been found in *written* language, where the spoken mode of language has been made *visible*. Contributions to the first two iconicity volumes by Matthias Bauer (1999), Andreas Fischer (1999), Max Nänny (1999, 2001), Robbie Goh (2001) and Christina Ljungberg (2001) have illustrated iconic usages that cannot occur in spoken varieties of language.

There may be another, equally important reason, however, why signed languages may have preserved their iconicity more clearly.³ S.D. Fischer (2001: 106) remarks that signed languages may not grammaticalize so rapidly as spoken languages because “most sign language users do not have parents who use the same language and that therefore sign language must be recreolized in every generation”. It is true that, in structure, signed languages share features with creoles and creolized language, which are also more transparent (i.e. more iconic, especially diagrammatically) than spoken languages with a longer history. However, this does not mean that signed languages do not grammaticalize at all. As stated above, they do have full grammatical structure, and so they do have signs which have become conventionalized so that their earlier iconic origin or motivation is no longer immediately visible. Indeed, Klima and Bellugi (1979) have established that most iconic signs are not transparent to hearing participants, but they are often translucent, i.e. once the meaning of the sign is known, the sign can be understood as motivated. Moreover, the degree of transparency does not only depend on perceptual features but also on cultural features. Thus, Pizzuto and Volterra (2001) have shown, by means of some very interesting experiments, that signs used in Italian sign language were more easily understood by Italian than by non-Italian hearers, because these signs resembled culturally-specific Italian gestures. As in all cases of iconicity, the perception of the similarity between sign and referent depends on the interpreter and the context that he is part of.

We welcome the attention paid to gestures and signed language in this volume because the research into gestural signs and the structure of signed languages can cast new light on the structure of spoken languages (in both oral and written form), and more particularly, it may tell us more about the iconic foundations of spoken languages and the way iconicity has evolved in them. There are a number of studies in this volume that are directly or indirectly related to sign language or sign language research (gathered together in Part II). It must be noted, however, that the five broad sections distinguished in this book are meant as a loose categorization; most of the contributions cannot be limited to the section in which they have been placed. For this reason, we will not always follow these sections closely in this introductory chapter; rather, we will indicate how the various topics discussed in each study refer to and are linked with topics discussed in others.

The most direct investigation into the role played by iconicity in signed language is provided by Klaudia Grote and Erika Linz. Their contribution pays special attention to the fact, already remarked on above, that the interpretation of a sign depends very heavily on its context, especially as concerns the extent to

which its occurrence is perceived as conventional. In their study, Grote and Linz first remind us that only *certain qualities* of a referent can be iconically represented in a sign, i.e. the similarity between a sign and its referent is neither complete nor objective,⁴ and the recognition of its iconicity is always filtered by the interpretation of the perceiver. Quite understandably, therefore, the more conventional the immediate context of the sign is, the less likely it is that a conventionalized sign will be interpreted iconically. The main aim of their article is to explore the influence of sign language iconicity on semantic conceptualization. They test whether the iconic quality of a signed word helps to establish the semantic concept more quickly, and whether it influences which quality of the concept stands out more or is more prototypical. This, in turn, may provide information about the semantic structuring of the lexicon. The experiments presented in their study involve confronting both signers and non-signers as well as bilinguals with fully lexicalized (conventionalized) signs (visual or oral ones) as well as with certain qualities connected or unconnected with the referent of the sign. It turned out that signers and bilinguals were faster in judging iconic sign picture relations than the non-signers, who reacted to all qualities connected with the sign in the same way. This was in fact the outcome that the researchers had expected because for the non-signers there was no iconic visual connection between the sign and one of the visual qualities, their sign representing a sound rather than a visual word. This suggests that the iconicity of the sign persists in sign language even when the sign has become lexicalized. The experiments thus show that the semantic organization of the mental lexicon of signers and bilinguals is influenced by the iconicity of the sign. These results additionally suggest that language may influence conceptualization, i.e. that it is not just conceptualization that steers linguistic expression. In other words, the outcome suggests a “moderate version of linguistic relativity” (p. 36).

A rather different experiment was conducted by William Herlofsky, who shows how research in sign language, in this case the signing of metaphor in Japanese sign language, may be beneficial in helping to develop a comprehensive theory of metaphor and iconicity. Working within a cognitive theory of language where form, meaning, metaphor and iconicity are all equally relevant and fully integrated into the framework of the theory, Herlofsky illustrates how the relationship between real-world space and mental space (which he investigated earlier [Herlofsky 2001] from an evolutionary point of view) may be made more visible by considering the use made of ‘signing spaces’ in signed poetry. He first shows that the iconicity of visual language can best be approached through the analysis of metaphor. Metaphor provides the foundation for our conceptualization of many basic abstract ideas, as the author illustrates by referring to the work of

Lakoff and Johnson, who show how complex metaphors arise through primary, cross-domain associations acquired in early childhood (this is called conceptual 'blending'). After a brief discussion of the types of iconicity that occur in sign language to express concrete objects (these make use of structural correspondences in both 'form' and 'path' between our conception of objects in the real world and the form and movement of the articulators in the signing space, used to 'sign' these concepts), Herlofsky moves on to the signing of abstract concepts, where it is much more difficult to create signs that 'resemble' their object. He shows that here the same type of metaphorical blending takes place as is the case in regular, i.e. non-signed language. By illustrating how this blending actually occurs *visibly* in the signing space in the performance of signed poetry, Herlofsky gives us a better idea of how metaphoric blending may take place in regular language.

At this point we will discuss a contribution by Masako Hiraga (even though we have placed it in Part III because it is also concerned with structural iconicity) since it likewise deals with the notoriously difficult problem of metaphor and iconicity and since it refers to Herlofsky's study and draws on the same example, a Japanese haiku, which is also available in sign language. In Hiraga's study the vagueness of the Peircean notion of metaphor is counterbalanced by a more precise definition derived from cognitive theory. Elaborating and refining Turner's and Fauconnier's model of blending, Hiraga explains the dynamic interplay of metaphor and iconicity from two angles: (1) iconicity manifested as image-schema in metaphor, (2) metaphor giving an iconic interpretation to form. The example she uses to illustrate her theoretical model is a *haiku* by Basho Matsuo whose bipartite metaphorical structure is perfectly suited to substantiate her argument. The essay also demonstrates that in the revision of the poem, *kanji* (Chinese logographs) effectively strengthen the link between form and meaning. The studies by Herlofsky and Hiraga, which deal with the same problem from a linguistic point of view on the one hand and a literary one on the other, exemplify particularly well the advantages of the interdisciplinary approach taken in this and the previous volumes on iconicity.

To return to the topic of Part I, Axel Hübler's contribution to this section does not actually make use of sign language proper but of gestures used by speakers of spoken language. He is interested in the connection between gestures and linguistic signs, and he shows how the loss of the one may lead to change in the other, thus giving an indication of how originally iconic gestures may emerge in a different form linguistically. By offering a glimpse of how such gestures may have been translated into spoken language, we may acquire a clearer idea about what links there are between spoken and signed languages and about the structure ultimately underlying both. Hübler first develops the idea that

there is an iconic relation between the verbal and the gestural mode in the expression of so-called ‘redundant phrasal verbs’ (i.e. expressions in which the particle does not alter the propositional content of the verb, as in ‘swallow *down*’ for ‘swallow’) and in the expression of ‘pure spatial verbs’ (such as ‘to up’). Thus, the accompanying gestures not only resemble but highlight a certain aspect of the spatial meaning inherent in the verb and/or the adverbial particle. In other words, a phrasal verb like ‘lift up’ accompanied by an upward movement of the hand highlights a part of the event itself. Similar gestures could be used in a metaphorical spatial way in verbs such as ‘yell out’. Hübler suggests further that this cross-modal form of iconicity is the result of the link that exists between these verbs and gestures on the *operational* level; i.e. the spatial concepts, whether expressed verbally or gesturally, are linked to the same part of the brain. These observations are then used to explain a rather interesting historical-linguistic development: the rise of most of these redundant and pure phrasal verbs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are linked to the great efforts courtly society took in “subjecting the body to a rigorous control” (p. 74). Too much gesturing became frowned upon. Hübler’s (still tentative) suggestion is that the resulting reduction in gestures, was compensated for verbally by means of an additional but semantically redundant particle.

Keiko Masuda’s investigation into birdcalls has a link with the above studies because it likewise involves the more direct mimicking of a real-world object, but this time by oral rather than visual means: she investigates in how far the sounds produced by birds are actually reflected in the linguistic signs that we use to refer to those sounds. The experiments show how close the phonetic word of a particular language, in this case English, is to the actual sound made, but the investigation also indicates what phonetic or phonological constraints of the language in question are in force, or indeed relaxed. It is well-known that even in onomatopoeia, which is considered to be one of the most direct forms of imagic iconicity (i.e. a type of icon that comes close to the ‘real’ thing),⁵ the conventional phonological system of language plays a role, and it is to be expected that the choices made to represent birdcalls are somehow constrained by the phonological framework of the language in question.⁶ Iconicity, then, is a creative device that to some extent does and does not follow the conventions of language (cf. Lecercle 1990, Fónagy 2001: 2ff.). Sound combinations that do not occur in the phonemic inventory of English such as *ts*, *pf*, *ps*, may still crop up in onomatopoeic expressions, as in *tse tse*, *phft*, *phsst* (the last two are examples from comic books given in Crystal 1995: 250). However, the more conventional the onomatopoeic words become, the more likely it is that they follow the normal phonological rules. In other words, exclamations or interjections in