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### *Saussure's Theory Of The Linguistic Sign: A Cognitive Perspective*

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# SAUSSURE'S THEORY OF THE LINGUISTIC SIGN: A COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

This paper elaborates Saussure's idea of the linguistic sign as a bilateral unit combining the signifier (a concept / meaning) and signified (a sound image). It is argued that onomasiologically their relation is accounted for by cognitive mapping which evolves in the direction (1) the experienced world → the thought / meaning of a linguistic sign; (2) the meaning of a linguistic sign → its internal form; (3) the internal form of a linguistic sign → its external form; (4) the external form<sup>1</sup> → the external form<sup>2</sup>. Semasiologically, the relation between the signified and the signifier evolves in an opposite direction and grounds on mental construal. Therefore, a cognitive approach to Saussure's definition of a sign provides a better understanding of the interaction between its conceptual and formal aspects.

**Key words:** *Saussure, sign, signifier, signified, cognitive mapping, mental construal.*

## Introduction

According to F. de Saussure (1966: 66-67), the linguistic sign is a two-sided psychological entity (Fig. 1), with the two intimately united elements being a concept and a sound image (drawing (a)). The latter is not a material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses. A sound image is the *signifier*, and a concept is the *signified* (drawings (b) and (c)). Each of them recalls the other.

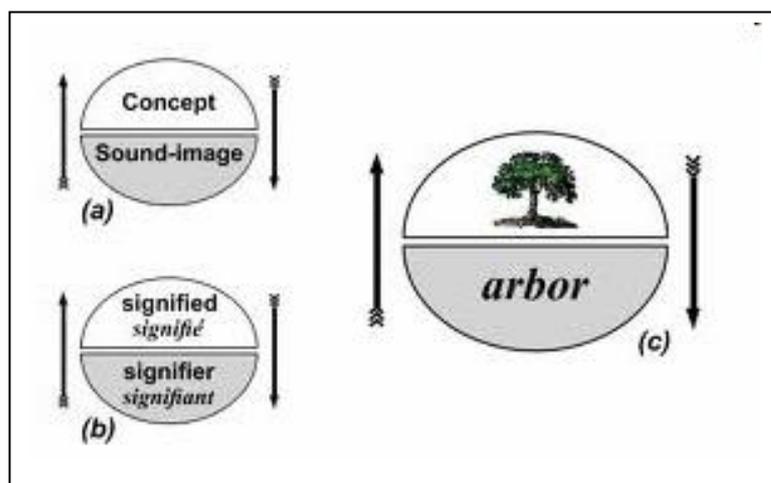


Fig. 1. Saussure's interpretation of a sign

Today, the above insights, which have become classical for the theory of language, may be given interpretation in terms of mapping and construal conceptions developed in cognitive science. Such interpretations aim to expose the nature of the signified, and the way it is exteriorized by the signifier.

## Discussion

The further discussion includes: defining the term *construal* used in different cognitive disciplines, relating *construal* and *mapping*, and exposing the relevance of mapping and *construal* for the process of semiosis as an activity that involves (linguistic) signs.

In cognitive science, the term *construal* refers to the way in which people perceive, comprehend, and interpret the world around them. Social psychology says that *construal* plays a crucial role in situations when people are obliged to venture beyond the information immediately provided by the direct observation or secondhand report of a stimulus event. In this case, a person infers the additional details of content, or meaning from the information available. In other words, when a person lacks the knowledge to correctly deal with a given situation he or she employs *construal*. Initially viewed as an obstruction in one's perception of the world, *construal* has evolved into a mechanism used to explain how or why people think the way they do (Ross 1987; Aronson, Wilson & Akert 2010). The importance of *construal* is specifically emphasized in cognitive psychology, which studies conceptual schemata / schemas (Bartlett 1932) as structures that, being non-specific, organize information of our prior experiences (Neisser 1967: 287) and thus are applicable in *construal*, since they help perceivers to resolve ambiguity, fill in the gaps, and provide predictability and coherence of information (Ross 1987). Cognitive linguistics considers various linguistic expressions to be dependent on *construal*, which is understood as the way of our processing information. This understanding is highlighted in R. Langacker's cognitive grammar (2008), which maintains that the meaning of a linguistic expression is not just the conceptual content it evokes – equally important is how that content is *construed*. *Construal* is a particular way of “viewing” a “visual scene”. What we actually see depends on: (a) what we chose to look at – *focusing*, (b) where we view it from – *perspective*, (c) how carefully we examine it – *specificity*, and (d) which elements we pay attention to – *prominence* (Langacker 2008: 55). In a number of my works (Zhabotynska 2009, 2010, 2013 among others) I argue that conceptual *construal* as information processing has two stages: first, we identify constituents of the given information and combine them within a coherent conceptual structure; then, we apply different cognitive operations (like the ones described by Langacker as *construals*) to the obtained structure. As a result, we get various modifications of this structure. Therefore, we should differentiate between the terms “conceptual model” and “cognitive model” used in cognitive linguistics as synonyms. The *conceptual model* should be understood as an information structure taken without any cognitive operation(s) applied to it. The *cognitive model* should be understood as an information structure modified by some cognitive operation(s). Cognitive operations create several cognitive models on the basis of one and the same conceptual model.

Mental *construing* deals with the results of *cognitive mapping*. In cognitive psychology, cognitive mapping is broadly defined as representation of the experienced world in the human mind. It is a process composed of a series of psychological transformations by which an individual acquires, codes, stores, recalls, and decodes information about the world. *Cognitive map* is the term used to refer to one's internal representation of the experienced world. Cognitive maps are invariably incomplete and partially distorted (underlined by me – S.Z.), the properties that can be revealed in external representations or in spatial behaviors (Downs & Stea 1973). Information about the world retained in a cognitive map is a *subjective* image, a world's *model*, an *interpretation* of the world, which must not be equated with the world per se, since “a map is not the territory” (A.Korzybski), as well as “a menu is not the food” (A.Watts). The list may be extended with the analogies: “the blueprint is not the house, the recipe is not the dish, the computer simulation of weather does not raine on us” (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 4). The fundamental hypothesis of cognitive linguistics is that linguistic meaning involves *motivated mappings from conceptualization to expression*, This hypothesis underlies many investigations in metaphor theory, the role of iconicity in grammar, processes of grammaticalization, etc. (Shina 1999: 229-230).

In semiosis, cognitive mapping may be attributed to the Speaker and the respective onomasiological approach “*from the meaning – to the linguistic form*”, and mental construal may be attributed to the Listener and the respective semasiological approach “*from the linguistic form to its meaning*”. Hence, mapping and construal are mirror phenomena that establish the relation between the domains of EXPERIENCED WORLD, THOUGHT (MIND), and LINGUISTIC SIGNS (LANGUAGE). This relation may be represented with an extended semiotic triangle (Fig. 2). Onomasiologically, when a linguistic sign is created, the process of semiosis involving mapping proceeds in the direction: (1) from the information obtained through experience to the concept in the mind, or meaning; (2) from the concept to the internal form of a linguistic sign; (3) from the internal form of a linguistic sign to its external form. Semasiologically, when a linguistic sign is understood, or interpreted, the process of semiosis involving construal (reconstructing the whole from its part) evolves in the opposite direction.

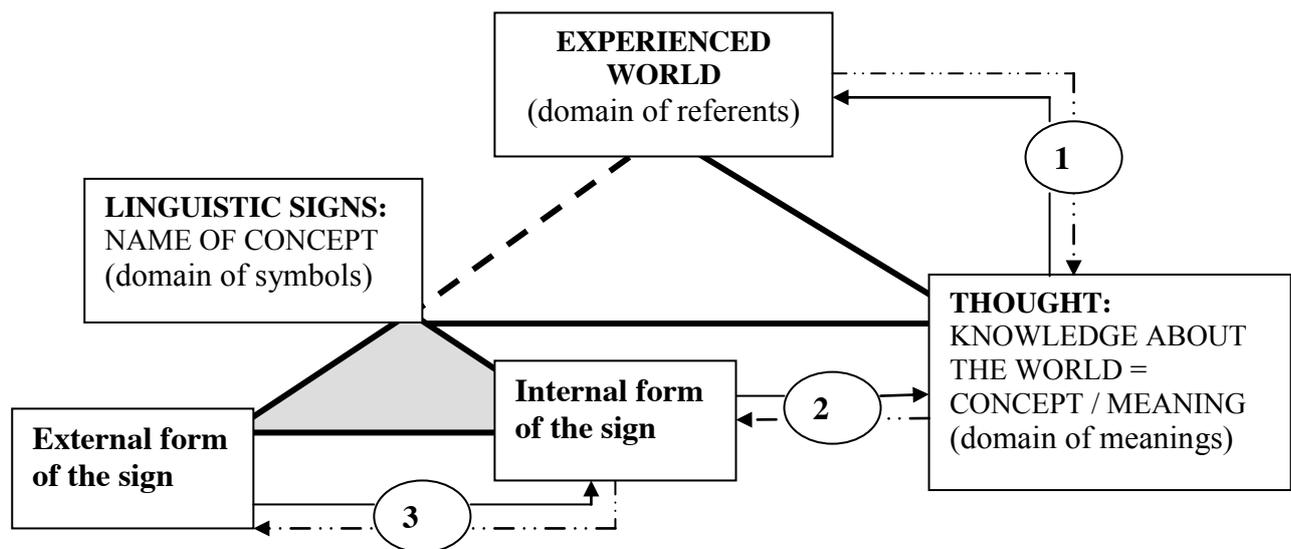


Fig. 2. Directions of mapping / construal in semiosis

Below, I will consider the sequential process of mapping with the emphasis on its two major properties – *i n c o m p l e t e n e s s*, or fragmentary nature of conceptual maps, and their occasional *d e v i a t i o n s*, or departures from a conventional pattern. The latter, subjective in nature, tends to be iconic, compatible with that which exists “in reality”, or that which we bodily perceive. The theoretical issues are illustrated with linguistic signs that belong to different levels – lexical, syntactic, and textual.

**1. WORLD → THOUGHT / MEANING OF A SIGN.** Mapping, as an incomplete and sometimes deviant mental representation, is grounded on attention, which singles out only particular fragments of the perceived (experienced) entity. According to L. Talmy (2000: 76-77), such fragments, taken together, constitute a pattern of attention. Due to focusing on its particular parts, a single attention pattern can be overlaid in different ways onto the same referent scene. In Langacker’s cognitive grammar (Langacker 2008: 70-73), different focused patterns of attention are compatible with the prominence construal of the trajector / landmark alignment. The trajector is the primary, and the landmark is the secondary semantic focus. Both are equally important for the meaning of a linguistic expression. E.g. In the situation *The clerk sold the goods to the customer* the focal attention is mapped onto the SELLER (the trajector), while in the situation *The customer bought the goods from the clerk* the focal attention is mapped onto the CUSTOMER (the trajector). Information registered by a pattern of attention is a concept which becomes the signified (meaning) of a linguistic signs. *I n c o m p l e t e n e s s* of the signified is a topic of the long-standing discussion about the boundaries between “linguistic” and “encyclopedic” meanings. Anyway, our knowledge about the named object, even if this knowledge is “encyclopedic”, remains incomplete.

Deviation of a linguistic meaning from the canonical pattern may be illustrated by Langacker's (2008: 74) examples of changing the viewer's position from static to dynamic, as in the sentence *The forest is getting thicker*, where the meaning of the sentence implies that the viewer is in motion. In a text, deviation is exhibited by perspectivization manifested with "late indefinites" (Dirven & Verspoor 1999: 203). In English, the indefinite article used with a name of the entity already introduced before signals the change of perspective: the described event is "seen" by another person, different from a previous narrator.

**2. MEANING → LINGUISTIC FORM / internal form.** When created, a linguistic sign is always motivated, i.e. somehow related to the meaning which it evokes. Motivation that facilitates access to the meaning may be provided by the external and internal linguistic forms. The external form is the sound form (sound image) of a linguistic expression. The internal form, or motivator (Potebnya 1993: 100; Kubryakova 2004: 62) is a fragment of meaning immediately represented in the external form. Cf. "Form does not represent meaning but instead picks out regularities that run throughout meanings. Form prompts meaning and must be suited to its task" (Fauconnier & Turner 2000: 5). The relation between the meaning and the external form of a linguistic expression is iconically manifested in onomatopoeic words (e.g. *to hiss, to buzz, to quack, etc.*), and in sound symbolism (e.g. the sound [i] is associated with a small size: *pin, thin, bit*). The relation between the meaning and the internal form of a linguistic expression is manifested via mapping as fragmentary, incomplete representation of the meaning in the internal form (*cat-chaiser, food-begger* – of a dog). Deviations of the internal form, or motivator may occur when it departs from the "real state of things" represented through iconicity or metonymy. The examples of such deviations are metaphors (*a lion* 'a brave person') and counterfactuals – oxymoron (*terribly beautiful*), and irony (*bright* in the meaning 'stupid').

**3. LINGUISTIC FORM: internal form → external form.** The internal form of a linguistic sign is structured with an onomasiological model (Dokulil 1962, Kubryakova 1978) which includes the basis (the target concept), the feature (characteristics of the basis), and the link (the relation between the basis and its feature). E.g. *three-wheel bike, three-wheeler* – "BIKE (basis) HAS (link) THREE WHEELS (feature)". The external form of a linguistic expression may represent the onomasiological model in its complete form (*coffee-maker* = this machine makes coffee). However, in most cases the onomasiological model has its fragmentary, incomplete representation. The missing elements are: the link (*Londoner* = one [lives in] London) or the link and the basis (*the young* = [people] [are] young). Fragmentary representation of the internal form results in the compression of linguistic expressions (*three-piece suit* > *three-piecer* > *threer* > (*the*) *three*). In syntax, fragmentary representation of the internal form may be exemplified by different cases of compressing the predicative structure of a sentence (*Winter has come* > *Winter*). In a literary text, fragmentary representation of its internal form in its external form may be exemplified by various verbal images – metonymic or metaphoric. E.g. (a metaphoric image of aging): NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY. *Nature's first green is gold, / Her hardest hue to hold. / Her early leaf's a flower, / But only so an hour. / Then leaf subsides to leaf. / So Eden sank to grief, / So dawn goes down to day. / Nothing gold can stay.* (R. Frost). Deviation of the external form, its considerable departure from the internal form of a linguistic expression, is demonstrated by the examples like *crazy prices, guilty money, mortal land, etc.* In the expression *crazy prices* the onomasiological model is "PRICES (basis) make (link) A PERSON CRAZY (feature)". The model has a complex propositional feature "A PERSON is/becomes CRAZY". The logical subject (A PERSON) is omitted, and the predicate (CRAZY) is added to the onomasiological basis PRICES, without being its immediate characteristics. Deviant external forms are also exhibited by implicatures discussed in linguistic pragmatics. They may be both conventional (*She is beautiful but smart*) and conversational (A. *Do you know the news?* – B. *I was on a business trip*).

**4. LINGUISTIC FORM: external form<sup>1</sup> → external form<sup>2</sup>.** The phenomenon of mapping as fragmentary, incomplete representation of a whole is also extended into the domain of linguistic forms per se. A larger linguistic form may be represented by a shorter form, as in:

clippings – *lab*, abbreviations – *UNESCO*, lexical blends – *newseum*, and haplology – *Englaland* > *England*.

## Conclusions

Presumably, language as a sign system results from cognitive mapping / construal. While our thought maps upon the experienced world (represents the information about it with gaps and deviations), language is mapped upon our thought. In language, the external form of a linguistic expression is mapped upon its internal form. In the domain of external forms, a smaller form is mapped upon the larger one. This observation has theoretical implications for different linguistic fields. For typology, it is important that languages may exhibit differences at various levels of mapping / construal (content of the linguistic meaning, the choice of a motivator for representing this meaning, the choice of a sound form to externalize the motivator). Different stages of mapping / construal are also relevant for contemporary cognitive theories of language, particularly, for the Theory of Conceptual Metaphor and the Theory of Conceptual Integration. The Theory of Conceptual Metaphor focuses on metaphoric conceptual models, but leaves for further in-depth discussion the patterns of their verbal manifestation. The Theory of Conceptual Integration happens to analyze mental and formal blends on a par. Meanwhile, a mental blend may be signified by a non-blended form, while a blended form does not obligatory signify a mental blend.

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