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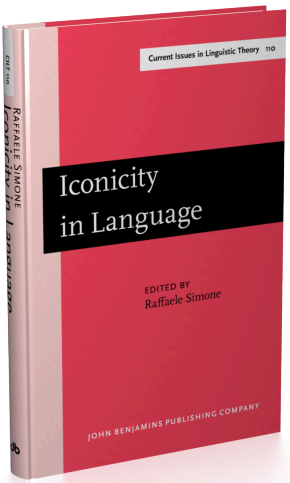

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Foreword
Under the Sign of Cratylus[1]

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It is well known that many *Grundprobleme* of modern tradition were first stated in Greek antiquity. Several of them, though, remained without a clear-cut solution and reappear intermittently in history, every time in an ever more puzzling manner. This undoubtedly holds true in linguistics and philosophy of language for the crucial opposition formulated in Plato's *Cratylus*: is language *physei* or *thesei*, does it look like the things it stands for or is it quite indifferent to such things? Every time that we ponder over what we know and what we don't know about language, this issue re-emerges to remind us that, in spite of its undeniable progress, linguistics has never managed to solve the 'Problem of Cratylus' — how the experience of the world is converted into, or mirrored in, language.

Like the many open questions that Plato has left us, the Problem of Cratylus has impressed its marks on linguistic thought over the centuries. As a result two opposite patterns have faced each other in history of linguistics since its beginning. We may call the first one the Platonic Paradigm: according to this, language and reality must resemble each other to some extent if we want to be able to speak of reality without necessarily recurring to it directly. The other is what we could call the Aristotelian (or better the 'Aristotelian-Saussurean') Paradigm: it claims that language and reality are quite independent of, and do not resemble, each other; this is claimed to be so for reasons of economy and 'handiness', since no language could be used if not arbitrarily structured.

It is obvious that the second paradigm has prevailed historically (for details, cf. Simone 1990), giving rise to theoretical formulations that are by now so widespread as to be treated almost as axioms (or perhaps even as dogmas): one of these is the idea that language is radically arbitrary. The most

influential modern formulation of this paradigm is that given by Saussure in his *Cours de linguistique générale*, but we can find witnesses of it in almost every important stage of linguistic thought since Antiquity to the present time. Indeed, the sheer weight of the accumulated arguments has had as a consequence the acceptance of this claim as a virtual truism.

The success of the Aristotelian Paradigm through history does not mean, however, that the Platonic one has ceased to evolve; to the contrary, it has become ever more articulate. It has had, to be sure, the quaint destiny of being condemned to a sort of underground life: isolated if not ridiculed throughout its history, viewed as odd in spite of the support of figures like Leibniz or Vico, it has never received a full citizenship among the fundamentals of linguistic theory. At best, its relevance has been recognized only in very limited and marginal areas like the onomatopoeia of single words. In spite of this ostracism, however, a respectable part of the Western tradition in linguistics and philosophy of language can be viewed as a sort of struggle against the prevalence of arbitrariness, as a rebuttal of the very idea that language can be indifferent to reality. Even the relentless search for perfect languages (Eco 1993), i. e. systems of signs offering a direct perception of the intended meaning (or even of the referent) of utterances, can be viewed as a special case of the overall 'struggle against arbitrariness'.

Today, after a protracted latency, the Problem of Cratylus is once again fiercely discussed, especially by those linguists who recognize the need of a semiotic foundation for linguistics. And, as always, the Platonic Paradigm comes with it. A tangible sign of this, among many, is the amount of publications and research on non-arbitrary aspects of language that have flourished over the past two decades, climaxing in works like Givón (mainly 1979, 1984, 1990) or Haiman (1987). Others are to be expected, since the interest in this subject has rapidly spread wide and far.[2] The issue of iconicity has even been, somewhat unexpectedly, slipping into textbook discussions on particular aspects of linguistics — such as grammaticalization (Hopper & Traugott 1993: 63-67, 171 and passim) or language change (McMahon 1994: 84-91 and passim). New areas of study have been or shortly will be influenced by the Platonic Paradigm, perhaps conquered by it.

All such investigations share a few common polemic targets. Generally speaking, they all jointly question the Aristotelian-Saussurean axiom in depth. The assumption that language is quite independent of, or autonomous from, the outside world (both human and natural) does not seem to be acceptable

any longer. A need is felt for new premises from which to explain the foundations of language structure. Moreover, by raising such radical issues, these investigations were bound to trigger a chain of subsequent theoretical questions, thus creating a sort of 'dangerous' sequel of discussions.

Many of these investigations, for example, toy with the idea that language is radically non-autonomous, given that so many of its aspects (from the phonological and morphological systems to the order of constituents, the nature of grammatical categories, and so on) crucially depend on how the human mind is made up and how it views the world. Another dangerous side effect activated by the re-appearance of the Problem of Cratylus is the renewed attention given to the never entirely solved issue of analogy. Indeed, with arbitrariness under fire, analogy looms large as the most efficient explanation of many otherwise puzzling problems (like morphological dynamism and several other diachronic issues) — and analogy is, obviously, one of the major and most visible effects of the speaker's demands on language structure.

In addition, the anti-arbitrarist debate has re-ignited the discussion on the delicate question of naturalness in language (and generally in human behavior). The less arbitrary we consider linguistic structures, the more 'natural' they reveal themselves — one would say. Last but not least, this trend has had another important implication on the metatheoretical level: it has reminded that one has to doubt every kind of linguistics that does not take into account in a sufficiently complex way the problem of how the outside world (participants, settings, actions, etc.) is 'imported' into language.

The end result of this renewed discussion on arbitrariness has been the definition of a set of semiotically biased postulates for linguistics, which draws together into an explanatory whole topics like naturalness, analogy, motivation, the biological bases of language and communication, and so on. All in all, this 'struggle against arbitrariness' seems to have stimulated reflection not only on specific features of language, but also on the possible future development of linguistics. This debate is hardly, therefore, *arrière-garde* (as sometimes previous versions of the Platonic Pattern were), but a vital and growing direction of contemporary research.

But just what is this struggle *for*? The Platonic view claims that many aspects of language and linguistic behavior intrinsically bear the marks of a set of natural constraints. The generic use of the term *iconicity* normally clouds all these notions. But if we look at them more closely, we can discern several

distinct senses.

The first is what I have proposed to call *physical determinism* (Simone 1990), i. e. the constraints imposed by the psycho-physical equipment of speakers, their bodily nature, their way of processing knowledge and viewing the world. (This is, I believe, one legitimate meaning of the Saussurean term *motivation* and its equivalents in other languages and traditions.) The limitations imposed on the form of languages and on the possibility for languages to change through history and to vary geographically seem in effect to derive from such a constraint.

A second sense relates to what we could term out the *depictional demand*, i. e. the need for the event(s) talked upon to be somehow reflected in language, with the immense evolutionary advantage for our species to be able to inspect linguistic utterances instead of things. As a consequence of this demand, a certain degree of diagrammaticity seems to be compulsory in syntax if we want to 'read' states of affairs in utterances rather than in the outside world.

A third more specific sense of *iconicity* can be found in language behavior, as a consequence of a sort of *principle of predicative effectiveness*: this impels users of (both verbal and gestural) languages to prefer linguistic choices that are more effective for them, i. e. that more vividly render some aspects of the world described or that express more neatly their own hierarchy of relevance (as in focusing or grounding techniques in different languages).

These various senses of *iconicity* are extensively dealt with in the papers collected in the present volume. Some of them, in fact, are concerned with the constraints imposed on language by the limitations of human processors; others investigate how non-arbitrariness reveals itself in the patterning of languages; others, finally, insist on the consistently non-arbitrary striving of communicative behavior. In this last perspective, indeed, the present volume features studies on subjects that are generally neglected in dealing with 'iconicity', namely gestures in aphasics and in deaf people and the development of writing in children. These studies converge with the more typically linguistic inquiries to show that the strictly arbitrarist model offers an oversimple explanation of the genesis of language and linguistic behavior, and suggest that arbitrariness should perhaps be interpreted more properly as a kind of 'degenerate iconicity'.

Clearly, many different types of non-arbitrariness are at issue in the papers collected here, and indeed there are even voices of open dissent

towards the very assumption of non-arbitrariness. But, on the whole, a deeply felt and highly articulate dissatisfaction with arbitrarist models of explanation seems to find expression in this volume.

All things considered, I believe that what would be needed after some decades of revival of interest in non-arbitrary aspects of language is an overall synthesis, capable of pulling together the theoretical considerations and the empirical information gathered so far, and of proposing techniques of analysis corresponding to the global assumptions which are now available.

Notes

1. The present volume is the fruit of a conference bearing the same title, held in the University of Rome in October 1992. Professor T. Givón, who was to speak, could not attend but was so kind as to allow us to re-publish a comprehensive paper first appearing in *SiL* 15:1. Professor Sheila Embleton, who presented a paper on the same topic as the one published here, submitted for publication an expanded version of it prepared in collaboration with professor Raimo Anttila. We wish to thank professors Givón and Anttila for their collaboration.— Thanks are due also to my colleagues David Hart and Patrick Boylan for the help they generously and patiently gave me, and to Dr. Federica Casadei for her assistance during the preparation of the material for publication.

2. A recent example is the first issue of the new French journal «Faits de langues» 1/1993, entirely devoted to 'Motivation et iconicité'.

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