

# *Between text and grammar: the principle of iconicity*

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to study the way a text means what it means by exploring a powerful shaping principle in language, namely that of iconicity. I shall briefly survey the psychological-cognitive grounding of such a principle and the different ways in which iconicity manifests itself at the various levels of language. Special attention will be paid to certain iconic phenomena at the level of syntax that play an important expressive role in a particular descriptive text.

## INTRODUCTION

The present paper is an attempt to study the way a text means what it means by exploring a *shaping principle in language, namely that of iconicity*. Iconicity operates overtly at textual level and it is a pervasive —though hidden— motivating force in the internal structure of language itself.

The relation between language and meaning has traditionally been described as arbitrary: following Bolinger (1980: 17 ff.) «there is nothing in the word "tree" that hints at its meaning». There are countless and uncontroversial arguments: arbitrariness is an intrinsic property of any coded system (genetic, mathematical, telegraphic). As such, language requires a set of *minimal arbitrary units* that when combined according to certain rules will constitute the physical bulk of a language. Arbitrariness is not only a requirement, but also a differentiating

property of human language, when compared to non-human communication systems. For language to grow, form had to be divorced from meaning, as Karcevskij already noted in 1929: «it is due to the asymmetrical dualism of the structure of linguistic signs that a linguistic system can evolve (p. 93, my translation)».

Without this reduction, as Bolinger (1980: 38 ff.) has pointed out, human language would be at the stage of a communicative system where particular signs are in a one-to-one relationship with what they signify. The multiplication of communicative demands, in quality and in number, the limitations perhaps of the gestural-vocalic human apparatus, overloaded by such demands, led to a recycling of the smallest units as empty, meaningless elements available for arbitrary and unlimited combinatory behaviour potential at a higher level.

To claim that there may be a relation between the word and the world is laughed at as nonsense or fantasy at the least by linguistic orthodoxy:

The modern sciences of language with their fundamental shift from a referential to an internally-relational semantics, would eradicate the last vestiges of the heresy debated in the Cratylus. (...) There is in words and sentences no pre-established affinity with objects, no mystery of consonance with the world. No *figura* of things, perceived or yet to be revealed, inheres in the (purely arbitrary) articulations of syntax. (...) The linguistic marker is as «coded» as the algebraic symbol (Steiner, 1989: 105-6).

Despite the apparently overwhelming amount of rational evidence supporting and demonstrating the arbitrary nature of many aspects of the linguistic code, there is room for thinking and exploring the intuitive feeling that language *means*, and that the word and the world are related. Words *do* actually hurt and soothe and they can even be said to preserve a certain power of invocation in our daily, subjective experience of language. There must be an area in which linguistics and the actual experience of language meet. The contrary would mean that the scientific method is bound to be severed from what Steiner (1989: 106) calls «the empirical, the historical, the Cratylean bias» and that experience can only be apprehended through non-scientific paths. Literature scholars and philosophers such as Steiner have expressed the wish that linguistic inquiry bridge the contradiction deriving from the fact that during the XXth century, language has been made the centre of human phenomenology on the one hand and has made of this centre a formality, an algorithm, on the other. The aim of linguistics is the study of natural language where meaning and reality are «real presences».

Iconicity or iconism<sup>1</sup> is one of the concepts that are central to the study of the relation word-world, to explain why language is the way it is and why it means what it means. Etymologically speaking, the word *icon* is related to the visual

domain, that is, to one of the most fundamental and basic perceptive processes that structure our psyche, our knowledge. The drawing of a table is an icon of the table, i.e. there is a relation of sameness or resemblance —i.e. an iconic relation—, which can be apprehended immediately by a perceptive-cognitive process that involves the spontaneous identification of lines and volumes. An icon is «a sign which refers to the object which it denotes simply by its own features» (Peirce, 1940, cit. in Sebeok, 1986: 328). In art history, the term has traditionally been used to refer to the Byzantine Christian culture, where an icon is an abstract and simplified image of the divinity. According to Slobin (1985: 221), the image, the scen —i.e. the sign— contained the unseen, the divinity, i.e. the concept. Divinity resided in the icon which therefore deserved veneration.

## 1. ICONICITY IN LANGUAGE

### 1.1. General aspects

Cognitive sciences, Artificial Intelligence and psychology offer enough grounds for considering that language is closely interrelated to cognition and perception. Talmy (1990) even suggests that it seems quite reasonable to think that language evolved after vision, and that therefore it might have partly incorporated its organization. Lakoff & Johnson (1980) have shown that our conceptual system is ultimately grounded in basic spatial and ontological experience through metaphors. They point to a certain corporality of our conceptual and cognitive system, keeping track of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology according to which meaning cannot emerge without bodily experience.

In language we shall consider that a sign (word, sentence, text) is iconic «if it exhibits some "similarity" or "resemblance" with that which the sign is a "sign OF"» (Verhaar, 1985: 21). Iconic aspects of language will reflect in a synthetic, direct, immediate, visual-like way meanings of various kinds.

As Givón (1985: 188 ff.) suggests, linguistic forms are often the way they are because they *resemble* the conceptual structures they are used to convey and they often resemble each other because the different conceptual domains they represent are thought of in the same way. These relations of resemblance are, respectively, phenomena of isomorphism and automorphism.

A clear functional motivation seems to account for these phenomena and the underlying principle of iconicity: «(...) A coded experience is easier to *store*, *retrieve* and *communicate* if the code is maximally isomorphic to the experience» (Givón, 1985: 189; emphasis original). Iconicity is thus related to three basic

communicative principles that govern the structuring of language systems: the principles of clarity, of expressiveness and of processability (Slobin, 1977; Givón, 1979b).

Despite its intrinsic functionality, the nature of iconism, is however, insidious. It pervades through language, but with varying degrees of transparency, or rather of opacity. It is therefore necessary to make a series of preliminary remarks:

- i. The phenomenon of iconicity is a general principle and it can only be fruitfully analysed when applied to different languages, since an individual language may offer just a few clear exponents.
- ii. To try to find iconic relations in the code means to «crack the code», in Halliday's (1985: xxxi) terms. The code is hard to penetrate, because of the complex functional and historical layerings. For each single language, there are various kinds of adjustments made by the system to contextual pressure (pragmatic adequacy) and to history (typological adequacy). In some cases there will only be vestiges or sediments left by this fundamental shaping principle. There are as well competing motivations (*economy, effectiveness, processability*) that interfere in and modify the linguistic code (Haiman, 1983).
- iii. Different levels of language display different kinds and degrees of iconism. The smaller the units, the more arbitrary the behaviour. In other words, the lower the units in the linguistic hierarchy, the less probable will an iconic relation be. As Bolinger (1980: 18) notes, «(...) arbitrary and conventional is a fitting description of distinctive sounds, less so of words, even less of sentences, and beyond that, scarcely fits at all. The larger the scope, the looser and less arbitrary the structure».

The term does not only apply to simple signs, but can also be extended to the organization of signs itself, resulting in «an isomorphically constructed code» (Givón, 1985: 188).

- iv. There are thus different degrees of iconicity, which would then be a gradient from less to more abstract/general (Givón, 1984: 213), which could be represented as in Figure 1 below:

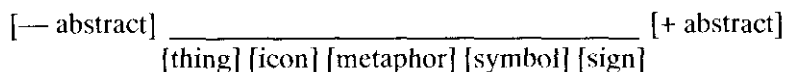


Fig. 1.—*The gradient of iconism.*

- v. At some levels iconicity is inserted in the linguistic code, and therefore no manipulation is possible. At other levels (phonic, textual), iconicity

is a strategy that may be chosen by the speaker for communicative purposes.

## 1.2. Iconicity at the level of sound

Within this frame, the level of sound has been extensively explored in poetry—and perhaps to a lesser extent in other registers—through the use of various and well-known strategies: alliterative patterns and assonance, e.g. the parodical criticism of the technique in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night Dream*,

- (1) Whereat with blade, with bloody blameful blade  
He bravely broached his boiling bloody breast.

The symbolism associated with certain sounds, as in Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner*,

- (2) The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew  
The furrow followed free;  
We were the first that ever burst  
Into that silent sea.

as well as different degrees of contrast between short and long vowels, stress, overall phonic patterns, etc. By exploiting these phonic resources, it seems that «the physical (auditory) form resembles, and by that resemblance, suggests, something in nature (or in our natures)» (Bolinger, 1980: 19).

In written language, and particularly in contemporary text-types such as advertisements, graffiti, poetry in general and ideogrammatic poetry in particular, the potential of the graphic medium itself and of the lay-out for conveying meanings iconically is extremely suggestive. The texts are visual emblems of their content (as in for instance, George Herbert's poem *Eastern Wings*), and language is endowed with a certain palpability<sup>2</sup> (Jakobson, 1960).

From the perspective of linguistic studies, there have been interesting attempts at describing and explaining both sounds and graphs in terms of *mimesis* or iconicity: on the one hand, linguists such as Jakobson (1978), Ultan (1984), Malkiel (1987) Woodworth (1991) *inter al.*, have focused on aspects of sound symbolism and language structure and history. On the other hand, as Harris (1986) has interestingly noted, most attempts at explaining the iconic origin of the letters of the alphabet are based on the idea that «the audible sound has a visible or at least visualisable correlate, namely the position or movement of the speech organs; and it is this which *the shape* of the letter copies» (Harris, 1986: 94; my emphasis).

### 1.3. Iconicity at the level of word

Onomatopoeias, and to a lesser extent phonesthemes are typical instances of an iconic relation. They are usually felt by speakers as involving a certain naturalness, or rightness, between sound and sense. These words, however represent a reduced portion of the lexicon, and therefore have little significance.

The lexicon of a language is opaque: words, objectively speaking, are arbitrary signs. The isomorphic or mimetic relation between the word and the reality it denotes is anything but self-evident. However, from a subjective perspective, from the perspective of the user of language, words can be said to be iconic, displaying a one-to-one correspondence between the word and its referent, a relation which is unique. The natural relation pointed at in the *Cratylus* and subsequently explored by poets, is a legitimate object of study, and it is actually necessary if one aims at understanding the way language is used. As Bolinger (1988: 237) puts it, «a word "sounds like" what it means, for a native speaker, who will probably feel that "pigs are aptly named because they are so dirty"». The kind of iconism reflected at this level is further specified (ibid.): «When a word has acquired a central meaning it is iconic when used in ways appropriate to that meaning. It need not be sound-symbolic to be *permeated* by that meaning» (emphasis original).

Words may suffer processes of semantic fading: they often become grammaticized and opaque. When this is the case, the tendency is for speakers to re-analyse them, and to re-iconise them, as Bolinger (1988) has extensively demonstrated.

Conversely, euphemisms would be instances of de-iconising strategies aiming at dissociating the word from the reality it carries with it.

Folk etymology and word-formation (compounding, reduplication) are areas where the iconic, transparent principle is powerful and creative and of a more visible kind, although the underlying experiential perspective is the same.

### 1.4. Iconicity at the level of grammar

The morpho-syntactic level of the code may display features that are iconic. Morphology as such is more often than not opaque and the kinds of meanings carried by grammar less accessible. Cross-linguistic studies (Bybee, 1985), however, have shown that it may be considered a constructive principle, as can be seen from a few illustrative cases: a) closeness between verb stems and inflectional categories tend to reflect the conceptual closeness of the concepts the morphological categories express; the more important a category, i.e. the more

it affects the meaning of the verb, the closer will the inflection be to the lexical part of the verb. b) The correspondence between, on the one hand, familiarity and predictability (i.e. less effort required for its process) and phonetic reduction on the other has been analysed extensively (Zipf, 1935; Meillet, 1912; Havers, 1931; Meinhof, 1936). The articles are often unstressed forms of demonstrative determiners: phonetic reduction and loss of accent in the change from deixis the anaphora mirrors the loss of prominence from something new to the mere expression of something as already known (Greenberg, 1985). c) Lexical causatives differ in meaning from analytical expressions of causativity. In (3) (4) below, the second member of each pair expresses a direct, non-mediated causation (physical proximity) whereas the first may refer to indirect, external causers (physical distance).

- (3) a) He caused the tree to fall.  
       b) He felled the tree.  
 (4) a) She had them lie down  
       b) She laid them down.

At the level of sentence, word-order arrangements that have often become fixed signal meanings in correspondence with cognitive reality. An aspect of sentence organization which is particularly iconic and ubiquitous is *proximity*: physical proximity is iconically related to semantic proximity or mutual relevance. There is a tendency for adjectives to be next to the noun they qualify, for the subject to be close to the verb it governs, for the complement to be near its verb: note for instance, the marked flavour of Object-fronting in English, and its restricted use in (5) below:

- (5) These chairs I like!

As Dik (1987: 85 ff.) seems to suggest, there is no reason to think that a grammar should be neutral as between producing and understanding linguistic expressions, since that is the function of grammar. I would venture that, to a large extent, grammars are actually *cognitive* grammars.

### 1.5. Iconicity at the level of text

Texts are instances of language where the function of iconism is best analysed, and where iconism is clearly a communicative option. The study of iconicity is then a step towards the analysis of the text's expressiveness. A common *figura* in classical rhetorics was the correspondence between the *ordo naturalis* and the *ordo artificialis*: «In natural order (...) text and discourse (sermo) have the same arrangement as things in the universe of discourse (ordo rerum)» (Enkvist, 1981: 98).

Linearity is an icon of sequence<sup>4</sup>, i.e. the order of mention in the speech chain *maps* the order in which the concepts, or the events, occur. Certain relations, temporal (as in stories and narratives), spatial (as in guide-books) as well as causal ones are often preserved in the guise of linear relations within the text. The text is then, according to Enkvist (1981), *an icon of experience*. This natural iconic order, which is perception-based, is normally perceived as unmarked (everybody tells a story in more or less the same order). It may be modified if the speaker has other competing motivations (personal interest, focus, maintenance of perspective, climax creation, etc.) (Chafe, 1980). The latter will be felt as salient and will be necessarily signalled by marked syntactic and lexical strategies.

The following text illustrates how meaning is conveyed both by the lexicon and grammar, as well as by textual structure and progression.

#### TEXT

TITUS is seven. His confines, Gormenghast. Suckled on shadows; weaned, as it were on webs of ritual: for his ears, echoes, for his eyes, a labyrinth of stone: and yet within his body something other—other than this umbrageous legacy. For first and foremost he is *child*.

5 A ritual, more compelling than ever man devised, is fighting anchored darkness. A ritual of the blood; of the jumping blood. These quicks of sentience owe nothing to his forbears, but to those feckless hosts, a trillion deep, of the globe's childhood. *The gift of the bright blood. Of flood that laughs when the tenets mutter «Weep».* Of blood that mourns when the sere laws croak «Rejoice!» O little revolution in great

10 shades!  
Titus the seventy-seventh. Heir to a crumbling summit: to a sea of nettles: to an empire of red rust: to rituals footprints ankledeep in stone.  
Gormenghast.

15 Withdrawn and ruinous it broods in umbra: the immemorial masonry: the towers, the tracts. Is all corroding? No. Through an avenue of spyres a zephyr floats; a bird whistles; a freshet bears away from a choked river. Deep in a fist of stone a doll's hand wriggles, warm rebellious on the frozen palm. A shadow shifts its length. A spider stirs...

*And darkness winds between the characters.*

*Gormenghast*, M. Peake (1950)

## 2. THE TEXT'S EXPRESSIVENESS

### 2.1. The lexical level

The text is a description and as such deals with phenomena (entities, relations, position, qualities) in space (Werlich, 1983). To my mind, the dominant (Jakobson, 1935), i.e. the focal element which governs the text is the expression



of (DENSITY). The semantic features associated with (DENSITY) are (OPACITY) and (ABSENCE OF MOVEMENT) (both spatial, i.e. immobility, and temporal, i.e. atemporality). (DENSITY) is partly expressed through the lexicon, and is thus referential, external.

- a) (IMMOBILITY) is suggested through the explicit description of the castle and its related architectural elements: *towers (1.18); masonry (1.18); labyrinth of stone (1.3); avenue of spires (1.19); stone (1.3, 15, 20)*.
- b) (A-TEMPORALITY) is referred to by the expressions: *immemorial (1.17); anchored darkness (1.6); legacy (1.4); heir (1.13); ritual (1.7); footprints (1.14)*.
- c) (OPACITY) is suggested by the choice of words such as: *shadows (1.1); umbrageous (1.4); darkness (1.6)*.

Content, however, is not only an inherent expressive potential of the lexicon. *Meaning* is rather the result of the referentiality of lexemes and the meaning potential of syntax and of textual progression.

## 2.2. The syntactic level

The following aspects of syntax convey the meaning (DENSITY) in an iconic way: a) Physical proximity between signs is an icon of conceptual proximity; b) Formal sameness reflects semantic sameness, and c) Categoriality of verbs reflects discourse function. From this perspective, density is a structural, internal property of the text.

### a) *Physical proximity between signs is an icon of conceptual proximity*

The text relies basically on juxtaposition and paratactic constructions for its expansion. From cross-cultural studies, parataxis can be defined as a symmetrical relation which presents things simultaneously, as parts or aspects of a whole, in unity of time, without progression and without the depth contrasts (foreground and background) offered by subordination. Juxtaposition is a primary iconic linking strategy where relations are established on a spatial basis (physical contact between two clauses) without any intervening elements, such as connectors. This spatial proximity, immediacy or density iconically correlates with semantic proximity and density, following Haiman's principle (1983: 788) that «the conceptual distance between two conjoined clauses varies with the presence of an overt conjunction between them».

Owing to physical proximity, the reader is forced to accept some conceptual proximity and to activate interpretive strategies in order to find out or create meaning relations that are left opaque.

Syntactic devices—such as coordination and subordination—are substituted for by punctuation. We find an extensive use of colons (lines 2, 3, 13, 14, 17, 18) and of semi-colons (lines 7, 11, 19).

The use of colons is a restricted device for expanding clauses into texts. According to Quirk et al. (1985: 1620), it is a means for establishing «sharper separation than a comma and closer interdependence than a semi-colon». Its meanings are associated with explanation or «with a kind of fulfilment of the expectation created». For Halliday and Hasan (1976: 69) a colon is simply a «a purely orthographic convention, serving precisely to signal the presence of cataphoric cohesion».

In the text, the colon mechanically branches structures forward, in a linear, physical way. Semantically, there is, however, no fulfilment of the expectation created, so that the progression forward inherent to linearity is broken into fragments, revealing a certain lack of movement.

There are only two instances of explicit parataxis expanding the meaning: *and yet* (1.3) (extension: adversative addition) and *for* (1.4) (extension: addition-result). However, the linkers suggest a relation which is somewhat disturbing, and opaque.

Juxtaposition and parataxis contribute to creating density (physical and semantic closeness), opacity (non-explicit relations) and immobility (unfulfilment of predictions). The second iconic principle is related to this feature of maximal linkage:

b) *Formal sameness reflects semantic sameness*

Gormenghast is a world where nothing changes, where things repeat each other, and as such, the text is extremely repetitive:

- i. Lexical repetition is probably the primary mode of intersentential connection (Longacre and Thompson, 1985) and the tightest cohesive device. The words *ritual, blood, stone, darkness, shadow* are extensively used and they bind the text together across sentences and across paragraphs both at the formal and semantic levels.
- ii. Another mode of textual cohesion is achieved through syntactic repetition. As shown in Figure 2, the text displays a considerable number of parallel and symmetrical structures. This strategy is commonly used—and to my mind, over-exploited—throughout the novel (Leech & Short, 1981).



The third principle that will be discussed operates at the crossroads between grammar and discourse and has been described in Hopper and Thomson (1985).

c) *Categoriality of verbs reflects discourse function*

The feature (TEMPORAL IMMOBILITY) in the description of Gormenghast derives from the stylistically relevant absence of verbs. Consequently, there will be absence of tenses, indefiniteness of temporal reference and of aspectual contrasts.

To say that there are no verbs and processes is perhaps too strong a claim, so let us examine this in detail. The semantic features associated with a prototypical verb are, according to Givón (1979: 320-1) *visibility, movement, and effectiveness* (i.e. prototypical *action* processes in Halliday's, 1985: chap. 5, terminology). A close analysis of the surface realization and syntactic behaviour of verbs reveals that the semantic properties above are not sufficient for an identification of action processes in discourse. For a form «to qualify as a prototypical verb (it) must *assert the occurrence of an event in the discourse*» (Hopper & Thompson, 1985: 155, emphasis original). Actually, they claim that the prototypical semantic properties and the full range of grammatical contrasts of a particular verb derive from its discourse role as presentative form. In other words, the more a verb introduces an event in discourse, the more it will display the prototypical semantic properties and the full range of grammatical contrasts associated with the category *verb*.

- i. In the fragment that described Titus and the castle, there are verb stems which, from a semantic point of view, could qualify as prototypical verbs since they display the appropriate semantic features of movement, effectiveness and visibility.

(6) *suckled* (1.1), *weaned* (1.2), *anchored*, *jumped* (1.7), *withdrawn* (1.17), *choked* (1.20).

However, these verbs do not introduce events in the discourse and as such are not apprehended as realising prototypical processes: they do not have the full grammatical potential of prototypical verbs, and therefore have the restricted behaviour of adjectives.

- ii. In the text, there are also a certain number of stative verbs. Stative verbs are «less» verbs than action verbs, since they are less effective in moving the discourse forward: «a stative relation profiles a configuration that is construed atemporally and accessed as a simultaneously available whole» (Langacker, 1984: 111).

(7) *owe* (1.8), *brood* (1.17), *float* (19).

Their non-differentiated discourse role is iconically reflected in their lower degree of categoriality (narrower range of grammatical contrasts such as aspect, etc.).

- iii. Existential and relational sentences, which are «poor exemplars» of event-reporting discourse, are likely to display a very reduced number of grammatical contrasts: the existential construction in English<sup>6</sup> allows for tense contrasts, however, number contrasts are neutralized as in (8)

(8) There's lots of people in here

and there are no aspectual contrasts as in (9)

(9) \*There's being...

The low categoriality of existential processes—mapping the low dynamism potential—is further reflected in the ellipsis of the existential markers (*there + be*), a strategy which is extensively illustrated in the text:

(10) (...) for his ears (there were) echoes, for his eyes (there was) a labyrinth of stone: and yet, within his body (there was) something other (...)

Relational sentences, which do not introduce events at all are «likely to be coded with no lexical item linking the subject and the predicate» (Hopper & Thompson, 1985: 170). This feature, systematic in many creole languages<sup>7</sup>, is here a stylistic—though very common—iconic strategy for the expression of stative, non-dynamic meanings. (*zero-copula*) does not allow for temporal and aspectual reference, it is the clearest exponent of atemporality.

(11) His confines (/) Gormenghast; (/) suckled on shadows; (/) weaned (...) on webs of ritual; (/) Heir to a crumbling summit; (/) to a sea of nettles: (/) to an empire of red rust: (/) to rituals' footprints ankle-deep in stone.

## CONCLUSION

The kind of analysis that has been undertaken in this paper springs from a confessedly partial reading, as in fact, all readings are. According to Toolan (1990), linguistic criticism or stylistics could be seen as a strategic reading from a specific place of observation. In this case, the place of observation is a functional theory of language which among other claims, states that language is a motivated code, and more specifically, that there is much in the deep grammar of a language that can be not only described, but explained. Iconicity is one of such deep principles that operate at all levels in language, particularly at the crossroads between grammar and text. A close analysis of this phenomenon may

enable us to get a deeper insight into the way grammar organizes and structures meanings as well as into the kinds of meanings it carries along.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Eco (1972), notes the fact that the term *icon* is a kind of «umbrella term», covering various kinds of phenomena.

<sup>2</sup> Interesting aspects on this topic can be found in: Carro Marina, L. (1988). *Aproximaciones al método ideogramático de Fenollosa*, Madrid: Universidad Complutense. Good illustrations can be found in surrealist French poetry and in the contemporary journal *Doc(k)s* (France), contemporary Spanish poets of the grup *Zaj* (Brossa, Sarmiento, Arze) and in the British journal *Blast*.

<sup>3</sup> Bolinger's views coincide with Verhaar's (1985) more elaborate analysis. The experience of the use of such signs (referential lexemes) is that of iconic signs. The experience of the referential lexeme (*mountain*) as *name* belonging to the object */mountain/*, is different from the experience of the lexeme *mountain* as *word*, *meta-representation*, *idealization* of the name (*mountain*). The difference is between subjective vs. objective experience, i.e., between *name* vs. *word*. When we speak, we refer to things, we name them; we don't simply use lexemes, i.e. an abstraction consisting of a series of phonemes */m/ /o/ /u/ /n/ /t/ /a/ /i/ /n/*. The *use* of a word makes it a name.

<sup>4</sup> The iconic principle of temporal sequence is more pervasive, more grammatical, less stylistic, in isolating languages (such as Chinese) which lack an elaborate morphology to establish syntactic relations and where therefore sequence is part of the grammatical structure (TAI, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Jakobson (1966/1973: 234) recalls the etymology of Lat. *oratio prosa* (< *prosa* < *proversa*), discourse that moves forward, and Lat. *versus*, return.

<sup>6</sup> In some languages the existential construction does not even involve an element of the class *verb*, but rather an existential morpheme or particle. See Hopper & Thompson, 1985.

<sup>7</sup> Relational sentences in English have often contracted verbal forms: *they're a nice couple*. Contraction would be an iconic structure, implying phonetic reduction resulting from reduction in event reporting potential.

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