Language, Meaning, and Arbitrariness: A Philosophical-Linguistic Inquiry from Plato to Saussure

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Abstract:

The concerned paper deals with the problem of arbitrariness and plurisignificatory interpretations of language or spoken words. It examines how arbitrariness plays a crucial role in producing multiple meanings or interpretations. The arbitrary aspect of signs helps to account for the scope of interpretation. Arbitrariness implies that there is no one-to-one link between the signifier and the signified; signs possess multiple meanings or interpretations rather than a single fixed meaning. According to Saussure, the relation between the two components of the linguistic sign the signifier and the signified is "arbitrary," because meaning is not fixed within the signified. Meaning is conventional and therefore, a single text or speech can generate multiple meanings or interpretations. All systems of signs are grounded in the arbitrariness of the sign. In fact, every means of expression used in society is based, in principle, on collective behaviour or social convention. By "arbitrary," it is meant that the relation is unmotivated; the signifier has no natural connection with the signified. Furthermore, the paper hypothesises that the greater the degree of arbitrariness or immotivation, the wider the scope for meanings, significations, or interpretations.

This paper attempted to show that Saussure was not the pioneer of this problem; rather, it existed as early as the time of Plato and Aristotle. Therefore, it analyses how the problem of arbitrariness and interpretation is conspicuous from the classical age to the modern period. There are three phases in examining this problem. The first is the classical phase, in which the current paper discusses Plato's debate on the "correctness of names," highlighting two approaches: the naturalist and the conventionalist. After this, it examines Aristotle's views on metaphor and explores how the concept of metaphor plays a role in the aforementioned problem. In the middle phase, this research concentrates on John Locke, who argues that words represent ideas in the mind. He emphasises that the connection between words and ideas is not natural but arbitrary, meaning that it is based on human agreement rather than any inherent relationship. This is followed by Condillac, who classifies signs into three types: accidental signs, natural signs, and institutional (or artificial) signs. He argues that artificial signs are arbitrary because their meanings are established by human convention rather than by any natural connection. In the modern phase, Saussure emerges as the founder of the concept of the "sign," asserting that all signs are arbitrary.

Keywords: Arbitrariness, Plurisignification, Signifier-signified, Linguistic convention, Interpretation.

1. Introduction

Language has long been regarded as the primary medium through which human beings communicate meaning, knowledge, and experience. However, the relationship between words and the things they signify has been a persistent philosophical problem. One of the most fundamental questions about language is whether words have meanings naturally, or whether their meanings are given to them through human agreement and convention. This question directly implicates the problem of arbitrariness and the possibility of multiple interpretations. The notion of arbitrariness challenges the assumption that linguistic signs have fixed, inherent meanings. If the connection between a word and its meaning is not natural but conventional, then meaning becomes unstable, variable, and open to interpretation. This instability gives rise to what may be called plurisignification- the capacity of a single sign or utterance to generate multiple meanings depending on context, usage, and interpretive framework. Ferdinand de Saussure famously articulated this idea in modern linguistics by asserting that the linguistic sign is arbitrary. According to Saussure, the relationship between the signifier (sound-image) and the signified (concept) is not motivated by any natural resemblance. However, the philosophical roots of this idea extend far earlier than Saussure. From Plato's *Cratylus* to Aristotle's theory of metaphor, from Locke's account of words as voluntary signs of ideas to Condillac's distinction between natural and artificial signs, the arbitrariness of language has been a recurring concern.

This paper aims to trace the historical development of the concept of arbitrariness and its implications for interpretation. It argues that the more arbitrary a sign is, the more freedom it provides for generating multiple meanings. By examining the classical, middle, and modern phases of linguistic thought, the paper demonstrates that arbitrariness is not merely a linguistic accident but a structural condition that enables interpretation itself.

2. The Classical Phase

2.1 Plato and the Correctness of Names

Plato's *Cratylus* (dialogue) represents one of the earliest systematic inquiries into the nature of naming and the relationship between words and things. The central issue of the dialogue is the "correctness of names," which is debated through opposing positions represented by Cratylus and Hermogenes. Cratylus defends a naturalist theory of naming, according to which names belong to things by nature. At the same time, Hermogenes advocates a conventionalist theory, claiming that names are assigned by agreement and custom. According to the naturalist view, each thing has a correct name that reflects its essence. The correctness of a name, therefore, lies in its ability to mirror the nature of the object it names. In contrast, the conventionalist view denies any natural bond between name and thing, asserting instead that names are the result of social agreement and collective decision. From this perspective, no name is inherently correct or incorrect apart from its acceptance within a linguistic community.

Hermogenes explicitly argues that names are entirely conventional. He maintains that "whatever name you give to a thing is its right name," and that changing a name does not make it any less correct than the previous one. This argument emphasises the arbitrary nature of naming and suggests that names do not pre-exist in nature but are imposed by human choice. Plato complicates this debate by introducing examples that seem to support both positions. One such example is the name "Hermogenes," which literally means "born of Hermes." Since Hermes was the god associated with wealth and commerce, one would expect a person bearing this name to be successful in business. However, the Hermogenes of the dialogue is portrayed as unsuccessful, suggesting a mismatch between name and essence. This discrepancy undermines the naturalist claim that names inherently reflect the nature of their

bearers.

Despite extensive discussion of natural correctness, Plato ultimately does not endorse a strict nature-theory of naming. Rather, the dialogue suggests that while names may aspire to reflect the essence of things, in practice their correctness depends on usage and convention. Names do not describe their objects; they merely refer to them. This distinctione is important because it clearly reveals the basic arbitrariness of linguistic signs. Plato further argues that the correct use of names depends almost entirely on custom. To use a name correctly is to use it in accordance with established linguistic practice. Attempts to replace conventional names with supposedly more "rational" ones often result in confusion or ridicule. Thus, the authority of naming lies not with individual speakers but with the linguistic community as a whole. In this way, Plato's *Cratylus* reveals a deep tension between nature and convention while ultimately affirming the conventional basis of language. The absence of a natural bond between name and thing creates space for arbitrariness, which in turn allows for interpretive flexibility.

2.2 Aristotle on Language and Metaphor

Aristotle inherits the Platonic problem of naming but approaches it from a more systematic perspective. For Aristotle, the debate between nature and convention regarding the correctness of names is less significant than the functional role language plays in communication and thought. He defines language as a system of sounds that signify mental impressions by convention rather than by nature. In *De Interpretatione*, Aristotle states that spoken sounds are symbols of impressions in the mind, and written symbols represent spoken sounds. While mental impressions are universal, linguistic symbols vary across communities. This distinction establishes a natural relationship between mind and world but a conventional relationship between language and mind.

Aristotle's theory of metaphor further illustrates the arbitrary and interpretive nature of language. He defines metaphor as the transference of a name from one object to another to which it does not properly belong. This transference may occur from genus to species, species to genus, species to species, or by analogy. Such transfers demonstrate that words are not bound to single, fixed meanings but can be extended to new contexts through established conceptual relations. Metaphor thus becomes a clear example of plurisignification. A word used metaphorically acquires meanings beyond its literal sense, and these meanings are not fixed by convention alone but by shared patterns of understanding. Aristotle acknowledges that there can be no natural connection between the sounds of language and the things they signify, reinforcing the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs.

However, Aristotle also attempts to explain how meaning remains intelligible despite arbitrariness. He argues that metaphorical transfers rely on stable conceptual relations such as similarity and proportionality. These relations are not themselves arbitrary, even though the linguistic signs involved are. In this way, Aristotle seeks to reconcile arbitrariness with communicative stability. Nevertheless, this reconciliation remains incomplete. If words can acquire multiple metaphorical meanings, it becomes difficult to determine when a term is being used literally or figuratively. Aristotle's theory thus implicitly acknowledges the interpretive openness of language while struggling to account for it fully.

3. The Middle Phase

3.1 Locke and Words as Signs of Ideas

John Locke offers a radically individualistic account of language by defining words as voluntary signs of ideas. According to Locke, there is no natural connection between articulated sounds and the ideas they represent. If such a natural connection existed, there would be only one language shared by all humanity. Instead, words are arbitrarily imposed

by individuals to signify their own ideas. Locke emphasises that the primary function of words is to serve as sensible marks of ideas in the speaker's mind. Communication occurs when the hearer associates the same idea with the word as the speaker intends. However, because ideas vary from person to person, this process is inherently unstable. Misunderstanding arises when the hearer associates a different idea with the same word.

Language, for Locke, is therefore fundamentally imperfect. Words do not have fixed meanings, and there is no guarantee that different speakers attach the same ideas to the same words. Moreover, the connection between word and idea is private, known only to the individual speaker. This privacy intensifies the problem of interpretation and multiplies the possible meanings of linguistic signs. Locke further argues that linguistic diversity reflects the diversity of ideas across individuals and communities. Since words are arbitrarily linked to ideas, different languages can differ entirely in their vocabularies and conceptual structures. Meaning, in this view, is not socially fixed but individually constituted.

This radical arbitrariness leads to what Locke describes as the "double imperfection" of language: the arbitrariness of signs and the variability of ideas. Together, these factors make language an unreliable medium for conveying precise meaning and create vast potential for interpretive plurality.

3.2 Condillac and the Classification of Signs

Étienne Bonnot de Condillac builds upon Locke's insights while offering a more systematic account of the relationship between language, thought, and signs. Condillac identifies three types of signs: accidental signs, natural signs, and artificial (or institutional) signs, clearly explaining how each type differs from the others. Accidental signs arise by chance associations, natural signs are involuntary responses to stimuli (such as cries of fear), and artificial signs are deliberately created by human beings. Artificial signs, which constitute

language proper, bear only an arbitrary relation to the ideas they signify. They are products of free will and remain under voluntary control. Condillac argues that artificial signs enable reflection and analytical thought. By manipulating signs, the mind gains control over its own operations. Language thus becomes the primary instrument of cognition. However, because artificial signs are arbitrary, they also shape how knowledge is formed and expressed.

Unlike Locke, Condillac rejects the idea that linguistic imperfections can be resolved simply by definition. Instead, he proposes that understanding complex ideas requires reducing them to simpler components and tracing their formation. Meaning is therefore historically and cognitively generated rather than fixed. Condillac's theory reinforces the idea that arbitrariness is essential to language. Artificial signs, precisely because they are arbitrary, allow human beings to think, reflect, and communicate. At the same time, this arbitrariness ensures that meaning remains open to reinterpretation.

4. The Modern Phase

4.1 Saussure and the Arbitrariness of the Sign

Saussure's claim goes far beyond the traditional view of language as merely a medium of human communication and also beyond Locke's idea that words or sounds function as signs that stand for ideas. According to Saussure, language is not simply a naming system; rather, it is a structured system of signs. Each sign consists of two essential and inseparable elements: the signifier (the sound-image) and the signified (the concept). The connection between these two elements is psychological, and their association bears the stamp of collective approval. Language, therefore, is constituted by the systematic combination of these two components within a social framework.

Saussure famously states: "The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary… the linguistic sign is arbitrary" (P. 67). This statement clarifies that the relationship between the sound-image and the conceptual image is arbitrary, meaning that it is conventional or traditional. The relation between the signifier and the signified is formed by the collective agreement of a linguistic community and not by the voluntary act of any individual. There is no natural or inherent connection between the two. The result of their association is known as "signification," and the two aspects of the sign are inseparably linked.

To illustrate this inseparability, Saussure uses the analogy of a sheet of paper: just as it is impossible to cut one side of a sheet without cutting the other at the same time, it is impossible in language to isolate sound from thought or thought from sound. Any attempt to separate them for theoretical purposes leads either into pure psychology or pure phonetics, but not into linguistics. Thus, the linguistic sign must always be understood as a unity of signifier and signified.

Signs do not exist in isolation within an individual; rather, they are psycho-social phenomena that exist only within a collectivity. Although individuals participate in language use, language itself is a social product. Saussure identifies *langue* as the true object of linguistics - the structured system of language deposited in the minds of speakers. While individuals use signs in speech, these signs are maintained and regulated through social interaction, not personal choice. No individual has the authority to create or discard linguistic structures at will. This understanding leads Saussure to propose the concepts of immutability and mutability of the sign. The immutability of the sign means that, although the relationship between signifier and signified appears freely chosen, it is fixed within the linguistic community. Language is shaped by social forces, inherited from previous generations, and preserved through tradition. Once established, signs cannot be changed by individual

preference. At the same time, language is mutable. Over time, linguistic signs evolve due to historical and social influences. Because the bond between signifier and signified is arbitrary, changes in sound or meaning are possible. Thus, language exhibits both stability and transformation across time.

Saussure also proposes a science of signs called semiology, which studies the life of signs within social life. Language is one part of this broader system. Although individuals appear to choose linguistic signs, their freedom of choice is limited by the existing structure of language. In this sense, one "chooses" but does not fully choose, since the system pre-exists the individual. This paradox resembles what later thinkers describe as a "double bind."

Another important distinction in Saussure's theory is between *langue* (the abstract system of language) and *parole* (individual speech). Langue is a structured whole, similar to a building in which individual bricks derive their function from their place within the entire structure. The parts do not exist independently of the whole. Langue is supra-individual; it exists completely only within the community as a whole, although each individual internalizes it. Parole, on the other hand, is the individual use or expression of this collective system. Saussurean structuralism is therefore holistic in two senses. Socially, it denies the individual any independent linguistic existence outside the collective system of langue. Systemically, it denies linguistic units any separate meaning apart from their relations within the structure. Meaning arises from differences between elements within the system.

Two major objections have been raised against Saussure's theory. The first question is how purely arbitrary relations can produce systematicity. In response, Saussure distinguishes between absolute and relative arbitrariness. Not all signs are arbitrary to the same degree. Some are completely unmotivated, while others show partial motivation through internal relations. For example, the French word *vingt* ("twenty") is absolutely arbitrary, whereas *dix-*

neuf ("nineteen") is relatively motivated because it is composed of elements meaning "ten" and "nine." Thus, language introduces order within arbitrariness. The second objection concerns linguistic change. If the bond between signifier and signified is arbitrary and languages constantly evolve, how are stable linguistic values established? Saussure answers that value emerges only from a synchronic perspective, that is from examining the system at a given moment. Meaning is established through differences between co-existing elements. Therefore, there is no contradiction between arbitrariness and systematicity, since all linguistic values are determined contrastively within the structure of language.

5. Conclusion

This paper has traced the concept of arbitrariness in language from classical philosophy to modern linguistics, demonstrating that the problem of interpretation is inseparable from the arbitrary nature of signs. From Plato's debate on the correctness of names to Saussure's theory of the linguistic sign, language emerges as a conventional system that resists fixed meanings.

Arbitrariness is not a flaw but the enabling condition of linguistic creativity, metaphor, and interpretive plurality. The more arbitrary a sign, the greater the scope for meaning. Language, therefore, is not a transparent mirror of reality but a dynamic social system in which meaning is continually negotiated. By situating Saussure within a long philosophical tradition, this study shows that modern linguistic theory is deeply rooted in classical concerns. The problem of arbitrariness remains central to understanding how language functions and why interpretation is both inevitable and infinite.

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