

Once a root phoneme, always a root phoneme

On the Systematicity of Signifier-to-Signified Correspondences

Saussure's essential notion that the relation between meaning and form is arbitrary (Saussure 1916) is generally accepted among linguists. Over the past few years, however, the strict applicability of this notion has been challenged by a growing amount of interdisciplinary oriented (linguistic, cognitive, and cultural) studies (cf., e. g., the overview by Schmidtke, Conrad & Jacobs 2014; Dingemanse et al. 2015). Furthermore, having reviewed the evidence, Dingemanse et al. (2015) point out that a strictly arbitrary language would be difficult to learn, a perfectly iconic one could not serve all communicative goals, and a fully systematic one would not offer a sufficient amount of expressive freedom.

Drawing on the already observed systematicity of correlations between sounds and morphosyntactic classes, I will present the results of an investigation that explores the systematic relation between (subsets of) sounds and two generalized classes of morphemes, viz. function morphemes and content morphemes, in particular nominal, verbal, and adjectival roots, in two closely related languages, Middle Welsh and Middle Breton. In order to test the hypothesis that sounds/sound classes are not distributed randomly the sound–meaning correspondances in random equal-size text samples of both languages are checked using quantitative methods.

The paper will address the following research questions:

1. Is there a significant systematic correlation between sounds/sound classes and content/function morphemes, in particular roots?
2. If yes: does the correlation show similar patterns in both sister languages, pointing towards a diachronically stable system?

References

- Dingemanse, Mark et al. (2015). "Arbitrariness, Iconicity, and Systematicity in Language". In: *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 19.10, 603–615. DOI: j.tics.2015.07.013.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de (1916). *Cours de linguistique générale*. Ed. by Charles Bally. Paris: Payot.
- Schmidtke, David S., Markus Conrad & Arthur M. Jacobs (2014). "Phonological iconicity". In: *Frontiers in Psychology* 5.80. DOI: fpsyg.2014.00080.