Iconicity in language and literature: language innovation and language change

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ICONICITY IN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Language Innovation and Language Change

Summary.—The purpose of this paper is to explore the connection between iconicity as used as a general force in language, both natural and poetic language, and the way its workings are reflected in language change, especially syntactic change. Linguistic changes themselves may reveal more clearly the iconic impulse present in language users, since it is via change that the structure of language and the principles underlying it often become more visible. First the subject will be defined, various types of iconicity will be distinguished and examples both of an individual kind (as found especially in literary texts) and of a more systematic and conventionalised kind (as encountered in the system of language) will be given. I will look briefly at how one individual’s use of iconicity may spread to a whole community and thus cause a systematic change in language itself. Finally, I will illustrate by means of some cases of syntactic change how iconicity (or the lack of it) may influence or bring about change.

1. Introduction

In spite of de Saussure’s emphasis on the essential arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, it has long been recognised that form may enact meaning in language. It is perhaps not surprising that the awareness of form as meaning came more strongly to the fore in literature (and literary criticism) the moment that poets began to use form to “break [...] down the reader’s ‘stock responses’” (Davie 1955: 102), thus creating a heightened sensitiveness to form. (As Chaucer so succinctly put it, “by his contrarie is every thyng declared” (Troilus & Criseyde Bk I, 637). What I am referring to is the modernist upheaval in literature, when traditional linguistic forms and structures were partly abandoned; when meaning was no longer represented directly and easily through conventional structure. Instead, the reader “being robbed of a familiar discursive logic” (Butler 1994: 12) often had to piece together the meaning of an utterance from the cognitive contents and associations of individual forms and from the linguistic arrangement of these forms. Similarly, in the visual arts, the meaning of a painting no longer followed naturally or conventionally from the forms on the canvas; the modernist painting had to be interpreted out of a new arrangement of spatial forms, out of the shapes and colours used. Jakobson (1971: 339) in this connection describes the sense of outrage, the “naive anger” (p.336) that many people feel when confronted with abstract paintings. This is comparable to the reaction of the layman to ‘difficult’ poetry or prose, such as found in modernist works by T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound or James Joyce.

In fact, modernist writers in their search for new forms and new formal arrangements were falling back on or rediscovering older iconic principles that have always been an important force in language, but of which speakers through conventionalisation are not usually aware. My purpose in this paper is to look at the role that iconic forms play in language. Since my concern with iconicity is that of a linguist, I will be most interested in the similarities in this respect between the poetic and the standard language, and not in their differences (cf. Mukařovský 1970: 41). I do not believe that iconicity is a special privilege of poetic language as Leech (1987: 86) has suggested:
Is there any parallel autotelic function on the third functional plane, that of the literary text as a formal object [the other two planes are 'discourse' and 'representation']? I would argue that there is, and that it lies in the principle of iconicity which assumes in literature, an importance far beyond that which it has in everyday language. A literary work, in its textual form, is what Epstein (1975) calls a 'self-reflexive artefact': its very physical substance imitates or enacts the meaning that it represents. ... *Whereas iconicity has only a minor role in everyday language use*, in literature it comes into its own as an important communicative device. (Italics added.)

Instead, I would follow Kiparsky (1987: 186) (and cf. also note 6), who writes (and shows) that,

> 'figures of language' studied by poetics, such as alliteration, rhyme, parallelism, and metrical form, ... and the regularities which may govern their distribution in a work or body of literature, are grounded in the human language faculty; this is why they always involve linguistic categories of the sort that play a role in the grammars of languages, and why the rules governing them obey principles that also apply to linguistic rules and representations. (Italics added.)

Even metrical form, which had always been thought of as such a typical characteristic of poetics (witness Jakobson’s remark quoted in Kiparsky 1987: 193, “Measure of sequence is a device that, outside of poetic function, finds no application in language”), has now been shown to be an essential part of language as well. Referring to recent developments in metrical phonology, Kiparsky (1987: 194) writes: “The basic insight to come out of phonology in the study of suprasegmentals is that *language itself is metrically organised*. By this we mean that language itself has the attributes which we associate with ‘metrical’ systems.” It is true, of course, that literary language as written text has in the course of time acquired a visual image that has led to the use of iconicity in a different way, i.e. a more purely imagic (less diagrammatic) use of it as seen also in other visual signs (see below, ‘imagic iconicity’). In his essay on “The relation between visual and auditory signs”, Jakobson (1971: 341) writes that “in visual signs it is the spatial dimension which takes priority, whereas the temporal dimension takes priority in auditory signs.” It must be clear that in spoken language iconicity can only be of a temporal, sequential kind, because one cannot go backwards and forwards as one can with visual signs, taking in the whole simultaneously. In this essay I will point at some examples of ‘visual’ or ‘imagic iconicity’, but they will not be part of the main argument. I agree with Jakobson (p.344) that written language is a ‘superstructure’, an ‘epiphenomenon’, and hence that visual iconicity is of an essentially different kind.

The article is arranged as follows. I will first distinguish (section 2) the various types of iconicity that have been differentiated by linguists in the last few decades since Jakobson’s seminal work in this area (see Jakobson 1971, especially his essay “Quest for the essence of language”). I will then show how iconicity has more and more pervaded linguistic theoretical thinking, especially in the realm of cognitive linguistics. In section 3, I shall look at how iconicity ‘comes to be’ in language by concentrating on iconic forms used by writers, especially poets. I shall next show how the iconic structures they use resemble in function the ones found in ‘ordinary’ language, where they have become so conventionalised that we
no longer recognise them as iconic. (Writers are of interest because they are more ‘conscious’ users of language, using language “at full stretch” (Nowottny 1962: 85, 123); there, innovations show more boldly and more palpably what we can do with language.) My main concern in section 4 will be to explore how speakers’ iconic innovations may become part and parcel of everyday language and become conventionalised. It should not be surprising that, just as poets fall back on iconic forms to give a more concrete ‘feel’ to their verbal expressions, so language users may fall back on iconic devices when, due to changes taking place elsewhere in the system, linguistic ambiguities/problems may need to be resolved. In the final section, I will briefly illustrate the kind of role that iconicity may play in syntactic change.

2. Types of iconicity
Iconicity is derived from the word ‘icon’. An icon is an image that more or less reflects a situation, concept or object in the real world. Thus, photographs, drawings, traffic signs (in a more schematic way) or gestures can be seen as icons. In a similar way writing systems may be iconic (as the runic alphabet and ancient Egyptian or Chinese ideographs to some extent were/are). It is quite likely that all writing systems started off that way, even our own alphabet. Spoken language, too, may have started off as iconic. Bolinger and Sears (1981:129) write,

> Everything points to icons as more primitive than symbols. Children invent them. Two speakers without a common language resort to them for communication. But however vivid the beginnings, the color has long since faded to a uniform gray... Language has become an almost purely conventional code, with a few exceptions listed as curiosities.

The ‘curiosities’ include onomatopoeic words, and to some extent also the use of ‘phones-themes’, a term used for sounds that are aesthetically pleasing because they reflect in some way the concept referred to. Phonesthemes are often used in word-formation. Thus, the trilled r (and also l which is phonetically very similar to r) is used as a frequentative morpheme in words like stutter, jingle, Dutch stommelen ‘stump, stumble’, redden ‘tidy up’ vs redden ‘save’. Also, the association of high frontvowels with lightness and smallness, and low backvowels with heaviness and darkness has often been noted. Samuels (1972:152), for instance, explains great [greːt], rather than the historically expected development [griːt], in this way. Similarly, the use of sl- at the beginning of words often indicates a kind of nastiness: slimy, slippery, slobber, sloppy, slink. Many of these words are of unknown etymological origin, suggesting that they are ‘made up’ freshly out of such phonaesthetic building-blocks of the language.

However, as suggested by Bolinger and Sears, such icons do not play a large part in language anymore. This in contrast to diagrammatic iconicity, which is pervasively present. There is a basic difference between what I will call ‘imagic iconicity’ and ‘diagrammatic iconicity’ (see figure 1, next page). In imagic iconicity there is a direct, one to one relation between the sign and the signified, and this relation is iconic:
In diagrammatic iconicity, such a direct, vertical relation is missing, instead there exists an iconic link between the horizontal relation(s) on the level of the sign and the horizontal relations on the level of the signified:

Thus, the temporal relation between the events taking place in the real world may be iconically reflected in the way in which the signs naming these events are ordered on the linguistic level. Similarly, in semantic iconicity, e.g. metaphor, it is the semantic relation, the similarity between a body-object such as ‘foot’ and the lower part of a mountain, that leads to the same sign being used for both. Thus, although it is generally true today that most linguistic symbols (be they words – or more strictly free morphemes – or sounds) are essentially arbitrary, this is not so when one considers the combinations of morphemes and the order of words in the clause. In fact the higher the linguistic level, the less arbitrary language becomes: “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 system” (Bolinger 1980:18). Thus, the moment one combines two arbitrary morphemes, like shoe and box, the word shoebox is no longer arbitrary, because it has a relation in form and meaning to both ‘shoe’ and ‘box’. In other words, a ‘shoebox’ cannot be called a ‘snailbox’ or a ‘shoelace’. Thus, the important and pervasive type of iconicity in language has to do with the arrangement of signs.

Figure 1. Types of iconicity

| iconicity   | magical                     |
|            | diagrammatic               |
|            | structural                 |
|            | semantic                   |
|            | - isomorphism              |
|            | - iconicity of motivation  |
|            | - sequential ordering      |
|            | - markedness               |
|            | - centrality vs            |
|            | - peripherality            |
|            | - distance/proximity       |
|            | - repetition               |
|            | - metaphor (cognitive)     |
|            | (cf. Anttila 1989:141ff.)  |
|            | - metaphor (grammatical)   |
|            | - analogy                  |
|            | - grammaticalisation       |
As mentioned above and indicated in figure (1), diagrammatic iconicity thus involves two types, structural and semantic. In both semantic and diagrammatic iconicity, it is the perceived relation in meaning between two concepts that leads to the use of the same form or word or the same shape or structure. Sometimes it also works the other way round, but this is less usual. An example of this would be _flaunt_ and _flout_: for many speakers they have acquired the same meaning through similarity of form. Similarly, _obsequious_ developed into a pejorative term through association with other _ob_-words, which had a negative ring, like _obstreperous, obstinate, obnoxious_, etc. (the last item was also originally non-pejorative). Semantic iconicity is an important source for the creation of new words, and a tool constantly resorted to by poets. Again, it plays a very important part in language change, since the principle usually called ‘analogy’ is in fact an instance of metaphor (see e.g. Anttila 1989:88, 99). In analogy, too, the speaker sees a relation in meaning (which is often grammatical rather than cognitive meaning) between two items, which may cause her/him to create a new form. For example, the use of _-ed_ in the past tense of originally strong verbs (as in _burned_ for earlier _bam, helped_ for earlier _halp_ etc.) developed because of the perceived relationship between ‘pastness’ and the ‘weak’ dental ending. Again, the other way around is also possible, i.e. a sameness in form may influence a word’s meaning, but this occurs less frequently. An example is the change in meaning in the Dutch word _gijzelaar_ ‘hostage’ (for some speakers even in _martelaar_ ‘martyr’) from a passive to an agentive noun. Thus, ‘gijzelaar’ for many speakers of Dutch refers to the hostage-taker rather than to the victim, and ‘martelaar’ to the torturer rather than to the one tortured. This has happened on the analogy of the more frequent and still productive pattern, _wandelaar, moordenaar, goochelaar_, etc. (i.e. the one who ‘walks’, ‘murders’, ‘juggles’).

More recently, the notion of metaphor has been extended to explain unidirectional changes (a type of grammaticalisation) in which expressions used in the “content domain” (Sweetser 1990:11), i.e. the real world of objects and activities, come to serve to express relationships in the speech-act or metalinguistic domain, and from there in the epistemic or reasoning domain. Thus, there seems to be an equation between our physical self and our inner self, which makes us borrow concepts of the socio-physical world, and transfer them metaphorically to our conversational and reasoning world. This transfer, Sweetser believes (1990:31), may well be universal. It would explain for instance how root-modals (e.g. OE _mæg_ expressing physical ability), develop into deontic modals ( _may_ expressing social permission, as in _You may go_), and in addition develop epistemic meaning (as in _This may be true_).

My main concern in this paper, however, will be diagrammatic iconicity of a more purely structural kind since that plays a more important role in syntax and syntactic change. Haiman (1980) distinguishes two kinds: (i) isomorphism and (ii) iconicity of motivation. The first one, he claims, is universal, the second is not. Isomorphism means that there is a one to one relationship between the sign or ‘signans’ and the object/concept signified, the ‘signatum’. This can be found on the lexical as well as the grammatical level. It means that he believes
that in language the existence of pure synonyms and homonyms is linguistically pathological; it is not a normal state. Thus, the use of French delit in Middle English next to its native synonym, lust, was occasioned through borrowing. This synonymity, however, was soon 'remedied' through change: lust and delight are now used in rather different ways. In the case of homonyms, the situation is often remedied by replacing them with other words. E.g. in the homonymous pair queen (OE cwēn) – quean (OE cwene), the latter has been replaced. Sometimes, an existent variant pronunciation comes to be used to solve the problem, as for instance with the originally homonymic pair cheer and chair (cf. the pun in Macbeth, Arden ed. V, iii, 21).

Similarly, in syntax, isomorphism entails that one cannot really have optional differences in surface structure. In other words, the old generative idea that many surface structures may have one deep structure, implying that these surface structures all mean the same (because transformations which link the two structures are meaning-preserving), is not really possible. Haiman believes that there is complete isomorphism in language; in other words, exceptions to it are either temporary, or are motivated independently, as Haiman shows convincingly for a number of syntactic cases. It should be added, though, that Haiman is more concerned with syntax than with the lexicon, where such exceptions create less of a problem as long as the non-isomorphous items create no ambiguities in communicative situations. That there is a strong avoidance of homonymy among speakers, however, has been very convincingly shown by Samuels (1972:144ff.), when he discussed the reason why most early Middle English [e:] words (e.g. eat, lean, beast) became [i:] in standard English and not [e:] [e:] would have been historically more regular but the choice of [e:] would have created a lot more homonyms.10

The other subtype, Haiman distinguishes, is iconicity of motivation. This is in fact the most interesting one because it has been paid much less attention to, presumably because it is more schematic than the other types and therefore less visible. One type of iconic motivation is sequential ordering. This can be ordering on any level of grammar. A simple type is narrative sequence, as in veni, vidi, vici: what happens first is ordered first (pace Ajello 1994:82, who sees this as an example of unnatural order). Iconic motivation on a deeper syntactic level is referred to by Greenberg (1966:103) when he writes, “the order of elements in language parallels that in physical experience or the order of knowledge”; and it is shown in the all but universal precedence of subject over objects,11 and in the protasis preceding the apodosis in conditional clauses (because the given precedes the new). The ‘rule’ of S(subject) before O(object) before O is therefore important for typological studies because it provides a basis for the groupings that have been found to be statistically relevant. E.g. the frequent occurrence of languages with SOV, SVO and VSO order, where S precedes O, and the rareness of OSV, OVS and VOS order, where it does not, can be explained by it. Similarly, iconic motivation plays a role in the linguistic concept of ‘markedness’: “It is universally assumed that markedness is iconically motivated: categories that are marked morphologically and syntactically are also marked semantically” (Haiman 1980: 528). A simple example is the
marking of the plural. In most languages, the plural consists of the singular form plus an extra morpheme, indicating that plural is *more* than singular. Haiman (1980:530) gives an interesting morphological case in the use of the polite address form. The polite (semantically marked) form expresses power as well as distance; the non-polite, unmarked form stresses intimacy, equality and lack of power. This markedness can be matched iconically by using either a plural form (as Haiman says “there is strength in numbers”; cf. also the royal ‘we’ and the doctor’s ‘we’) as done in French or historically in English, or by using the third person as in Italian or German (the third person expresses more distance, because it is used to talk about people, not to people: it is a term of reference, not a term of address).

There is at the moment great interest in iconic motivation because it may provide an account of why the principles of Universal Grammar (UG) are the way they are. Generative grammarians do not seem to be very interested in an explanation for UG, they are mainly concerned with finding out what the principles of UG look like on the basis of a purely formal account of the grammars of the world’s languages; for them indeed syntax is autonomous. They are interested in model-building, where elegance, simplicity and economy decide the form of the principles. This may indeed be useful as a methodological strategem, but it ignores the links UG might have with other cognitive systems and with our perception of the world. As Haiman (1980:537) says, “Ultimately, I believe that many (if not all) of the formal universals of grammar which now engage the attention of most syntactic theoreticians will, if valid, be found to reflect properties of the world rather than properties of the mind per se.”

Sweetser (1990:6) similarly argues that “our linguistic system is inextricably interwoven with the rest of our physical and cognitive selves.” She continues that one can view this with terror (as autonomous syntacticians may do) because “The study of human culture and cognition is frightingly broad as a field” or we can rejoice “because there is no point in pretending the autonomy of language if such a pretense obscures *real explanatory possibilities*” (italics added).

Developments in cognitive grammar show how the principles of UG may be connected with our perception of the world. Deane (1992:123), for instance, writes about the position of modifiers that any differences in position “involve degrees of grammatical centrality and peripherality, reflected iconically in word order”. He compares the notion of centrality and peripherality to the way we perceive the world. Physical objects, like a tree or the human body, usually have the most massive and rigid part in the center. “The more massive something is, the more difficult it is to move, and hence the more its location is fixed.” “Conversely a light object only flexibly attached to the whole [like branches or arms] is much less predictable.” “Entities in the center are multiply linked, and each link constrains their location” (idem p.123). On the other hand, elements that do not play a central role have much more relative freedom, such as adverbial phrases in the clause, or the freer position of case forms other than nominative and accusative fulfilling the subject and object functions. Deane also adds (p.124), “the greater the semantic flexibility, the more peripheral a concept should be (and vice versa). On these grounds, specifiers and other identity-of-sense anaphors are the
most peripheral of all, since for them everything – sense and reference – is variable, a
function of context.” Here, we could consider, for instance, the relative freedom of Old
English clitic pronouns. They can occur in many different positions in the clause, as shown
clearly in van Kemenade (1987). Deane thus explains the word order within the NP as
iconically motivated:

```
   DET
   /---\ N''
  /     \  \N''
 /       \ AP \\
|        |    N
|        |   PP  \\
|complete|destruction|of the city
|peripheral|central|peripheral
```

This would be the prototypical NP. Of course other factors (functional, expressive) may
change the order. The important point is, however, that this tree presents what the generative
model of X-bar theory (which is based on theoretical elegance and economy) predicts. In
other words, the UG principle of X-bar theory may have an iconic foundation. Langacker
(1978:859) had noted something similar, when he said that “depth of embedding correlates
with centralisation.” Deane calls his hypothesis “grammar as metaphor” (which is similar to
Lakoff’s (1987:283) “spatialization of form hypothesis”) and concludes, “If syntactic
structure is in some sense derivative from spatial form, then we should be able to predict the
properties of grammar from independently motivated properties of spatial cognition” (p.46),
in other words, “The two types of knowledge are processed by the same specialized neural
mechanisms, and so will share a common representational format” (p.47). This is a far cry
from the hypothesis of UG, where, if any relation with other cognitive systems is envisaged,
it is usually considered to be with computational ones.

3. Diagrammatic iconicity: poets’ innovations and conventionalised structures in language

Before we move on to a more detailed discussion of the role played by diagrammatic
iconicity in language change, I would like to consider a little bit further how iconic language
users are synchronically. For this purpose, I have chosen selections from poetry, mainly
because poets’ use of iconicity is more pronounced, more novel and therefore more
illustrative. However, in principle the same mechanisms work in ordinary communication,
although it may be the case that some ordering mechanisms, such as chiasmus for instance,
are less likely to be used in spoken conversation (for its use in literary texts, see Nanny 1987,
forthcoming). At least I cannot think of any chiastic patterns that have developed in grammar.
Possibly in word-formation, names/acronyms like radar and kodak may have been selected
on the basis of their aesthetically pleasing (chiastic) sound sequence. For the larger part of
my examples I will make use of the introduction by Max Nanny in a volume of Word & Image
I will concentrate on those mechanisms, such as sequence, distance and repetition, which have been shown to have an impact also on language as rule-structured. I will ignore devices which are much closer to imagic iconicity and therefore less likely to occur in conventionalised grammar. For instance, Nanny (1986:201) shows how poets may indicate the outline of an object (steps) in their stanza form,

```
SAT on the Dogana's steps
For the gondolas cost too much, that year,
And there were not 'those girls', there was one face,
And the Buccentoro twenty yards off, howling 'Stretti',
```

Or they may show the meaning of a word like *reverse* iconically in the increasing and decreasing lineshapes which precede and follow the word 'reverse' in the example from T.S. Eliot below,

```
Do I dare
disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all; –
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?
```

3.1. Sequence

Language speakers may use sequence (certain fixed sequences have in fact become part of the rule system, so that we are not conscious of them in normal use) in order to match the order in which events take place in the real world, as when they order a temporal clause before the main clause, when the activity in the temporal clause comes first in time. Sequence may also be influenced, as we have seen above, by notions of centrality and peripherality. Poets usually go a bit further than that in that position not only shows the place of an activity in the time sequence, but actually has an iconic relation with the *meaning* of the word, a kind of double iconicity one might say: imagic and diagrammatic. The following is a passage from Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (Bk VI, ll.572–75) (Nanny 1986:204), where the word *end* is not only the last word in that passage but also the last word in the line (and notice also the order of *first*, and *midst - last*, however, is in a non-iconic position); iconically, it is the last part of the sequence, but it also *means* 'end':

```
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.
```

Similarly in Bk VI, ll.1–3,
The leaves were yellow when to Furness Fells
The haunt of shepherds, and to cottage life
I bade adieu;

where the ‘endness’ of adieu is extra emphasised by the deviation from normal word order. Nannya (1986:205–5) gives many more examples from Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot and others, but the principle is the same.

3.2. Distance and its converse, juxtaposition
Distance between a speaker and the addressee may be created by using a plural or a third person form, rather than a second person, as we saw above. We find a similar use in poetry. Widdowson (1993) gives an interesting example from a poem by Tony Harrison, ‘Long Distance II’, where:

Though my mother was already two years dead
Dad kept her slippers warming by the gas,
put hot water bottles her side of the bed
and still went to renew her transport pass.

... He couldn’t risk my blight of disbelief
though sure that very soon he’d hear her key
scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief.
He knew she’d just popped out to get the tea.

I believe life ends with death, and that is all.
You haven’t both gone shopping; just the same,
in my new black leather phone book there’s your name
and the disconnected number I still call.

Widdowson suggests that the shift in the use of person in the description of the poet’s father is purposeful. His father is first described in the third person, reflecting the rift that has grown between the poet and his father (the whole poem is about the poet’s feelings of (dis)connection with his working-class parent(s), but in the last stanza the poet turns to ‘you’ to refer to his parents. This switch may be seen to represent iconically the deep-seated feelings and memories that still tie the poet to his father, because, just as his father cannot accept his wife’s death (“and still went to renew her transport pass”), he cannot accept that his father is dead: “in my new black leather phone book there’s your name/ and the disconnected number I still call.” In other words, to show their ‘sameness’, the poet uses more intimate you, to show disconnection he uses the more distant he.

A very common way of showing distance in poetry is by means of the visual device of stanza breaks or spaces between lines, as Nannya (1986: 202–4) shows with examples from Emily Dickinson, Dylan Thomas, Philip Larkin and T.S. Eliot. This device, for obvious reasons, cannot be used in the temporal sequence of spoken language. However, distance can also be indicated sequentially. Nannya (1986:204) gives an example from The Prelude (Bk V, ll.79–80),
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... underneath one arm
A stone, and in the opposite hand, a shell

Here "the linguistic distance between expressions [stone and shell] corresponds to the conceptual distance between them" (Haiman 1983: 782); and again, because this is poetry, the distance is more concrete, it is literally spatial.

Distance is used in grammar in the same way but because it has become conventionalised and more abstract (it has become part of the rule system, as we saw above) we no longer notice it. Haiman (1983) gives as examples the difference between causative expressions such as kill and cause to die. In kill the expression of causation has become amalgamated with the infinitival verb, causation is therefore instantaneous. In cause to die there is distance between the two, through the use of separate verbs. This provides a possible slot for intermediate agency so that I caused the chicken to die may convey an element of magic, which is not possible in I killed the chicken. Also, as Hopper and Thompson (1980:256) have shown, distance may lead to or be used to express greater 'individuation' (or, if you like, less control). They note, for instance, that in Spanish the object of busco has no preposition (so less distance) when it is non-animate; when it is animate, there is a preposition:

Busco mi sombrero
I seek my hat/ I'm looking for my hat
Busco a mi amigo
I seek my friend/I'm looking for my friend

Similarly the distance between a transitive verb and its object is linguistically and conceptually smaller than between an intransitive verb and its complement (the latter usually has a preposition). This also works for the difference between the pair:

He sprayed the door with green paint
He sprayed green paint on the door

In the first example the door is probably green all over, whereas this is not necessarily the case in the second sentence. In other words, when there is less distance between spray and the door, when the door is more intimately connected to the verb, it is more likely to be totally affected by it. In the same way the order of indirect and direct object says something about the conceptual impact of the sentence. Thus,

Who has taught French to the children?

Does not imply that the children actually know French (the question is likely to be used as a request for information about the name of the teacher). On the other hand,

Who has taught the children French?

does imply that they have indeed learned French. In other words, the closeness of children to the verb has a direct relation to the degree in which children has been affected by it (cf.
The opposite of 'distance' is 'juxtaposition'. Leech and Short (1981: 239-242) show how "words which are close in the text may invoke an impression of closeness or connectedness in the fiction, not only closeness of time, but psychological or locative relatedness." In the following example,

There were six men at the table in the lunchroom eating fast with their hats on the backs of their heads.

they illustrate the effect of natural juxtaposition broken up and a new one created. The effect of placing *with their hats ... after eat* rather than in its more natural position after *men*, is that the reader interprets the situation as one of great haste; the men are in such a hurry that they have not got time to take their hats off. In a similar way juxtaposition may play an important role in language change, as we will see in the example discussed in section 5.2. The role of juxtaposition can also be seen in perception verb complements that take a plain infinitive:

I saw her hit the ball

where the seeing and the hitting takes place at one and the same time and in one location. This is in contrast to examples such as,

Alex saw Julia to have been in a hurry when she dressed

(the example is from van der Leek 1992:13, who also discusses it), where time, and probably also location, is not the same, and this is iconically indicated by distance, by placing *to* in between.

3.3. Repetition

This is a very common but also multifarious device, and therefore its impact is more difficult to define. Nanny (1986:205) mentions various literary uses of repetition, such as 'similarity, continuity, regularity, monotony, emphasis', not all of which find a place in the grammatical system. The most common functions of repetition in language systems are 'plurality' (which roughly covers Nanny's 'similarity' and 'continuity') and 'intensification' ('emphasis'). Thus, reduplication (of the whole word or part of the word) is often used to form the plural of nouns or adjectives (cf. Haiman 1980: 530). Complete iteration is still often found in pidgins and creoles to express the plural (e.g. in Malay). Pidgin languages often provide examples of literal iteration. (The following examples from pidgin English are from Todd 1984, more pidgin examples can be found in Aitchison 1994.) Thus *soso* (from *so*) is used in the sense of 'always', rather similar to Nanny's (1986:205) example from Wordsworth's 'Elegiac Stanzas': "So pure the sky, so quiet was the air! So like, so very like, was day to day" (II.5–6), where the repetition of *so* likewise suggests continuity. Similarly *kraikrai* is used for 'cry always'. Sometimes repetition is used to cut down on homophones.
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(see also Aitchison 1994:31). Both sun and sand (with the characteristic pidgin loss of the consonant cluster) are pronounced /san/. To distinguish between the two, ‘sand’ becomes sansan. But notice that iconicity plays a role here too, because sand is clearly a plural entity while sun is not.

Pidgins also provide playful examples of intensifying repetition such as benben ‘crooked’ from ben ‘bend’, or fainfain ‘very lovely’ from fain (Aitchison 1994:30 gives additional examples from Tok Pisin). Haiman (1980:531) notes the reduplication of the entire verb in Tagalog to indicate a change of state, which is also a form of intensification, (ma)basag ‘get broken’ and (magka)basagbasag ‘get thoroughly smashed’. A similar kind of reduplication showing result or change of state can still be seen in some of the older Indo-European languages (but here already reduced to part of the word), where in the perfect the first syllable is repeated to express result, e.g. Greek leipo, perfect leloipa ‘leave’, Gothic lētan, lailōt ‘let’, Latin canō, cecini ‘sing’ (cf. Lass 1994:160). Interesting in this respect is that the prefix ge-, which is used in Old English to express perfectivity, is also used to denote ‘collectivity’ as in Gothic ga-skōhi ‘pair of shoes’, and still in Dutch (and German) berg – gebergte, ‘mountain’–’mountain-range’ (Lass 1994:204), thereby showing in one morpheme both the function of intensification and plurality, just as both functions can be expressed by repetition.

The use of iteration in literature for emphatic purposes is well known. The reader does not need to be reminded of the way in which Dickens in the first chapter of Bleak House shows how the fog has penetrated every little hole and cranny in London, even the stem and bowl of the skipper’s afternoon pipe. The author simply repeats the word fog, repeats it every time in the same position (as subject at the beginning of the clause) and in similar syntactic constructions: “fog down the river”, “fog on the Kentish heights”, “fog creeping”, “hovering”, “drooping”. Another writer who makes effective use of repetition is Ernest Hemingway. In the following short story (from In Our Time) the bleak, dehumanised atmosphere is brought out well by a number of means, by the use of impersonal pronouns like they (in the first line), existential there and it, by the repetition of shut(ters), words referring to water (rain, puddle), but especially by the repetition of the locative phrase against the wall and other directional adverbs, verbs and prepositions up, down, out, in, against, sit, stand.

They shot the six cabinet ministers at half-past six in the morning against the wall of a hospital. There were pools of water in the courtyard. There were wet dead leaves on the paving of the courtyard. It rained hard. All the shutters of the hospital were nailed shut. One of the ministers was sick with typhoid. Two soldiers carried him downstairs and out into the rain. They tried to hold him up against the wall but he sat down in a puddle of water. The other five stood very quietly against the wall. Finally the officer told the soldiers it was no good trying to make him stand up. When they fired the first volley he was sitting down in the water with his head on his knees. (Italics added.)

In another passage, from “Big Two-Hearted River, Part I”, the words look down and watch are repeated several times to emphasise the curious, intensive way in which the main character, Nick Adams (a soldier who has returned from the war wounded – but this is only
implied, not told) studies the movement of the water and the trout in the water – many of the verbs, adjectives and nouns have to do with (non-)movement – in an attempt to ward off other thoughts that might disturb him too much,

The river was there. It swirled against the log piles of the bridge. Nick looked down into the clear, brown water, colored from the pebbly bottom, and watched the trout keeping themselves steady in the current with wavering fins. As he watched them they changed their positions by quick angles, only to hold steady in the fast water again. Nick watched them a long time.

He watched them holding themselves with their noses into the current, many trout in deep, fast moving water, slightly distorted as he watched far down through the glassy convex surface of the pool, ...

Nick looked down into the pool from the bridge. It was a hot day. A kingfisher flew up the stream. It was a long time since Nick had looked into a stream and seen trout. (Italics added)

3.4. Conclusion

Above I have shown that similar kinds of iconic tendencies can be found in literary language and in everyday language use, both on the lexical and on the more abstract grammatical level. It is clear that “iconicity in (literary) text(s) can only be perceived if the reader [or hearer] moves from meaning to form” (Nanny 1986:199), thereby showing that meaning must be primary, not form ( and by ‘meaning’ I understand the relation with the physical world). In other words, form is not ‘autonomous’. It is perhaps not surprising that some of the more readily identifiable iconic devices come from pidgin languages, which, linguists agree, are more transparent. Grammatical conventionalisation begins to affect a pidgin much more stringently in the process of creolisation due to the fact that greater demands are made on it in terms of communication.26 A similar process may have taken place when language first developed. That would fit the idea that all languages started off iconically and have faded to a “uniform gray” (cf. the quote from Bolinger and Sears at the beginning of section 2).27 Conventionalisation of this type does not only occur in language, as Haiman (1993) has shown, but is typical of many other human or socio-cultural activities. Haiman writes in an entertaining article that grammaticalisation (another example of a conventionalising process in language) should be understood as a type of ritualisation. Ritualisation can also be seen in the development of cultural stereotypes. As examples he describes the development of the “Vogue mannequin” and “the fool as hubby” archetypes, whose “message” in advertising or television comedies can only be properly understood if one is an insider in the culture which uses it. The same of course has happened in myths, the rituals of which are often poorly understood unless one is, say a ‘priest’ in the culture that practises it, or has studied its history and origins intensively. In the same way our rules of grammar may have become so conventionalised that it has become impossible to see the iconic drive (the intention) behind it. Bolinger and Sears (1981:129), however, write that “[t]hough the system in all its smaller parts may be more symbolic than iconic, we sense it as iconic, and treat it so in daily small acts of creation and readjustment.” By this they imply that iconicity remains a constant force, that even completely conventionalised structures may still be subject to it. This innate iconic, analogical sense comes out in (poetic) linguistic creation, as we have seen; in fact, in any
situation in which language is ‘created’ (in language acquisition and pidgins), and also in situations where for some reason the grammatical structure or the lexical item used no longer fits or has become awkward. In other words, iconicity must be seen as an important productive force in language change.

4. From language innovation to language change
At this point it becomes important to understand how the innovation of one speaker may affect the system of language used by all speakers. There is still a lot of controversy about how language change takes place (what Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968) have called the “actuation riddle”). One theoretical model seems highly appropriate to the artifact of language, and that is the ‘Invisible-hand Theory’, developed by the eighteenth century school of Scottish philosophers to deal with the explanation of changes in systems which are neither natural (such as physics and chemistry) nor artificial (such as mathematics, computer languages etc.). Keller (1985, 1990/1994) shows in some detail the implications of this theory for language. He calls language “a phenomenon of the third kind”, because, unlike in natural systems, covering laws do not apply to it, prediction is not possible. Nor is language completely under control, subject only to man-made change, as is the case in artificial systems. In other words, it has a bit of both. How invisible-hand theory works is best explained by analogous examples of other socio-cultural phenomena (i.e. phenomena which are like language of the ‘third kind’). Keller (1985:218–219) describes how a socio-cultural phenomenon like a traffic-jam is created. A traffic-jam is not (normally) caused intentionally, but yet it is the automatic result of the intentions of the drivers who are in it. When someone brakes hard in front of us, we brake hard as well because it is not our intention to crash the car. Usually we brake just a little harder than necessary (than in fact the first car does) just to be on the safe side. The next driver does the same, and so ultimately, after car number x, the whole thing comes to a complete standstill. The traffic-jam may be said to illustrate language change, and the intention of each driver, made under certain constraints, can be seen as a language innovation. (For a similar difference between ‘change’ and ‘innovation’, see Milroy 1992.) Keller (1985:230) also gives a possible scenario for the loss of a lexical item, which in a minor way constitutes a ‘change’. Imagine a barber who feels himself a cut above other barbers, and to express that calls himself a ‘haircutter’. He raises his price befitting his new image. When other barbers note that more and more customers disappear to go to the trendy ‘haircutter’, they may decide to become ‘haircutters’ too, so they likewise change the sign on their shop-fronts. When this fashion spreads, the word barber may disappear, and the normal word for a person who cuts your hair becomes haircutter. However, even though the first barbers changed their name intentionally, this does not mean that they intentionally caused the disappearance of the word barber. That was never their intention. On the contrary, its disappearance would be against their own interests.

We can sum up the basic characteristics of invisible-hand phenomena as follows: “they are the result of human actions, but not the goal of their intentions” (Keller 1985:216). It is
clear that an invisible-hand explanation necessarily involves a process which runs from the level of individual purposeful actions to a higher level of unintended resulting structure (it begins intentionally and continues causally). It means also that speakers are conscious of their innovations, but they are not conscious of carrying out a ‘change’ in their language, because the change is a causal phenomenon (not a purposive one), in which the notion of consciousness is out of place. When we compare again the domains of poetry and language, it is clear that the poetic innovations do not normally rise above that first level, i.e. they do not lead towards a change. The innovations of speakers, however, may, but only in those cases where many speakers perform the same innovation due to a similarity of situation and a similarity in the kinds of constraints that work upon such a situation. Keller (1985: 231 ff.) discusses what kinds of constraints may operate in communicative situations. They have to do with the economy of speaking/hearing, with group processes (to which social group does the speaker want to belong), with personality/individuality, etc. It seems likely that external (socio-cultural) constraints would bear most heavily on the phonetic and lexical levels, whereas on the syntactic level (because the innovations are more subconscious here) ease of communication is the most important. It is probably true, therefore, that on the syntactic level the constraints will be mostly language internal. What I mean is that changes will take place because something else in the language structure has changed (externally or internally), which has caused the old structure to become ‘ill-fitting’. If that is so, it is also to be expected that the constraints are fewer here and tighter. In other words the chance that individual speakers will innovate in similar ways, is greater. Aitchison has shown this in some detail in an article called “The language lifegame”, where she indicated that “given certain initial conditions, and a limited set of options, a particular outcome might be so highly probable as to be almost inevitable” (Aitchison 1987: 29).

5. The role played by iconicity in language change
We have seen in section 3 how the order of words in an utterance, how repetition and distance can be used by speakers with an iconic function. The discussed types of iconicity function in the same way in both poetry and everyday language because the same iconic drive is present in every user of language. There is mainly a difference in degree not in kind. Poets will be innovatory in a more conscious way, and more purposefully, whereas in normal language use innovations – especially in syntax, our concern here – will be far less frequent and less conspicuous. We expect to find such innovations only under special circumstances such as with children in the process of language acquisition, or in other circumstances in which certain structures have become opaque and difficult to learn. In section 4, it was suggested how such individual innovations may develop into full-blooded changes, and how they are more likely to occur on the phonetic and lexico-semantic than on the syntactic level. In this final section I would like to look at two cases of syntactic change, showing how in similar circumstances syntactic structures that have become less transparent because of changes having taken place elsewhere, may become reorganised in an iconic way.
5.1. The spread of periphrastic ‘do’

The first case has to do with word order. Middle English saw the development of the periphrastic verb *do*. At first *do* was freely used in all types of sentences, affirmative as well as interrogative and negative. For a while therefore, there was a choice. Ellegård (1953) and Kroch (1989), which is based on Ellegård, show that the occurrence of *do* in this period was not haphazard. Certain structures clearly favoured the use of *do*. Kroch believes a processing constraint was involved, causing speakers to use *do* whenever that would reduce processing complexity. He discusses a number of situations where this indeed seems to be the case: the (b) cases below.

\begin{tabular}{llll}
\hline
 & (a) & Saw he the moon? & \\
& (b) & Saw my father the moon? & → Did my father see the moon? \\
\hline
& (a) & Left the queen yesterday? & \\
& (b) & Left the queen her daughter in the castle? & → Did the queen leave her daughter in the castle? \\
\hline
& (a) & John saw clearly & \\
& (b) & John saw clearly the light & → John did clearly see the light \\
\end{tabular}

(The subject pronoun in the first example functions as a clitic and is therefore not “an intervening element” (Kroch 1989:147).) This processing complexity, according to Kroch, was occasioned by the loss of case forms in early Middle English. It became necessary for the object to be adjacent to and positioned to the right of the verb, since the form of the object was no now longer distinguishable from that of the subject. Thus in (i), where we have a transitive verb, *do* is favoured only when the subject is a full NP and not a clitic, showing that there is a preference, made possible by *do*, for the verb and its object to be placed together. Similarly concerning (ii), Ellegård (1953:188ff.) mentions that during the slow loss of inversion, which took place between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, inversion was much more disfavoured in transitive sentences, where the inverted subject would separate the verb from its object, than in intransitive sentences. Again with the help of *do*, the inversion could as it were be neutralised. In (iii) there is again a tendency for the V and O to stick together when there is an adverb involved. In Old English, adverbs of indefinite time and modality tended to follow the finite verb, so in basic word order the order would be SOV Adv. When the word order changed into SVO in Middle English, this adverb remained closely connected with the verb (because of its semantic links) leading to the new SV Adv O order, i.e. with a break between V and O. Again Ellegård shows that the insertion of *do* is early and frequent in these cases. This need for the adjacency of O and V could be explained by a processing complexity of the type mentioned by Kroch. I do not believe this is correct, however, because already in Old English nominative and accusative forms were often indistinguishable (there was never a distinction in the plural, and only a few declensions distinguish an accusative singular). In addition, if the reduction of complexity is the most important factor, this does not explain (as Kroch admits) why *do* was not introduced early in clauses of the type,
Which knight saw the king?

where the introduction of do would have solved the ambiguity between,

Which knight [subject] saw the king?
Which knight [object] did the king see?

If, however, we look at this example iconically, it is clear that this case falls in line with the other cases where a choice is involved. We have seen above (section 3.2) that matrix verb and transitive object tend to occur together due to the close links that connect them and the centrality of their position. Thus, all three cases (i, iib and iiib) where do tends to be inserted regularly involve iconic motivations. When we compare (i-iii) to Which knight saw the king, we note that there is not a similar iconic motivation there. Whether knight is subject or object, makes no difference to the iconic proximity, in both cases the V and O stay together. And here, as has been noted, do indeed occurs much later. This may show that the iconic drive is a stronger force on the introduction of do in particular sentence structures than processing complexity, or the need to solve a structural ambiguity. The availability of do, in other words, enabled speakers to ‘behave’ more iconically.

5.2. The bleaching of possessive ‘have’ to semi-modal ‘have’
In Old English, have was used as a possessive verb in constructions such as,

\[ \text{pū hefdest clāð to werien} \]
\[ \text{you had clothes to wear} \quad (\text{Lamb.Homilies 33, Fischer 1994: 141}) \]

where clāð functions as object of hefdest, but also as object of the infinitive. Syntactically, it is the object of the possessive verb, and the infinitive is used adnominally. Semantically, however, clāð is more an object of the infinitive (this object interpretation was possible in Old English because in basic word order the object preceded the infinitive), because the meaning of the infinitive is more prominent than that of the main verb. In early Modern English, due to the change in basic word order (from SOV to SVO), another surface order arose with the object following the infinitive, i.e. You had to wear clothes, next to the old order, depending on whether clothes was interpreted as the object of have (in which case the old order would be the more normal) or as an object of wear. So, what was left ambiguous in Old English (clāð as object of both have and wear) had to become explicit in Middle English, early Modern English. A choice had to be made as to which verb the object belonged. Once the two verbs were placed together (in the new order) i.e. juxtaposed, there arose an iconic tendency to interpret them as one entity (on analogy with other double verb constructions involving modals, aspectualisers etc.). This then led to a new meaning of the verb have in the new order: it became a modal verb of obligation. This shift was not so startling since the older constructions where have and the matrix verb as it were shared an object already sometimes could carry a modal interpretation (but not necessarily with obligative meaning) as in,
In Fischer (1994) I checked the interpretation of these ‘shared object’ constructions in a
corpus of Old, Middle and early Modern English. I found that a modal interpretation was
possible but occurred in only thirty nine of the one hundred and twenty two attested cases.
No increase in this interpretation is shown in the course of time, until the word order changes,
after which the modal obligation becomes the only possible one. It has been usual to interpret
the change from possessive *have* into semi-modal *have* as an example of grammaticalisation.
In the study mentioned, I have tried to show, however, that the change is much more abrupt,
that there are no gradual developments (which are a prerequisite in grammaticalisation)
before the Early Modern period, and that the real cause of the change was the juxtaposition
of *have* and the infinitive brought about by the word order change. Additional evidence for
this scenario comes from languages like Dutch and German, where the basic word order
remained SOV. In these languages the cognate of *have*, *hebben* and *haben* respectively, did
not acquire a fixed position before the infinitive, and it did not change into a semi-modal. In
other words, in these languages there did not arise the opportunity to reinterpret *have*
iconically (for more details on this case see Fischer 1994).

To conclude. What I have tried to show is that there is a strong tendency in language users
to behave iconically. The reason for this may be the fact, as argued for convincingly by
cognitive linguists, that we learn language through our contact with the socio-physical
world; and that our language acquisition device, so to speak, is part of a larger cognitive
system. Even the system of language, although highly conventionalised, may well have been
more iconic to start with. Iconic behaviour is most easily seen in ‘new’ languages, like
pidgins, in new formations (metaphorical shifts in poetry), new analogical patterns (very
clear in children’s language), folk etymology etc., and in the artistic manipulation of
language by poets and writers. I hope that a realisation of the presence of iconic motivation,
even in the rules of grammar, may help us to come to a fuller explanation of why and how
certain syntactic changes take place; more satisfactory, at least, than the ‘explanations’
presently offered in more formal accounts of syntactic change, which, staying as they do
within the formal theory of grammar, often seem rather circular.
I am much indebted to Max Nanny of the University of Zürich, whose inspiration and fascination with structure and the ‘linguistics’ of literature stimulated me into writing this article, and I wish to thank him for his critical reading of an earlier version of this text. I am also most grateful to my colleague Peter Verdonk of the University of Amsterdam and to Joseph Trotta of the University of Gothenburg for their comments and their enthusiasm and support. I would also like to thank Katie Wales, and two anonymous reviewers for raising a number of critical points, which have led to a substantial reworking of the final text.


Butler (1994), among others (see e.g. Davie 1955: 148, Nanny 1986: 199), believes that this development goes back to “French symbolist poetry, which had already experimented with free verse, typographical rearrangement, and an irrationalist association of ideas” (p.4). It is here that “the language of literature abandons the conventional binding conventions of syntax and logic” (p.9). It should be added, though, that poetry is not alone in abandoning conventional structure (as will be emphasised below). Tyler (1994: 673–74), for instance, shows that in ordinary language, too, normal expectations may be violated for pragmatic purposes in order to highlight something in a text.

I am not denying, of course, that form did not always play an important part in literature, but, whereas in the past, a writer made a conscious decision about what style fitted best the particular genre he was writing in, so that form and meaning worked conventionally together to create the message, the ‘modern’ writer or poet is more aware of form also as a separate device, as structures that can be used startlingly and independently, to add to or even contradict meaning (e.g. Nanny (forthcoming) shows how in one of Hemingway’s short stories or prose-poems, “Up in Michigan”, chiasmatic structures add to the meaning of the story). This expresses itself not only in abrupt changes of style, and an ordering of words that would be called awkward in ordinary speech, but also in a more frequent and audacious use of visual signs, such as blanks, the shape of a stanza (cf. the example from Pound’s Cantos below), differences in fonts etc. For a historical overview of such typographic foregrounding, see van Peer (1991); for some audacious uses of it in e.e. cummings, see Cureton (1981) and Nanny (1985: 133–35).

Jakobson shows in this essay (1971: 346ff) that it was in fact Charles Peirce who was the pioneer in the classification of signs (in his “On a new list of categories”, published in the Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1867). Peirce was also the first to divide icons into two types: images and diagrams, here referred to as imagic and diagrammatic iconicity.

Cf. also Leech and Short (1981: 234), “the communicative values of literature can be seen as a special exploitation of values which are inherent in the language of every day use.” Or, to put it the other way around, “whatever feature you come up with as the distinguishing mark of poetry turns out to exist in non-poetic texts as well” (Attridge 1987: 17).

Jakobson (1971: 700) correctly remarks that even icons are partly symbolic, “the full apprehension of pictures and diagrams requires a learning process. No painting is devoid of ideographic, symbolic elements”, thus showing that there is no simple contrast between icons and symbols; rather, they are on a cline.

Cf. Leech and Short (1981: 233–34), who write that (diagrammatic) iconicity falls under the ‘principle of imitation’, and emphasise that iconicity is inherent in language. It is strange, therefore, that in generative studies of language acquisition, so little attention has been paid to ‘imitation’. Indeed it has even been dismissed as unimportant because in the generative view the only way in which the fast process of language learning by children could be explained, is by postulating a ‘black box’ or Universal Grammar, which enables children to produce new structures rather than just ‘imitations’ of sentences produced by others. For a view that imitation is a crucial factor in language learning, see Lieberman (1991: 127;141–42), who writes, “[i]mitation is probably the most important mechanism for the transmission of human culture.”

In connection with children and imitation, it is interesting that Pontecorvo (1994) has shown that iconicity can be seen to be at work in children’s writing before they actually have learned how to write. In her study of Italian four to five year olds, Pontecorvo found that there is a distinct tendency in children...
to use, for instance, more (imaginary) letters for a plural than a singular concept (in spite of the fact that the Italian plural inflection marker does not add any sounds), and smaller letters for diminutives. Another way in which children often behave iconically is in their spontaneous use of ‘folk etymology’ (this is an example of semantic iconicity, see below). Thus, in Dutch, children may refer to the word rotonde ‘round about’, as rontonde, thereby indicating the relation they consider it to have with ‘round’ (Dutch /ront/ means ‘round’). Similarly opereren ‘to operate upon’ often becomes openreren, because they associate it with the body that has to be opened up. A special study dealing with iconicity and children is Slobin (1985).

9 It should be noted, however, that another linguist (Traugott 1989) does not see the move into the epistemic domain as essentially metaphorical, in contrast to Sweetser. According to Traugott the path must be seen as “the conventionalizing of conversational implicatures”, which in itself is explained by “the process of pragmatic strengthening” (1989:50).

10 One of the reviewers objects against “the avoidance of homonymity” being used to explain language change. (S)he refers to Lass (1980). In this book, Lass upholds the view that explanation is not possible in language because we cannot set up laws that predict what will happen. It is true that explanations of the nomological-deductive type are indeed not possible in language. This is because language is not a natural system like physics (see further section 4 below). But Lass’s view of explanation is unnecessarily restrictive here, as has indeed been pointed out by many of his critics (e.g. Shapiro 1991:3ff.). Explanation, but only after the event, is possible in language, and I believe with Samuels (1987) and many others that any explanation that offers insight into the processes at work, is also an explanation, and should be deemed acceptable until a better or more comprehensive one has been found. Only in this way, can we slowly begin to understand more about language and how and why it changes. Note that the danger of circularity in functional explanations, which Lass correctly points out, may be lessened when it can be shown that such a functional explanation has a basis in principles, which apply not only to language but also to other cognitive systems (see also the discussion towards the end of section 2). One such principle is iconicity.

11 Deane (1992:203) sees the usual subject before object order as an iconic example of ‘attention flow’ (a term taken from Delancey 1981), which begins at the agent and ends at the patient. Attention flow, however, may be intercrossed by the grammatical marking of ‘view point’.

12 The idea that universal features of grammar are based on principles which can only be discovered by taking note of semantic consideration, is also emphasised by Jakobson in his essay, “Implications of language universals for linguistics” (1971: 580–592). He writes on p.591, that we must “conceive language as a whole ‘in and for itself’ and simultaneously as a constituent part of culture and society.” More recent studies stressing that structure and function are intimately related are Givón 1994 and Simone 1994b. Givón (1994: 61) even relates the pervasive iconic tendency in language to a general biological tendency: in both biology and language, the “principle that structure is the basis of function” rules.

13 Since especially the eighties many books and articles have appeared on this topic both from a literary point of view (e.g. Cureton 1981; Leech and Short 1981, chapter 7; Nanny 1984, 1985, 1987, 1994) and a linguistic one (e.g. Haiman 1980, 1983, 1985a and b; the articles in Simone 1994a).


16 The relation between the meaning of the word end and its position at the end of the line in the first quote from Wordsworth below, comes very close to ‘imagic iconicity’. This is the kind of ‘icon’ that Ezra Pound tried to achieve in his poetry, when he refers to ‘le mot juste’ as distinct from the ‘ordinary word’ (see Literary Essays of Ezra Pound (ed. T.S. Eliot) quoted by Simpson 1978:661). Pound believed that poetic language should ‘denotate’ the world, that the best poetic language “is in a relation of absolute correspondence or absolute representational efficiency with that which it represents” (Simpson 1978:662). Simpson calls this Pound’s “‘natural language’ fantasy”, i.e. the fantasy, in the words of the philosopher Reid, that “nature hath established a real connection between the signs and the things signified” (quoted in Simpson p. 662).


From John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*, first section, 2, quoted in Leech and Short 1981.

On this role of *to*, see also Langacker (1992), and Givón (1994: 57), who shows in his ‘binding scale of event integration’ that *to*-infinitives are lower on the scale (i.e. less integrated) than bare infinitives. On the development/use of *to* in infinitival constructions in English and the iconically motivated difference between *to*- and bare infinitives in Middle English, see also Fischer (1995, 1996).

Aitchison (1994:15) illustrates this in humorous fashion when she writes,

> When parrots do it [i.e. repetition], it’s parrotting.
> When advertisers do it, it’s reinforcement.
> When children do it, it’s imitation.
> When brain-damaged people do it, it’s perseveration or echolalia.
> When dis-fluent people do it, it’s stuttering or stammering.
> When orators do it, it’s epizeuxis, ploce, anadiplosis, polyptoton or antimetabole.
> When novelists do it, it’s cohesion.
> When poets do it it’s alliteration, chiming, rhyme or parallelism.
> When priests do it, it’s ritual. etc.

It is clear, however, that Aitchison finds so many uses because here (on purpose, of course!) she does not consider the function/intention behind them; thus in her list only ‘reinforcement’ and ‘cohesion’ tell us something about function.


In a very interesting article dealing with this story, Simpson (1992) shows that in terms of cohesion and narrative structure the story can also be characterised as impersonal, dehumanised. He notes the general lack of causality in the story (p.53); even one case where natural causality is reversed (p.55). Other factors too are shown to contribute to the feeling that the story tries to be non-‘engagic’ (p.62), such as the lack of formal connectives, the way in which descriptive and actional patterns are distributed, and the incomplete, undetermined ending.

Givón (1994: 62) offers another, very interesting suggestion for the presence of both “iconic and abstract elements” in grammar. Comparing the complex code of grammar to the biological code, he writes, “The rise of more abstract coding and rhythmic-hierarchic structure is common to both. This rather ubiquitous feature of biological codes is probably an adaptive response to the very same inherent limitation – the paucity of iconic coding dimensions. As the functional complexity of a biological domain increases, the code-level presses into service less isomorphic, more abstract dimensions.”

Likewise, if we accept that there is an ontogenetic relation between language development and children’s acquisition of language, it is not surprising that iconicity plays an important role in the latter too as we can see in the prevalence of analogical formations in children’s speech, and as Pontecorvo (1994) has shown even in the way children develop a writing system (cf. note 8). For the presence of iconicity in pidgins, see also Romaine (1988: 39).

Kroch sees the complexity in the parsing rather than in the generation of sentences (n.6, p.106). He writes, “To give a coherent account of the data, we clearly must postulate the existence of a feedback relationship between generation and parsing so that the difficulties of the latter process come to guide the operation of the former.” If we accept, however, that iconicity is a force in speakers, then that could also explain why speakers insert *do* in the circumstances described below.

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19 From John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*, first section, 2, quoted in Leech and Short 1981.
20 On this role of *to*, see also Langacker (1992), and Givón (1994: 57), who shows in his ‘binding scale of event integration’ that *to*-infinitives are lower on the scale (i.e. less integrated) than bare infinitives. On the development/use of *to* in infinitival constructions in English and the iconically motivated difference between *to*- and bare infinitives in Middle English, see also Fischer (1995, 1996).
21 Aitchison (1994:15) illustrates this in humorous fashion when she writes,

> When parrots do it [i.e. repetition], it’s parrotting.
> When advertisers do it, it’s reinforcement.
> When children do it, it’s imitation.
> When brain-damaged people do it, it’s perseveration or echolalia.
> When dis-fluent people do it, it’s stuttering or stammering.
> When orators do it, it’s epizeuxis, ploce, anadiplosis, polyptoton or antimetabole.
> When novelists do it, it’s cohesion.
> When poets do it it’s alliteration, chiming, rhyme or parallelism.
> When priests do it, it’s ritual. etc.

It is clear, however, that Aitchison finds so many uses because here (on purpose, of course!) she does not consider the function/intention behind them; thus in her list only ‘reinforcement’ and ‘cohesion’ tell us something about function.

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