The critique of iconicity: the Bierman-Goodman connection

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Introduction

Ever since the 1960s the question regarding the specificity of the iconic sign (mainly discuss on example of pictures) in contradistinction to other kinds of signs has been the subject of lively debate in general semiotic. In the course of discussion, the Peircean notion of iconicity came in for criticism by philosophers, such as Arthur Bierman and Nelson Goodman, as well as semioticians, such as Umberto Eco and René Lindekehns. In opposition to this critique, Göran Sonesson introduce his own view, which defend iconicity.
Bierman’s arguments
1. The Metaphysical Argument

In the world there are some universal categories which means everything in the universe shares some characteristic with each other. That leads to conclusion that everything in the universe iconically denotes everything and everything in the universe is denoted by any other thing. By introducing smth called negative connotation we would be able to avoid the consequence of ubiquitous denotation. The metaphysical have another consequence – conventional sign have denotative freedom – it can denote nothing, one, or many things.
There are some conventional signs that denote nothing, because nothing in the universe possesses sign’s signification. But can iconic sign describe nothing? If the resemblance relation holds between two things, at least one of the terms of that relation will be an iconic sign. Resemblance relation is reflexive what mean, that iconic sign denote itself. Due to this statement iconic sign cannot have null denotation.
3. The Uniqueness Argument

Even if we not include that iconic sign denote itself – can it have null denotation?

For iconic sign to have null denotation it must be unique – it cannot resemble anything else in the universe.

But according to Morris, resemblance is what makes iconic sign an iconic sign. That means icon cannot have both null denotation and be a sign.
4. The Diversity Argument

If every distinct object in the universe were unique in all respects, we could conclude, by the previous argument that no object could be an iconic sign. We cannot decide about rejecting specific characteristics of the objects just to make it sign. This kind of sign is more about being under convention, which in our case is useless, because iconic signs are all about resemble to the real object in the universe.
5. The Residue Argument

Suppose that on basis of some of the residue characteristics an object will resemble one class of objects, and on other residue characteristics it will resemble on another class of objects. But on the other hand, we can eliminate this ambiguity if we specify which characteristics constitute the sign’s signification. Doing that, we have to state the connotation of the sign, so our distinction between conventional and iconic sign is disappearing.
6. The Symmetricality Argument

According to Bierman: “if an object’s resemblance to another object is sufficient for its being an iconic sign, we have no way of deciding which of the two objects is the icon, for resemblance is a symmetrical relation”. To make this argument a little bit easier to understand: when we have two objects who are resembling, we have to decide: which one is going to be ‘the denotation’. In this moment iconic sign loses its attribute, in simple words: symmetrically – being resemble to one object, without interference of a human.
7. The Correct Application Argument

Apart from the first argument about universal characteristics, we should make it clear: if it’s possible for an icon to resemble nothing in the universe? Yes, it’s logically possible, but going further, if it resembles nothing, then it has no signification – thus we have no criterion for deciding if the application is correct or not.
8. The Unchanged Meaning Argument

From Socrates thought that iconic sign applied correctly or incorrectly won’t change its meaning we can try to look if iconic sing applied even correctly can change its meaning. Best way to show that is to present Bierman’s example, which shows that iconic sign even if is applied correctly, its changes its meaning. The criterion to say that iconic sign have its meaning is its denotative and significative sense (due to lack of its connotation).
Sonesson’s counterarguments
Argument of regression

• base on the idea, that there are some universal characteristic, which are shared by all things in the world so, on that account these things may refer to and be referred to everything else.

• if we accept that iconicity is at the origin of signs, then everything in the world will be signs

• according to Bierman this consequence can be avoided if we introduce limitation that no iconic sign should contain universal characteristic

But....
Argument of regression

- presented solution is scarcely acceptable
- sheer resemblance does not constitute something as a sign
- when we compare two objects in terms of their similarity, we just establish an iconic ground
- the objects become iconic signs only when one of these objects is taken to stand for the other
- the fact that two things are similar means that these two things provide potentiality for one thing to become an iconic sign for another
- the import of argument of regression actually depends on the way we interpret Peirce’s theory
The symmetry argument

• It is based on the idea, that identification of the commonsensical notion of similarity understand in commonsensical way can be identified with the equivalence relation of logic

• In logic the equivalence relation is symmetrical and reflexive, so it cannot define any type of sign

• This statement can be supported by experiments carried out by Rosch (1975), Tversky (1977), Tversky & Gati (1978)
The symmetry argument

• This goes to show that unlike the Bierman view, similarity in semiotic aspect is asymmetric and irreflexive. Therefore, this also leads to the rejection of the symmetry argument.

As Sonesson says: “Contrary to the argument of regression, the symmetry argument may thus be avert, without introducing a supplementary sign function and without correct the definition of the iconic ground”.

Bierman’s arguments hard to reject

It is hard to find any of Bierman’s argument being easy to defend. In our opinion problem lies in his misunderstanding of the basic concepts of iconic signs. For instance, he claims that resemblance between two things already makes one of them an iconic sign of second one (when resemblance only creates an iconic ground that can lead to create a sign). Due to that, we have to reject all of his arguments and focus on the correct interpretation of iconic sign.
Hochberg & Brooks studies

This experiment was carried out to determine whether the child is able to recognize photographs and two-dimensional line-drawings, even without receiving any instructions related to pictorial meaning and content.
Hochberg & Brooks studies

Fig. 1. Pictures shown in Part 1
Hochberg & Brooks studies
Hochberg & Brooks studies

The results of this study showed, that child was able to recognize pictorial representations of solid objects, without specific training or instruction. It points to some irreducible minimum of native ability for pictorial recognition. We must infer, that there is an unlearned propensity to respond to certain formal features of lines-on-paper.
Our proposition

We thought about extending Hochberg & Brooks’ experiment to cover iconic signs differed in levels and kinds of iconicity:

• black-and-white line drawings and realistic color pictures
Our proposition

• black-and-white photos and coloured photos
Our proposition

- replica: uniform and coloured
Our proposition

These modifications allowed us to address the following questions:

• Does iconic signs differed in levels or kinds of iconicity have an effect on children’s performance on a naming task

• Does child is able to recognize replica as a representation of the object without specific training or instruction
Summary

- Ever since the 1960s iconic sign (especially pictorial sign) has been the subject of lively debate in general semiotic.
- Bierman formulated 8 arguments against iconicity.
- Two of them: the metaphysical argument (argument of regression) and the symmetricality argument which summarize main objection against icon were discuss extensively in Sonesson writings.
- Sonesson introduced the reason, why we cannot accept Bierman line of reasoning.
Summary

In our opinion iconic sign surely exist, because:

• Bierman based his arguments on false assumptions and conceptual misunderstanding
• Objections regarding his view are supported by psychological experiments (for example perform by Rosch or Tversky), as well as Hochberg & Brooks’ studies

So we cannot accept Biermans objection concerning icon or save them from Sonesson critique.
References

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Thank you very much for your attention 😊

Tack ska du ha!