

The Dual Face of Linguistic Meaning: Combining Logic and Iconicity

It has long been accepted that sign language (i) employs the same logical structures as spoken language and simultaneously (ii) makes extensive use of iconicity. But the articulation between these two modules has only been discussed piecemeal. Based on new data from American Sign Language (ASL), we argue that natural language semantics must be extended with a pictorial component, one that makes crucial use of the formal semantics of pictures recently developed in philosophy and in linguistics (Gabriel Greenberg, Dorit Abusch). The result, which we call 'iconological semantics', offers a new integration of logical and iconic semantics, as well as a new perspective on the foundations of meaning in natural language.

We also show that the pictorial semantics of some constructions has consequences for their syntax. In ASL, classifier predicates, which notoriously have an iconic semantics, often override the basic SVO order of the language, yielding preverbal objects instead. But crucially this is only true to the extent that the denoted object is typically visible before the action (e.g. x ate up y). This is in essence because the classifier predicate creates a visual animation of the denoted scene. When the object is visible only *after* the action (e.g. x spit out y), an SVO order is regained. We argue that this behavior is mirrored by that of pantomimic gestures in spoken language: they too can override the default word order of the (spoken) language (Goldin-Meadow et al. 2008), but we find the same contrast between eat-up and spit-out-type gestures, owing again to an iconic syntax.

In sum, on both semantic and syntactic grounds, natural language isn't just a discrete logical system, but rather such a system with a tightly integrated pictorial component.

Optional readings:

[General audience; general background] On sign language semantics: Schlenker, what it All Means, Chapter 2. Pre-print: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/vxi81q1hgy4xkmr/Schlenker-What%20it%20All%20Means-Chapter%202-preprint.pdf?dl=0>

[Research-level] On iconological semantics: Schlenker and Lamberton (2024, Linguistics & Philosophy), 'Iconological Semantics': <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10988-024-09411-x>
<https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/007048>

[Research-level] On iconic syntax: Schlenker et al. (2024, Linguistics & Philosophy), 'Iconic Syntax': <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10988-023-09388-z>,
<https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/006060>