Onomasiological iconicity in spoken, written and signed languages

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In this paper I will argue that it is necessary to distinguish between two types of iconicity in order to assess the true scope of this phenomenon in natural languages. In *semasiological* iconicity, a linguistic form is interpreted as suggesting a certain linguistic meaning so we obtain a *form miming meaning* (FMM). This is the usual way of seeing iconicity in natural languages. But there is another way of approaching the iconic relations between meaning and form. It can be called *onomasiological* iconicity. In this case, a linguistic meaning suggests a particular iconic interpretation of a linguistic form, so we obtain a *meaning miming form* (MMF). Phonesthemes are a very clear example of   onomasiological iconicity: the semantic value of certain sound combinations as English initial *gl*— (which acquires the connotation of something related to light or vision) is clearly derived from the meanings of several words containing this initial consonant cluster: *glitter, glisten, glow, gleam, glear, glimmer.*… The distinction established by Klima & Bellugi (1979) between transparent and translucent iconic signs can be easily accounted for using the semasiological/ onomasiological dichotomy. A transparent sign can be understood simply from its form alone. For example, in the ASL sign for TREE the forearm represents the trunk of the tree and the hand with the stretched fingers depicts the branches. The iconicity of a translucent sign can only be properly understood if its meaning is previously known. Iconicity in written language is clearly of the onomasiological type. For example, the grapheme <i> has a thin, elongated shape (corresponding with the vowel [i]) contrasting with <o> or <a> (corresponding with the vowels [o] and [a]), that have a rounded, more voluminous shape: so the written word *thin* has a thin letter <i> and the word *fat* has a bigger rounded letter <a> (Nänny 1999). But these associations cannot be semasiological, that is, based on supposed intrinsic values of these letters (as a reflection of those of the corresponding vowels), simply because, in their original form (that of the Phoenician abjad), they transcribe consonants and not vowels and their shapes were slightly or completely different.

References: • Taub, S. F. 2001. *Language from the body. Iconicity and Metaphor in American Sign Language.* Cambridge: CUP. • Klima, E. & U. Bellugi (eds.) 1979. *The signs of language.* Harvard: Harvard University Press.