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## ON THE PROBLEM OF SEMIOTIC NATURE OF ABBREVIATIONS AND PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS

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The article highlights a semiotic approach to the study of specific language units: abbreviations and phraseological units. The relation between the signifier and the signified helps to perceive the process of the formation of new linguistic signs which can be both motivated and arbitrary. In both cases the asymmetry of a linguistic sign causes the appearance of either a new signifier (in abbreviation), or a new signified (in phraseology).

**Key words:** semiotics, motivation, abbreviation, phraseology, signified, signifier, asymmetry of a linguistic sign.

### К проблеме семиотической природы аббревиатур и фразеологических единиц

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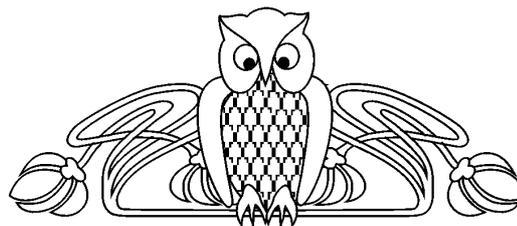
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В статье рассматривается семиотический подход к изучению особых языковых единиц: аббревиатур и фразеологизмов. Отношения между означающим и означаемым помогают понять процесс формирования новых лингвистических знаков, которые могут быть как мотивированными, так и немотивированными. В обоих случаях асимметрия языкового знака является результатом появления либо нового означающего (в аббревиации), либо нового означаемого (во фразеологии).

**Ключевые слова:** семиотика, мотивированность, аббревиация, фразеология, означаемое, означающее, асимметрия языкового знака.

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The semiotic approach to the study of abbreviations and phraseological units proves to be very productive as it helps to realize the processes which define the relations between the signifier and the



signified in a word as a linguistic sign. Due to this, the problem of motivation becomes essential for the study of these two types of language units. The problem of motivation is traditionally approached from the viewpoint of semiotics. In this respect abbreviations (or shortenings – the two terms are used here as synonyms) and phraseological units are specific linguistic signs. While studying both shortenings and idioms from semiotic point of view, it is important to take into consideration such an essential aspect as motivated vs. arbitrary nature of these specific signs. These two groups of linguistic units should be studied in regard of realization of extensional and intensional functions which vary from one group to the other.

In his time a famous Swiss linguist F. de Saussure claimed arbitrariness as the main semiotic principle of a linguistic sign. “A linguistic sign is arbitrary”<sup>1</sup>. Since that time there has been a discussion on the nature of a linguistic sign among linguists both in this country and abroad (Charles Bally, Emile Benveniste, Jerzy Kurylowicz, Eugenio Coseriu, Roman Jakobson and others)<sup>2</sup>. There were different causes why this issue has not been solved yet. Firstly, the definition of the term *arbitrary* (from French *l'arbitraire*) is opaque, because it has different interpretations. Secondly, there is still some disagreement about what relations between the signifier and the signified in a linguistic sign may be characterized as arbitrary: (a) the relations between the signifier and the signified object (denotatum); (b) the relations between the signifier and the signified (concept). Thirdly, the subject matter of the discussion concerning semiotic signs – in general, and semiotic character of a linguistic sign – in particular, is studied differently in different sciences, e.g. psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, philosophy, etymology, etc.

Linguistics traditionally studies arbitrariness vs. motivation as being an intra-system (structural) and functional (i.e. being realized in speech process) phenomena<sup>3</sup>. Also, a linguistic sign arbitrariness is studied differently using the synchronic and diachronic approaches, as well as on different planes of a language system; besides, the problem may be studied in different semiotic aspects: semantics, syntagmatics, pragmatics<sup>4</sup>.

In modern linguistics arbitrariness of a linguistic sign is believed to be caused by, on the one hand, the tradition of linguistic sign usage, and on the other hand, genesis of signs in general and their random appearance. However, the latter statement is sometimes criticized. Other linguists, such as V. M. Solntsev (В. М. Солнцев), I. N. Gorelov (И. Н. Горелов),



A. P. Zhuravlev (А. П. Журавлев), prove natural determination of “primary” choice of this or that sound cluster for the nomination of some signified. The adherents of this approach are inspired and theoretically supported by the onomatopoeic theory of language origin and the phenomenon of the so called sound symbolism (See the works of Ch. Osgood). As V. M. Solntsev (В. М. Солнцев) writes, sound imitation and sound symbolism exist in languages, but they do not define the nature of the language as a secondary semiotic system. In language systems there has always been a tendency not to form new sound clusters (new signifiers) for nomination of a new signified, but rather complicate already existing signifiers or signified<sup>5</sup>.

The question whether there is an intrinsic connection between form and meaning (sound and sense) or whether words are purely conventional symbols was fully re-examined during the last century<sup>6</sup>. The term motivation denotes the relationship existing between morphemic or phonemic composition and structural pattern of the word on the one hand, and its meaning on the other.

Motivation is a highly complicated phenomenon which may work in three different ways on a lexical level:

1) Onomatopoeic words are phonetically motivated. Besides, the theory of sound symbolism should not be overlooked (see the works of Ch. Osgood, A. P. Zhuravlev (А. П. Журавлев) and others);

2) A lot of words are motivated by their morphological structure;

3) If a word is used in a transferred meaning, the result is semantically motivated words.

Shortenings are peculiar linguistic units and motivation displays itself differently in different types of shortenings.

It is a well-known fact that shortening of words is a specific means of word-formation which unlike other types produces both words and word-variants. The traditional classification of shortenings singles out two main groups: graphical and lexical. Afterwards there was distinguished a third, overlapping group (grapho-lexical shortenings) which includes initial abbreviations (or alphabetisms) and acronyms<sup>7</sup>. These classifications account for both the origin of the shortening and its word-status (a new word or a word variant).

There are different views on how various types of shortenings are motivated. Some scholars (H. Marchand among them) affirm that initial abbreviations and clipped compounds are most arbitrary and non-motivated because they have no word-building paradigm. But the analysis proves the opposite.

Those initial abbreviations (alphabetisms and acronyms like *MP*, *BBC*, *UNESCO*) and clippings (like *flu*, *exam*, *phone*) which have become recurrent in speech action may acquire a grammatical paradigm and start functioning as ordinary words. In this case they are used with articles, in the possessive case; they begin to serve as a derivational basis adding

lexical and grammatical suffixes (e.g. *-s*, *-ess*, etc.) In a sentence such shortenings may be found in the function of the attribute as well as the subject or the object, e.g.:

... as compared with an ordinary MP's salary;  
*Ch. Killis, who for two years was a Conservative MP, expresses the views of many other MPs;*  
*Many BBC programmes now outdraw their money-making rival.*

Other linguists consider all types of shortenings to be secondary in their relations with their full prototypes, and thus being originally motivated which is also true, e.g.:

1) *Bus* < *omnibus* (initial clipping);  
 2) *MP* < *Member of Parliament* (Br.), *Military Police* (Am.) (an alphabetism);  
 3) *FRED* < *Fast Relocatable Editing Dump* (an acronym homonymous to a proper name *Fred*).

Thus the analysis of shortenings shows that the problem of motivation is not simple and must be approached from different angles. The study of motivation shows that it is realized through an indirect connection between the shortened form of the signifier (the form) and its signified (the concept) because of the existence of direct relation of this shortened signifier with its full form, and the latter is the component of a linguistic sign.

Thus English shortenings (as well as Russian ones of a similar structure) are motivated insofar as:

1) the connection between the signified and the shortened form of the signifier is indirect because of the direct connection between a shortening and its full prototype;

2) the signifier is originally motivated by its full form.

So the peculiarity of motivation of abbreviations lies in the fact that its motivation is represented by:

a) the connection between the signifier (second form) and the signified (concept);

b) and at the same time there is a connection between different signs – what is known as “horizontal” relations – of different signified and signifiers.

Therefore abbreviations illustrate the tendency to complicate already existing signifiers, which demonstrates the dichotomy of economy and abundance of language means. In its turn phraseological units represent the example of the linguistic sign complication, but on the level of the signified.

Studying phraseological units as language signs, we need to take into consideration the complexity of the relations between the signifier and the signified within this specific sign. It has already been mentioned that the modern means of enriching a language vocabulary tend to take shape of constantly changing relations between the meaning and form in already existing linguistic signs. As for phraseological units, the relation between the signifier and the signified is even more complicated due to the fact, that the signified of an idiomatic linguistic sign is fractionary, since idiomatic meaning is interwoven with cultural and connotational semes.



A phraseological unit of any language has a corresponding free word-group with its own meaning, which is determined by the meanings of the words – components of this free word-group. In phraseological meaning of an idiomatic sign the relation between the denotatum (an object or a phenomenon of the reality) and the signifier is indirect and embodied through a mediation of a trope (e.g. metaphor, metonymy) which makes up the inner form of a phraseological unit. The inner form of an idiom serves to establish the cognitive ties between the denotational component of the phraseological meaning and cultural and connotational components of its semantics. What is more, phraseological units being semiotic signs of this or that language system demonstrate the tendency to be transferred into elements of a sign system of this or that culture. A two-facet idiomatic sign is processed within the structure of a culture system, which highlights or intensifies cognitive senses of its semantics, which, in its turn, are relevant for a new system<sup>8</sup>.

So we can define a phraseological system of any given language as a secondary sign system due to the indirect relation between the signifier and the signified in this specific linguistic sign, which will be demonstrated on the following examples.

A phraseological unit *a canary in a coalmine* possesses the meaning “an early indicator of potential danger or failure”. Asymmetry of a linguistic sign manifests itself in the asymmetric relation between the signifier “a canary in a coalmine” and the two signified which it corresponds to: the first is the meaning of a free word-group and the second one is a phraseological meaning of an idiom. It establishes the horizontal relations between a free word-group and a phraseological unit. The cognitive ties between the two are established through the inner form of this phraseological unit, which is based on the metaphor originating from the following situation: miners would take caged canaries and carry them down into the mine tunnels with them; if the amount of dangerous gases such as carbon monoxide accumulated in the mine exceeded the safe level, the gases would kill the canary before killing the miners, thus providing a warning to exit the tunnels immediately. The basis of the metaphor in this case is the cognitive mapping of a hazardous situation in a mine onto any dangerous circumstances in any sphere of life.

In some cases the process of complication of the signified in an idiomatic sign undergoes several stages. Most often it happens when a phraseological unit already possessing a phraseological meaning – the signified, that is only indirectly related to the signifier through a metaphor or another trope, develops polysemy by acquiring new phraseological meanings. In this case this process makes the asymmetric relation between the signifier and the signified in this idiomatic sign even more complicated. The polysemy of a phraseological unit is often developed when a general-use idiom is borrowed into a specific terminological area, in which it starts to perform as a term, acquiring a certain definition, thus a new sign

appears. This new sign is characterized by one-to-one correspondence of the signified and the signifier.

For instance, a free word-group *a bear trap* means “a type of a trap meant to catch bears”. Originally it dates back to the 1600s and looked like a huge trap, about two or three feet across, with big zigzag teeth. This type of traps still exists nowadays. However, they are restricted or banned in many areas of the world and the modern-day modifications tend not to use the steel saw-tooth design, due to concerns about both animal cruelty and potential injuries to any humans who inadvertently wander into the trap. Instead, rubber or offset ridges are used so that an animal is simply trapped rather than injured.

The meaning of this free word-group was metaphorically transferred to denote different things in different terminological areas:

a) Police professional slang (Am.): A police radar trap for speeders;

b) Business term: A false signal that the rising trend of a stock or index has reversed when it has not. A bear trap prompts traders to place shorts on the stock or index, since they expect the underlying to decline in value. However, instead of declining further, the investment stays flat or slightly recovers;

c) Pilots’ professional slang: a hauldown device that allows helicopter to land on small flight decks in bad weather;

d) Golf term: the most demanding 3-hole stretches on the PGA tour. Winners of the PGA tour have to face its perils to come out with the victory. How “the bear trap” is played invariably determines the winner of a tournament;

e) Skiing nomenclature name: bear-trap bindings, are a type of ski bindings widely used through the middle of the 20th century. It attaches firmly at the toe only, normally in a trapezoidal metal cup roughly the same as the toe of a boot. A strap is fastened over the toe to stop it from rising out of the cup vertically. Another cable holds the boot forward into the cup, and under the tow strap. If the heel is lifted, causing the boot to rotate in the toe clip, a spring keeps tension on the cable to keep the boot pressed forward.

As the study shows, the signifier “a bear trap” in the process of acquiring a new signified forms a new linguistic sign which starts to perform different functions in different contexts, which vary from professional to terminological. This way there appears a number of terminological homonyms with the same signifier – “a bear trap”, but these linguistic signs cannot be regarded as polysemantic because all of them have been formed on a different motivational basis. For example, the terminological idiom “a bear trap” in business is opposed to “a bull trap” (with bears and bulls representing the major agents of the Market) and does not possess any cognitive senses connected with the original meaning of this free word-group. These homonyms strictly realize their terminological definition only in the specialized contexts, unlike general-use idioms, thus functioning as separate linguistic signs.



Suffice it to say here that shortenings and idioms are motivated at the time of their appearance and stay as such as long as there is a connection with the full prototype (in case of abbreviations) or with a free word-group (in case of phraseological units). In course of their functioning in a language, the connection may be lost and these linguistic units become arbitrary.

However, it should be noted that abbreviations of grapho-lexical and lexical types are also motivated by their morphological structure, e.g. *GP* (“general practitioner” – alphabetism) и *jeep* (“a car for general purpose” – acronym); *motel* < *motorist* + *hotel* (telescope shortening), *phone* < *telephone* (initial clipping), *flu* < *influenza* (mixed clipping), *doc* < *doctor* (final clipping). As for phraseological units, they illustrate semantic motivation, as the whole unit acquires a new transferred meaning and starts functioning as a new linguistic sign.

Extensional and intensional functions are realized in the two groups of linguistic units (abbreviations and phraseological units) differently: shortenings of all types perform extensional function in a language, whereas phraseological units demonstrate intensional function rather than extensional.

Thus the semiotic approach to the study of abbreviations and phraseological units helps to expose the complicated relation within these different types of linguistic signs. The focus on the two particular vocabulary types of units in this research serves one purpose: to identify the asymmetric relations between the signifier and the signified which work in different ways depending on the type of a linguistic sign.

Horizontal relations between different signified and signifiers of the two units (full prototype / abbreviation; free word-group / phraseological unit) help to understand the motivated or arbitrary character of newly formed linguistic units. The described inter-sign processes define the semiotic nature of abbreviations and phraseological units and their peculiarities.

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