

Annual report 2016 of ACLC research group: Iconicity in language use, language learning, and language change

Coordinator: Olga Fischer

Webpage: [Iconicity](#)

Participants in 2016

- Olga Fischer (ACLC), senior researcher, coordinator
- PhD students affiliated to the group: Imogen Cohen and Elisabetta Materassi (UvA)
- Ludovic De Cuyper (University of Ghent, Belgium)
- Christina Ljungberg (Zürich University, Switzerland, coordinator)
- Piotr Sadowski (American College, Dublin, Ireland)
- Hendrik De Smet (Universiteit Leuven, Belgium)
- William Herlofsky (Nagoya Gakuin University, Japan)
- Klaas Willems (University of Ghent, Belgium)
- Masako Hiraga (Rikkyo University Tokyo)

Description

Iconicity as a semiotic notion refers to a natural resemblance or analogy between the form of a sign ('the signifier') and the object or concept ('the signified') it refers to in the world or rather in our perception of the world. The similarity between sign and object may be due to common features inherent in both: by direct inspection of the iconic sign we may glean true information about its object. In this case we speak of 'imagic' iconicity (as in onomatopoeia, or photography) and the sign is called an 'iconic image'. In language, the similarity is usually a more abstract analogy; we then have to do with diagrammatic iconicity which is based on a relationship between signs that mirrors a similar relation between objects or actions. Both imagic and diagrammatic iconicity are not clear-cut categories but form a continuum on which the iconic instances run from almost perfect mirroring (i.e. a semiotic relationship that is virtually independent of any individual language or system) to a relationship that becomes more and more suggestive or abstract and also more and more language- or system-dependent (i.e. in Peircean terms 'symbolic').

Contrary to the structuralist idea that language is fundamentally arbitrary, linguistic research in the twentieth century has shown that iconicity operates at every level of language (phonology, morphology, syntax) and in practically every known language. The process referred to as grammaticalization can also be seen to be related to iconicity, via the iconic principles of quantity and proximity as shown, among others, by John Haiman and Talmy Givón. Recent literary criticism has confirmed that iconicity is also pervasive in literary texts, from its prosody and rhyme, its lineation, stanzaic ordering, its textual and narrative structure to its typographic layout on the page.

Overview of progress in 2016

- The volume of the tenth international symposium (held at the University of Tübingen) is now in press with [Benjamins](#), entitled *Dimensions of Iconicity*, edited by Angelika Zirker, Matthias Bauer, Olga Fischer and Christina Ljungberg. All the papers were read and reviewed by the four editors Olga Fischer and Christina Ljungberg and other more specialized reviewers. Only the best were selected, quite a few had to be disregarded. The volume gathers together papers on phonic, cognitive and multimodal dimensions of iconicity.
- Olga Fischer and Christina Ljungberg together with Pamela Perniss, as local organizer have been preparing the [eleventh conference on Iconicity](#) at the University of Brighton (to be held April 6-8, 2017). The plenaries will be given by Mark Dingemanse, Neil Cohn and Lucia Santaella. There will be a separate workshop on “Experimental approaches to iconicity in language evolution” as part of the symposium, and sign language and gesture will play an important role at the conference.
- Olga Fischer has given a plenary talk as president of ISLE at the [ISLE conference in Poznan](#) in September 2016 on the rediscovery of the importance of analogy in cognitive science -- after a long neglect within the generative school of linguistics --, in which she referred to interesting ideas voiced on analogy by Hermann Paul as early as 1886. She also showed that not enough attention is paid to analogy in grammaticalization studies and in diachronic construction grammar.
- Olga Fischer has also presented a paper at the SLE Conference in Naples with the title [‘What role do iconicity and analogy play in grammaticalization?’](#), as part of a workshop organized by linguists from Max Planck Leipzig, and the universities of Leipzig and Jena on “Diachronic and functional explanations in linguistic typology”, whose aim was to formulate “explanations that have cross-linguistic validity” and that are of interest in what they may reveal about the “cognitive basis of human language”. The emphasis of her talk was

on the universal role played by analogy, and specifically on how its influence can be uncovered by means of a close look at both diachronic and comparative evidence.

- Finally, not mentioned in the report of 2015, Olga Fischer has presented work, done together with Hella Olbertz, at the [SHEL 9 conference at UBC in Vancouver](#) . It involved a comparison of two similar but unrelated grammaticalization cases in English and Spanish, concerning the grammaticalization of English *have to* and *Spanish tener que*, where analogy can be shown to have played an interesting role in that in both English and Spanish similar factors involving similarities in word order and the use of particular lexical items have steered the way the grammaticalization developed, thus providing interesting evidence for the force of analogy. The paper coming out of this research will be published in a volume with CUP in 2017.