

How sound is meaning

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Two ideas have shaped linguistic theorizing about the relation between sound and meaning for a good century:

1. The **arbitrariness** of the sign (F. de Saussure) according to which the relation between sound and meaning in simplex expressions is arbitrary.
2. The principle of **compositionality** (typically ascribed to G. Frege) according to which the relation between sound and meaning in complex expressions is predictable from its constituent expressions and the rules that combine them.

In this talk I explore these ideas based on two (apparent) form-meaning mismatches:

1. **Fake past:** past tense marking in English is not always interpreted as past tense but when used in a conditional clause receives a counterfactual interpretation (*I wish I had a car now*)
2. **Rising declaratives:** declaratives are not always interpreted as assertions but when used with rising intonation receive a question interpretation (*You want a car?*)

I argue that in neither case are we in fact dealing with a ‘form-meaning’ mismatch. Rather, the key to understanding both types of phenomena is to recognize the existence of a (universal) spine which comes with built in interpretive functions (Wiltschko 2014). As a consequence, lexical material may get enriched with meaning that is not overtly expressed. Thus, the assumption of the spine lends a particular view on the principle of compositionality: it is what underlies the fact that the “rules of composition” determine in part the meaning of a complex expression.

Accordingly, there is nothing fake about fake past. It arises because the lexical entry for the so called past tense marker does in fact not specify temporal *past*. Rather the past tense interpretation as well as the counterfactual interpretation is derived from the lexical entry in combination with the spine (Wiltschko 2014).

Taking this approach to form-meaning mismatches as a starting point, I show that it cannot fully account for the mismatch between clause-type and speech-act type in rising declaratives. That is, unlike with fake past, there is no abstract lexical entry (“declarative”) that is interpreted as an assertion in one syntactic context and as a question in a different syntactic context. Rather, I argue that rising intonation itself triggers the question intonation, but it does so by virtue of associating with the spine as sound alone rather than a Saussurian (arbitrary) sound-meaning bundle. In this way, I show that the meaning of sound reveals the interpretive functions intrinsic to the spine: since there is no lexical entry for intonational tunes, there is no arbitrary sound-meaning relation. As a result, the interpretation of rising intonation is virtually universal precisely because the interpretive functions of the spine are universal (and there is an aspect of iconicity involved, as I will show).

I further show that the canonical interpretation of declaratives as assertions is equally universal precisely because there is no arbitrary sign. Instead it derives from the configuration of the universal spine: the most basic and unmarked clauses are used to encode things we know and thus give rise to assertions.