Arbitrariness and *valeur*: an example

Saussure claimed that there is an intimate relationship between ***l'arbitraire du signe*** and the notion of ***valeur*** – i.e. that the arbitrariness of the relationship between ***signifiant*** and ***signifié*** in the sign function meant that each ***signifiant*** could only be defined *relative to* the others with which it forms a system; and the same is true of each ***signifié*** in *its* system.

I claimed that this means that the speech community has to ***strictly police the boundaries*** – e.g. between two phonemes. A good example for German learners of English would be the boundary between /e/ and /æ/. It is essential to make the distinction between these two sounds when speaking English.

In the following, I give an exception (the non-arbitrariness of onomatopoeia) in order to prove the rule.

(*RARE*) *NON-ARBITRARINESS* (*e.g. ONOMATOPOEIA*)				(*NORMAL*) *ARBITRARINESS* (*e.g. MOST WORDS*)			
phonetic	*emic*	*lexical*	*semantic*	*phonetic*	*emic*	*lexical*	*semantic*
[mjɪʊ̯]		MIAOW	'cat noise'	[bɪt]	/ bɪt /	BIT	'bisschen'
[mjeʊ̯]		MIAOW	'cat noise'	[bet]	/ bet /	BET	'Wette'
[mjɐ̯ʊ̯]		MIAOW	'cat noise'	[bɐ̯t]	/ bet /	BET	'Wette'
[mjɛʊ̯]		**MIAOW**	'cat noise'	**[bɛt]**	**/ bet /**	**BET**	'Wette'
[mjæʊ̯]		**MIAOW**	'cat noise'	**[bæt]**	**/ bæt /**	**BAT**	'Schläger'
[mjaʊ̯]		MIAOW	'cat noise'	[bat]	/ bæt /	BAT	'Schläger'
[mjɐ̯ʊ̯]		MIAOW	'cat noise'	[bɐ̯t]	/ bʌt /	BUT	'aber'
[mjɑʊ̯]		MIAOW	'cat noise'	[bɑt]	/ bɑt /	BOT	'Bot'(AmE)

If the relation between sound and meaning were ***not*** arbitrary, it would not be necessary for the speech community to so strictly police the boundaries between one sound and another, or between one meaning and another, or, to sum up: between one sign and another. In a semiotic system based on a ***non***-arbitrary association of meaning with sound, you could vary your pronunciation quite a lot and people would still know what you meant – maybe [mjɪʊ̯] would be understood as an imitation of the noise that a small cat makes, and [mjɑʊ̯] as the noise that a large cat makes, but there would be no doubt about the fact that you were imitating the noise made by a cat.

But if you varied one of the sounds in most other English words by that much, you would cross four boundaries. Between the boundaries, variation is unimportant and is therefore ignored; across the boundaries, however, the distinctions are vital, and are policed strictly.

Most of the difficulties that speakers of different dialects have in understanding each other are related to these strictly policed boundaries. For example, a modern RP pronunciation of BAT as [bat] instead of [bæt] could sound like BUT to an Australian. An American pronunciation of BOT as [bɑt] instead of [bɒt] might sound like the name BART (as in Bart Simpson) to a speaker of British English. A New Zealander might pronounce BET as something like [bɐ̯t] or even [bɪt]. An Australian would immediately recognise that it was a New Zealander speaking; the rest of the world would probably think it was an Australian (or a New Zealander, or a South African).