Depiction and Convention

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A̲bstract

By defining both depictive and linguistic representation as kinds of symbol system, Nelson Goodman attempts to undermine the platitude that, whereas linguistic representation is mediated by convention, depiction is mediated by resemblance. I argue that Goodman is right to draw a strong analogy between the two kinds of representation, but wrong to draw the counterintuitive conclusion that depiction is not mediated by resemblance.

I

It's a platitude that whereas words are connected to what they represent merely by arbitrary conventions, pictures are connected to what they represent by resemblance. My portrait and my name, for example, are importantly different because whereas my portrait and I are connected by my portrait's resemblance to me, there is only an arbitrary connection between my name and me. In this essay I defend this platitude from an alternative picture proposed by Nelson Goodman, which suggests that depictive and descriptive representation are equally arbitrary.

Goodman attempts to undermine the platitude that depiction is mediated by resemblance by defining both depiction and description as kinds of symbol system.[2] From the claim that depiction is a kind of symbol system, Goodman draws the conclusion that "Almost any picture may represent almost anything; that is, given picture and object there is usually a system of representation, a plan of correlation, under which the picture

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[2] Goodman's claim that depiction is a kind of symbol system is also adopted by Bach (1970), Kulvicki (2006), Lopes (1996, 59) and Scholz (2000).

represents that object." (Goodman, 1968, 38). Because they are both kinds of symbol system, Goodman argues, it follows that depiction and description are equally arbitrary.

Goodman's position is interesting because he draws an extremely close analogy between depictive and descriptive representation. The moral that can be drawn from my discussion of his views is that it is possible to uphold such a strong analogy between the two kinds of representation, while still maintaining the platitude that whereas descriptive representation is mediated by convention, depictive representation is mediated by resemblance. So Goodman's insights about the relationship between depiction and description can be accepted, but without drawing the counterintuitive consequences that he attempts to draw.

I will disagree with Goodman on two points. Firstly, I will argue that Goodman's claim that depiction is a kind of symbol system is in fact compatible with the platitude that depictive representation is not arbitrary but mediated by resemblance. Secondly, I will disagree with Goodman's definition of depiction as a kind of symbol system. While I will agree with Goodman that some kinds of depiction, such as maps, do belong to depictive symbol systems, I will argue that not all depictions do. On top of this, I will present a positive analysis of depictive symbol systems in terms of resemblance.

Sections Two and Three draw a distinction between symbol systems in the abstract and symbol systems in use, analogous to the distinction between languages in the abstract and languages in use, to argue that it does not follow from Goodman's thesis that depiction is a kind of symbol system that depictive representation is arbitrary or unmediated by resemblance. Sections Four and Five argue for an analysis of depictive symbol systems analogous to David Lewis' analysis of conventional language. And Section Six uses that analysis to argue that Goodman is wrong to define depiction as a kind of symbol system, on the grounds that not all depictions belong to depictive symbol systems.

Two clarifications. First, depiction is a kind of representation, common to figurative painting and sculpture, photographs, maps, sketches and the like. So although figurative and non-figurative paintings, for example, have much in common, non-figurative paintings are not counterexamples to the thesis that depiction is mediated by resemblance because they intuitively don't belong to the same kind of representation as

figurative paintings. Figurative and non-figurative paintings are similar because they are flat surfaces marked with paint, not because they represent in the same way.[3]

Second, the consequences of the definition of depiction as a kind of symbol system is not Goodman's only or most persuasive objection to the platitude that depiction is mediated by resemblance: Goodman also argues that depiction is not mediated by resemblance on the grounds that resemblance is insufficient for depictive representation (1968, 3-6), that it appears possible to depict but not resemble non-existents (1968, 25) and that depiction should be analysed in terms of formal conditions of symbols systems such as syntactic density, semantic density and relative repleteness (1968, 225-232).[4] Nevertheless, drawing out the consequences of Goodman's definition of depiction as a kind of symbol system is still an important step towards assessing both the strength of the analogy between depictive and descriptive representation and the platitude that depiction is mediated by resemblance.

II

A symbol system, according to Goodman's definition, is a set of characters correlated with a set of extensions (1968, 143). In the symbol system of Arabic numerals, for example, the characters are the numerals '1', '2', '3', '4'… and the extensions are the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4 … and so on. The symbol system correlates '1' with 1, '2' with 2, '3' with 3, '4' with 4 … and so on. According to Goodman, alphabets, languages, notations, musical scores and various methods of depiction are all distinct symbol systems.

By a correlation between a set of characters and a set of extensions, Goodman simply means a function from the characters to the extensions. A function is a mapping between two sets: it delivers a member of the second set for every member of the first set. The function of doubling, for example, takes every member of the set of natural numbers

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[3] This is a point agreed upon even by those who, like Goodman, deny that depiction is mediated by resemblance. See, for example, Lopes (1996, 5-6).

[4] For fuller defences of resemblance theories of depiction from Goodman's criticisms see, for example, Blumson (2007), Hopkins (1998), Hyman (2006) and Novitz (1977).

to another member of that set: it takes 1 to 2, 2 to 4, 3 to 6, 4 to 8 … and so on. Every mapping between two sets, no matter how arbitrary, is a function.

Since a symbol system is simply a function from characters to extensions and a function is any arbitrary mapping between two sets, any picture may represent anything in some symbol system or another. There is a function from portraits to people, for example, that takes the Mona Lisa to Socrates and so it follows that there is a symbol system in which the Mona Lisa represents Socrates. Just as words represent other things in other languages, pictures depict other things in other symbol systems, so what a picture represents appears to depend not on what it resembles but on its extension in a symbol system.

So if depiction is a kind of symbol system, then any depiction may represent anything. Goodman draws the conclusion that "Descriptions are distinguished from depictions not through being more arbitrary… and words are more conventional than pictures only if conventionality is construed in terms of differentiation rather than of artificiality. …what describes in some systems may depict in others. Resemblance disappears as a criterion of representation [depiction] …" (Goodman, 1968, 230-1). Goodman takes the definition of depiction as a kind of symbol system to imply that depiction and description are equally arbitrary and that depiction is not mediated by resemblance.[5]

There is an obvious lacuna in this argument. Even if it follows from the definition of symbol systems that any picture may represent anything, it does not follow that any picture may depict anything, since the alternative symbol systems relative to which characters possess other extensions may lack the syntactic and semantic properties required for being depictive. So although, for example, there is a symbol system in which the Mona Lisa represents Socrates instead of Lisa, that symbol system may not be a depictive one, in which case the fact that there is a symbol system in which the Mona

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[5] This argument is most explicit in Goodman's discussion of depictive realism, where he writes "Realistic representation, in brief, depends not upon imitation or illusion or information but upon inculcation. Almost any picture may represent almost anything; that is, given picture and object there is usually a system of representation, a plan of correlation, under which the picture represents that object." (Goodman, 1968, 38).

Lisa represents Socrates would not show that the Mona Lisa's depiction of Socrates is arbitrary.

Furthermore, there seems to be little obstacle in principle to combining Goodman's thesis that depiction is a kind of symbol system with the thesis that depictions resemble what they represent, or any other thesis which maintains that the relationship between depictions and what they represent is non-arbitrary. As Dominic Lopes writes, "The claim that pictures are symbols in this [Goodman's] sense is not incompatible with perceptual explanations of depiction. Nothing in the symbol model rules out pictures being correlated with, and standing for, their subjects because they resemble them… A theory of depiction may, without inconsistency, explain pictures as both symbolic and perceptual." (Lopes, 1996, 57).

For example, the following analysis of depictive symbol systems, which suggests that resemblance between characters and extensions is the property required for a symbol system to be depictive, is attractive:

A symbol system is depictive if and only if every character in that symbol

system resembles its extension.

So the symbol system of maps, for example, is supposed to be depictive, according to this analysis, because every map resembles the region it represents in that symbol system. If this analysis is right, then it seems plausible that the definition of depiction as a kind of symbol system establishes neither that depiction is arbitrary nor that it is unmediated by resemblance.

But the following example shows that this analysis cannot be right. Often, letters of the alphabet are used to represent themselves, so that 'a' represents 'a', 'b' represents 'b', 'c' represents 'c' … and so on. Since resemblance is reflexive, every letter in this symbol system resembles and represents itself, but it is intuitively not the case that every letter in the symbol system depicts itself, or that the symbol system described is depictive. The letters' resemblance to themselves is incidental to their representation of themselves: even if, for example, capital letters were used to represent lower case letters, so that the letters failed to resemble what they represent, the kind of representation would be the same.

In the following sections, I will exploit the analogy between symbol systems and languages which shows how to resolve this problem. Even if one thinks, as Lopes does, that the compatibility of the thesis that depiction is a kind of symbol system with the platitude that depiction is mediated by resemblance is obvious, the analogy is still interesting because, as well as showing how the two theses are compatible, it also provides a diagnosis of why Goodman and others may have thought them to be incompatible. In particular, I will argue that Goodman overlooked an important distinction between languages in the abstract and languages in use.

<div align="center">III</div>

Just as a symbol system is a function from characters to extensions, it is plausible that a language is a function from sentences to truth-conditions.[6] So, for example, the meaning of 'Snow is white' in English is snow is white, according to the definition, because English is a function from sentences to truth-conditions that takes the sentence 'Snow is white' to the condition of snow's being white. Similarly, 'Grass is green' means grass is green in English because 'Grass is green' is taken by the function to the truth-condition of Grass' being green.

Just as the claim that depiction is a kind of symbol system appears to leave no role for resemblance in depictive representation, the definition of languages as functions from sentences to truth-conditions at first appears to leave no role for convention in linguistic representation. The problem is that a function from sentences to truth-conditions necessarily takes the sentences it does to the truth-conditions it does: the function from English sentences to the states of affairs they represent, for example, necessarily takes the sentence 'Snow is white' to the state of affairs of snow's being white.

But to conclude on these grounds that convention has no role in linguistic representation would be obviously incorrect. This is because, while it is a matter of necessity rather than convention that 'Snow is white' in English means that snow is white, it is contingent that English, or the language given by the function from English

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[6] See, for example, Lewis (1975).

[8] These points are from Lewis (1969; 1975).

sentences to their truth-conditions, is the language of this continent, and this is a fact which is plausibly governed by convention.

In general, while the meaning of a sentence in a language is always a matter of necessity, it is always a contingent matter whether a language or a function from sentences to truth-conditions is a population's language of use. The role of convention in linguistic representation is not to determine the meaning of a sentence in a language, but to determine whether or not a language or a function from sentences to truth-conditions is a population's language of use. So, for example, English is the language of this continent, rather than some other language which would serve equally well, because there is a convention of speaking English on this continent.[8]

If the platitude that resemblance plays a similar role in depictive representation as convention plays in linguistic representation is right, then this suggests that the role of resemblance in depictive representation might be in determining which symbol systems in the abstract are symbol systems in use. In the next two sections I will follow up this suggestion by introducing an analysis of depictive symbol systems analogous to Lewis' analysis of conventional language, which shows that it is wrong to infer from depiction being a kind of symbol system that depiction is not mediated by resemblance.

IV

A convention is a rationally self-perpetuating regularity in behaviour.[9] For a regularity of driving on the left to be a convention it must be, firstly, that drivers are aware that there is a regularity of driving on the left and, secondly, that drivers have a reason to drive on the left on condition that others do. This is because if either of these conditions failed then the regularity of driving on the left would not be rationally self-perpetuating: drivers would not continue driving on the left in the first case because they would not know that it was better to do so and in the second case because others driving on the left would not give them any reason to do so.

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[9] This section summarizes Lewis (1969; 1975). See Abell (2005), Bennett (1971), Lopes (1996, 131-5) Novitz (1977) and Schier (1986) for discussion of Lewis' analysis of convention in connection with depiction.

These points suggest the following initial formulation of Lewis' (1969, 58) analysis of convention, which is that a regularity in the behaviour of a population is a convention if and only if:

(1) everyone conforms to that regularity

(2) everyone expects everyone else to conform to that regularity

(3) everyone has reason to conform on condition that others conform.

So, for example, driving on the left is a convention in Australia because everybody drives on the left, everybody expects everybody else to drive on the left and everybody has reason to drive on the left if others drive on the left.

Three amendments. First, imagine that everyone drives on the left because they expect others to and because everybody has reason to drive on the same side as others. However, nobody believes that others drive on the left for these reasons: rather everyone believes that others drive on the left merely out of habit or because driving on the left is more scenic. The regularity of driving on the left in this population is not a convention for avoiding collision, since members of the population would continue driving on the left even though they believe others may not care about collision (Lewis, 1969, 59).

To avoid this case it is necessary to build into the analysis that all the members of the population are aware that all the conditions of the analysis are fulfilled. A regularity in the behaviour of group is a convention, according to this amendment, if and only if:

(1) everyone conforms to that regularity

(2) everyone has a reason to conform on condition that others conform

(3) everyone believes (1)-(3).

So, for example, driving on the left is a convention in Australia because everybody drives on the left, everybody prefers to drive on the left given that everybody else drives on the left and because everybody believes that everybody else conforms to the regularity for these three reasons.

Secondly, the conditions of the analysis may still be met even when common interests are absent. Imagine a work place in which everyone aims to impress their employer by out-performing their peers. A regularity of hard work obtains in this work place, everybody has reason to conform to the regularity of hard work on condition that others do and everybody is aware of this. Nevertheless, hard work is not a convention of

the workplace, because the workers do not have a common interest in everybody working hard.

To address this problem it is necessary to build into the analysis a condition stipulating that everybody has a common interest in general, rather than merely partial, conformity to the regularity (Lewis, 1975, 165). So a regularity in the behaviour of a group is a convention, according to the amended analysis, if and only if:

(1) everyone conforms to that regularity

(2) everyone has a reason to conform on condition that others conform

(3) everyone prefers everyone to conform to that regularity on condition that others conform

(4) everyone believes (1)-(4).

So driving on the left, for example, is a convention in Australia because everyone prefers everyone to drive on the left on condition that most do, since everyone driving on the left will tend to reduce accidents on condition that most others drive on the left.

Thirdly, the analysis, as it stands, does not guarantee arbitrariness in all cases. Suppose, for example, that there is only one café in our town and that it is a regularity in our behaviour to meet at that café to drink coffee. We only like to drink coffee together, so that I have reason to go to the café only if you go to the café. Nevertheless, because there is no alternative place for us to drink coffee our regularity of meeting at the café is not chosen arbitrarily but of necessity and because it is not chosen arbitrarily, it is not correctly classified as a convention.

To address this problem the analysis has to be amended to ensure that an alternative regularity is available. So a regularity in behaviour of a group is a convention, according to the final analysis (Lewis, 1969, 76; 1975, 165), if and only if:

(1) everyone conforms to that regularity

(2) everyone has reason to conform on condition that others conform

(3) there is an alternative regularity which everyone would have had reason to conform to if others had conformed to it

(4) everyone prefers everyone to conform to that regularity on condition that others conform

(5) everyone believes (1)-(5)

So, for example, driving on the left would not be a convention if it weren't for the existence of the option of driving on the right, which everyone else would have reason to do if others did.

Since conventions apply primarily to regularities of behaviour the analysis of convention cannot apply directly to functions from sentences to truth-conditions, but only to regularities in behaviour concerning those functions. According to Lewis, the relevant regularity is truthfulness in the language, which consists in trying to sometimes utter sentences of the language when and only when the truth-conditions or states of affairs they represent in that language obtain. (Due to mood and other complications a slightly different regularity is required, but truthfulness serves for current purposes.)

Lewis (1969, 177) suggests that a group has a convention of using a language if and only if they have a convention of truthfulness in that language or, putting this together with the full analysis of convention, that a group has a convention of using a language if and only if:

(1) everyone conforms to a regularity of truthfulness in that language

(2) everyone has reason to conform to that regularity on condition that others conform

(3) there is an alternative regularity of truthfulness in another language which everyone would have reason to conform to if others conformed to it

(4) everyone prefers everyone to conform to a regularity of truthfulness in that language on condition that others conform

(5) everyone believes (1)-(5).

English, for example, is a language spoken by English speakers since English speakers are truthful in English, English speakers expect other English speakers to be truthful in English and English speakers prefer to be truthful in English given that others are.

V

According to the platitude, whereas words are connected to what they represent merely arbitrarily, depictions are connected to what they represent by resemblance. That suggests that the position of resemblance in depictive representation is analogous to the position of

arbitrariness in linguistic representation, so that substituting symbol systems for languages in Lewis' analysis of conventional language use and adding that which symbol systems are used is not arbitrary but depends on the resemblance between their characters and extensions should provide an analysis of depictive symbol systems.

Arbitrariness is ensured in the analysis of convention by the second condition, which ensures that the population conforms to the regularity for no other reason than that other members of the population conform to it, and by the third condition, which ensures that there are other regularities which all members would have preferred to conform to had others done so (Lewis, 1969, 70). So to adapt Lewis' analysis of the conventions governing linguistic representation in order to provide an analysis of depictive symbol systems, the third condition should be dropped and the second altered to include resemblance. This suggests that a symbol system is depictive if and only if:

(1) everyone conforms to a regularity of truthfulness in that symbol system

(2) everyone has reason to conform to that regularity, since the characters of the symbol system resemble their extensions

(3) everyone prefers everyone to conform to a regularity of truthfulness in that symbol system on condition that others conform

(4) everyone believes (1)-(4).

So, for example, the symbol system of maps is depictive because everybody conforms to a regularity of truthfulness in the symbol system of maps and prefers others to, everybody expects everybody to conform to this regularity and everybody has reason to do this because maps resemble what they represent, rather than simply because everybody else uses them.

Two clarifications. First, depictive symbol systems are not always conventional, but the other conditions of Lewis' analysis of convention are still required to ensure that truthfulness in a depictive symbol system is communicative. Communication, even when it is not conventional, is still cooperative and explicit. So the third condition of the analysis has to be retained in order to capture the cooperativeness of depictive communication and the fourth (formerly fifth) condition has to be retained in order to capture the explicitness of depictive communication. The difference between depictive

and conventional communication is merely that explicit cooperation is facilitated by resemblance instead of precedent.

Second, the definition of truthfulness in a language cannot be straightforwardly applied to symbol systems, since symbol systems are functions from characters to extensions rather than truth-conditions and extensions need not be true or false. One cannot be truthful in the symbol system of Arabic numerals, for example, since the extensions of the numerals in the system are numbers, which exist or not rather than obtaining or not or being true or false.

The solution lies in observing that depiction is of states of affairs as well as objects. The Mona Lisa, for example, does not merely depict Lisa but also the state of affairs of Lisa's smiling. Symbol systems can then be defined as functions from characters to states of affairs and truthfulness in a symbol system as trying to sometimes perpetrate characters of the symbol system when and only when the states of affairs they represent in that symbol system obtain.

It might be objected that this does not resolve the problem, because depictions do not resemble states of affairs, but only objects. This objection can be answered by invoking resemblances between the state of affairs of a picture's having certain properties and the state of affairs it represents. The state of affairs of Santa's portrait's being partly red, for example, resembles the state of affairs of Santa's wearing a red coat, because both states of affairs have the property of being states of affairs of something's having the property of being partly red.[10]

The analysis of depictive symbol systems just given shows that neither of the conclusions Goodman draws from the claim that depiction is a kind of symbol system follows. It appeared to follow, for example, that depiction could not be characterized in terms of resemblance because there was no non-incidental role for resemblance in depictive representation. But the analysis shows that there is a non-incidental role for resemblance, since resemblance between characters and extensions of a symbol system determines which symbol systems are adopted for use.

The symbol system of using letters to represent themselves, for example, is not counted as depictive because although all the characters in that symbol system resemble

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[10] See Blumson (forthcoming) for fuller defence of this proposal.

their extensions, it is not for this reason that this symbol system is preferred over others as a method of representing the letters. If, on the other hand, the symbol system of using letters to represent themselves was preferred due to their resemblance to themselves, it seems it would count as a depictive symbol system. So this analysis, unlike its predecessor, accommodates this example.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that it does not follow from depiction being a kind of symbol system that the relationship between depictions and what they represent is merely arbitrary. While it is true that there are always other symbol systems in which the same pictures have different extensions, which symbol system is selected for use in communication is not arbitrary but depends on the resemblance between the characters and extensions of that system just as, while it is true that sentences have their meaning in English necessarily, linguistic meaning is not a matter of necessity since which language is spoken depends on arbitrary conventions.

<p style="text-align:center">VI</p>

The claim that depiction should be defined as a kind of symbol system is difficult to adjudicate, because it is trivially true that there is a function which maps every depiction to the state of affairs it represents. But the distinction between symbol systems in use and symbol systems in the abstract makes adjudicating this claim easier, because while it is trivial that all depictions belong to symbol system in the abstract, it is not trivial whether all depictions belong to symbol systems in use. In this section, I argue against Goodman's claim that depiction should be defined as a kind of symbol system by using the analysis of depictive symbol systems just given to argue that not all depictions belong to symbol systems in use.

Maps, for example, belong to depictive symbol systems, since amongst cartographers there is a regularity of truthfulness in the symbol system of maps, the fact that maps resemble their state of affairs in that symbol system gives cartographers a reason to conform to that regularity, cartographers prefer each other to conform to that regularity on condition that most do and all cartographers are aware of all these facts. The resemblance between maps and what they represent is a reason for cartographers to

conform to the regularity, because all cartographers desire to conform to a system in which the symbols are readily interpreted by other cartographers.

But not all depictions belong to depictive symbol systems. Suppose, for example, that Philomela's only motive is to exact revenge on Tereus for cutting out her tongue. In order to do so, she weaves a tapestry depicting his crime. Trivially, there are many functions from characters to extensions that take Philomela's tapestry to Tereus' crimes. I will argue that since none of those functions need meet the four conditions of being a depictive symbol system, Philomela's tapestry is a depiction that does not belong to a depictive symbol system. And since not all depictions belong to symbol systems, depiction is not a kind of symbol system.

The first condition of the analysis requires a regularity of truthfulness in a symbol system. Philomela's tapestry meets this condition; there is a regularity of truthfulness, for example, in the function that takes Philomela's tapestry to Tereus' crimes and the Bayeux tapestry to the Battle of Hastings. But if, for example, the Bayeux tapestry and every other depiction apart from Philomela's tapestry had not existed, Philomela's tapestry would have depicted Tereus' crimes without belonging to any regularity of truthfulness. So it is not the case that all depictions must meet the first condition of belonging to a depictive symbol system.

The second condition requires that the resemblance of characters to extensions in a symbol system gives everyone reason to be truthful in that symbol system. Because her only motive is revenge on Tereus, Philomela has no general reason to conform to a regularity of truthfulness. She has no reason, for example, to perpetrate the Bayeux tapestry when the Battle of Hastings occurs, so she has no general reason for being truthful in the symbol system which takes her tapestry to Tereus' crimes and the Bayeux tapestry to the Battle of Hastings. So Philomela's tapestry is a depiction which fails to meet the second condition of belonging to a depictive symbol system.

The third condition requires that everybody prefers everybody to conform to a regularity of truthfulness in the symbol system if most do. Philomela's tapestry doesn't meet this condition because if Philomela's only motive is revenge on Tereus, then she is indifferent as to whether anybody else conforms to a regularity of truthfulness in any symbol system, including in the symbol systems that takes her tapestry to Tereus' crimes

and the Bayeux tapestry to the Battle of Hastings. But despite not meeting the third condition of belonging to a symbol system, Philomela's tapestry is a depiction, so the third condition of belonging to a symbol system is not met by all depictions.

Since it need not meet the first three conditions, Philomela's tapestry need not meet the fourth condition either. The fourth condition requires that everyone in a population believes that the first three obtain. So Philomela's tapestry could remain a depiction without meeting the fourth condition if anybody in the population falsely believed that the tapestry did not belong to any regularity of truthfulness, because there were no other depictions, or if anybody in the population rightly believed that Philomela had no general reason to conform to a regularity of truthfulness or that she had no preference to conform to such a regularity if others did.

<center>VII</center>

So. The analysis of depictive symbol systems shows that Goodman is wrong on two counts: depiction is not a kind of symbol system and, even if it were, it does not follow from depiction being a kind of symbol system that it is mediated by resemblance. But Goodman is also partially right: there is a kind of symbol system which is distinctively depictive and many depictions, such as maps or architectural plans, belong to those symbol systems. Furthermore, the analogy Goodman draws between depiction and language is reflected in the analogy between the analyses of convention and depictive symbol systems.

The conclusion that depiction is not a kind of symbol system might seem to undermine this important analogy, since the analysis of conventional language appears to encompass everything it is expected to whereas the analysis of depictive symbol systems appears not to. While maps and other members of depictive symbol systems, for example, have their linguistic analogues, it may seem that Philomela's tapestry and other depictions which do not belong to symbol systems in use lack linguistic cousins, so that

the analogy between depictive and descriptive representation is not as close as Goodman and I both maintain.

But this conclusion would be premature. Just as some depictions fall under the analysis of depictive symbol systems whereas others do not, some spoken utterances belong to conventional language whereas others fall outside it. If somebody shrieks loudly in alarm, for example, then, whilst there call trivially belongs to some language – function from sentences to truth-conditions – or another, whether it falls under the analysis of conventional language use will depend on the preferences, reasons and beliefs of the speaker and their population. Such improvised utterances are the analogues of depictions which fall outside the analysis of depictive symbol systems.

So the extremely close analogy between depictive and descriptive representation Goodman drew by defining depiction as a kind of symbol system turns out to be correct. In his words: "The often stressed distinction between iconic and other signs becomes transient and trivial; thus does heresy breed iconoclasm." (1968, 231). But I have also argued that the counterintuitive consequences Goodman draws from this analogy do not follow: in particular, the platitude that depictions are connected to what they represent via resemblance whereas words are connected to what they represent only arbitrarily is preserved.[*]

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