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On the Semantic Basis of Heraldic Propaganda or What do Arms Mean, and How?

Antti Leino

Abstract

Despite the occasional claim to the contrary, it is clear that a coat of arms often has some semantic content beyond just identifying its bearer. In this respect arms are very much like proper names, and it turns out that some of the linguistic theories used to analyse names can be applied to heraldry as well.

In the past twenty years, cognitive linguistics has gained momentum as a mainstream linguistic paradigm. Its refusal to see a fundamental distinction between language and other human cognition provides a good starting point for a linguistic analysis of heraldry itself, not just the verbal description of arms in blazon. Such an analysis makes it possible to see how various fragments of meaning are incorporated into a coat of arms.

I Introduction

One of the common questions lay people ask about a coat of arms is “What do they mean”; one of the common answers is “Arms do not have a meaning as such, they just identify their bearer”. Of course, the issue is not as simple as this, and elements in an armorial design often have some significance. My goal here is to see if this fragmentary semantic content can be analysed using theories that have been developed in cognitive linguistics.

Within linguistics, the closest analogy to arms can be found in proper names. Not only are there close similarities between the two, but coats of arms have traditionally been closely related with names. That the general public sees an association is apparent for instance in the Names and Arms clauses in wills, and various heraldic authorities also seem to see some sort of connection between the two.

In England, the jurisdiction of the Court of Chivalry used to include surnames as well as coats of arms (Squibb 1959: 139), and the same appears to be the case of the Lyon Court in Scotland (Gayre 1961: 146). Somewhat similarly, in Germany a title of nobility and a surname were seen as a property of the family in the same way as a coat of arms (Sunnqvist 2001: 89). In fact, at the time the legislation regarding surnames was changed there was also some discussion on whether the inheritance of coats of arms would also change accordingly, and a similar question was raised

in Sweden (*ibid.*: 97–98, 134). While the the end result at least in Germany was that these changes do not necessarily apply to coats of arms, this discussion itself can be seen as a proof that the two are seen as similar.

These examples are not intended to show any legal connection between names and coats of arms. This is not my goal; rather, I wish to point out some of the similarities of the two methods of identification. Furthermore, my background is that of an onomastician, and I have done some studies in the structure of proper names (e.g. Leino 2005, forthcoming). From this starting point, I will take a look at how coats of arms refer to each other and also to phenomena outside heraldry.

In terms of linguistic theory, this paper builds on cognitive linguistics, a movement that has emerged in the past twenty years.¹ Like all new scientific or scholarly paradigms, this movement started largely because earlier theories were seen as inadequate. In this case, the problems were largely centred around the strict division between syntax and semantics: the early cognitivists saw that it is ultimately impossible to thoroughly describe the structure of linguistic expressions if their meaning is ignored.

In this view, language is seen as a part of the more general human cognition, and linguistic knowledge cannot be separated from other knowledge. This basic view can be elaborated to some fundamental hypotheses, which Croft and Cruse (2004: 1) give as

- language is not an autonomous cognitive faculty
- grammar is conceptualization
- knowledge of language emerges from language use

If these hypotheses hold, then one should be able to describe the structure found in heraldry in the same way as cognitive theories describe grammar in language. The first hypothesis is the most important one: the existence of a separate linguistic ability would separate language from heraldry, unless heraldry was seen as falling under that ability. The second one can be applied to heraldry, as it is easy to see parallels between the rules in armorial design and the rules in grammar. Finally, as the last one suggests, knowledge of the rules and customs of heraldry can be inferred from the existing coats of arms and their use.

Traditionally, the study of sign systems such as heraldry has been more a task for semiotics than linguistics. However, considering the fundamental ideas of cognitive linguistics such a division is not necessarily the most fruitful. In fact, abandoning it can be seen in some sense as a return to the early decades of the 20th century, when semiotics started to diverge from the linguistic theories of the time. In any case, my goal here is to apply current linguistic theories to heraldry as a system that resembles language, not just to blazon as a linguistic genre.

¹It resembles Scots clans in that not all of the specific theories that are considered cognitive can trace their origins to a common ancestor.

2 Linguistic and Heraldic Constructions

Cognitive linguists claim that there is no strict division into grammar and lexicon, but that sentence schemata and individual words can instead all be viewed as fundamentally similar conceptual structures – although of course differing in how complex and specific they are. Knowing a language consists of knowing these *constructions*.²

Such constructions combine form with meaning, and they may be composed of smaller parts. Furthermore, while the meaning of a construction is related to the meanings of its parts, it cannot necessarily be directly derived from them: idioms, such as *by all means*, are typical examples of this, but the same applies to a lesser extent to language in general.

Similar constructions can be found in heraldry: a coat of arms is composed from individual elements according to pre-existing rules. Clear examples of grammatical structure can be found in cadency and marshalling, and the development of systematic cadency described by Gayre (1961: 112–119) sounds much like the development of a written language. That, too, is a mix of natural evolution and conscious planning, driven on one hand by the need to be understood and on the other hand by the tastes of different individuals.

As these constructions carry meaning, they can be used in propaganda. For instance, when Edward III of England claimed the throne of France he promptly changed his arms to match this claim. His successors kept the quartered arms of France and England, and Henry IV even changed the French quartering when the arms used by the King of France changed. Figure 1 shows an analysis of these arms using the notation of Construction Grammar, a branch of cognitive linguistics with an emphasis on describing the syntactic structure instead of the semantic content. As the rules of heraldry mainly govern the structural aspects of the design as opposed to the content, this seems a suitable framework for the current study.

The notation used in this figure is a much simplified adaptation of that proposed by Kay (1998). In it, each box contains on top the form of the symbol – that is, the armorial representation – and below it the meaning. Below that a box contains smaller ones that give a similar representation of the constituent elements. While this notation is too simple to capture all the information contained in the construction, it is sufficiently thorough for the work at hand.

The diagram shows how the arms adopted by Henry IV are a specific instance of a more general – or *schematic* – construction. This more general construction tells that quartering two coats of arms means having the right to both of them; in fact, an even more general construction for marshalling could be devised as a further step up in the hierarchy. Since the specific case here incorporates the arms of France and England, the normal meaning is that the bearer of these arms has the right to both the quarters, which in turn means claiming the thrones of both

²Some theories make a distinction between *constructions* and *constructs*; in this parlance, constructs are complete and ready-to-use, while constructions have at least some elements that are left unspecified. I will not make such a distinction here.

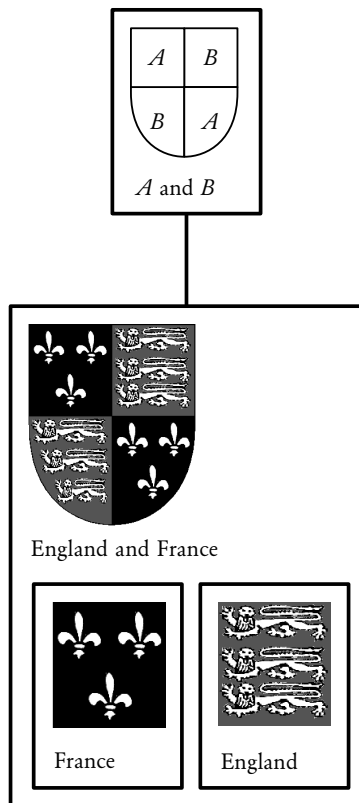


Figure 1: Arms of Henry IV as a construction.

countries.

In this example there is no need to attempt further analysis of the arms of France and England. By this time, they do not have any significant meaning besides their reference to the countries, even though the elements may have had some significance at the time the arms were originally adopted. In this, the arms have become much like proper names: especially place names are often composed of common nouns and pre-existing names, but eventually they may lose all connection to these origins.

Even when a place name has become opaque to some extent, it is possible that some elements of the name are still recognisable. Similarly, a heraldic design may combine some familiar elements with others that are seen as either arbitrary or unknown. Sometimes the elements are recognised as intended, but misinterpretations are also common.

As an example of such misinterpretation, consider the flag of the Carelia Air Command,³ seen in Figure 2. Someone not familiar with Finnish military emblems

³Incidentally, this Air Command includes the WWII-era Fighter Squadron 24, renumbered to 31, which is still the world's highest scoring squadron.

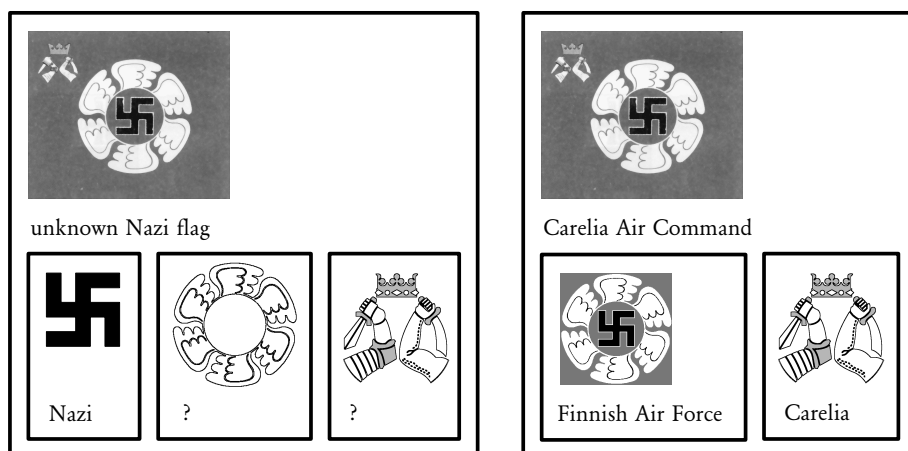


Figure 2: Two interpretations of the flag of the Carelia Air Command

would immediately recognise the swastika as a Nazi symbol. This, however, is a mistake, as the Finnish air force adopted the symbol in March 1918, whereas Deutsche Arbeiterpartei was founded in January 1919 and formally adopted its swastika the next year, after becoming the Nazi party. While the Finnish air force stopped using the swastika on its planes in 1945, it is still used in other contexts. In fact, the flag shown here dates from 1958, as the Air Command was formed in 1952 as a part of post-war reorganisation.

This example also illustrates the phenomenon of *entrenchment*: the more a symbol is used with one meaning, the more prominent this meaning becomes. Outside linguistics, it was a well-known maxim of the Nazi propagandists that anything can be made truth by repeating it often and loudly enough. Within linguistics it is also well known: at least Bloomfield (1933: § 2.8.) noted already that an approach based on essentially this concept works in learning a language.

More recently, such linguists as Giora (1999) have studied its role in how the meaning of linguistic expressions develops. She divides “basic meaning” into three different fundamental meanings, of which one is the entrenched meaning of an expression. Giora calls this the *salient meaning*; the other two are *linguistic meaning*, derived directly from the meanings of the constituent elements, and *privileged interactional interpretation*, which takes into account the conversational context.

These three “basic” meanings can be seen in heraldry as well. For instance *azure, three fleurs-de-lis or* has a salient meaning of ‘France’. Its linguistic meaning might include the support of the French crown by St. Mary, as the fleur-de-lis is one of her emblems. The privileged interactional interpretation depends on how the arms are displayed: for instance, a banner showing the arms would normally have been interpreted as signifying the presence of the king.

It is also worth noting that while linguists traditionally see a sign – by which they mean any expression, such as a word or a sentence – as a combination of form

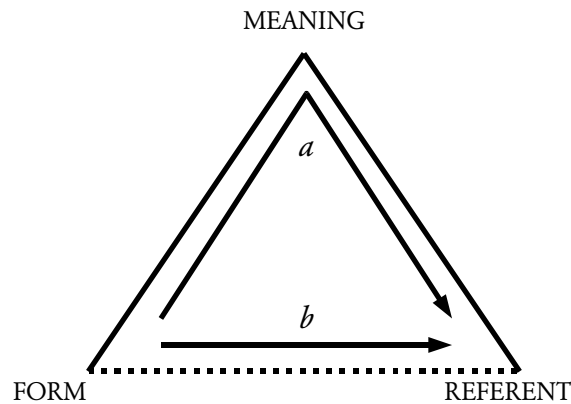


Figure 3: The semiotic sign

and meaning, within semiotics a sign is seen as a triangle, consisting of not only these two but also the referent (e.g. Ogden and Richards 1960). These views are not incompatible, but rather reflect the difference in how these two fields emphasise their object of study. The semiotic triangle, shown in Figure 3, is in fact useful in linguistics when studying phenomena like names.

In understanding language one normally follows the route shown in the triangle as *a*: from the form first to meaning and from there to the specific referent – for instance, from the string of letters *this article* to the general concepts of an article and being close to hand, and finally to this particular paper. In arms, as well as names, there is also a direct link from form to referent, shown as *b* – in the case of *gules, three lions passant guardant* or one does not normally think of any general meaning associated with the arms, but recognises them as the arms of England. However, when the arms are not known one has to resort to going the long way and interpreting the meaning of the arms, in case that gives some clues about the referent. As seen in the case of the Carelia Air Command, these clues can sometimes be misleading.

3 Integrating Concepts

Analysing the structure of a coat of arms as a construction gives some insight into how different parts of the design contribute to its meaning. However, this still leaves open the question of how various elements refer to concepts outside the realm of heraldry. Some answers can be found in the theory of *conceptual integration* or *blending* (Fauconnier and Turner 2003).

Conceptual integration builds on more fundamental theories on how concepts within the human mind can be represented. The basic hypothesis is that they are

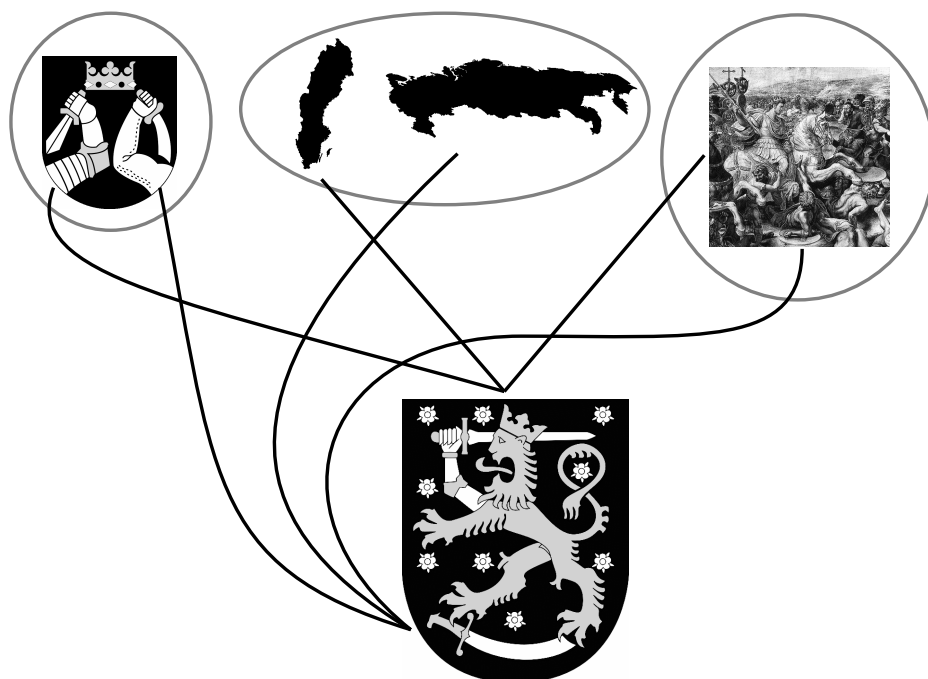


Figure 4: Conceptual integration resulting in the arms of Finland

best represented as geometric objects in a *conceptual space* (e.g. Gärdenfors 2000), and that similarity between concepts can be seen as geometric similarity. In terms of the current work, the major issue here is that meaning is not something composed of atomic features but that concepts are instead separate entities that can overlap with and resemble each other to varying degrees.

Conceptual integration starts with a series of concepts from different spaces, finds similarities between them, and projects the relevant concepts into a new space. This is best understood when looking at an example, and Figure 4 shows how the arms of Finland can be seen as a result of integrating three different spaces.⁴

The coat of arms was adopted by Johan III, King of Sweden, who started styling himself Grand Duke of Finland around 1580 (Talvio 1999: 12–13). It is usually accepted that he did this primarily to spite Ivan IV, Tsar of Russia and Grand Duke of Muscovy, although another consideration may have been that his late brother-in-law Sigismund II August had been King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania. The arms of the new Grand Duchy certainly support the view that this was mainly directed against Ivan.

The arms integrate concepts from three different conceptual spaces. Within heraldry, it draws on the arms of the Province of Carelia, right on the border between Finland and Russia, whose arms had been adopted a couple of decades

⁴The notation used here is a much simplified version of that used by Fauconnier and Turner.

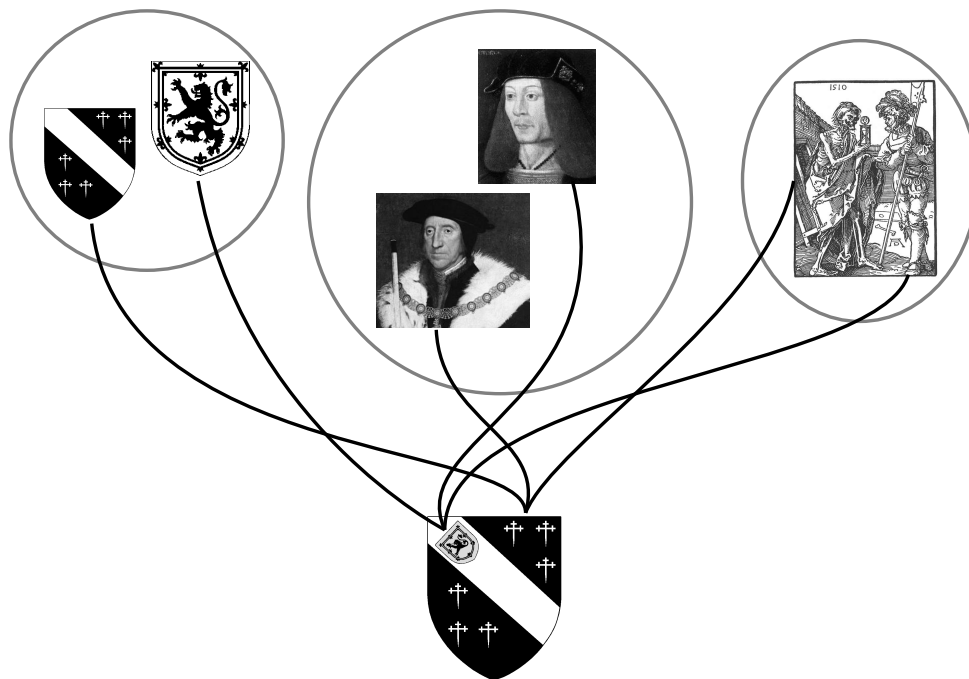


Figure 5: Conceptual integration resulting in the Flodden augmentation

earlier. The Carelian arms show two differently armoured arms wielding swords. In the conceptual space of geography or politics, these correspond to the countries of Sweden and Russia; and finally, in yet another conceptual space they correspond to the different sides in a battle.

These correspondences enabled Johan – or his heraldic designers – to make a statement. The arms of the new Grand Duchy include the scimitar and straight sword that represent Russia and Sweden, but now another element is taken from the conceptual space of a battle. The lion that wields the Swedish sword tramples the scimitar, in much the same way that a victorious army can run over an inferior one. As a result, while the new style of Grand Duke proclaimed that Johan was in no way inferior to Ivan, the arms go even further in claiming Swedish supremacy.

As another example of conceptual integration in armorial design, Figure 5 shows the augmentation of the Howard arms after the Battle of Flodden. Here, the conceptual space of heraldry contains the arms of Scotland and Howard. These correspond, in the space of persons, to James IV, King of the Scots, and Thomas, Earl of Surrey. Finally, in yet another space, these correspond to a person killed and the one responsible for the killing. As a result, the Howard arms were augmented by adding a shield where the lion of Scotland is killed like James IV was in the battle.

As Fauconnier and Turner claim that conceptual integration is one of the pri-

mary mechanisms of human thought, it is not surprising that it is commonly used in designing new arms. There it includes such design criteria as references to the profession or past deeds of the recipient; on a somewhat different level it is also the mechanism behind canting arms. All in all, it allows a wide variety of references, both to other arms and to objects or events outside heraldry.

4 Conclusions

Heraldry can be seen as a systematic way of designing signs for identification. Some of the features in this system have essentially been grammaticalised – they are established in a way similar to linguistic structures, and they carry meaning in much the same way. These grammar-like structures include relatively high-level ones like cadency, but also more fundamental ones like rules for arranging the charges on a shield.

Consequently, it is possible to use linguistic methods to study the system of heraldry itself, not just its verbal expression in blazon. Cognitive linguistics is especially suitable for the task, as one of its main theses is that the ability to use language cannot be separated from human cognition in general. A cognitive approach also makes it possible to describe the systematic parts of heraldry as constructions, much in the same way as linguistic structures. At the same time, it accepts that there are aspects of heraldry that cannot be described systematically.

The cognitive view also refuses to see a sharp distinction between form and meaning, and instead describes language in terms of constructions that consist of a syntactic and a semantic pole joined together. In some heraldic constructions, like those related to cadency, the semantic pole is quite clear, whereas in others, like the rules of tincture, it is extremely vague. This, too, is to be expected.

The way a coat of arms is composed of elements with vague or almost nonexistent meaning is not unique to heraldry. Similar compositions exist within language, for instance in idiomatic expressions or proper names. There are tools, like those building on the theory of conceptual integration, that can be used to discover the limited semantic content in such expressions, and these tools are also useful in analysing the meanings of coats of arms, both intended and perceived.

In addition to the language-like system evident in armorial design, heraldry also includes a clearly linguistic component, blazon. According to Brault (1997: 5–10) the two did not develop in parallel, but instead systematic heraldry developed first and the characteristics of modern blazon considerably later. Nevertheless, this still leaves somewhat open the question of how exactly the structure of armorial composition relates to that of blazon. Furthermore, it would be interesting to study whether this relationship can be used to explain the emergence of blazon around 1250, and whether it is reflected in the nature of blazon as a contemporary linguistic genre. Such questions are beyond the scope of the present article, but they are worth further research.

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