

Sound Symbolism and Onomatopoeia (with special reference to English, Armenian and Russian)

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Abstract

The function, realization and the role of sound-symbolic phenomenon can vary in some languages. The study of sound symbolism and onomatopoeia in Armenian, Russian and English showed that highly expressive forms of language occur not only in daily conversation, advertising, newspapers and magazines, but also in creative literature: children's poems, stories and great works of art. As a powerful stylistic device they realize an impact upon the reader or listener and evoke certain emotional expressively evaluative reactions. The comparative analysis of this phenomenon demonstrates that the word is heard differently in different cultures.

Key words: onomatopoeia, sound symbolism, alliteration, assonance.

Introduction

It is well known that unlike certain language units – morphemes, words, sentences – which convey meaning, phonemes are considered to be meaningless. However, the interpretation of the phonetic realization of the message is not passive at all. The segmental and prosodic features of the message perceived help the hearer to distinguish not only between the lexical and grammatical meanings of language units, but also between the social, educational, geographic, professional status and sex of the speaker. Moreover, by using the phonetic characteristics, we can judge about the speaker's emotions, his character, health, mood, etc.

Naturally all these characteristic features are far from being linguistic, but the importance of these features in the process of communication should not be underestimated. Phonetic characteristics are equally important for recognizing the style of the discourse in communication.

Sound-Meaning Connection in English

It is quite generally accepted that meaning is applied on the word and morpheme level. In other words, it is accepted that words, prefixes, suffixes and roots have meaning that is unrelated to their sounds. The fact that vowels and consonants can convey some meaning is usually denied.

But the so-called sound-symbolists believe that the vowels and consonants do have meanings of their own which are 'connotative' and which are expressed and perceived sub-consciously. A number of experiments have demonstrated that the commonly held belief in absolutely 'meaningless' speech sounds is wrong to some extent (Jeffries 1998:175).

Scientists provide us with unlimited examples from European and other languages to prove the existence of certain relation between word sounds and word meanings.

In his experiment Sapir used two invented words MAL and MIL, which the subjects were asked to identify with 'a large table' or 'a small table'. Most of them associated MAL with 'a large table' and MIL with 'a small table'. (www.percepp.com/soundsmb.htm)

We also tried to check this association. But the knowledge of Russian made our subjects hesitate between MIL and MAL since the latter coincides with the Russian root *МАА-* meaning 'small'. So when, to avoid unnecessary associations, we used TAL and TIL instead of MAL and MIL, the majority of subjects chose TIL for 'a small table' and TAL for 'a large table'

Sound-symbolists state that each sound, each vowel and consonant, has some inherent feeling which informs the meaning of every word that contains it. Because this 'inherent' meaning is implicit in its form, it is universal. The feeling of [b] will be the same in every language that uses this sound, and that feeling will directly reflect how [b] is pronounced. In English it involves a barrier. It is loud, sudden, explosive. It involves breach, a violation of the integrity of the barrier.

e.g. ball, bubble, bulge, break, bang, bump, etc.

Because the inherent meaning is implicit in the form, you cannot express directly what it is. We cannot explain what the exact meaning of [b] is.

Some of the research related to what was described as 'phonetic symbolism', that is, the extent to which individual speech-sounds carried specific meanings; other research related to the appropriateness of words as a whole – the so-called 'morphosymbolism'.

In the middle of the 18-th century Von Humboldt distinguished between *onomatopoeia* and sound *symbolism*. Some linguists use these terms indiscriminately. The terms *echoism*, *natural expressiveness*, *true echoism*, *clusters*, *onomatopoeia*, *sound symbolism* are also often used to denote sound - meaning connections. Sometimes onomatopoeia is defined in its limited sense (imitation of natural sounds) as a familiar and well-recorded form of sound symbolism. (<http://www.trismegistos.com/magicalletterpage/Theory.html>)

Onomatopoeia vs Sound-Symbolism

In our paper we distinguish between *onomatopoeia* and *sound symbolism*.

Onomatopoeia is defined as the imitation of a sound using the consonants and vowels in a word. Therefore it only applies to words which either refer to a sound, or which refer to something that makes a sound in some salient way (Galperin 1977:124).

The term *sound symbolism* is used in connection with groups of words rather than single words whose sound form creates impressions connected with movements, emotions, duration, repeated actions, degree of force, etc. (<http://www.ling.gu.se/~abelin/ny%20inlaga.pdf>)

The most obvious direct connection between sound and meaning is usually called *onomatopoeia*. Onomatopoeic words make some claim to being less arbitrary than other words by trying to sound like the sound they describe.

E.g., you can hear a *baa* of a lamb, when it *bleats*. You can hear a *bow-wow* of a dog when it *barks*. You can hear a *moo* of a cow when it *moos* or *bellows*.

It would be wrong to think that English onomatopoeic words reflect the real sounds directly, irrespective of the laws of the language, because the same sounds are represented differently in different languages.

e.g.	English	Russian	Armenian
	<i>buzz</i> [z]	жу́жжать [ж]	բզզալ [q]
	<i>giggle</i> [g]	хихика́ние [х]	հհհհոց [h]
	<i>sizzle</i> [s-z]	шипеть [ш]	բշշալ, փծրծալ [z], [d]

Nevertheless, sometimes one can notice cases of coincidence or resemblance in onomatopoeic words of different languages.

e.g.	English	Russian	Armenian
	<i>cock-a-doodle-do</i>	ку-ка-реку	ծուկրուկու
	<i>moo</i>	му	մու
	<i>miaouuv</i>	мяу	միաուու

English onomatopoeia often appear in comic books. Though the number of onomatopoeic words is not large, onomatopoeia can often be found in comic books. The reason is that onomatopoeia has an important function in comic books since the readers cannot understand the gist of the picture with the picture only. But if one onomatopoeia *SLAM!!* is added to the picture of a dog standing in front of the door, it can make us realize the situation. The *SLAM!!* makes it possible to grasp the state of affairs that the door was closed with vigor and made the dog spring up. Its role is "label". Onomatopoeia used as labels in comic books can help to clarify the situation beyond the limits of the picture. It is clear that the frequency in use of onomatopoeia in novels is low. Onomatopoeic words are always used with quotation marks in English novels since novels choose real words rather than onomatopoeia. So, onomatopoeia are used as verbal forms.

e.g. *The tree creaked and groaned.*
The trap could do nothing but rattle. (Crystal 2005:25)

Onomatopoeia is widely used in poetry. In the poem "The Onomatopoeia River" by Max Dunn, separate words pronounced one after another with different rate make us hear the sound produced by the river, moving from its source where it is a tiny-brook. Then making its way through stones, and at last coming to the sea, as a white calm stream.

Glade...shade... pool...cool....
Fickle trickle... supple...able...
Yearningtrending...wending.
 (read each line faster)
Amble, addle, dawdle, dabble,
babble, bubble, gurgle, gambol,

*bustle, hustle tussle tumble,
mumble-grumble-rumble, hurtle-
Lunge! Plunge!
Splash! Spray!
flay, fume.
Gnash! Lash! Rage, wage.*

(read each line slower)

*Freed, speed....
weed....reed
haze...laze....
hide...glide...
wide...tide.*

(R. Sadler "Enjoying More Poetry" p.123)

In cases of sound symbolism proper the relationship between sound and meaning is less direct, e.g. *And the silken sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain.*

Here the repetition of the sound [s] actually produces the sound of the rustling of the curtain. This sentence can be compared with Armenian «Աշխիւն մշուշունք շշուկ ու շրշուկ» (Teryan 2002) or with Russian “Чуть слышно шуршат камыши”, where the repetition of the sounds [ʃ], [ш] produces the sound of rustling of the leaves touched by the wind. Here the stylistic device of alliteration creates the onomatopoeic effect.

Sound-meaning correspondences are widely used in literature to create a kind of aesthetic effect. Stylistic phenomena which reflect the sound matter of the language used for aesthetic purposes are onomatopoeia (the use of which was discussed in the text with the definite sound system for the creation of visual impression and “sound-painting”, can in different cases be treated as onomatopoeia or as sound symbolism depending on the contents and the effect they produce).

Sound-symbolism is expressed not only by the sound-effects, but by the visual means as well. Literary style researches reveal great difficulties in the interpretation of sound-meaning correspondences.

In poetry we cannot deny the fact that the arrangement of sounds carries a definite aesthetic function. Poetry is not entirely divorced from music. Such notions as harmony, euphony, rhythm and other sound phenomena are undoubtedly not indifferent to the general effect produced by a verbal chain.

Poetry, unlike prose, is meant to be read aloud and any oral performance of a message inevitably involves definite musical interpretation. Sound symbolism in poetry, is expressed by *alliteration and assonance*. For example, the repetition of the sound [d] in the lines quoted from Poe's poem “The Raven” prompts the feeling of *anxiety, fear, horror, anguish*, or all these feelings simultaneously.

*Deep into the darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortals ever dared to dream before.*

We come across a number of cases of alliteration in K. Mansfield's "A Cup of Tea", the use of which adds much to the character and feeling of the heroine:

She was young, brilliant, extremely modern, well-dressed and amazingly well-read in the newest of the new books

(K. Mansfield "A Cup of Tea and Other Stories" p.250)

The clusters with [r], [br], [tr], [dr] express the active character of Rosemary, who is quick in movements and decisions. She brings a poor young girl to a house to treat her with a cup of tea and suddenly decides to take care of her in the future.

And suddenly it seemed to her such an adventure. Supposing she took the girl home. Supposing she did one of those things. She was always reading about or seeing on the stage. What would happen? It would be thrilling. And she heard herself saying afterwards to the arrangement of her friends. (ibid)

The repetition of the fricative [s] reminds us of a sudden whistle. The abundant usage of the sound seems to underline that Rosemary has come to her decision unexpectedly for herself.

Nevertheless alliteration does not always reflect sound symbolic associations. It is simply fun to say and enjoyable to hear alliteration in many familiar phrases, clichés and expressions, newspaper headlines, proverbs and sayings:

<i>tit for tat, blind as a bat,</i>	<i>bigger and better.</i>
<i>it is neck or nothing,</i>	<i>hale and hearty,</i>
<i>sweet smell of success,</i>	<i>now or never,</i>
<i>safe and sound,</i>	<i>do or die.</i>

Nursery rhymes thrive on alliteration, as in the following:

- *We Willie Winkle.....*
- *Goosey, goosey gander.....*
- *Baa, baa black sheep.....*

Tongue-twisters also make great use of alliteration, for example:

- *A tutor who tooted the flute*
- *Tried to tutor two tooters to toot.*

And advertisers often use alliteration to make sure you get the message-and remember it:

- *The cold, crisp taste of Coke.*
- *Tennis makes you trim, taut and terrified.*

Many sayings also use alliteration:

- *So many customs, so many countries.*
- *So many men, so many minds.*
- *So much to do, so little done.*
- *Time and tide wait for no man.*

Alliteration is often met in book titles:

“*Sense and Sensibility*” (Jane Austin)

“*Pride and Prejudice*” (Jane Austin)

Like rhyme, alliteration is of a great help to memory (Galperin 1977:124).

Studying the sound meaning relations we have arrived at the following conclusions.

Conclusion

To our opinion sound-meaning relations can be classified into two groups: a) onomatopoeia and sound symbolism.

Onomatopoeic words are words imitating real sounds produced by people, animals and inanimate things.

Sound symbolism in English can be expressed: 1) by means of vowels, consonants, consonant clusters, and by the syllabic structure of words, 2) sound-meaning relation in English mainly occurs as a feature of groups of words rather than individual words.

In poetry alliteration gives pleasure, creates melody, establishes mood, calls attention to certain words and points out similarities and contrast. It often contributes to the meaning of a work, to its musical quality and unity.

In some cases alliteration and assonance do not reflect any sound symbolic associations. They merely draw attention to some words and are used in tongue twisters, proverbs, different clichés, familiar phrases which are easy to memorize. In spite of the presence of sound, the role, realization and function of symbolic phenomena can vary in some languages, including Russian, Armenian and English. It is also worth mentioning that the sound symbolic system of a language deserves attention and can become a subject of serious research.

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Հնչյունային խորհրդանշայնություն և բնաձայնություն

Հնչյունային խորհրդանշայնության և բնաձայնության առկայությունը որոշ լեզուներում, նրանց դերը, իրացումը և գործառույթը կարող են տարբերվել: Այս երևույթի ուսումնասիրությունը հայերենում, անգլերենում և ռուսերենում ցույց է տալիս, որ հնչյունային խորհրդանշայնությունը և բնաձայնությունը հանդիպում են ոչ միայն առօրյա խոսակցական դիսկուրսում, գովազդներում, թերթերում և ամսագրերում, այլև լայնորեն կիրառվում են գեղարվեստական գրականության մեջ՝ մանկական բանաստեղծություններում, հեքիաթներում և արվեստի լուրջ գործերում: Դրանք ազդեցիկ հնչյունաբանական հնարներ են, որոնք օգտագործվում են ընթերցողի վրա ազդելու և որոշակի զգացմունքներ առաջացնելու համար: Այս երևույթի համեմատական քննությունը ցույց է տալիս, որ տարբեր մշակույթներում աշխարհը տարբեր կերպ է ընկալվում:

Звуковой символизм и звукоподражания

Функционирования, реализация и роль звукового символизма и звукоподражания в некоторых языках (армянском, русском и английском) могут варьироваться.

Исследование звукового символизма и звукоподражания в армянском, русском и английском языках показало, что эти выразительные формы языка существуют не только в быденной речи, в рекламе, в газетах и журналах. Они очень часто используются в литературе: детских стихах, рассказах, и серьезных литературных произведениях, как важные стилистические приемы экспрессивно-оценочного воздействия на читателя или слушателя. Сравнительный анализ этих стилистических приемов подтверждает, что в различных культурах мир воспринимается по разному.