

SOUND SYMBOLISM AND ONOMATOPOEIA

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Workshop abstract (and introductory talk abstract):

The workshop aims to discuss the relation between onomatopoeias and sound symbolism. According to Nygaard, Cook & Namy (2009: 181) onomatopoeia is “one of the most obvious examples” of sound symbolism. Onomatopoeias are understood as simple underived words based on the imitation of sounds of extra-linguistic reality, such as English *woof*, Ilocano *ripak* ‘sound of a slammed door’ (Rubino 2001), or Seri *ṛoṛo’ṛo*: ‘coyote howling’ (Marlett, ms.).

Due to the imitative nature of onomatopoeias, phonology plays a crucial role in their shaping. Unlike the major part of the lexicon that is based on (a combination of) morphemes, onomatopoeias are based on a combination of phonemes, which is one of the unique features of this class of words.

The term sound symbolism is used “when a sound unit such as a phoneme, syllable, feature, or tone is said to go beyond its linguistic function as a contrastive, nonmeaning-bearing unit, to directly express some kind of meaning” (Nuckolls 1999: 228). Sound symbolism postulates *systematic association* between the sound (combination of sounds) and the meaning represented. Thus, for example, nasal+stop clusters, e.g., *-nk*, in Austronesian roots represent short resonant sounds (Blust 1988: 45).

The workshop will focus on the following main thematic areas:

(i) While the idea of sound symbolism as “an inmost, natural similarity association between sound and meaning” (Jakobson & Waugh 2002: 182) has a long tradition, views of the significance and the role of sound symbolism in onomatopoeia and, more generally, ideophones vary. Dingemanse et al. (2016: e117-e118) prefer a more moderate view of “ideophones as words that combine a significant degree of arbitrariness with weak iconicity.” They reject two extreme positions, one of them downplaying the role of sound symbolism in ideophones (including onomatopoeia) and the other, the so-called, *strong iconicity assumption* exaggerating it by claiming that the forms of ideophones are direct phonetic representations of meaning. The strong iconicity assumption can be illustrated with, for example, Egbokhare (2001) who assigns a meaning to each Emai vowel and consonant. The opposite view is represented, for example, by Bredin who believes that onomatopoeia and sound symbolism must be kept distinct (1996: 568), or Sasamoto & Jackson (2015: 48) who point out that the non-arbitrary nature of onomatopoeia does not mean “that we can pinpoint the ‘meaning’ of sound; the same sound occurs in a variety of contexts and the interpretation of such onomatopoeia is context-dependent.”

Despite some skepticism, there is ample cross-linguistic evidence of the employment of sound symbolism in the formation of onomatopoeias. The following examples from Basque and Udihe illustrate the point:

- (1) Basque
 - back-vowels indicate ‘strong boiling’: *bor bor*
 - central vowels normal intensity of boiling: *gal gal*
 - front vowels weak boiling: *pil pil* (Ibarretxe-Antuñano 2017: 201)
- (2) Udihe
 - Monosyllabic onomatopoeias with short vowels usually are associated with shorter sounds and momentary actions, e.g., *pōkč* ‘crack’ and *pek* ‘thud’.

- The word-final affricate *č* and cluster *kč* are usually associated with destruction, e.g., *pökč* ‘crack (of a wooden push pole), *pič-pič* ‘smack’ (about a thrown raw egg).
- Onomatopoeias in */r/* often render loud resonant sounds (crash, rumble, thunder) or turbulence, e.g., *kofjer* ‘rustling’, *čingir* ‘jangling’.
- onomatopoeias ending in */k/* are associated with sounds that end abruptly, for example, colliding solid objects, abrupt animal vocalization imitations etc.: *potok* ‘knock’, *tafak* ‘plop, chop’ (Tolskaya, ms.)

The magic of sound symbolism lies in its *potentiality*. In imitating the sounds of extra-linguistic reality language users can (but do not have to) actualize this potential in order to achieve the best possible sound-imitating effect for onomatopoeias. The idea of the potentiality of sound symbolism goes back to Grammont (1901: 321). It was reiterated by a few other authors, for example, Jakobson & Waugh (2002), or Elsen who maintains that “sound symbolism exists, but it may be latent without being active all the time” (2017: 492)

The thematic area arising from point (i) thus concerns the role and the significance of sound symbolism in onomatopoeia. Cross-linguistic comparisons are most welcome.

(ii) Sound symbolism is manifested at two levels of generalization: (a) the level of phonesthemes, i.e., specific sounds or a combination of sounds associated with a certain meaning that are assumed to exist in most languages (Elsen 2017), example (3), and the level of sound types, example (4).

(3) Alagwa

- onomatopoeia for hissing sounds produced by animals seem to preferably include the dental ejective affricate *ts* [tsʰ] as in *tsuwîi* ‘hissing sound produced by snake or antelope’ and *tsiitsiitsii* ‘hissing sound produced by snake’ (Kiessling 2022.).

(4) Nivkh

- *voiced stops* occur word-initially in the citation forms of native words only in a limited number of cases. Onomatopoeic words, which begin with the voiced stops, refer to the sounds of signalling equipment, cf. *durin durin* ‘sound of dinging’, *gorŋ gorŋ* ‘sound of bell ringing’ (Gruzdeva 2022.)

This thematic area should answer the question of the prevailing kind of sound symbolism in the particular languages.

(iii) It has been demonstrated (e.g., Hinton et al. 1995; Newman 2001; Kilian-Hatz 2001; Ibarretxe-Antunano 2006; Nuckolls 2010; Dingemanse et al. 2016; Saji et al. 2019) that sound symbolism may be both universal and language-specific. This issue concerns both of the above-mentioned levels of generalization.

This thematic area relies on cross-linguistic research that should help answer the question of the degree of universality of the individual sound-symbolic manifestations. It should also reflect on the assumption that phonesthemes are “largely language-specific in its choice of phonetic segments” (Hinton et al. 1995: 5).

(iv) Polysemy (5), synonymy (6), and formal flexibility (7) of onomatopoeias is a common phenomenon. This fact raises the question of how these lexical relations fit the idea of the role of sound symbolism in onomatopoeia formation.

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| (5) | Georgian (Topadze 2022) | <i>c'k'ap'</i> | 1) sound of rain drops; 2) noise of scissors |
| | Kinyarwanda (Ngoboka 2022) | <i>togotogo</i> | 1) sound of boiling (food), 2) sound of a |

faulty engine'

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| (6) | Choctaw (Haag 2022)
Burunge (Kiessling 2022) | <i>basakach</i>
<i>slatahḡ</i> | <i>wimilichi</i>
<i>hosloxu</i> | <i>qip̄i</i> | ‘sound of fire’
‘sound of a sudden
strong blow’ |
| (7) | Babanki (Akumbu 2022) | <i>hyì hyì ...</i>
<i>hyì hyì ... kyì? kyì?</i> | <i>hyàk hyàk ...</i> | <i>hyà hyà ...</i> | <i>hà hà ...</i>
‘sound of laughing’ |

These are the central thematic areas for the proposed workshop, but the discussion of any other issue related to the workshop topic are most welcome.

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