WHEN SOUNDS SPEAK: TOWARD A TYPOLOGY OF SOUND SYMBOLISM AND ICONICITY

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The idea of sound symbolism or iconicity as "inmost, natural similarity association[s] between sound and meaning" (Jakobson and Waugh 2002: 182) in onomatopoeia and, more broadly, in ideophones, has a long tradition. As noted by Akita, "the large majority of studies agree that languages involve sound symbolism, and speakers of the languages can more or less sense this." Widely known is Humboldt's view (1836: 79) that unlike direct imitation, "[l]anguage chooses to designate objects by sounds which partly in themselves, partly in comparison with others, produce on the ear an impression resembling the effect of the object on the mind."[1]

While the idea underlying terms like sound symbolism and iconicity seems to be simple and unambiguous, i.e., that a combination of sounds, retrieved from the phonological stock of a particular language, stands for a meaning, the opposite is true. Hinton, Nichols and Ohala (1994: 1) refer to the wide scope of sound symbolism when pointing out that "[t]he term 'sound symbolism' has been used for a wide array of phenomena in human languages, related but each with its own distinguishing characteristics." They distinguish (i) *corporeal*, (ii) *imitative*, (iii) *synesthetic*, and (iv) *conventional sound symbolism*. Another strand of research finds direct parallels between form and meaning on many different levels of language; indeed, within the lexicon (onomatopoeias, ideophones), but also in morphology (Jakobson 1965) and syntax (Haiman 1985). Such findings fly in the face of one of the design features of language, namely arbitrariness (de Saussure 1916; Hockett 1960). As noted by Pharies (1985: 88) "[w]ith the possible exception of the arbitrariness question, no topic in linguistics is more controversial than 'sound symbolism'."

This situation leads Johansson et al. (2020: 255) to conclude that "[d]espite the progress made in the field of sound symbolism and iconicity... our understanding of sound symbolism and its mechanisms remains patchy" in spite of the fact that "[o]ver the roughly twenty-year

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[1] The translation is cited from Horman (1949: 396).

period of renewed interest in non-arbitrary associations between sound and meaning, … the area has gone from a poorly understood field residing on the fringes of linguistics and semiotics to an area extensively studied from a range of perspectives and through a wide array of methods" (2020: 254-255). The methods range from experimental approaches (the iconicity toolbox, see Motamedi et al. 2019; the kiki-bouba paradigm, see Ramachandran & Hubbard 2001; Ćwiek et al. 2022) to list-based approaches (Blasi et al. 2016; Joo 2019; Erben Johansson et al. 2020; Thompson et al. 2021) to corpus-based observations (Akita 2009; Nuckolls 2020) to ratings (McLean et al. 2023; Van Hoey et al. 2023; Winter et al. 2023) and so on. The most recent overview can be found in Sidhu (2025). Terms like sound symbolism and iconicity cover a wide array of interests and approaches, precisely because they have so long been marginalized within linguistics.

No wonder, then, that typological research into sound symbolism is still in its infancy and that the views of its both language-specific and universal relevance and significance vary. While Elsen assumes that sound symbolism appears to be a universal phenomenon but linguists tend to neglect it, and that "sound symbolism exists, but it may be latent without being active all the time" (Elsen 2017: 491-492), Langacker is of the view that "[s]ound symbolism is not imaginary, but neither is it very powerful (1973: 25)." Ahlner & Zlatev (2010: 312) are also of the view that "proponents of sound symbolism, from Cratylus onwards, seem to have overstated their claims". Based on their experiments, Dingemanse et al. (2016: e117-e118) confirm the existence of sound symbolism in ideophones, however, they prefer a more moderate view of "ideophones as words that combine a significant degree of arbitrariness with weak iconicity." By implication, they reject two extreme positions that appear in the literature on sound symbolism: one of them downplays its role and the other, the so-called, strong iconicity assumption exaggerates it by claiming that the forms of ideophones are direct phonetic representations of meaning.

This brief yet reasonably comprehensive overview of various perspectives and claims illustrates that iconicity and sound symbolism have been revived as a central topic of interest for linguists in the past few decades. Some might even say that it is as old as linguistic science itself, and any study of sound symbolism inevitably takes into account Plato's *Cratylus*. Additionally, one of the most frequently cited sources on the typology of sound symbolism, *Sound Symbolism* by Hinton et al., was published over 30 years ago. But since then, the field has been continuously evolving and expanding. It is time to take stock.

The aim of the proposed workshop is to establish a new platform for discussing the relevance of this concept from both language-specific and universal perspectives. Therefore, the workshop will focus on four primary topics, framed by the following questions:

1. Are sound symbolism and iconicity (in their various types and terms) universal phenomena, or are they language-specific? Are there sound-symbolic patterns that occur frequently across languages? Conversely, are there unique or rare manifestations of sound symbolism?

2. Sound symbolism and iconicity can be realized in multiple ways. How do languages vary in this regard, and what similarities do they share?

3. What methods can we use to detect sound symbolism and iconicity within or across languages? How can we strike a balance between the language-particular and the cross-linguistic?

4. At what levels of granularity can we compare manifestations of lexical iconicity or sound symbolism? How does multimodality relate to the typical comparison of sound symbolism in spoken words? And how do sign languages fit into these typological considerations?

We welcome studies that examine sound-symbolic phenomena in individual languages, in language groups, or across geographic areas, as well as studies that address theoretical aspects of the typology of sound symbolism and iconicity, engaging with one or more of the four questions listed above.

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