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DASH, SPLASH AND HUSH: ARBITRARINESS VERSUS ONOMATOPOEIA

The traditional approach to sound symbolism: a review

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist and founder of European structuralism, in his linguistic theory established a number of dichotomies pertaining to different aspects of language, e.g., **langue** vs. **parole**, **synchrony** vs. **diachrony**, **syntagmatic** vs. **paradigmatic**, **form** vs. **substance**, and **signifié** vs. **signifiant**.¹ According to Saussure (see Fischer-Jørgensen (1975)), language is described as a system of linguistic signs, every sign having a dual structure, i.e., every sign consists of a signifié and a signifiant (signified and signifier), or sign-content and sign-expression which – in Hjelmslev's nomenclature – means that every linguistic sign, every word, has its concept (meaning) and its acoustic image (the actual string of sounds).

It is agreed that the relation between the signifié and the signifiant is **arbitrary**. This means that there is nothing about the English form /kæt/ that says it ought to refer to the feline quadruped we know very well, and not to a house or a whale. Likewise, the English word *tree*, its German equivalent *Baum* and French *arbre* have the same signification, i.e., they refer to the same class of objects, all three varying significantly in form while none of them naturally represents a tree or its distinctive properties (on this issue see, for example, Lyons (1977:100)). McMahon (1994:177) claims that the very theory of arbitrary links between a signified and a signifier made studies of semantic change possible and until that time it was generally believed that every word had its true meaning: hence *etymology* (Greek *etymos* – 'true'). Given that the link between the signified and the signifier is only arbitrary, either of them may change in the

¹ Many of these dichotomies are challenged in present-day linguistics and, in particular, within the framework of cognitive linguistics. See, for example, Sweetser (1990), Ruhl (1989), Kleparski (1996) and Kleparski (1997).

course of time. This phenomenon has been extensively studied by a number of scholars, for example, Ullmann (1957,1962).

The only commonly acknowledged exception to the universality of the Saussurean image of a linguistic sign is the case of **onomatopoeia**, which is defined in Bolinger (1992:28) as:

[...] direct imitation of a sound 'in nature', whether it represents the sound itself (bang, whoosh, cough) or something for which the sound stands (a relationship of metonymy, e.g. cuckoo, blast 'party', hum 'be active', knock 'summon to door').

Understandably, ideal imitations cannot exist because different languages have different phonological systems and onomatopoeic expressions are bound to conform to these particular systems. Another characteristic feature of onomatopoeic forms, according to McMahon (1994:85), is their maximal **iconicity**, which is reflected in that *[...] onomatopoeias are not affected by sound change or analogy [...]*; and later he adds that they also are not affected by semantic change. As an example of resistance to phonological change McMahon (1994) gives the Mid.E. forms *pipen* 'the sound produced by chickens' in which the stem was pronounced /pi:p/, and *pipe* 'instrument used for smoking', with the same long monophthong. After the completion of the Great Vowel Shift chicks still go *peep* /pi:p/ but smokers put a /paip/ in their mouth.

Given that we are raising here the issue of iconicity it should be explained at once that it is directly connected with onomatopoeia. With reference to iconicity, Wescott (1971:416) defines an icon as *[...] a non-arbitrary intentional sign – that is, a designation which bears an intrinsic resemblance to the thing it designates*. Iconicity is a very general term and it covers both visual images, like ♪ ♫ on toilet doors, and oral/aural ones to which we shall turn presently, especially **sound symbolism** and onomatopoeia. One should mention here that it is possible to distinguish two approaches to these notions: one lumps them together and uses the terms interchangeably (see, for example, Crystal (1987:174)), and the second – represented by Bolinger (1992:28) – treats onomatopoeia as a sub-class of sound symbolism which, in turn, is defined as *[...] that form of iconicity in which the nature of the sound resembles what the sound stands for*.

Another sub-class of sound symbolism distinguished by Bolinger is **phonesthemes** which is based on the synesthetic connection between sound and sound, sound and size, sound and movement, etc. He seems to duplicate the category 'sound-to-sound' which either should be included in an onomatopoeia sub-class or onomatopoeia should be a category of phonesthemes. The examples of sound-to-light relations are words beginning with the *gl-* cluster such as, for example, *glitter, glossy, glow, gleam, glimpse*, etc.; sound-to-movement relations are exemplified by the *sw-* cluster suggesting a smooth, wide-reaching movement, for example, *sweep, swell, swarm, swerve, swoop*, etc.; the *-nt* cluster

suggesting shortness in words like, for example, *bunt*, *punt*, *stunt*, *runt*, *blunt*, etc.; the *-rl* /ɜ:(r)/ cluster indicating roundness in such words like *swirl*, *curl*, *pearl*, *barrel*, *roll*. Sound-to-size or distance connection is believed to exist between close vowels (especially /i/) and smallness or closeness, and open vowels (especially /a/) and largeness or farness, for example, *slit* vs. *slot*, *chip* vs. *chop*, *wee* vs. *vast*, *little* vs. *large*, *near* vs. *far*, *this* vs. *that*, *see* vs. *saw*. Sound-to-sensation relation is claimed to exist between *sn-* and *sl-* clusters which are said to convey certain unpleasant associations, e.g., *snafu*, *snake*, *snarl*, *sneeze*, *sneer*, *slime*, *slither*, *slug*, *sloppy*. Additionally, the *sl-* cluster is often claimed to have something to do with downwardness, for example, *slope*, *slalom*, *slack*, *slave*, *slump*, *slouch*, etc.

Those who adhere to this approach admit that the phonesthematic relationship is not universal and there are clear counterexamples even in one system: *big* vs. *small*, Polish *wielki* ‘big’ vs. *mały* ‘small’. Such words as *gladiator* and *glucose* have nothing to do with light, and the content of the word *swap* implies rather sharp than far reaching movement. For more examples of phonesthemes consult Crystal (1987,1995) and Bolinger (1992). Among others, Bolinger (1992:28) says:

Phonesthemes differ from onomatopoeia in being vaguely analysable, and from morphemes in not being PRECISELY analysable (such as the un-, -test-, and -ed of untested).

What he means here is that onomatopoeic formations have amorphous structure and are treated as indivisible entities; from that definition one may draw the conclusion that onomatopoeic expressions are on a par with monomorphemic words differing only in the first being maximally iconic (the form, that is to say phonetic image, stands for the thing signified), the other being totally arbitrary. Aside from onomatopoeia and phonesthemes, Bolinger (1992:29) distinguishes non-verbal modifications, intonation, and postural sound symbolism, falling under the heading ‘primary sound symbolism’ but, because of lack of space, they shall be of no concern to us here. What is worth mentioning is that Bolinger (1992) highlights off ‘secondary sound symbolism’, in which, he admits, the association of words is accidental, though he tries to prove it works.

Onomatopoeia and sound symbolism revisited

On the basis of the discussion presented in the previous section one can say that the existence of sound symbolism and onomatopoeic words is a truism: it seems so obvious that there is nothing left. Nevertheless, we would like to consider these phenomena with a more critical eye from a different perspective of view. An attempt will be made to prove **that sound symbolism in fact does not exist** and that the superficial similarity of forms, cf. phonesthemes, is

essentially arbitrary, and that looking for sound symbolism in language implies looking for regularities in language which are simply not there to be found. We will also try to show that onomatopoeic formations should not be given any special status in the theory of language and that the relationship between form and meaning in these expressions is nothing less than arbitrary.

At the outset, we will provide some partial evidence that onomatopoeias are affected by sound change or analogy like any other lexical formations and the point that they sometimes resist those changes is due to the fact that some forms behave unpredictably. Beyond doubt, and despite the *Junggergrammatiker*, there are always exceptions in language. If we consider analogy and sound change: some onomatopoeias undergo these processes when, at the same time, some definitely non-onomatopoeic forms do not, e.g., at the very beginning of the Mid.E. period /h/ was dropped in consonantal clusters /hr, hl, hn/: *hnacod* ‘naked’, *hringan* ‘ring’, *hlúð* ‘loud’, the same kind of /h/ was lost in onomatopoeias: a horse *hnægð*, now it ‘neighs’, an ox *hlewð* then the /h/ was lost. In O.E. there were different ways of plural formation and suffixing -s was only one of them; then, in order to regularise the system, only one way was selected, e.g., O.E. *bōc* /bo:k/, Mod.E. ‘book’, O.E. *bēc* /be:tʃ/, Mod.E. ‘books’; strangely enough, the analogy did not apply to some forms that would hardly be called onomatopoeic such as, for example, *ox/oxen*, *goose/geese*, *man/men*, *tooth/teeth* or *salmon/salmon*. An example of onomatopoeic forms following the rules of regular sound change may be the sound produced by sheep, which in O.E. period would *blæt* /blæ:t/ but now they *bleat* /bli:t/, in the meantime they would /ble:t/.² Another regular change affected short /u/ which, around the 15th century, had an option to become /ʌ/ or to remain /u/ in such words as, for example, *put*, *full*, *butcher*, *cushion*, *sugar* (all with the vowel /u/) and *cut*, *drug*, *dull*, *sun*, *much*, *fun* (with the vowel /ʌ/). Surprisingly, in O.E. swine *grunað* but later it decided to *grunt* /grʌnt/, so a clearly onomatopoeic form having an option of remaining unaffected chose to undergo a phonological modification. Onomatopoeic expressions also underwent other sound changes: an O.E. *hund* (dog) *byrcð* /bürkð/ with a high mid vowel and now it *barks* with a low back vowel /a:(r)/. All these examples testify to regular behaviour of onomatopoeias as far as the phonological change is concerned, i.e. there is nothing inside these forms that prevents sound change from operating.

As mentioned earlier, McMahon (1994:177) claims that onomatopoeic expressions are not affected by semantic change. In the following we will make an attempt to prove that the semantic structure of what is commonly known as onomatopoeic forms may be altered in an identical way to non-onomatopoeic words. In the literature on the subject (see, for example, Kleparski (1986,1990),

² Factually, the change that took place conformed in every way to a regular sound change on a par with such words as, for example, *dæd* > *déd* > *deed* or *sæ* > *sé* > *sea*.

Waldron (1979)) there are three traditionally recognised basic semantic changes: **broadening** (extension, widening or generalisation), **narrowing** (specialisation), and meaning **shift**. We speak of broadening when the meaning of a word becomes wider, i.e. when it retains its original meaning and additionally means something else, e.g. *pipe* originally meant a simple musical instrument, but through association with its shape it means now ‘a tube’ (a hollow cylindrical body), or the word *picture* used to denote ‘something painted’ but with the passage of time it has broadened its meaning to include the sense ‘a photograph’. Narrowing of meaning may be illustrated by means of the history of the word *meat*, which originally referred to food in general, not only to edible flesh,³ or *garage*, which once meant ‘any safe place’ but now is used to denote a building for storing or repairing cars. Meaning shift can be exemplified by the semantic history of the word *silly* which originally meant ‘happy’, or Polish *kurwa* which originally referred to an unmarried woman but now is used in the sense of ‘whore’, or an emphatic particle used after words which the speaker wants to emphasise.

First, the process of narrowing of meaning in onomatopoeias can be exemplified by Polish *gęgać*; in the 16th century it meant ‘of a goose’s sound, speak nonsense, or speak through the nose’, now only the first meaning ‘of a goose’s sound’ is associated with *gęgać*: the verb *huczeć* ‘to make noise’ once referred to people, musical instruments, the sea and thunder, etc. Now it is never used with reference to people. The verb *piąć* originally meant ‘sing’ while in present-day Polish it refers only to the sounds produced by roosters and hens. English *bray*, originally applied to such animals as horses, oxen and deer, while in present-day English only men and donkeys can bray. *Croon* once meant ‘bellow’, ‘roar’ or ‘murmur’, ‘hum softly’, but now it means ‘to sing sentimentally into a closely held microphone’.

Broadening of meaning in onomatopoeic expressions may be clearly traced in a number of Polish forms: *pikać*, originally ‘of a chick’s sound’, in the course of time gained the additional meaning ‘beat lightly (of heart)’;⁴ *gruchać*, which originally described the sound made by a pigeon, now also means ‘wooing, courtship’.

A change that seems least likely to apply to onomatopoeic forms is meaning shift, and yet examples are not sparse: *bawl* once meant ‘bark, howl’ (of a dog), now it is used exclusively in the sense ‘cry, shout loudly’; *chuckle* in its original

³ The original meaning of *meat* ‘food’ is petrified in what Kleparski (1996,1997) refers to as meeting points between synchrony and diachrony such as, for example, *sweetmeat*, *mincemeat* or the proverbial expression *one man’s meat is another man’s poison* (for more examples see Kleparski (1997) and Heller *et al.* (1993)).

⁴ Apart from that there is also an onomatopoeic informally used derivative *pikawa* used in the sense ‘heart’.

sense meant exactly the opposite to what it means today: in the 16th century it meant ‘laugh vehemently, openly’ and around 1800 *chuckle* acquired its present meaning ‘to laugh quietly to oneself’; *hip* – the exclamation at present used to begin a cheer or to show approval, was used at first to call to someone or to attract their attention (like the modern *hey*); the word *jangle*, ‘ring a bell sharply’, went through a number of meaning alterations until it reached its present-day meaning: the original sense of the verb was to ‘chatter’, ‘babble’, then it was applied to birds, later it meant ‘to speak harshly’, ‘grumble’, and from this usage the meaning ‘to make a discordant noise’ developed and, finally, *jangle* began to refer to bells. Nowadays, it is hard to imagine that *jargon* could have meant anything other than ‘argot’, ‘a special language used by a group’, but in fact the noun, in its original sense was used for the twittering or chattering of birds. The Polish verb *grzechotać*, ‘to rattle’, evolved from *krzekotać* < *krik* (Mod.Pol. *krzyk*) ‘to cry’, ‘shout’.

The representative examples quoted above should make it clear that onomatopoeic expressions are as likely to be affected by semantic changes as non-onomatopoeic forms and that there is nothing in onomatopoeias that would block or even attenuate the possibility of meaning change; the fact that we do not perceive these changes is due to the synchronic point of view of language and the fact that linguistic change usually occurs over several generations of speakers. More generally, depending on the nature of linguistic enquiries, the synchrony/diachrony dichotomy can either be conducive or damaging to particular descriptive goals. It seems that what is needed in the case at hand is a **panchronic** point of view because the purely synchronic approach tends to deny the relevance of the past to the present altogether (see Klepanski (1997), Ruhl (1989)).

To pursue our ends, we conducted a survey in order to examine to what extent ‘onomatopoeic’ expressions merit the epithet, i.e. to what extent do they resemble (or not) real sounds of nature. The sounds in question are taken from different Indo-European languages such as *iha iha* (Catalan and Polish), *kra kra* (Italian), *pip* (Danish and Swedish), *tok tok* (Dutch), *i – i – i* (Catalan and Spanish), *guru guru* (German), *bau bau* (Italian), *summ summ* (Danish, German, and Norwegian). The elicitation consists of two parts; having completed the first part the participants of the test are given the second. The instructions are identical in both parts, that is to say:

The italicised expressions are the sounds typically produced by various animals in various languages. Name those animals.

I. One time when I was walking in the countryside I heard [...]:

1. *iha iha*
2. *kra kra*
3. *summ summ*

4. *tok tok*
5. *i – i – i*
6. *guru guru*
7. *bau bau*
8. *pip*

For the second elicitation, although the animals are the same as in the first, the context in which they are used is fairly clear; the aim of the second part was to check how much context would influence the choice of the animal by the person under examination. The contexts are as follows:

- II. 1. While walking across the meadow full of flowers I heard [...] (*summ summ*) around me.
2. When I was visiting Bethlehem I heard [...] (*iha iha*) when an Arab was pulling that obstinate animal.
3. When I was in the jungle I heard [...] (*i – i – i*) and saw it dextrously jumping from one tree to another.
4. In the country, my grandmother sprinkles grains of wheat to [...] (*tok tok*) every morning.
5. In the summer, every morning and evening I hear [...] (*kra kra*) by the pond.
6. My uncle keeps [...] (*guru guru*) in the loft of the cowshed.
7. The most popular pet in Poland is a [...] (*bau bau*).
8. Early this morning I was woken up by a [...] (*pip*) hiding in the branches of the tree.

The test was carried out on samples of Polish students and university graduates. They can all speak at least one foreign language and they have some linguistic training, which certainly proved to be of help in performing the task given to them. On our part, an attempt was made to select the most obvious and self-evident cases of onomatopoeia (the actual sounds produced by animals), in which the connection between form and meaning has not been questioned. We decided not to choose verbs of ‘onomatopoeic’ action because then the proof that there are no ‘onomatopoeic’ forms would be too easy to demonstrate. Consider, for example, the following material: a bird *chirps* in English, *crvkuće* in Croatian, *kvittar* in Swedish; a bee *buzzes* in English, *zuj* in Croatian, *mezamzemat* in Hebrew, *ronzo* in Italian, *surrar* in Swedish; a pig which *rokuje* in Croatian, *chrumka* in Polish, *grunts* in English and *grymtar* in Swedish. All these forms differ so greatly from one another that it is more than obvious that they do not refer to the same actions or describe the same sounds produced by one and the same animal.

The results of the first part of the survey are summarised below. Correct answers are in bold while incorrect in plain letters, the symbol # indicates lack of an answer, and the numbers after the words indicate the number of subjects who chose a particular answer:

<i>iha iha</i>		donkey 3	horse 17			
<i>kra kra</i>			crow 20			
<i>pip</i>	# 8	bird 3	mouse 2	chick 6	peacock 1	
<i>tok tok</i>	# 6	hen 2	turkey 1	frog 1	woodpecker 9	horse 1
<i>i – i – i</i>	# 13		donkey 3	horse 2	mouse 1	pig 1
<i>summ summ</i>	# 20					
<i>guru guru</i>	# 8	pigeon 6	turkey 4	rabbit 1	bird 1	
<i>bau bau</i>	# 10	dog 9	cat 1			

And here are the results of the second part:

<i>summ summ</i>	bee 11	cricket 6	# 3
<i>iha iha</i>	donkey 19	horse 1	
<i>i – i – i</i>	monkey 20		
<i>tok tok</i>	hen 20		
<i>kra kra</i>	frog 9	crow 11	
<i>guru guru</i>	pigeon 19		# 1
<i>bau bau</i>	dog 20		
<i>pip</i>	bird 19		# 1

As can be observed on the basis of the above results, the contextualised task was completed much more successfully: there are 14.4% correct answers in the first part of the questionnaire and as much as 85.4% correct answers in the second and the results would have been even higher if the contexts in questions 1 and 5 had been more supportive. Let us now analyse the respective responses: the sound *iha-iha* is produced by both the Polish donkey and horse. The overwhelming number of answers giving ‘horse’ (85% in the first section) may be attributed to the fact that horse is more popular and deeply rooted in Polish reality. In any case, this is a wrong answer but with a context provided as much

as 95% got it right. Frogs in Italian make the sound *kra-kra* and exactly the same sound is produced by Polish crows, but bearing in mind that these were Polish students' responses under examination it seems understandable that in the first section they uniformly chose the animal with whose sound they are familiar. The right animal, however, was completely different and they were not so sure of the animal when they were doing the second part of the task: 45% changed their minds and decided on frog even though the context was not clear enough. Answers to *i – i – i*, *pip* and *tok-tok* in the first part of the survey seem to be random: they resemble 'shots in the dark' where some responses are correct, 0%, 15% and 10% respectively, some are wrong, 35%, 45% and 60%, and some are missing, 65%, 40% and 30% (the diversity of responses seems to suggest that the 'onomatopoeic' sounds could mean almost anything), but in the second part, where the context is unambiguous, the percentage of correct answers is 95% and 100% respectively. The number of correct responses to *guru guru* and *bau bau* in the context-free part is somewhat better (30% and 45% respectively), because these expressions resemble in form the generally known Polish *gruhu gruhu* and *hau hau*, but the percentage of correct answers could still be expected to be higher. The second part of the survey was completed almost faultlessly: 95% of correct answers for *gruhu gruhu* and 100% for *bau bau*. The *summ summ* form seems so abstract for Polish people that they did not even try to provide any answer in the first section though bees, which produce this sound, are one of the most common and best known insects in Poland and the very form *summ summ* is present in a number of Indo-European languages such as, for example, Estonian, German, Danish and Norwegian. The supplied context (broad as it is) enabled the examined to give some expected and probable answers: 55% were correct and 30% missed.

Discussion

From the results of the survey one can safely draw the conclusion that the most iconic images in language, i.e. the sounds of animals, are seemingly no less arbitrary than generally recognised arbitrary forms like *house*, *cup* or *tree*. We may think that it is only the context that makes a word meaningful and that there is nothing in the word or its form itself that would contribute to its meaning, and the above results seem to confirm the hypothesis. The student informants clearly referred to the knowledge of their mother tongue (see *kra kra* or *bau bau*), and gave priority to the forms known. One may conclude, therefore, that onomatopoeic forms are so strongly arbitrary that they have to be learned individually, because the resemblance they bear (or not) to the objects they are supposed to designate cannot be associated by people even with some linguistic knowledge for whom the different phonological systems onomatopoeic forms are

put in is no obstacle. If one considers the sounds made by a dog such as, for example, English /wuf/ or /bau wau/, Polish /hau hau/, Italian /bau bau/ and Ukrainian /haf haf/, there seem to be no constraints in the phonological systems of these languages that would prevent a dog from barking uniformly, for instance /bau bau/ or /vau vau/. The fact that barking is represented differently in each language supports the thesis that those forms are arbitrary.

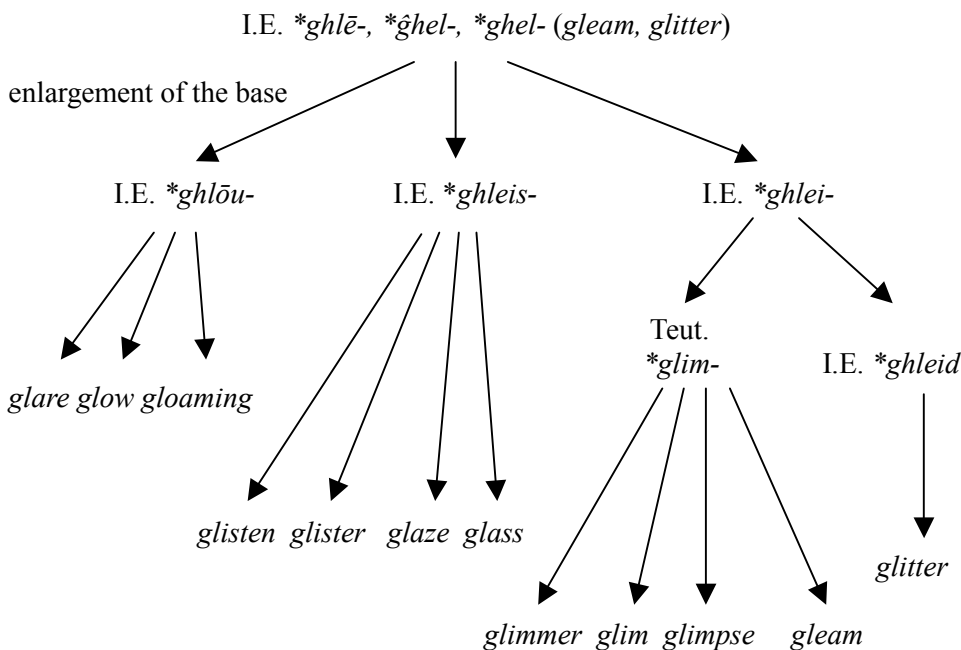
One may conclude that the superficial similarity of onomatopoeic forms in different languages is very often caused by language contact; borrowings sometimes make up to 90% of vocabulary (e.g. in Albanian), and onomatopoeic expressions are not an exception that cannot be borrowed by another language. In Irish, for example, despite its rich history and literature, most animals produce sounds in the English way, though the orthography of animal sounds conforms to the Irish writing system: for example, dogs *bhuf* /wuf/ and cows *mū* /mu:/. Borrowing of onomatopoeias can also be traced in the history of Polish: *gong* ‘the sound of a gong’ appeared in Polish in 1900, in English it was present as early as 1600, and it was probably adopted from Malayan *gong*; *furkać* or *furzeć* ‘flutter’ (from the sound of fluttering wings) was taken in from the Ukrainian *furknúty*, *kwękać* ‘grumble because of ill health’ was taken from the German *kränkeln*.

The apparent relatedness of onomatopoeic formations in different languages is – to a large extent – also generated by their same common root. In Slavic languages there are similar onomatopoeic forms: Polish *mlaskać*, Slovak *ml’askat’*, Czech *mlaskati*, Bulgarian *mljáskam* and Slavonic *mlásati* all sound and mean almost the same (i.e., ‘smack, click’) because they have developed from one Slavic root **mleškati*/**mlěskati*. The same phenomenon can be traced in a number of verbal forms, like *dzwonić* ‘ring’, *chichotać* ‘giggle’, *czkać* ‘hiccup’, *grzmieć* ‘thunder’, *piszczeć* ‘squeak, squeal, peep’. These and other Polish forms have cognates in many other Slavic languages and this is due to the fact that they originated from one Proto-Slavic onomatopoeic root: **zvę-ti* (**zvъn-ěti*), **χβχ- ъt-a-ti*, **skeuk-*, **grę-ti-* (**grъme-*), **pisč-ě-ti* (**pisči-*) respectively.

It can be safely assumed that the sound made by a duck has a common Indo-European ancestor. Compare, for example, English and German *quack quack*, Catalan *cuac cuac*, Dutch *kwak kwak*, Croatian *kva kva*, Italian and Portuguese *qua qua*, Norwegian *kvakk-kvakk*, Swedish *kvack kvack*, Spanish *cuac cuac*, Irish *vāc vāc*, Welsh *cwac cwac* and some equivalents from other non-Indo-European languages such as Hungarian *háp-háp*, Thai *gaab gaab* (with falling tone), Japanese *gaagaa*, Hebrew *ga ga ga*, Estonian *prääks prääks*, Chinese (Mandarin) *gua gua*. It is well-documented that words in languages that are related genealogically are likely to bear some resemblance to one another and this applies not only to onomatopoeic formations but to other forms as well.⁵

⁵ Compare, for example, words for ‘mother’ and ‘night’ in various Indo-European languages.

Now let us turn our attention to another case of sound symbolism, that is to say **phonesthemes**. It should be more than obvious that if onomatopoeic expressions are arbitrary, which we hope to have given at least partial evidence of, then the other instances of sound symbolism (in which the form and meaning, according to the traditional approach, are less strongly related) are also totally arbitrary. An attempt will be made to explain why some clusters refer to some similar idea, e.g. that *sl-* conveys unpleasantness. The reasons why phonesthemes can be vaguely analysable seem to be twofold. One is that they are derived from one and the same source, i.e. they have a common lexical ancestor, and the other is that they are simply accidental. We will look, for example, at the derivation of sound-to-light phonesthemes with the *gl-* cluster; for the sake of clarity it will be presented in the graph below:



In the derivation above, some intermediate stages, for example, I.E. **ghlōu* > O.E. *glowan* > Mod.E. *glow*, have been left out in order to make the graph as intelligible as possible. As can be seen from the graph, words beginning with the *gl-* cluster can legitimately be said to pertain to luminosity because they are all derived from the same Indo-European stem: **ghl̥-, *ǵhel-, *ghel-* (*gleam, glitter*). But this fact does not have any significance for speakers for they do not analyse such segments as meaningful or vaguely meaningful morphemes. Normally, speakers tend to look at such segments as indivisible entities because it takes somebody with an academic knowledge of English etymology and a

classical education to discern any relationship between forms like *permit*, *remit*, *commit* and *admit* or *sedan*, *sedate*, *sedentary* and *sediment*. In fact, *mitt(ere)* in Latin means ‘send’, ‘do’ and *sed(ere)* means ‘sit’, and at this point we should ask the question. Why are the segments *-mit*, *sed-*, *-pter-*, *bibl-*, *-ceive*, *pred-* not treated as instances of sound symbolism? After all, they relate to certain concepts, viz. ‘sending’, ‘sitting’, ‘winged’, ‘bookish’, ‘taking’, and ‘prey’ respectively. The answer is that these theoretically ‘vaguely analysable’ morphemes are not analysable at all by speakers whose access to synchronic information is part of their competence.

As has already been pointed out, looking for sound symbolism in language is looking for regularities that do not seem to exist; the superficial similarity of forms is quite often superficial. Let us imagine, for example, the sound symbolic hypotheses that senses in Polish tend to end with a voiceless velar sound: *węch* /vɛx/ ‘smell’, *wzrok* /vzrok/ ‘eyesight’, *sluch* /swux/ ‘hearing’, *smak* /smak/ ‘taste’, *dotyk* /dotyk/ ‘touch’ or that names of parts of the body include vowel /o/: *noga* ‘leg’, *stopa* ‘foot’, *ucho* ‘ear’, *dłoń* ‘palm’, *łokieć* ‘elbow’, *nos* ‘nose’, *kolano* ‘knee’, *udo* ‘thigh’, *oko* ‘eye’, *włosy* ‘hair’, *kostka* ‘ankle’, *biodro* ‘hip’, *policzek* ‘cheek’. At first sight the hypotheses seems to work fine but at a closer look there would be few who would not consider it ridiculous. It is crystal-clear that such a type of convergence is thoroughly fortuitous or, as it has been shown earlier, etymologically explainable; recognition of a common source very often depends on how deep into the past we are able to look. Nevertheless, even if the common origin of some words can be traced, there is not much synchronic value in this because phonesthematic clusters are neither productive nor analysable. If someone called you a *swindler*, *swine* or *swoeer* and you did not know the word you definitely would not think that you are smooth in moving.

Apart from this, one should remember that languages employ a finite number of phonemes by means of which they can convey an enormous number of meanings. It should be understandable that the same sounds may appear in one semantic field (see the Polish /o/ in the semantic field **PARTS OF THE BODY**) and that this coincidence of forms is caused by a limited number of phonemes employed by a language and it is not difficult to find patterns which seem to exist but that are, in fact, fortuitous. Having provided some evidence that onomatopoeia as well as other instances of sound symbolism are based on arbitrary ground, but bearing in mind that onomatopoeia as such is a very useful term, especially in literature, we would like to suggest a new definition of it: **onomatopoeia should be understood as a class of words referring to imitation of sounds of nature with no iconic relationship**. If a nonce formation *pedomatopoeia* was a general term for different kinds of walking, e.g., crawling, hobbling, marching, staggering, tiptoeing, dashing, limping, rambling, strolling, wandering, etc., the correlation between onomatopoeic forms and the actual sounds of nature could be explained on the bases of analogy between

pedomatopoeia and actual ways of walking, or the term reptiles and real animals which fall under this category. Such terminology may be useful for mere categorisation but it does not have any relevance for linguistic theory.

Conclusions

In this paper we have submitted partial evidence that onomatopoeic expressions as well as other instances of sound symbolism are no more than terminological inventions which seem to have no relevance in any theory of language. We made an attempt to show that the behaviour of onomatopoeic formations is by no means different from that of other 'arbitrary' forms: by the same token onomatopoeias are subject to the same phonological changes as non-onomatopoeic words (e.g. *hnægð*, *blét*, *grunað*). Moreover, onomatopoeic expressions appear to undergo exactly the same kinds of semantic change as unmotivated ones. Broadening of meaning may be exemplified by the semantic evolution of Polish *pikać* and *gruchać*; the process of narrowing of meaning can be observed in the history of Polish *gęgać*, *huczeć*, *piać* as well as English *croon* and *bray*; meaning shift in onomatopoeias can be illustrated through the history of such English lexical items as *bawl*, *chuckle*, *hip*, *jangle*, *jargon* and Polish *grzechotać*. The results of our survey confirm the thesis that traditionally perceived onomatopoeic formations are as arbitrary as any other unmotivated words in a language and that it is only context that gives meaning to an 'onomatopoeic' expression. However expressive 'onomatopoeic' words, if a context is not provided, may mean virtually anything in every possible language. Onomatopoeias require the same linguistic knowledge as any other word in a given language: every single word has to be learned individually and the fact that words are arbitrary is one of the reasons why languages are different.

It seems that the superficial similarity of onomatopoeic forms can be explained in two possible ways; one is brought about by language contact: 'onomatopoeic' formations, just like other words, can be borrowed by languages, see Irish *bhuf*, *mū* and Polish *gong*, *furkać* and *kwekać*; the other reason for onomatopoeias being similar in different languages is their common ancestral root, e.g. *mlaskać*, *dzwonić*, *chichotać*, *czkać*. The apparent similarity of sound symbolic clusters can also be justified twofold: one is the same as in onomatopoeia, viz. etymological relatedness, e.g. *glare*, *glow*, etc., the other is their mere accidentality.⁶ The assumption that there is no sound symbolism (and – accordingly – onomatopoeia) in language adds to the universality of Sausurrean dichotomy *signifĕ* vs. *signifiant* which, in turn, leads to a greater uniformity in the theory of language. Finally, our paper seems to provide some

⁶ See the senses and parts of the body in Polish.

vindication of the panchronic perspective in language analysis; only when we allow historical information (phonological changes, semantic changes) into our analysis are we able to throw some light on the spurious nature of onomatopoeia.

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