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PHONOSYMBOLISM - SOME NOTES

In the high old times of structural linguistics, when the *-eme* was the new key to scientific language study, its proponents were nevertheless not unaware that it did not answer all questions. Units are essential to measurement or any kind of orderly handling, but sub-unitary features not easily measurable nevertheless exist and have a communicative function. At the end of Chapter 14 of Language, Leonard Bloomfield listed a series of English 'symbolic' words testifying to the existence of a 'system of initial and final *root-forming morphemes* of vague signification', such as

[fl-] 'moving light': *flash, flare, flame, flick-er, flimm-er*

[fl-] 'movement in air': *fly, flap, flit (flutt-er)*

and [-ɛʃ] 'violent movement': *bash, clash, crash, dash, mash gnash, slash, splash.*

He ends the chapter with a short summary:

> The analysis of minute features, such as the root-forming morphemes, is bound to be uncertain and incomplete, because a phonetic similarity, such as, say, the [b-] in *box, beat, bang,* represents a linguistic form only when it is accompanied by a semantic similarity, and for this last, which belongs to the practical world, we have no standard of measurement.

So far as I know, Bloomfield carried the subject no further, but others have had more or less to say on the same or similar matters under such terms as phonesthetics, sound-symbolism, and (the term I prefer) phonosymbolism. Nevertheless, the subject has attracted less attention than it deserves and remains somewhat nebulous in many people's minds. In this short paper I hope only to disperse some of the clouds by making a necessary distinction, and thus perhaps to clarify terminology and sharpen the focus of interest.

The first distinction to be made is a basic one between *onomatopoeia* and what I call *phonosymbolism*. Onomatopoeia is properly limited to that class of lexemes in which the word is made or 'named' from or by imitation of sounds - such words as *quack,* a duck's call; *bang,* the noise made by a hard blow, an explosion, or the like; *drip,* the noise made by a small and intermittent fall of a liquid. These are elemental words, using direct sound-imitation; they are not symbolic. Sir James Murray, editing the noun *echo* in 1880 for the Oxford English Dictionary coined the adjective *echoic,* and appears to have used it himself in the strict sense: the human speaker echoes with his voice a sound he hears in nature, thus producing (once conventionalized into his linguistic system) a word.

Some dictionaries recognize this, if not always strictly, in their etymological label 'of imitative origin'.

Once such a word is produced, it may, like any other word, undergo semantic developments, including symbolic extensions. Thus *quacking* comes to mean stupid or querulous talk; a *bang* may symbolize sudden forcefulness; a *drip* may be a boring person. In such developed senses, the original echoism may be masked or wholly lost. Sound change may also disguise the original echoism: English *cow* has undergone normal early-modern-English diphthongization from OE *cū*, which is certainly a closer echo of the cow's noise (imitated by other speakers and in other languages as [mu:], [bu:, bø:, bo:] [lu:, lo:] etc).[1] The distinction, however, is valid and necessary between *echoism*, or direct vocal imitation of sounds heard, and *phonosymbolism*, in which the word or a part of it (such as Bloomfield's 'root-forming morpheme') bears some other relationship between the sound component and the understood meaning, which may be called 'symbolic'. The word itself is a phonosymbolic formation and is an example of the phenomenon of phonosymbolism. It is this relationship which I should like briefly to consider.

Perhaps most obvious is ablaut or vowel gradation. It was long ago observed that, for example, in Germanic 'strong' verbs such as *sing, sang, sung; befehlen, befahl, befohlen; brekke, brakk, brukket,* there is a phonetic progression from high and/or front to low and/or back. This is by no means simply regular; there are numerous exceptions or contradictions, some of which are due to sound change. Nevertheless, there would seem to be a persistent sense of pattern. Folk formations such as American English *snuck* for *sneaked* testify to this:[2] if (as is likely) *sneak* is from OE *snīcan*, 'to creep, to crawl', the ablaut series ī-ā-i-i does not support it. It does not follow any regular English sound-change nor are there any similar forms for other words of its class (*ride, rise, write,* etc) which could have furnished a direct analogical base.[3] The only clue is that it fits the front-to-back/high-to-low progression from present or timeless forms to past forms, still to some extent productive in present-day English. It is quite obvious that the general historical trend has been from strong verbs to weak; many old strong verbs (including *sneak*) have gone over, and all newly formed or adopted verbs are weak. Nevertheless, such strong verbs as survive are apparently enough to keep this pattern alive. Other folk examples of 'new' strong verb forms are, *wove* for waved, *brung* for brought, *dove* for dived. Here phonosymbolism means that an element of sound (the admittedly vague native-speaker sense of a series of contrasting sound-types) symbolizes the similar sense of time-contrast between present and past.

This sense of vowel-gradation symbolizing something other than sheer sound (as it does in echoic words) may also be seen in groups of echoic words that contrast semantically. An interesting experiment can be made with children by telling them a story and asking their explanation. Someone is dropping stones into a body of water. One stone goes *splash*, another goes *splish*, another goes *sploosh*: what makes the difference? Almost any child will see that it is

the size of the stone, or the amount of water displaced, and the quick child will rearrange the progressive sizes into the series *splish, splash, sploosh.*[4]

Phonosymbolism of this kind has surely taken a part in the semantic development of various contrasting words in English, a very few examples of which may be given here (verbs and nouns):

High/front stressed vowel	Low/back stressed vowel	Semantic contrast
niche	*notch*	Size: small/large
slit	*slot*	
flip	*flop*	Weight: light/
slip	*slop*	heavy
sweep	*swoop*	Movement in space:
skip	*scoop*	shallow/deep
skid	*scud*	Movement in time: sudden/steady
chip	*chop*	Strength or force:
grip	*gripe*	weak/strong
click	*clack*	Sound quality:
clink	*clunk*	sharp/dull

These few examples are minimal pairs, in which all other possibly functioning factors than the contrasting vowels are neutralized. But two points must be made. First, not all such phonetically minimal pairs will show any semantic association or contrast: consider *kick* vs *cook, peel* vs *pool, can* vs *coon,* and hundreds more - far more than those having a semantic association. As in etymology, both form and meaning must correspond before a valid relationship can be believed in. Second, in many non-minimal pairs or groups there may still be an effect of vocalic phonosymbolism: consider *stiff* vs *slack, bright* vs *gloomy* - even, perhaps, such a series as *twig* vs *stem* vs *branch* vs *trunk.* But such assumptions easily become dangerous and must be made with caution. When closer study of consonantal phonosymbolism has been made, however - a complex task which holds interesting possibilities for future research - better analyses of such words will become possible.

It must be insisted that the individual contrasting words may be of quite different and unrelated sources. One may have existed in the language long before the other or others were developed or borrowed. In such cases it is the existence of the phonosymbolic pattern in the native-speaker's consciousness that predisposes him to develop or borrow a new word: it fits a slot in the pattern, and to that extent seems 'more natural' or acceptable. If there was ever anything to the old 'ding-dong' theory of language origin,[5] this was its underlying idea: the *ding* calls for a corresponding and fulfilling *dong.*

A further point is that these correspondences cannot be predicted. The phonosymbolic pattern must emerge from the linguist's observation of this recurrent relationship in sufficient numbers of word pairs or groups so that *mere* coincidence is ruled out. But the assumption that because some echoic words have mates all must have them, or further, that because many do not have them the phonosymbolic pattern is disproved, would be false. It is a matter of potentiality, which is realized in only *some* of the possible cases, and unpredictably. A pattern may be productive without immediately or sometimes ever, producing all the forms it makes possible. The possibilities for new word-formation in this mode are both open and to some extent limited. Such inventions as Kipling's *schloop*, *squoggy*, and other words[6] are predicted on the phonosymbolic force of the vowels, as well as on direct echoism. (The *sch-* in contrast to *s-* can probably be shown to have a similar effect, but that is not our present concern.)

If it is argued that the high-front vowels in *little*, *leetle*, *tiny*, *teeny*, *eentsy-weentsy* and so on indicate small size, and that a great many other words use high-front vowels similarly, what about *big* and *small*, which reverse the contrast? The answer in this particular instance is that for *small*, which in OE had the low-front vowel [æ], a sound law has proved stronger than the phonosymbolic pattern; and that for *big*, of unknown etymology, one suspects unrounding of ME [y], and umlauted [u], and kinship with Norwegian dialectal *bugge*, a strong man, from the IE base **beu-* - thus a sound in origin relatively back, also drawn away from the phonosymbolic pattern by operation of a sound law. Once the prevailing phonosymbolic patterns of a language have been traced, they will help to clear up anomalies and fill gaps in etymology,especially for those words which do not follow the laws of regular sound change. Their application will reduce the element of surmise which has always plagued the practice of etymology.

The most striking example of phonosymbolism that I have come upon is the use of vowel contrast - again between high and/or front and low and/or back - in demonstratives. In some languages the system is not merely simple *this* vs *that*: Latin *hic*, 'this' (near me), *iste*, 'that' (near you), *ille*, 'that' (away from both me and you, yonder). In Bantu languages it is extremely elaborate, taking into account also the closeness or distantness of the interlocutors with regard to each other. But in languages generally there seems to be at least a two-way contrast between close to and away from the speaker. It is not always or only indicated by vowel contrast - other devices are used including gesture and intonation[7]- but enough languages in the world correspond in using this phonosymbolic device so that it would seem to be at least a semi-universal. A very small list of such contrasting demonstratives meaning very much the same as *this* (closer to the speaker) and *that* (farther from the speaker) is the following:

	Near the speaker	Away from the speaker
French	*ceci*	*cela*
German	*dies*	*dass*
Dutch	*dese*	*dat*
Norwegian	*ditt(en)*	*datt(en)*

	Near the speaker	Away from the speaker
Tongan	*ko eni*	*ko ena*
Hawaiian	*keia*	*'oia*
Efik	*emi*	*ðru*
Mang'anja	*ichi*	*icho*
Shona	*-u/-i/-a*	*-o*
Maya	*lelá*	*lelő*
Ojibwa	*ma·pa*	*uwiti*
Hindustani	*yih, yihī*	*wuh, jo*

It is not always possible to draw sharp lines of demarcation, expecially in matters of meaning. The behaviouristic proof that a linguistic signal 'means the same' to the hearer as it meant to the speaker is that the stimulus produced the expected or intended response. This is some help, but very gross help, largely limited to the sphere of simple physical actions. What a word means outside this primitive sphere is always potentially modifiable: literal meanings easily become transferred, metaphorized, reversed through irony, or are given qualifying emotional or attitudinal shadings. The lexicographer, having to number the meanings of a word as if they were always clearly discrete, finds himself driven to choosing those illustrative examples which are more precisely separated, leaving aside those which merge or shade from one nuance to another. He faces the dilemma of the numerating analyst who must find seven colours in the rainbow or eight semitones in the chromatic musical octave: the divisions are artificially introduced (since they are not in nature) for convenience in dealing with them at all.

There is no guarantee whatever that the complex of 'properties' that compose a speaker's understanding of what a word means to him - what he would use it to mean - and the complex of 'properties' that compose the hearer's understanding of what the work means to him will correspond in every detail. There will be a core or cluster of the same properties, a central area of congruence, but the surrounding area will show more or less non-congruence or even incongruity. In English, the effects of both echoism and phonosymbolism with various formal devices and for individual participating words, will vary from being rather central, as in the case of the demonstratives, to less so in the strong verb gradation, to peripheral or only partly active in the case of the echoic pairs. That phonosymbolism is a linguistic reality, however, can hardly be doubted. We need to examine many languages, lexeme by lexeme, and even phoneme by phoneme, to find and fully describe the places and the ways in which it functions.

FOOTNOTES

1. An interesting distinction is made in French: cows go [mø], bulls go [bø]. *La petite différence.*

2. The earliest example found in print is from 1890. See *Dialect Notes* 1.62.

3. *Druv*, for drove, is too rare to qualify.

4. The experiment should be tried with children speaking other languages. Voice volume and level should be kept the same for all words, and gestures should be omitted.

5. Once maintained, later rejected by Max Müller.

6. Just So Stories (The Elephant Child) 'He schlooped up a schloop of mud ... and slapped it on his head, where it made a cool schloopy-sloshy mud-cap.' Also later reference to 'squoggy, marshy country somewhere in Africa'.

7. The same word is often used for both close and not-close referents in cases where the element of contrast is subordinated, or where the referent is indicated by a gesture. Or, as in Japanese, the difference is signaled by consonant variation: *kore* (thing close to speaker), *fore* (close to hearer), *are* (away from both speaker and hearer).