

A History of Sound Symbolism

Margaret Magnus

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Abstract and Keywords

The fundamental paradox underlying the field of sound symbolism is this: on the one hand, if the form of a word affects its meaning, we should be able to understand a word just by hearing it, and on the other, since this is not true, we would expect the relationship between the sound of a word and its meaning to be arbitrary. But it has been demonstrated repeatedly on a large scale in many unrelated languages that the relationship between the sound and the meaning of a word is not arbitrary. This chapter views the history of sound symbolism as the evolution of our attempts to resolve this paradox.

Keywords: iconicity, Cratylus, phonology, semantics, mimetics

9.1 Overview

9.1.1 The Problem with Sound Symbolism

The fundamental thesis underlying the field of sound symbolism has always been controversial, because it appears to be so transparently wrong. The Sound Symbolic Hypothesis is that the meaning of a word is partially affected by its sound (or articulation). If the sound of a word affects its meaning, then you should be able to tell what a word means just by hearing it. There should be only one language. In spite of this, there has always been a fairly substantial group of linguists who do not dismiss the possibility that the form of a word somehow affects its meaning. Many of those who we think of as ‘great’ prewar linguists (Bloomfield, Jakobson, Jespersen, Sapir, Firth) wrote works proposing that either the sound or the articulation of words has a synchronic, productive effect on their meaning.

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9.1.2 Evidence

What sort of evidence have sound symbolists had for maintaining this position? Consider, for example, Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*. You seem to be able to glean something from the meaning of nonsense words:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

(p. 192) Sound symbolists have, more often than not, been influenced by poetry. There seems to be some power inherent in the sound of words which is particularly accessible in poetry.

However, the evidence cited most frequently in support of the hypothesis is the fact that the distribution of phonemes across semantic classes is not random. J Firth (1935) coined the term 'phonaesthemes' for classes of words which are confined to a particular semantic space and whose members also are constrained by a particular phonological form. Phonaesthemes have been shown statistically to be quite pervasive throughout the languages of the world. Consider some examples from English.

- INTENTION HINDERED: around 40 per cent of monosyllabic words starting with /st/: *stall, stand, (fixed) star, stare, starve, stash, staunch, stave, stay, stem (tide), stew, stick, stifle, still, sting, stint, stone, stop, strain, strand, strangle, strap, (go on) strike, strip, stub, stuff, stumble, stump, stun, stunt, stutter*
- STICKING TOGETHER or STRIKING: around 50 per cent of monosyllabic words starting with /kl/: *claim, clam, clamp, clasp, claw, cleave, clench, clinch, cling, clutch; clog, clot, clump; clang, clank, clap, click, clink, clop; clan, class, clique, club; close*

Because words of a given phonestheme are not in general cognate, some principle other than etymological derivation appears to be operative. Maurice Bloomfield (1895: 409) described the dynamic thus:

Every word, in so far as it is semantically expressive, may establish, by haphazard favoritism, a union between its meaning and any of its sounds, and then send forth this sound (or sounds) upon predatory expeditions into domains where the sound is at first a stranger and parasite. A slight emphasis punctures the placid function of a certain sound element, and the ripple extends, no one can say how far. [...] No word may consider itself permanently exempt from the call to pay tribute to some congeneric expression, no matter how distant the semasiological cousinship; no obscure sound-element, eking out its dim life in a single obscure spot, may not at any moment find itself infused with the elixir of life until it bursts its confinement and spreads through the vocabulary a lusty brood of descendants. [...] The signification of any word is arbitrarily attached to some sound element contained in it,

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and then congeneric names are created by means of this infused, or we might say, irradiated, or inspired element.

The history of sound symbolism is the history of the attempt to resolve this fundamental paradox: on the one hand, if sound determines meaning, we should know what a word means just by hearing it; on the other hand, the distribution of phonemes across semantic domains is not arbitrary.

9.1.3 The Overgeneralizations

Much of the uninteresting literature surrounding this debate can be traced back to two related overgeneralizations: the conventionalist overgeneralization and the naturalist (p. 193) overgeneralization. The conventionalist overgeneralization is that we cannot predict the referent of a given word in a given language from its form. There is therefore no synchronous, productive correlation whatsoever between the sound of a word and its meaning. This view presupposes that just because we cannot immediately see a correlation, none exists. It also presupposes that word semantics is monolithic and can be completely reduced to word reference. At the very least, most people accept that a word has a connotation as well as a denotation. The naturalists have all too often drawn the converse and equally untenable conclusion: the naturalist overgeneralization is that because some aspects of word semantics are derivable from phonetics, therefore all word semantics is derivable from phonetics.

9.1.4 Overview of Trends and Issues

If sound affects word meaning then it does so only in part, and one or more of the following must be true:

- A.** Sound affects meaning only in some words.
- B.** Sound modulates the basic meaning of the word.
- C.** Sound predisposes words to prefer certain referents.
- D.** Word meaning is decomposable into discrete parts, and sound affects only some aspects of the word meaning.

A number of other debates have preoccupied sound symbolists as well. For example:

- E.** Is sound-meaning in words a function of context? Does it arise only in *parole*, or do free-standing linguistic elements have sound meaning?
- F.** How far down the hierarchy does the sound-sense relationship go? Do syllable on-sets have meaning? Do individual phonemes? Do phonetic features?
- G.** Are some languages influenced by sound-meaning more than others?
- H.** What influence has sound symbolism had on the evolution and origin of language?