

ENCODING WITHOUT GRAMMAR: PHONIC ICONISM IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, interest in phonic iconism (or sound-symbolism) has revived. Phonologists have "re-discovered" direct mapping from sound to sense in the absence of conspicuous and arbitrary grammatical mediation.

Although phonic iconism is presumably detectable in all spoken languages, it is most easily demonstrated in languages that are widely used, well recorded, and intensively analyzed. Consequently, most examples of iconism in this presentation will be drawn from spoken English.

The presentation will conclude with citation of analogous examples of phonic iconism from other languages, some of them Indo-European and some non-Indo-European.

MICROLANGUAGE AND ALLOLANGUAGE

Microlanguage is the name given by George Trager to that core of spoken language which is subject to obvious and well known grammatical rules. /1/ In the view of Transformational linguists, this core is, in fact, the whole of language. But Trager also recognizes pre-language, or "baby talk;" paralanguage, including exclamations; and metalanguage, or verbal art. Although he offers no cover-term for these three domains of speech, I refer to them as allo-language and define them as speech that violates the rules of canonical utterance (while, in some cases, developing other rules peculiar to itself). /2/

ARCHAIC PHONOSEMY

The reason, I think, why so many languages can and do slight grammar is that grammar, unlike utterance or meaning, is only a means for multiplying the links between expression and content and does not in itself constitute either the expression or the content of spoken communication. Consequently, when language can minimize or dispense with grammatical mediation, it often does.

Direct mapping from sense to sound, without grammatical mediation, is sometimes referred to as phonosemy. Its ubiquity among the world's languages may be explained as a retention by those languages of an older and simpler manner of self-expression alongside one that is more recent and more complex. /3/

TYPES OF ICONICITY

Despite Ferdinand de Saussure's insistence on the arbitrariness of language, there is increasing evidence that all languages contain what Charles Peirce called icons, or utterances that mimic. /4/

In relation to any given utterance, however, the reality mimicked may be of any one of three types. The first such type of mimicry is primary iconism, exemplified by onomatopes like buzz or hum. The next type is secondary iconism, exemplified by syllabic phonesthemes like the -ash in bash, dash, and gash. And the last type is tertiary iconism, exemplified by infantile reduplicants like booboo, doodoo, and googoo or by palindromes like pop, tot, or cock. Words exemplifying primary iconism imitate non-linguistic reality; those exemplifying secondary iconism imitate other words; and those exemplifying tertiary iconism imitate (or, more precisely, repeat) segments of themselves.

One of the most striking areas of primary iconism in all spoken languages is that of bird vocabulary--words for birds themselves as well as for their vocalizations. Most birds that are small and produce high-pitched notes are represented, at least in part, by lexemes containing high front vowels. English examples are bird-names like peewee and siskin; verbs like chirrup and twitter; and echoics like cheep! and tweet!

Secondary iconism is well illustrated by a group of rhyming monosyllabic English nouns all of which denote something truncated: bump, hump, lump, stump, clump, etc.

Tertiary iconism of the reduplicative type is relatively straightforward in its structural derivation. But palindromy is more complex as regards the processes that give rise to it. It may be of any of four different subtypes, as follows:

- A. progressive
 1. additive: pop < pa
 2. replacive: bub < bud
- B. regressive
 3. additive: Nan < Ann
 4. replacive: Bob < Rob /5/

SEMANTIC PROCESSES

The semantic processes that produce iconic forms in English are of three types: monadic, dyadic, and triadic. Monadic processes produce forms that are not readily paired with other forms in an antithetical relation. Such a process is the use of the so-called "muffled" or "blurred" vowel /ə/ in the verbs muffle and blur.

Dyadic processes produce forms that are readily paired with corresponding forms in an antithetical relation. Such a process is the alternation of dorsal stops with dorsal fricatives in pairs like the following:

hack vs. hash
 crack vs. crash
 smack vs. smash
 stack vs. stash

In each of the above cases, the form ending with a stop has a punctive force, expressing instantaneous action, while the form ending in a fricative has a durative force, expressing the result of the action. /6/

Triadic processes, like dyadic ones, generate antitheses. But, in addition to antithetical meanings, they also generate a neutral meaning, intermediate to the other two. An example is provided by the three nicknames Hal, Hank, and Harry, all hypocoristic variants of the forename Henry. In this case, the form containing the lateral is (or at least once was) diminutive, and that containing the vibrant is (or was) augmentative, while the form containing the nasal is, like its more formal source, neutral. /7/

PHONIC PROCESSES

Phonic processes yielding iconic effects are of two major types--phonosemic (or microlinguistic) and phonetic (or allolinguistic).

Phonemic processes, in turn, may be monadic, dyadic, or pluralic in subtype. An example of a monadic phonosemic process is the nasalization that adds sonority to the verb click (from click). An example of dyadic process is the derogatory voicing in the verb snivel (as against sniffle). An example of a pluralic process is the labialization, apicalization, palatalization, and velarization encountered in the four provincial British nouns craps=crits=crutchings=cracknels, all denoting the cooked pig's intestines known in North America as chitterlings (and usually pronounced chitlin's). /8/

Three purely phonetic processes that nor-

mally go unrepresented in the standard orthography are:

- gemination, as in [ɛnni] for any;
 glottalization, as in [ʌ^ʔow] for oh-oh; and
 pharyngealization, as in [hʌ^ʔri] for hurry /9/.

PSEUDO-MORPHOLOGICAL PROCESSES

Although, in most cases, allolanguage eliminates microlinguistic morphology completely, in others it substitutes a reduced and deviant morphology. This pseudo-morphology may be either replacive or additive.

Replacive pseudo-morphology is particularly evident in American slang, where it takes two highly specific forms. One is replacement of any consonant or consonant-cluster by /z/ (a process which I have nicknamed "zazzification"), as in zillion for million, billion, or trillion. /10/ The other is replacement of any syllabic nucleus--whether monophthong or diphthong--by /uw/, written oo (a process which I have nicknamed "oogification"), as in oogly for ugly. /11/

Additive pseudo-morphology takes four forms, two of which are absent from microlanguage. These four are prefixation and suffixation (both present in microlanguage) plus infixation and interfixation (both absent). Examples follow.

1. prefixation: smelt from melt
2. suffixation: kiddo from kid
3. infixation: purp from purp
4. interfixation: pit-a-pat from pat(ter) /12/

The most distinctively allolinguistic of such affixes are syllabic prefixes consisting of a post-alveolar consonant and a stressless blurred vowel. Examples follow:

derivative	source or cognate
kathob, "vague thing"	thob, "be credulous"
gazook, "tramp"	zook, "prostitute"
chewallop, "bang!"	wallop, "hit hard"
jamoke, "fellow"	moke, "dull person" /13/
yazunk, "plop!"	zonk, "to strike"

Such formative processes produce pseudo-morphological results. One of these results is the echo-compound, consisting typically of a pleremic, or obviously meaningful, base-word followed by a cenemic, or relatively meaningless, rime-tag. Examples follow:

- roly-poly (plump)
 hurly-burly (battle)
 eenie-meenie (one, two...)
 palsy-walsy (excessively friendly)

One thing that is noteworthy about such groupings is that the initial consonants of the rime-tags

themselves form an apophonic series, ranging from surd through sonant and nasal to glide in the bilabial category. /14/

Another pseudo-morphological phenomenon is what I call a word-chain. Word-chains typically consist of three-word phrases, in which the first and third word lack phonic overlap but which are linked by phonic overlap with the second word. This overlap is either rime followed by alliteration or alliteration followed by rime, as below.

healthy, wealthy, and wise
 grunt, groan, and moan /15/

PHONOSEMIC CORRESPONDENCE

One of the characteristics of allolanguage is a closer relation between sound and sense than obtains in microlanguage. Even in allolanguage, however, there is a disjunction of scale, in accordance with which a number of quite different phonic devices can produce a single semantic effect. Of no effect is this truer than of diminution, which can be achieved by syllabic elision, by cluster-reduction, by high-fronting of vowels, by lateralization of vibrants, by occlusivization of nasals, or by velarization of labials. Examples follow:

1. Ed < Edward
2. Kit < Christopher
3. tip < top
4. Sally < Sarah
5. Peg < Meg
6. dunk < dump

In a few cases, these devices may even be pitted against one another. An example is the name Susan, which, when hypocoristic, may take either of two forms. One of these, Sue, is more diminutive in terms of syllable-count, while the other, Suzie, is more diminutive in terms of vowel quality.

SEMANTIC WEIGHTING

A majority of the semantic categories in language generally are dyadic, involving such familiar pairings as nominal vs. verbal, subject vs. object, or active vs. passive. Allolanguage exhibits just as many such pairings as does microlanguage. But it weights them emotively in a more discriminatory direction, showing clear preference for diminutive over augmentative forms but for derogatory over plauditory forms.

SEMANTIC CROSS-CURRENTS

Some allolinguistic forms exhibit simultaneously positive and negative manifestations of the same semantic category. In the category of size (or seniority), the 17th century nickname Poll(y) is a striking example. In terms of its consonantism, it is doubly diminutive. In terms of its vocalism, however, it is augmentative. Reading

from back to front, it means, literally, "(little) little big little Mary."

SEMANTIC FADING

Other allolinguistic forms, though distinctive as markers of non-canonical material, have so little intrinsic meaning as to be, in Glossematic terms, cenemic. Examples are the labial-onset prefixes in the following slang terms:

pizazz, "zest" (cf. zazzle, "sex appeal")
 bazoo, "snout" (cf. kazoo, "mouth resonator")
 fadoodle, "nonsense" (cf. doodle, "to scrawl")
 vaboom! "a thunderous sound" (cf. boom)
 magoo, "custard pie" (cf. goo, "slime") /16/

PHONIC ICONISM OUTSIDE ENGLISH

The polarity of high-front vowels versus low and/or back vowels seems universally to correlate with that between small and large. Indo-European examples are:

German Misch-masch: "heterogeneous mixture"
 Italian bimbo, bambolo: "baby, child"
 Russian pif da paf: "slam-bang"
 Bihari din-un: "a day or so"

Non-Indo-European examples are:

Estonian vinderdi-vänderdi: "to and fro"
 Basque bilin-balan: "ding-dong"
 Mandarin ching, chung: "light, heavy"
 Proto-Polynesian i^ʔi, oho: "small, large" /17/

In no language, however, is the diminutive/augmentative polarity more closely correlated with vocalic apophony than in English, where we encounter it equally often in derivative linkages like sip from sup and in echoic compounds like zig-zag and see-saw.

References

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- /2/ R.W. Wescott, Sound and Sense: Linguistic Essays on Phonosemic Subjects, Jupiter Press, 1980, p. 19
- /3/ ibid., pp. vii and 22
- /4/ ibid., p. 3
- /5/ R.W. Wescott, "The Iconicity of Consonant Alternation," The University of California Conference on Sound-Symbolism, Berkeley, January 1985, pp. 2 and 3

- /6/ R.W. Wescott, Sound and Sense (as above, fn. 2), p. 340
- /7/ R.W. Wescott, "Lateral/Vibrant Alternation in English Nicknames," Comments on Etymology, v. 9, n. 1, October 1979.
- /8/ R.W. Wescott, Sound and Sense (as above), pp. 349 and 352.
- /9/ R.W. Wescott, "The Iconicity of Consonant Alternation" (as above, fn. 5), p. 23
- /10/ *ibid.*, pp. 19 and 20
- /11/ R.W. Wescott, Sound and Sense (as above), p. 389
- /12/ R.W. Wescott, "Neglected Affixes in English," a lecture to the Linguistic Society at the State University College of New York at Buffalo, April 1978
- /13/ R.W. Wescott, Sound and Sense (as above), p. 401
- /14/ *ibid.*, p. 402
- /15/ *ibid.*, p. 378
- /16/ *ibid.*, p. 401
- /17/ *ibid.*, p. 326