ESTONIAN ONOMATOPOEIA: A TYPOLOGICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a classification of Estonian onomatopoeic words worked out by the author. The inventory of Estonian onomatopoeia (735 onomatopes) is examined within the framework of the universal classification of onomatopes worked out by S. Voronin.

INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen growing interest in the study of various iconic aspects of language. Of particular interest is the emergence of typological studies in the field of phonosemantics. The groundwork for typological studies in the field of onomatopoeia was laid down by S. Voronin in his universal classification of onomatopes /1/.

Onomatopoeia as a phonosemantic subsystem can be viewed as modelling extralinguistic acoustic phenomena by means of the phonological structure of words in a given language. Accordingly, onomatopoeia is approached from the extralinguistic point of view, the classification of onomatopes being based on the typology of extralinguistic sounds. It should be emphasized that an onomatope as a model is a double approximation of an extralinguistic sound /2/. At first the extralinguistic sound is channelled by the human ear and then the model is built up by means of the phonological structure of a language. The linguistic sign being a linear entity, the individual properties of a complex sound can only be conveyed successively. The extralinguistic and typological approach in the study of onomatopoeia brings to the fore the deep-set universal isomorphic features that otherwise would not be self-evident.

The present paper is an attempt to apply the principles of the universal classification of onomatopes to the study of Estonian onomatopoeia. The subject is of considerable interest since Estonian, as well as other Balto-Finnic languages, is noted for its rich repertoire of onomatopoeic and descriptive resources /3/.

A CLASSIFICATION OF ESTONIAN ONOMATOPES

CLASS A. INSTANTS
Type I. Instants
Pattern 1

$$\frac{(\text{PLOS+})\ (\text{SON}^{\text{LAT/NAS DENT}})}{\text{FRIC}^{\text{SIB}\hat{}}} \quad +\breve{\text{VOC}}+\text{PLOS}^{(s)}$$

$$\frac{< \text{AFFR}}{\text{FRIC}^{\text{LAB}\breve{}}}$$

Examples: TIKK-TAKK - tick-tack (of a clock); KLÕPS - a light clicking sound; KLUKSuma - to make a sound like water flowing unevenly out of an opening, esp. in the throat; NAPS - snap, the sound of closing the jaws quickly; SIDistama - (of a bird) to make a succession of short rapid sounds, twitter; VIDistama - (idem).

CLASS B. CONTINUANTS
Type II. Tonal Continuants
Pattern 2

$$\text{CONS} + \overline{\text{VOC}}\ (+\text{CONS}^{(s)})$$

Examples: PIIP-PIIP - beep-beep, the high-pitched tone of a motor horn or telephone; TUUT-TUUT - toot-toot, the low-pitched sounds of a horn; SIITSuma - (of young birds) to cheep; VIIKSuma - (of small birds) to make a thin high-pitched sound, to squeak.

Pattern 3

$$(\text{CONS+})\ \breve{\text{VOC}} + \text{SON}^{\text{LAT/NAS DENT}}$$

Examples: UNdama - to hoot (of sirens, communication lines); LLLLLLL - (occas.) the monotonous sound of communication lines.

Type III. Pure Noise Continuants
Pattern 4

$$\frac{\text{FRIC}\hat{}}{\text{PLOS}} + (\text{SON}^{\text{LAT}}{}_{+})\ \breve{\overline{\text{VOC}}} + \frac{\text{PLOS}}{\text{FRIC}\hat{}}$$

Examples: SISisema - to give a high-pitched prolonged sibilant sound, hiss; SOSis-

tama - to whisper; LÔHisema - to make the sound of tempestuous flames; SIUH - the sound of cutting through the air with a high-pitched whistling noise, swish; KAHisema - to whisper gently through the leaves (of wind), to swish (of clothes); karSOSS - the sound of an object entering sand, swish; HABisema - (of wind) to whisper gently through the leaves.

Type IV. Tone-Noise Continuants
Pattern 5

$$\frac{\text{FRIC}^{\check{}}}{\text{FRIC}^{\hat{}}} + \overbrace{\text{VOC}} + \frac{\text{FRIC}^{\hat{}}}{\text{SON}^{\text{NAS}}}$$

Examples: VIHisema - to make a noise by moving very fast, whizz, to whistle (of wind); VISisema - to make a continuous hissing sound (of wet logs burning), fizz; VIUH - (of an object) the sound of whizzing through the air; HUMisema - to make a low dull continuous buzz; SUMisema - to make a monotonous low hum (of bees in flight), buzz.

CLASS C. FREQUENTATIVES
Type V. Quasi-Instant Frequentatives
Pattern 6

$$\frac{(\text{PLOS+})\ (\text{SON}^{\text{LAT}})}{\text{FRIC}^{\text{SIB}\hat{}}} + \underbrace{\overbrace{\text{VOC}} + \text{R}}_{<\text{AFFR}} + \text{PLOS}^{(\text{s})}$$

Examples: (P)RAKSuma - to make sudden repeated explosive sounds (of ice, burning logs), crack, crackle; KRAKSti - with a sudden sharp explosive sound (as of breaking), crack; PLARTSti - the sound of a body falling into water or sth. wet hitting a surface and being flattened; LÄRTSti - with a noise of sth. wet hitting a surface and being flattened; SIRTSuma - to make short sharp sound(s) (of small birds or insects), chirp; TÕRTS - a short sharp, usu. unpleasant low-pitched sound of a horn or a brass instrument.

Type VI. Pure Frequentatives
Pattern 7

$$(\text{CONS+})\ (\text{SON}^{\text{LAT}}) + \overbrace{\text{VOC}} + \text{R}$$

Examples: URisema - (of a dog) to make a deep rough throaty sound, growl; TIRisema - (of an alarm clock) to make a high-pitched continuous vibrating sound, (of a telephone) to ring; PÕRisema - (of an engine) to make a deep continuous vibrating sound by a succession of quick strokes, (of the drum) to roll; SIRistama (of small birds) to sing in a trilling manner, (of a grasshopper) to chirr; KÄRisema - to make a sound as of tearing (of cloth, paper); KÕRisema - (of dry peas moving in a bowl) to emit a hollow continuous sound made by a succession of quick strokes;

PLÄRisema - to make a continuous harsh unpleasant dissonant blaring noise.

Type VII. Tonal Frequentatives
Pattern 8

$$(\text{PLOS+})\ \text{R} + \overline{\text{VOC}}\ (+\text{PLOS}^{(\text{s})})$$

Examples: KRIIKSuma - to make a prolonged grating sound (of a badly-oiled door), to creak; KROOKSuma - to make a deep low noise such as a frog makes, to croak; PRÄÄKSuma - to make the characteristic cry of a duck, to quack; RÄÄKSuma - to make a harsh reedy cry (of a crake); RUIgama - (of a pig) to make deep throaty sounds, to grunt.

Type VIII. Frequentatives
Pure Noise Quasi-Continuants
Pattern 9

$$\underbrace{\text{FRIC}^{\hat{}} + \overbrace{\text{VOC}} + \text{R}}$$

Examples: SURisema - to make a continuous dull vibrating sound, to whirr; RÖH RÖH, RÖH - (of a pig) short rough sounds in the throat; SORR, SORR, SORR - regular vibrating sounds made by the whirr of the spinning-wheel; HURisema - (of big insects) to make a continuous low-pitched vibrating sound.

Type IX. Frequentatives
Tone-Noise Quasi-Continuants
Pattern 10

$$\text{FRIC}^{\text{LAB}\check{}} + \overbrace{\text{VOC}} + \text{R}$$

Examples: VURR, VURR - regular vibrating whizzing sounds made by the rapid revolving of a spinning-wheel; VÕRRa-VÕRRa - the sound of the rapid motion of a threshing machine; VURama - to make a vibrating buzz.

HYPERCLASS AB. INSTANTS-CONTINUANTS
Type X. Tonal Postpulse Instants-Continuants
Pattern 11

$$(\text{PLOS})\ (+\text{SON}^{\text{LAT}}) + \overbrace{\text{VOC}} + \text{SON}^{\text{NAS/LAT}} + (\text{PLOS}^{(\text{s})})$$

Sub-type A. Short

Examples: TÜMPSuma - to make repeated dull sounds when striking with a heavy blunt object; PONTSatama - (of a soft heavy object) to fall heavily with a resounding blow; KOLKSuma - to make repeated loud unpleasant sounds, as of metal striking against metal; PLÕNKSuma - (of playing a stringed instrument) to produce repeated dull resonant sounds, to plonk.

Sub-type B. Prolonged

Examples: PLÕNNima - to play a stringed instrument carelessly or informally, esp. without skill; PIMM-PAMM - slow and repeated deep resonant sounds of a large bell; KILL-KÕLL - clear resonant sounds of small bells; TILL - a prolonged high-pitched ringing sound (as of a small bell).

Pattern 12

$$\text{PLOS}\ (+\text{SON}^{\text{LAT}}) + \overline{\text{VOC}}$$

Examples: PIU-PAU - repeated resonant sound of bells, resounding discharges of guns; PLAU - (of the door) the sound of sudden shutting with a bang.

Type XI. Pure Noise Postpulse
Instants-Continuants
Pattern 13

$$\text{PLOS}\ (+\text{SON}^{\text{LAT}}) + \overbrace{\text{VOC}} + \text{FRIC}^{\hat{}}$$

Examples: KAUHti - the sound of a sudden fall into water, splash; PLAUHti - the loud sound of a sudden fall into water; TSUHH-TSUHH - a nursery name for a railway train (imitation of the sound of a steam-engine).

Type XII. Pure Noise Prepulse
Instants-Continuants
Pattern 14

$$\text{FRIC}^{\hat{}} + \overbrace{\text{VOC}} + \text{PLOS}^{(\text{s})}$$

Examples: SAPSima - to strike softly with a branch of twigs; SOPS - the sound of a soft blow with a birch-twig.

Type XIII. Tone-Noise Prepulse
Instants-Continuants
Pattern 15

$$\text{FRIC}^{\text{LAB}\check{}} + \overbrace{\text{VOC}} + \text{PLOS}^{(\text{s})}$$

Examples: VOPSti - the sound of a swishing blow; VIPutama - (dial.) to make swishing blows with a branch of twigs; VAPP, VAPP - (of an owl) the sound of fluttering movements with wings.

Type XIV. Pure Noise-Tonal Prepulse-Postpulse Instants-Continuants
Pattern 16

$$\text{FRIC}^{\text{SIB}\hat{}} + \overbrace{\text{VOC}} + \text{SON}^{\text{NAS}}\ (+\text{PLOS})$$

Sub-type A. Short

Example: SUMPama - to make a muffled sound as in wading through deep snow or water.

Sub-type B. Prolonged

Example: SUMMima - to wade splashingly through water.

Type XV. Tone-Noise - Tonal Prepulse-Postpulse Instants-Continuants
Pattern 17

$$\text{FRIC}^{\text{LAB}\check{}} + \overbrace{\text{VOC}} + \text{SON}^{\text{NAS}}$$

Sub-type A. Short (not found in Estonian; cf. Eng. zonk - (slang) the sound of a short resonant blow (esp. on the head).

Sub-type B. Prolonged

Examples: VINGuma - (of a bullet) to make the sound of moving quickly through the air; VONGuma - (of breaking ice) to make a booming sound.

HYPERCLASS CAB. FREQUENTATIVES
QUASI-INSTANTS-CONTINUANTS
Type XVI. Tonal Postpulse
Quasi-Instants-Continuants
Pattern 18

$$(\text{PLOS+})\ \underbrace{\text{R} + \overbrace{\text{VOC}} + \text{SON}^{\text{NAS/LAT}}}\ (+\text{PLOS}^{(\text{s})})$$

Sub-type A. Short

Examples: PRANTSti - the sound of a resounding vibrating blow caused by a heavy fall; RONTSatama - (of a heavy object) to fall with a muffled vibrating blow; TRAMPima - to step heavily with the feet; MÜRTSti - the sound of a thundering bang.

Sub-type B. Prolonged

Examples: PRÕMMima - to knock violently on a door with one's fist; TRÜMMima - to bang forcefully (on a door).

Type XVII. Pure Noise Postpulse
Quasi-Instants-Continuants
Pattern 19

$$\text{PLOS} + \text{R} + \overline{\text{VOC}} + \text{FRIC}^{\hat{}}$$

Examples: PRAUH - a loud noise made by a violent blow, fall or break, crash; KRIUHKRAUH - the sound of sudden rapid tearing of cloth.

Type XVIII. Pure Noise Prepulse
Quasi-Instants-Continuants
Pattern 20

$$\text{FRIC}^{\text{SIB}\hat{}}\ (+\text{SON}^{\text{LAT}}) + \overbrace{\text{VOC}} + \text{R} + \text{PLOS}^{(\text{s})}$$

Examples: karSORTS - the sudden noise of a pencil penetrating paper; SLORTS - the sound of a liquid falling on a surface.

DISCUSSION

The distribution of onomatopes within different types of onomatopoeia varies considerably. The most numerous types in Estonian are I and X (161 and 126 onomatopes respectively), which make up 39 per cent of the whole inventory. They are followed by types V (88), II (76), III (69) and VI (67) totalling 40.8 per cent. The remaining types cover about one fifth of the material. Estonian is poorly represented in Types XIV and XV. No Estonian examples for Sub-type A, Type XV, could be found in our material.

In modelling extralinguistic sounds the principle of homogeneity between the acoustic parameters of the extralinguistic sound and the corresponding phonemotypes is observed. This is one of the reasons why in onomatopoeia typologically isomorphic features dominate. As regards allomorphic features, they could be brought about by a variety of reasons. A possible source of allomorphism lies in the phonological redundancy of several types of onomatopes. For example, to render pure noise, in principle, only one voiceless fricative is needed; but since the majority of roots contain more than one consonant, the other can be considered to be redundant. Phonological redundancy may be manifested differently in various languages. Firstly, an extra (redundant) voiceless fricative may be supplied, e.g. SUSisema. Secondly, consonants can be found which do not fulfil any echoic function, e.g. the /k/ in KAHisema; cf. the Japanese designations of swishing, rustling movement kasa-kasa, goso-goso. Thirdly, the extra consonant may signal sound-symbolic values, e.g. the labial /p/: the protrusion of the lips in PUHuma - to blow.

Another possible source of allomorphism lies in the non-stable nature of affricates. In a group of Estonian onomatopes the initial affricate has undergone assibilation, and consequently the initial fricative sibilant in these onomatopes (Types I, V, and X) can no longer echo the plosive character of the sound.

A characteristic feature of Estonian Tonal Continuants and Tonal Frequentatives is the occurrence of doublets with long vowels and diphthongs. The onomatopes with diphthongs denote somewhat shorter sounds. e.g. KIIKSuma KIUKSuma; KRIIKSuma KRIUKSuma. The phoneme /s/ which occurs finally in the combinations -ks, -ps and-ts, e.g. KLUKSuma, NAPS, PRANTSti is of expressive character, and serves the purpose of intensifying the meaning of the word. In a few onomatopes the "natural" order of qualitative elements is reversed, e.g. MÜRTSuma, MÜRisema. A parallel to this phenomenon can be found in the Nenets onomatopes mirćedaś and mirneleś which have similar meanings (in Nenets /r/ does not occur in the initial position).

Finally, it should be pointed out that although in onomatopoeia auditory motivation prevails, the majority of onomatopes manifest the phenomena of sound-symbolic interference as well. As a rule, labial and guttural sounds in the designations of the sounds made by birds and animals denote the place of articulation. Sound-symbolic interference is especially strong in the designations of bubbling, e.g. PULisema, VULKSuma, MULKSuma. In such onomatopes the presence of an initial labial appears to be more important than that of an initial plosive. Thus, strong sound-symbolic interference is a force that makes the patterns of onomatopes more complicate. A characteristic feature of Estonian is the fact that the phoneme /v/ occurs initially in a number of onomatopes. In addition to its auditory value the initial /v/ in Estonian onomatopes is usually also sound-symbolically motivated.

By way of conclusion it should be said that the typological study of onomatopoeia is an emerging area of research and it remains to be hoped that new studies will bring to light interesting facts in various languages of the world.

References

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/2/ M.Grammont, Traité de phonétique, Paris, 1933, p. 378.
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Symbols

CONS - consonant
PLOS - plosive
AFFR - affricate
FRIC - fricative
SIB - sibilant
R - the phoneme /r/
SON - sonorant
NAS - nasal
DENT - dental
LAB - labial
LAT - lateral: /l/
^ - voiceless (e.g. FRIC^ - voiceless fricative)
˘ - voiced (e.g. FRIC˘ - voiced fricative)
V̆OC - short vowel
V̄OC - diphthong or long vowel
/ - "either...or"
() - brackets for optional components