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. 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 phonemes like the -ash in bash, dash, and gash. And the last type is tertiary iconism, exemplified by infantile reduplicants like boon, doodoo, and googoo or by palindromes like pop, top, 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 pewee and siskin; verbs like chirrup and twitter; and echoes 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:
The semantic processes that produce iconic forms in English are of three types: monodic, dyadic, and triadic. Monodic 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 “blurred” or “blurred vowel” /ɔ/ 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:

- back 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 pungent force, expressing instantaneity and action, while the form ending in a fricative has a diffusive force, expressing the result of the action. /6/

Tragic 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 Hank, Harry, and Harry, all hypocoristic variants of the name Henry. In this case, 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—phonetic (or microphonetic) and phonemic (or allophonetic).

Phonetic processes, in turn, may be monodic, dyadic, or pluralic in subtype. An example of a monodic phonetic process is the nasalization that adds sonority to the verb click (from click). An example of a dyadic process is the de-rectory voicing in the verb oral (as against oral). An example of a pluralic process is the labialization, alveolarization, palatalization, and velarization encountered in the four provincial British nouns chow-chow, chortle, chitchat, and chitterlings (and usually pronounced chitterin’). /8/

Three purely phonetic processes that normally go unrepresented in the standard orthography are:

- gemination, as in [ŋŋ] for egg
- glottalization, as in [ʔʔ] for who
- pharyngolaryngization, as in [h̪h̪] for hurry /9/

PSYCHO-MORPHOLOGICAL PROCESSES

Although, in most cases, allolanguage eliminates microphonetic morpholiggy completely, in others it substitutes a reduced and deviant morphology. This pseudo-morphology may be either re-

- Additive pseudo-morphology takes forms of two, which are absent from microlanguage. These are prefixed and suffixed (both present in microlanguage) plus inflection and interfix-

Examples follow:

1. prefixation: snail from melt
2. suffixation: kidly from kid
3. inflection: surf from pop
4. interfixation: pit-yay from patt-er

The most distinctive allolinguistics of such affixes are phonetic prefixes consisting of a post-

Examples follow:

- derivative: source or cognate
  - kathaw, "waxen thing" thoh, "be credulous" gasok, "creep" zook, "prostitute" chewallop, "bang!" wallyl, "bit hard" jamoke, "fellow" make, "full person" /10/
yanak, "plop!" zonk, "to strike"

Such formative processes produce pseudo-

- morphological results. One of these results is the echo-compound, consisting typically of a phonemic, or obviously meaningful, base-word followed by a semantic, or relatively meaningless, rim-tag. Examples follow:

poly-poly (plunny)
burly-burl (battle)
eente-meente (see, too...)
poly-walzy (excessively friendly)

One thing that is noteworthy about such groupings is that the initial consonants of the rim-tags themselves form an apophonic series, ranging from word through sonant and nasal to glide in the bilabial category. /11/

Other pseudo-morphological phenomenon is what I call a word-choke. Words that typically consist of three-word phrases, in which the first and third word lack phonetic overlap but which are linked by phonetic overlap with the second word, is this same rule either in allilitation or alliteration followed by rise, as below:

- healthy, wealthy, and wise
- grunt, grump, and mump /12/

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 sense and sound with which a number of quite different phonemic combinations can produce a single semantic effect. Of no effect is this twier than of diminution, which can be achieved by syllabic elision, by cluster-reduction, by high-fronting of vowels, by lateralization of vibrants, by occlusivation of nasals, or by valorization of labials. Examples follow:

- big < edwards
- kit x christopher
- tip < topp
- salley < sarah
- peg < neg
- dog < snap

In a few of these devices may even be pitted, against one another. An example is the name Helen, which, though hypocoristic, may take either of the two forms. One of these, Helen, is more diminu-

Examples follow:

- grunt, groan, and moan /13/
- healthy, wealthy, and wise
- grunt, grump, and mump /13/

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 sky from pop and in echoid compounds like fig-thig and xerxes.

References

/1/ G.L. Trager, "Language," The Encyclopedia Britannica (1955)
/3/ Ibid., pp. vii and 22
/4/ Ibid., p. 3
/6/ R.W. Wescott, Sound and Sense (as above, fn. 2), p. 340


/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