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M.A.Flaksman

Санкт-Петербургский государственный электротехнический университет «ЛЭТИ»
Otto-Friedrich Universität Bamberg

ATYPICAL PHONETIC DEVELOPMENT OF ICONIC WORDS: PHONOSEMANTIC INERTIA

Abstract

Our research is devoted to the study of *phonosemantic inertia*, a rare linguistic phenomenon, when an iconic word can withstand phonetic changes undergone by the majority of the words belonging to the corresponding etymological class if these changes obscure the sound-sense link existing between the shape of the word and its meaning.

1. Introduction: iconic vocabulary of a language

Our understanding of iconicity is based upon Charles Peirce's classification of signs [4]. A sign can refer to its object through similarity (such signs are called icons), through a factual connection to its object (such signs are called indices) and through interpretive habit or norm of reference to its object (such signs are called symbols). This classification of signs is universal and therefore is applicable to the human language as well.

An icon in general resembles or imitates its object; it has a certain character or aspect, such as the object also has. Portraits, photographs and different diagrams are typical iconic signs. In a language any word that somehow imitates the object it is denoting, is iconic. The imitation cannot be perfect, as a human can pronounce only a limited number of phonemes, and the choice of the phonemes is always restricted by the phonemic inventory of a certain language. Nevertheless there exists a structural similarity among iconic words all over the world.

There are two major universal categories of iconic words: onomatopoeic (acoustic copies) and sound-symbolic (articulatory or acoustic-articulatory copies). S.V. Voronin [7] establishes a correlation between types of natural sounds and phoneme types representing these sounds. The natural sound classes are pulps, tones (or noises) and vibrating dissonance-like sounds and their combinations, their corresponding classes of onomatopoeic words are: Instants, Continuants, Frequentatives, Instants-Continuants, Frequentatives, Quasi-Instants-Continuants.

Sound-symbolic words can either denote bodily movements accompanied by sounds (e.g. sneezing, coughing, etc.) or different notions not connected with sounds (objects of different shape, types of movement) [7]. Sound symbolic words exhibit a structural similarity throughout different unrelated languages. Thus one of the near-absolute language universals is the statistically more frequent then average presence of the i-like sound in the structure of the words denoting small objects (e.g. *teeny-weeny, little*) [3]. The second established universal tendency is naming round objects with words containing labials and especially labial clusters (consonants like *b, p* and vowels like *o, u*). Thus if a word like *ball, bubble, pumpkin* does have a seme 'round, globular' it is highly likely to be iconic [11]. Iconic, non-arbitrary here would be the position of the lips while mimicking the form of the object. Another established sound symbolic universal is conveying a pejorative meaning through labial clusters (for example *bumpkin, looby*). It is connected with the mimics of disgust that involves using lips [8].

The number of iconic words in the vocabulary of a language is difficult to estimate, as 1) the process of iconic word coinage is continuous and 2) the original sound-sense correlation is quickly destroyed in the course of language evolution. Two factors speed up the destruction: 1) regular phonetic changes, 2) development of polysemy. The first distort the phonetic shape of the iconic word, the second disintegrates its sense. Therefore the history of every iconic word is on the first place the history of its de-iconization or integration into the existing arbitrary language system.

On earlier stages of evolution of human language, as believed by the researches of sound symbolism, iconic words may have constituted the majority of the vocabulary. Still at the present stage when all the languages of the word are well-established symbolic systems, iconic words that appear very soon adjust to the existing environment. In other words, from the moment of their creation iconic words move towards arbitrariness and lose their iconicity that is the sound-meaning similarity.

In our research we deal with diachronic development of iconic words and search for the a-systemic, specifically iconic, traits in their evolution.

2. Starting premises: research material, method and a working hypothesis

In our research we put forward a hypothesis that an iconic word could withstand regular phonetic changes in order to retain the originally existing sound-sense correlation. Thus we challenge the main axiom of linguistics – regular phonetic changes (or language laws) know no exceptions. We proceed from the assumption that regular phonetic changes being the main destructive force ruining the sound-sense unity of an iconic word, may in exceptional cases fail to take place if counterbalanced by iconic associations.

In order to detect phonosemantically inert words in the English language we conduct a detailed etymological investigation of English iconic vocabulary [1], [2], [5], [6]. Our research corpus is comprised of 3073 lexemes taken both from the Oxford English Dictionary [6] and the list of English iconic words made by I. Kuzmich [9]. The list contains the largest possible number of the words which iconic origin had been previously established.

We trace the history of all the words from the list in order to establish whether their phonetic development is regular and declare a word phonosemantically inert if 1) its form remains (completely or partially) unchanged i.e it does not undergo a regular phonetic change; 2) the original meaning of the word has been preserved.

3. Research results: findings and classifications

Research results show that there are only 13 phonosemantically inert words in all our data. That is about 0,5% of the analyzed vocabulary or 1 word out of 200. We present these words in the table below:

Word	Meaning	Pronunciation before a sound change	Expected pronunciation	Factual pronunciation	Sound change failing to occur
chirr	a vibratory sound	tʃər	tʃɜː	tʃɜː *and* tʃər	r>Ø/V_
cuckoo	a bird's name	kuku:	* kʌkau:	kuku:	ʊ >ʌ 17 c u: > aʊ GVS[1]
curr	to rumble, purr	kur	kɜː	kɜː *and* kʌr	r>Ø/V_
flute	a musical instrument	flu:tə	*flaut	flu:t	u: > aʊ GVS
halloo	to chase with dogs	halu:	*hælau:	hælu:	u: > aʊ GVS

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* The Great Vowel Shift

Word	Meaning	Pronunciation before a sound change	Expected pronunciation	Factual pronunciation	Sound change failing to occur
hoot	to jeer	hu:ten	*haʊt	hu:t	u: > aʊ GVS
hurr	to rumble	hur	hɜ:	hɜ: *and* hʌr	r>Ø/V_
toot	a sound of a horn	tu:ten	*taʊt	tu:t	u: > aʊ GVS
peep	a bird's cry	pi:p	*paɪp	pi:p	i:> aɪ GVS
boil	a blister	bi:l	*baɪl	bi:l	i:> aɪ GVS + /o/
boulder	a stone	bu:ldɘr	* baʊldɘ	bɘuldɘ	u: > aʊ GVS +/o/
booze, bouse	to drink	bu:z	*baʊz	bu:z	u: > aɪ
teeny	very little	ti:nɪ	*taɪnɪ	ti:nɪ	i:> aɪ GVS

We can classify these phonosemantically inert words in four ways.

Firstly is **by types of regular phonetic changes.** Phonosemantic inertia in English language takes place only in four cases. The first one is when iconic words fail to undergo the change /u:/ >/aʊ/ during the Great Vowel Shift. These words are: *flute, halloo, hoot, howl, toot, cuckoo* and *booze*. The second is when a word doesn't undergo the change /i/> /aɪ/ during the Great Vowel Shift (*peep, teeny*). Both are cases of failed diphongisation. We find no more examples of phonosemantic inertia with other phonetic changes of the GVS. The third case is the case of *cuckoo*, where the first vowel is not reduced to schwa. The forth case is the partially failed vocalization of /r/ (*hurr, curr, chirr*).

The second way of classifying phonosemantically inert words is by their **sub-classes.** The majority of the words are onomatopoeic, or sound-imitative (*flute, halloo, hoot, hurr, chirr, curr, howl, toot, cuckoo, peep*), and four words are sound symbolic (*boil, boulder, booze, teeny*).

The third way of classifying phonetically inert words is by the involvement of **secondary sound symbolism** in the process of inertia. Secondary sound symbolism is a phenomenon when the sound-sense correlation in the world is established accidentally via independent form and meaning development [10]. We distinguish pure phonetically inert words (*halloo, hoot, howl, toot, cuckoo, booze, teeny*) and words, influenced whose sound-sense correlation arouse through secondary associations (*flute, boil, boulder*).

The fourth way of classifying phonosemantically inert words is by **the grade of completion of the process**. In some cases phonosemantic inertia was complete (*flute, halloo, hoot, howl, toot, cuckoo, booze, teeny*), and in some only partial (*boil, boulder, hurr, curr, chirr*).

4. Conditions for phonosemantic inertia

Phonosemantic inertia is a rare phenomenon. It happens only under certain conditions. The first condition we observe is the presence of **strong sound-sense correlation at the period of change**. To withstand a regular sound change a word needs either to be relatively new, or have a very specific meaning, or have its sound-sense connection reinforced by secondary sound symbolism. And we note that *all* the phonosemantically inert words **had only one, direct meaning** in the period of change, strictly connected either with the type of denoted sound or the shape of an object.

The second condition relates to the extent to which **the sound change destroys the core elements of the iconic word's structure**. In the history of the English language we find only few such sound changes. The first is diphthongization of monophthongs during the GVS which destroys the core element of onomatopoeic class 'Continuants' – a long vowel that depicts the natural continuous sounds. Long /i:/ and /u:/ are the only vowels diphthongized during the GVS. The second drastic phonetic change is the delabialisation of long and short /u/. Labialization, for words denoting a round objects, is an iconic feature and its loss obscures the sound-sense correlation. The vowel /i:/ that is known to be characteristic

of small or insignificant objects was due to be eliminated as a result of the GVS but in the word *teeny*, which actually means 'extremely small' it is retained. Consonant /r/, a core element of Frequentatives is retained in the less frequent variant of pronunciation of words *curr, chirr, hurr*.

5. Conclusions

Phonosemantic inertia is a characteristic feature of iconic vocabulary. Both onomatopoeic and sound symbolic words can preserve their earlier form, if the sound-sense correlation is threatened by the regular phonetic changes. Not every iconic word can potentially be phonosemantically inert, as not every regular phonetic change affects the boundaries of iconic words sub-classes. An iconic word can potentially be phonosemantically inert if it has only one meaning that could be made unrecognizable by the drastic change of form.

All in all, phonosemantic inertia does not contradict the language system as a whole; it contributes to the variety of ways of language evolution.

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