

## **OLD AND MODERN ENGLISH ONOMATOPOEIA: TWO DIFFERENT SYSTEMS?**

Imitative (or mimetic, onomatopoeic) words are known to be an inseparable part of a wide variety of modern languages [2], [3]. In every language formations like *boom!*, *crash!* or *meow* have more or less obvious correlation between form and meaning which makes them precise, vivid and expressive. Such words can be classified as *iconic* according to Charles Sanders Peirce's universal classification of signs [4].

Despite the growing interest in iconicity and in the iconic vocabulary of the English language [1], [6], [7], the studies devoted to the diachronic aspects of imitative words' existence are extremely rare [8]. We argue that overtime iconic vocabulary of a language undergoes tremendous changes, and Old English words denoting natural sounds differ considerably from the Modern English ones.

As imitative words in general are marked out for their iconic sound-meaning correlation, they are susceptible to both the change of meaning and to the change of form. A brief look into the Oxford English Dictionary [5] reveals the intriguing fact, that the majority of roughly 2000 words marked as 'iconic' by origin appear *relatively recently* – in the late Middle English or Early Modern English. Most of the present-day iconic words date back to no earlier than the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It is difficult to believe that the English language before Chaucer was wanting in iconic words for, for example, meowing or booming. At the same time the OED shows a number of *obsolete* iconic words that were still in use in Medieval England and could have originated in the period we are interested in. Also as Old English words (iconic and non-iconic) are not included in the dictionary, we have absolutely no information about those iconic words that had gone out of use before the Middle English period. Let us analyze the situation.

A furtive look in some of the notable Anglo-Saxon writings confirms our suggestion that there existed iconic words at that period and that not all of them have survived to the present day. It can be illustrated on three random examples. We find, for instance, such phrases containing iconic formations: *Wælfýra mǣst **hlynode*** 'the greatest of funeral fires roared' (Beo. Th. 2244); *Scildas hlúde **hlummon*** 'loud clanged the shields' (Judth. 11); *Se hrefn mid openum múðe ongann **crákettan*** 'the raven began to croak open-mouthed' (Gr. D. 118, 25). The highlighted words denote various natural sounds imitated within the bounds of Old English phonemic inventory and in accordance with Old English phonotactical constraints. One can easily notice that two of the three words – *hlynian* and *hlimman* – are obsolete and their meaning in the same context is now conveyed through *roar* and *clang*.

It is an established fact that the vocabulary of any language changes overtime, some words becoming extinct, giving way to others, some acquiring new meanings through metaphor and metonymy, some coming from other languages. As the above mentioned examples show, iconic words do *not* stand out against the rest of the lexicon in this respect.

The previously discussed processes of vocabulary evolution are common for both iconic and non-iconic words. Now we would like to highlight some iconic vocabulary peculiarities.

As iconic words differ from non-iconic ones because they have a vivid sound-meaning correlation, there is another factor contributing to the renovation of this particular domain of the lexicon. This factor is regular sound changes. If we take any non-iconic words such as *pen* or *table*, we will notice that all regular sound changes that may potentially happen to these words would not affect their meanings. However, when we deal with iconic words we face a very specific problem: the sound form of an imitative word approximately equals its meaning. Therefore, the change of form automatically entails the slight change of iconic word's meaning.

It is fascinating to observe how regular sound changes obscure original sound-meaning correlation of imitative words on concrete examples. The modern word denoting the sound we produce in response to somebody's joke is *to laugh*. It comes down to Old English *hlehhan*, which was more apt for mimicking the sound we hear as it contained a velar fricative that had acoustic characteristics more suitable for imitation. The question is, how many of the Old English iconic words had lost their expressiveness due to the numerous sound changes before becoming obsolete and replaced by new – exact and vivid – iconic formations?

On the whole, imitative words differ fundamentally from the rest of the vocabulary by the very principle of their coinage. Being iconic elements in a predominantly symbolic system they change in the course of its evolution perhaps to the greater extent than the rest of the lexicon, as not only the usual patterns of meaning development affect them, but also the regular sound changes of the language. A brief comparative glance at the Old and Modern English imitative vocabulary suggests that we are possibly dealing with two completely different word sets at these time periods, and that the present-day system of sound-denotation tells us but very little about the ancient one.

### **Bibliography**

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