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**PRESERVATION OF LONG VOWELS IN ONOMATOPOEIC WORDS DENOTING PURE TONES: PHONOSEMANTIC INERTIA**

Резюме: Фоносемантическая инерция – это редкий лингвистический феномен, когда иконическое (звукоподражательное или звуко-символическое) слово оказывает сопротивление происходящим в языке фонетическим процессам, если те нарушают его смысло-звуковую корреляцию. Обнаружить фоносемантическую инерцию и её результаты в английском языке можно только путём анализа диахронического развития слов с привлечением текстовых источников. Анализ выявленных случаев фоносемантической инерции позволяет делать предположения об условиях, при которых возникает это явление. Ключевые слова: Великий сдвиг гласных, фонетические законы, звукоизобразительность, этимология, ономотопея, звуковой символизм, иконичность.

Onomatopoeic vocabulary existing and constantly appearing in every language of the world (Jacobson and Waugh 1997: 181–211, Voeltz 2001) presents a certain challenge for historical linguistics both from the point of view of uncovering the words' etymologies (Lieberman 2010: 243–258) and their historical reconstruction (Lühr 1988, Malkiel 1990: 9–37, Hock 1991, Durkin 2009: 128–131).

Among other peculiarities iconic (onomatopoeic and soundsymbolic) words have an ability to withstand regular sound changes (Malkiel 1963: 145–173, Kaufman 1994: 63–75, Joseph 1987: 1–26, Бродович 2008: 485–489); but although their imperviousness to phonetic laws is virtually a common knowledge, the examples of words having an onomatopoeia-related irregular development can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Moreover, the question, why these particular iconic words preserve their form while others (apparently similar) develop normally, remains unanswered. The process seems to be random and unpredictable, and the scarcity of

data prevents etymologists from making any generalizations.

The total number of so far known examples of atypical phonetic development of iconic words in English equals three. These are *cuckoo* (Skeat), *teeny* (Jespersen 1933) and *peep* (Hock 1991: 50). Their amount is less than insufficient for drawing any conclusions about the mechanism of the phonosemantic inertia (thus we name the phenomenon), therefore our primary aim is to find all English iconic words that can possibly exhibit traces of irregular phonetic development. In order to achieve this we comprise a research corpus of 3073 lexemes taken both from the Oxford English Dictionary and the list of English iconic words made by Kuzmich (Кузьмич 1993: 300–348). The list contains the words iconic origin of which has been previously established by a number of researches (Jespersen 1933, Marchand 1960, Wescott 1986 etc.). Thus we try to analyze the maximum of existing English iconic words.

Our next step is to study the development of these words and compare it to the regular patterns of phonetic changes. A thorough etymological analysis of English iconic vocabulary allows us to find 14 phonosemantically inert words, both onomatopoeic (including *peep* and *cuckoo*) and sound symbolic (including *teeny*). The corpus of fourteen words although being hardly larger than a corpus of three, nevertheless permits us to make some tentative conclusions. Our first observation is that the six of them (or about one third) are the phonosemantically inert words, denoting pure tones (*flute*, *halloo*, *hoot*, *peep*, *cuckoo*, *toot*). They all have a long vowel unchanged since Middle English.

**Cuckoo** /k\_ku:/ does not undergo either the u: > a\_ (GVS<sub>1</sub>) or > Λ changes. Early spellings (c1240 *Cuckoo Song*, Sumer is icumen in..murie sing *cuccu!* *Cuccu!* *cuccu!* Wel singes þu *cuccu*; ne swik þu nauer nu. 1340 *Ayenbite* 22 Þe yelpere is þe *cockou* þet ne kan nagt zinge bote of him-zelue. c1381 *Chaucer Parl. Foules* 358 Ther was..the *cokkow* most onkynde. 1594 *Spenser Amoretti* xix. sig. B3, The merry *Cuckow*, messenger of Spring) show that the word preserves its present pronunciation from the ME<sub>2</sub> period (MED, OED).

**Flute** /flu:t/ is a French loanword (Skeat). In ME there existed two variants of pronunciation – with /oi/ (1483 *Caxton tr. J. de Voragine Golden Legende* 95/1 The mayde remembered the wordes

and threwe doun her pype or *floyte*.) and with /u:/ (1384 *Chaucer Hous of Fame iii. 133* And many *flowte* and liltyng horne.) The pronunciation with /u:/ is not original in the word, it probably arose due to the folk etymology by association with words like *hoot* and

<sup>1</sup> Great Vowel Shift

<sup>2</sup> Middle English

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*toot*, all denoting a low continuous sound. The uncharacteristic spelling with ‘u’ appears at the end of the GVS period (Skeat) and remains until present time (1625 *S. Purchas Pilgrimes IV. 1533* Indians met vs on the way, playing vpon *Flutes*... 1718 *M. Prior Pleasure 77* The trumpet's sound Provok'd the Dorian *flute*.) (MED, OED). Thus the variant with /u:/ having a clearer sound-sense correlation than the one with /oi/ not only becomes predominant in ME but also turns out to be phonosemantically inert, failing to undergo the u: > a\_ change.

**Haloo** (or *hallow*) /hælu:/ was originally an interjection used as a hunting call (OED). Before and at the beginning of the GVS it had a long /u:/ as a core element of the structure (c1369 *Chaucer Bk. Duchesse 379* Be hert found is *I-halowed* and rechased fast long tyme. 1399 *Langland Richard Redeles iii. 228* He was *halowid* and y-huntid... 1440 *Promp. Parv. 224/1 Halowyn*, or cryn as schypmen.). During the GVS and later it remained unchanged (1525 *Ld. Berners tr. J. Froissart Chron. II. lxi. [lxiv.] 209* They..*halowed* after them as thoughe they had ben wolues. 1530 *J. Palsgrave Lesclarcissement 577/2*, I *halowe* houndes with a krye.) (MED, OED). The spelling with digraph ‘oo’ is from the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1681 *Dryden Spanish Fryariv. 57* Some popular Chief..but cries *halloo*, And in a trice the bellowing Herd come out). The word in the meaning ‘chasing call’ proves to be impervious to the u: > a\_ change.

**Hoot** /hu:t/ retains the long /u:/ and its present meaning from the ME period, as we can see on the contextual examples (c1200 *Ormulum l. 4875* Whaer se icc amm bitwenenn menn Icc *hutedd* amm. & þutedd. a1225 *Juliana 52* Ne make þu me nawt men to *huting* ant to hokere. c1380 *Sir Ferumbras l. 3225* Þanne by-gunne þay to grede & *houte*. c1440 *Promp. Parv. 251/2 Howtyn*, or cryn as shepmenn,..*celeumo*.) (MED, OED). The present spelling is late (1711 *J. Addison Spectator No. 131.* , I do not *hoot* and hollow and make a Noise.) and reflects the pronunciation with /u:/ grouping *hoot* with words like *boot*, *moon* etc. that have undergone the GVS normally (Skeat).

**Peep** /pi:p/ appears to be a phonosemantically inert variant of *pipe*. The word originally had a pronunciation with long /i:/ (OE *Lapidary* 14 An stan..þæs ansine is swilce an man pipige mid nigon *pipan* & an man hearpige. c1400 *Langland Piers Plowman (Laud 581) B. xiii. 232* Ac for I can noither tabre ne trompe..ne fythelen at festes, ne harpen..ne gentlych *pype*.). The spelling with ‘ee’ begins to 920 Preservation of long vowels in onomatopoeic words... appear upon completion of the GVS (1611 *Bible (A.V.) Isa. x. 14.* There was none that moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or *peeped*.). The meaning of *peep*, unlike its etymological doublet *pipe*, is very narrow – the word is applied only to a very high-pitched sound, a cry of a small bird or a mouse (OED).

**Toot** /tu:t/ like *hoot* retains the long vowel from the ME period. The first recordings of the word are relatively late, at the time when the GVS has already begun (1549 *T. Chaloner tr. Erasmus Praise of Folie sig. HjV*, That foule musike, whiche a horne maketh, being *touted* in. 1570 *P. Levens Manipulus Vocabulorum sig. Qii/2*, To *Tute* in a horne, *cornucinere*. a1598 *Fergusson's Sc. Prov. (1641) sig. B*, A new *tout* in an old horne.). But the digraph ‘ou’ is a characteristic ME way of conveying /u:/, also the word has cognates in Germanic languages (MLG *3 tûten*, Du *tuyten* , *toeten* , G *tuten*). In the 13<sup>th</sup> century we find a form with initial /\_/\_/ (c1200 *Ormulum l. 4875* Whaer se icc amm bitwenenn menn Icc hutedd amm. & *putedd*) and judging by evasive character of onomatopoeic vocabulary it may as well be the same word, unmistakably pronounced with /u:/. The phonological spelling with ‘oo’ is from the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1693 *J. H. tr. Juvenal Satires x. 4* See here a Troop of Horn-pipes *toot* along.).

Let’s analyze what these words have in common. The first and the most obvious peculiarity is that they all had a meaning strictly related to sound in the period preceding the expected sound change. They either denoted the sound itself or its performer or the instrument on which it was performed.

Our second observation is that of all the types of phonetic changes that happened during the recorded history of the English language (a period that stretches beyond 1000 years), phonosemantically inert words denoting pure tones are unaffected only by the Great Vowel Shift; moreover, they fail to undergo only u: > a\_ and i:>a\_ changes. The vowels /u:/ and /i:/ are the only ME long vowels diphthongized during the GVS.

Curiously, we find that all six words fall into one single category of classification of English onomatopoeic words created by Voronin (Воронин 1998). Voronin proposes an extensive classification (5 major types and about 30 sub-types) based on the correlation between the phonemic structures of the words and the structures of

3 MLG –Middle Low German, Du –Dutch, G- German

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their acoustic denotata. We find that our six words all belong to the one type ‘Continuants’ and to the one sub-type ‘Pure Tone

Continuants’. According to Voronin (Воронин 1998: 58–59), this sub-type has the following structure: [CONS (+SON<sub>LAT/LAB</sub>)] +V<sub>OC</sub> + (PLOS)<sup>4</sup>. A long vowel, as we see from the model, is the main (and in some cases the only) constituent of the ‘Pure Tone Continuants’.

In the history of the English language diphthongization of monophthongs during the GVS destroyed the core element of onomatopoeic words belonging to the ‘Pure Tone Continuants’ type – a long vowel that depicts the natural continuous sounds. Long /i:/ and /u:/ which we observe in our six phonosemantically inert words are obviously better suited for conveying the notion ‘prolonged sound’ than /a\_ / and /a\_ /: if the phonosemantic inertia hadn’t occurred, today we would have had \*c<sub>Λ</sub>ka\_, \*fla\_t, \*hæla\_, \*ha\_t and \*ta\_t. The word *pipe*, an etymological doublet of *peep* that arose due to the phonosemantic inertia has a slightly different meaning than *peep* in modern English.

Upon analyzing the examples of phonosemantic inertia in the English language we can outline under what conditions it occurs. The first condition is that at the time preceding the sound change a word should have a strong sound–sense correlation (that is a very specific meaning related exclusively to sound and a form typical to its phonosemantic class). The second condition is that the forthcoming sound change should involve destruction of the core elements of the iconic word’s structure. Onomatopoeic words denoting pure tones (*hoot*, *toot*, *peep*, *cuckoo*, *halloo* and *flute*) withstand the Great Vowel Shift because the vowel change threatened to distort not only their form but also their meaning.

Phonosemantic inertia is therefore neither spontaneous nor unpredictable. Its rarity is explained by the fact that it is brought about only by a combination of factors. On the one hand, synchronically very few iconic words have a strong sound-sense

correlation, as in the course of language evolution they quickly acquire new meanings only distantly related to the original one (sound – for onomatopoeic, size – for sound symbolic words). On the other hand, not every sound change affects the core elements of iconic words' structures and thus triggers the phonosemantic inertia.  
4 CONS—any consonant, PLOS—plosive, VŌC —long vowel, SON—sonorant, LAT—lateral [l], LAB —labial, (), []—brackets for optional components.

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Phonosemantic inertia is a rare phenomenon when an iconic (onomatopoeic or sound symbolic) word can withstand regular 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. In English the process and its outcomes can be detected upon studying the concrete textual examples of the words' diachronic development. The analysis of the discovered cases of phonosemantic inertia allows us to make suggestions about the conditions under which it occurs.