

# Correlations of Sound Symbolism with other Connotative Mechanisms: Some Preliminary Speculations

by  
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I have long been fascinated by the fact that so many English words somehow sound exactly right in terms of what these words mean and how they are used. Is it by accident that "butterfly" is merely a reording of the sounds of "flutterby?" I'm reminded of a bilingual joke. An American, a Frenchman, a Mexican, and a German were talking about sound symbolism. The American pointed out that "butterfly" is a very soft word, very reminiscent of what an actual butterfly looks and sounds like. The Frenchman agrees with the American, but feels that the French word "papillon" is equally appropriate. The Mexican points out that "mariposa," although it sounds very different from either "butterfly" or "papillon" is nevertheless a very appropriate name for describing something that is both delicate and pleasant. The German, after hearing all of this bragging about the appropriate names for butterfly in these various languages, becomes a bit disgruntled, and asks, "Und so was ist wrong mit 'schmeterlung.'" The answer, of course, is that there is nothing wrong with "schmeterlung," except for the fact that this word should be used to describe a German tank, and not a butterfly. Mark Twain felt that the German language had no really powerful words. He said, "...observe the strongest of the several German equivalents for explosion, —"Ausbruch." Our word "toothbrush" is more powerful than that" (260).

Twain was very concerned with sound symbolism as can be seen in this quote from "Eve's Diary:"

The minute I set eyes on an animal I know what it is. I don't have to reflect a moment; the right name comes out instantly.... I seem to know just by the shape of the creature and the way it acts what animal it is. When the dodo came along he [Adam] thought it was a wildcat.... But I saved him.... I just spoke up in a quite natural way...and said "Well, I do declare if there isn't the dodo!" (Fromkin 5)

Many words are onomatopoetic. Rice Krispies in English goes "Snap! Crackle! and Pop!" In German it goes "Schnapp! Krackle! und Popp!" The sound that a cat makes is "meow" in English, "miauler" in French, "murlykat" in Russian, "maullar" in Spanish, "miauen" in German, and "neaw" in Japanese. In advertising, there is the "Ah-h bra," and "Psssst Shampoo," and Northern Tissue has "cush."

"Staccato," "lulling," "murmur," and "lullaby" are words which sound very much like what they refer to. Words can be very euphonious, as when Maidenform names their

bras "Beautiful Dreamers," and describes them as "frothy, light as foam...just a wisp of sheer." Or words can be cacophonous, as in the "Cruex" ad which tells us how to get rid of "itching, chafing, rash, excessive perspiration, [and] irritation in the groin area." Dwight Bolinger has suggested that there is a relationship between the size of the oral cavity when a word is spoken and the size of the concept being referred to. There is a very small resonating cavity for such words as "wee," and "bit," and "itsy bitsy," "teensy weensy," "mini," "peep," "cheep," and "chirp," and in such pairs as "chip/chop," "slip/slap," "nib/knob," and "teeny/tiny" the first word of each pair is felt to be smaller than the second, which correlates again to the size of the mouth during the utterance of the respective words. The smallness can in fact be emphasized by prolonging the pronunciation of the vowels, as in "leeeeeetle," or "teeeeensty" (309).

Bolinger has also seen a correlation of "-olt" words with a sudden jarring motion, as in "bolt," "colt," "jolt," and "volt;" and a correlation of "-irl" words with a circular motion, as in "twirl," "swirl," "whirl," "furl," and "gnarl." Bolinger feels that "gl-" words are related to flickering light, as in "glitter," "glimmer," "gleam," "glisten," "glow," and "glare." Finally, he says that "-ump" words correlate strongly with heavy blunt objects, as in "stump," "rump," "dump," "chump," "grump," "lump," "bump," "hump," "clump," and "thump" (309). Bolinger even feels that there is a difference between "burned" and "burnt." Because 'burned' takes longer to say, he feels that it sounds like something going on, while "burnt" is a short staccato word indicating something already finished.

Walter Brasch points out that the names of many cartoon characters have had and will continue to have g or k sounds in one-syllable names. He asked one executive "Why," and received the answer, "It feels it should be" (xii). Allen Klein lists his occupation as "gelotologist." His grandmother didn't know what this term meant. She thought that her son had a job going around sampling Italian desserts, but actually a "gelotologist" is a person who has made a serious study of laughter. George Carlin contrasts the sound symbolism of baseball with that of football. Baseball, he says, is played in a pastoral setting, a park. There is no time limit. You bunt, sacrifice, and finally go home. Football, on the other hand, is technological. It's played in a stadium, is rigidly timed, and if there is a tie at the end they have a "sudden death." You try to get into the enemy territory. You block, clip, kick, blitz, throw bombs, and finally reach the end zone.

Carlin is very aware of the sound symbolism of words. He doesn't like the term "stomach noise," for example. He would much prefer the Latin expression, "borbarhythmia;" it is much more sound symbolic. Reinhold Aman says that some but not all of a word's sound symbolism carries from one language and culture to another. He uses the name of a French soft drink as an example. The name is "Pshitt," and in French it is merely an onomatopoeic rendering of the sounds produced when opening a bottle of this carbonated beverage. In English, however, both the connotations, and the denotations are very different. A similar problem is the Chevrolet "Nova." In Spanish, this means, "It doesn't run."

Words are very suggestive. Unless people want to elicit a kind of nervous laughter, they must avoid such words as "social intercourse," "uvula," "sexagenarian," "phono-

graphic magazine," "mastication," "castigation," "public area," "cunning linguist," "conundrum," and "homogeneous." This suggestive power of words also results in malapropisms, so that children talk about playing "chest" instead of "chess," pledge allegiance to "one national invisible," or "one naked individual" rather than "one nation indivisible," and sing "for amber waves of grey" instead of "for amber waves of grain." Amsel Green collected such malapropisms and published a book about them called *Pullet Surprises*. The title comes from a high school boy who wrote, "In 1957, Eugene O'Neill won a Pullet Surprise."

If a little bit of sound symbolism is good, then more symbolism must be better. That's one reason that echoic patterns are so common for sound symbolic words. Children say "mama," and "daddy;" they play with such toys as "yoyos," "seesaws," and "teetertotters," and they read such stories as "Amelia Bedelia." The characters in children's stories frequently have names like "Henny Penny," "Chicken Licken," "Goosey Loosey," "Foxy Loxy," "Ducky Lucky," and "Turkey Lurkey." In Beatrix Potter's story about Peter Rabbit, the hero's name stands out precisely because it does not contain an echoic element. The children are named, "Flopsy," "Mopsy," "Cottontail," and then breaking the pattern, there is "Peter." Adults also have echoic names that are sound symbolic, names like "Fifi," "Mimi," "ZsaZsa," which connote sexiness, and then there is "Evel Knievel." For adults, the h...p... pattern is most prolific. Consider "hanky panky," "hodgepodge," "hocus-pocus," and "higglety pigglety." The "blanketyblank" pattern is also productive, as in "clickety clack," "yakity yak," "hippity hop," "bumpety bump," and even "gobbledygook."

Up to this point I've attempted to give some indication of the nature and extent of sound symbolism in English, and give some clues as to how its contribution to connotative meaning gives sound-symbolic words a sort of double punch. I've also suggested that sound-symbolic words are highly suggestive in nature. At this point, I'm going to attempt to give some indication as to just how suggestive sound-symbolic words actually are. In fact, I feel that there are thirteen different parameters which relate in some way to sound symbolism, as follows:

| NUMBER: | PARAMETER: | ASSOCIATION WITH<br>HIGH FRONT SOUNDS: | ASSOCIATION WITH<br>LOW BACK SOUNDS: |
|---------|------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1       | Pitch      | High                                   | Low                                  |
| 2       | Edges      | Angular                                | Curvular                             |
| 3       | Size       | Small                                  | Large                                |
| 4       | Evaluation | Good                                   | Bad                                  |
| 5       | Shade      | White                                  | Grey etc.                            |
| 6       | Distance   | Short                                  | Long                                 |
| 7       | Time       | Short                                  | Long                                 |
| 8       | Sound      | Short Wave Length                      | Long Wave Length                     |



|    |             |            |             |
|----|-------------|------------|-------------|
| 9  | Brightness  | Light      | Dark        |
| 10 | Temperature | Hot        | Cold        |
| 11 | Color       | Hot Colors | Cold Colors |
| 12 | Sex         | Female     | Male        |
| 13 | Complexity  | Simple     | Complex     |

There are, of course, reasons for these various correlations. Female larynxes are smaller than are male larynxes; it therefore follows that they are associated with high-pitched sounds. The shortness of the wave length of the high pitched sounds is somehow equivalent to shortness in time or distance, and in fact distance is frequently measured in time. We very often don't even see the metaphors involved when we talk of bright colors or bright sounds (high front sounds), as opposed to dark colors or dark sounds (low back sounds), and we also have hot and cold colors relating to the shorter vs the longer wave lengths and thus these terms are relevant to temperatures, to colors, and to sounds.

What is exciting is that these connotative correlations are universal in scope. In fact, this list of thirteen correlations occurred to me while I was listening to a paper on phonetic symbolism in native speakers of English and Urdu (O'Boyle et. al.). The authors worked with six geometric shapes, a very angular shape, which they termed "takete," an overlapping of three ellipses called "uloomu," and then four other shapes—an "isosceles triangle," a "right triangle," a "circle," and an "ellipse." What they discovered is that for both English and Urdu speakers, the round figures (circles and ellipses) were assigned significantly lower frequencies than the other stimuli. They also found that complex figures and dense figures received significantly higher frequency settings than those stimuli not possessing these dimensions.

Obviously, this research is only in the very beginning stages. In fact this article is being written not so much to answer questions, as to raise questions. I feel that research in linguistic aesthetics is sorely needed, and I feel that a detailed and thorough study of sound symbolism would be a good approach to this important topic. Mark Twain stated it very well when he said, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is like the difference between the lightening and the lightning bug (Holland 108).

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