Sound Symbolism, Linguistic Ideology, and Remotivation of the Sign

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The well-accepted principle of the arbitrary relation between sound and sense has inspired an opposing force in linguistics, a line of research interested in finding a non-arbitrary correspondence between meaning and the speech sounds used to express it. This area of investigation, labeled sound symbolism, surprisingly finds an early proponent in Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of the doctrine of the arbitrary sign; Saussure wrote in his *Course on General Linguistics* that “the mind contrives to introduce a principle of order and regularity into certain parts of the mass of signs, and this is the role of relative motivation” (qtd. in Hiraga, 5). Though sounds are meaningless in and of themselves, Saussure continues – even in early language acquisition, young speakers understand that a single phonetic feature is enough to differentiate two unrelated meanings - the linguistic system is nevertheless deeply informed by the ordering efforts, whether conscious or subconscious, of the speaker. This engagement between speaker and language imposes on the system a certain motivation, that is, a necessity of association between form and content, signifier and signified, which causes learned associations of sound and meaning to operate at the level of the phoneme.

In spite of this concession to relative motivation and a language-specific relation of phonetic content to meaning, one line of research in sound symbolism seeks to overturn altogether the hypothesis of fundamental arbitrariness, by demonstrating universal relations between types of speech sounds and their referents. These studies specifically seek an iconic

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relation, where form in some way resembles content, and must therefore do so universally.

Onomatopoeia, the apparent imitation of non-speech sounds with speech sounds, is the area of sound symbolism most frequently claimed to show genuine motivation, a motivation which is just as frequently rejected as a general principle on the grounds of its lack of universality. Claims for a primary iconicity between sound and sense find stronger arguments based on synaesthetic relations, where the innate qualities of speech sounds evoke references to other senses, and are therefore made meaningful through incorporation in a cultural system of metaphoric associations. But much of the evidence for universal sound symbolism seems highly circumstantial, produced by selective or contrived research which imposes expected results from one code onto another.

Far more successful evidence for the existence of sound symbolism arises in the area of secondary, or non-iconic, sound symbolism, which claims that learned sound–meaning relations operate at the phonetic level, or at least at a sub-morphemic level, within the confines of a particular language: essentially Saussure’s argument for relative motivation. In English, this phenomenon is demonstrated especially well by groups of phonaesthemes, non-morphemic sounds and sound clusters which evoke meaningful associations. But importantly, phonaesthemes are only those sounds which reinforce, in identifiable groups, a collective sound-meaning link; they are only meaningful where felt to be so. Secondary sound symbolism can therefore be seen as a result of speakers’ perception of, and belief in, a motivated sound-meaning relationship; this folk-theory of language is essentially what orders “the mass of signs.” And the speech community’s perceptions of their code, while by no means universal, are a structuring force in widely disparate languages; linguistic ideologies, speakers’ understandings of their own language, are themselves shown to be productive forces in a language, perpetuated through the “metapragmatic” terms and discourse (that is, speech about speech) that speakers employ to
justify their own use of language. Through a discussion of secondary sound symbolism and linguistic ideology, this essay attempts to develop an understanding of sound symbolism in English as language-specific and speaker-based, created by speakers’ particular understanding of their particular code, but also resulting from a widespread and powerful – if not necessarily universal – tendency of speakers to order, justify, and thereby motivate language.

In Opposition to Arbitrariness – In Search of Universals

While an iconic relation, or inherent resemblance, is the goal of many arguments for universal sound symbolism, iconicity is not required to oppose the arbitrary nature of the sign. In some studies, cross-linguistic occurrences of non-random sound-meaning relations, even those that lack any perceivable iconicity, are also held as non-arbitrary strictly on the basis of a discernable pattern, and are therefore taken to be a blow against the Saussurean hypothesis. This is the case for a study of sound symbolism in proximal and distal forms, in which a claim is made not only for a recurrent sound-meaning connection at the level of phonemes, but also for one such tendency’s universal appearance. In Woodworth (1991) a survey of twenty-six diverse languages’ deictic pronouns (this and that,) place adverbs (here and there,) and directional affixes (glossed as toward and away) determined the vowel quality of each set. Within each pair of deictics, the overriding (though not exclusive) result was the presence of a higher vowel in the proximal form than that in the distal form, with vowel height determined by first and second formant value. The semantic categories tested here for relation to phonetic forms do not lend themselves to an interpretation as iconic; that is, no inherent expressive value seems to be highlighted by the link between high vowels and proximal forms (although a directly expressive
value is claimed for high vowels in other contexts, described below.) But Woodworth nevertheless claims that the study provides evidence for a primary, i.e. inherent, sound symbolism rather than secondary or conventionalized sound symbolism, because of the worldwide distribution of these corresponding sound-meaning connections, however subtle; if patterned, the results are non-random, and if non-random, the sound-meaning relation cannot be called fully arbitrary. The “strong relation” shown is even used to disprove the belief that “sound symbolism will randomly present and absent itself from various elements in language;” the non-random results argue instead for a motivated sound-meaning relation in one small strand of language, although the source of the motivation itself, if not iconic, remains mysterious (Woodworth, 290).

Woodworth’s study grows out of a long history of sound symbolism research seeking universals in the expressive value of sounds, ideally outside the constraints of language-specific, learned associations. A famous experiment by Firth, conducted in 1930, was designed to confirm a pervasive intuition about the expressive value of stops versus that of continuants; presented with pictures of simple shapes and a limited list of nonsense words, subjects consistently attached oomboolu and maluma to rounded shapes, and takete and kikeriki to angular ones. Unlike the test of vowel quality in proximal and distal forms, an association of sound type to visual image tests “synaesthetic effects, in which speech sounds symbolize- or are associated with- the responses of human senses other than the auditory one” (Bladon, 160). The synaesthetic effects highlighted here connect the feature \([\pm \text{continuant}]\) to the visual input of continuous versus broken or angular forms. The experiential and language-specific nature of this kind of association was to some small degree contradicted by successful repetitions of the experiment with German and Tanzanian subjects as well as English speakers, and the contrived
setting and forced associations dictated by the experiment were deemed unimportant, being the
necessary means for evoking an association which, by its consistency, proved to be a
demonstrable force in language, whether learned or innately iconic (Bladon, 160).

The search for synaesthetic sound effects found another shaky argument for universalism
in Brown’s 1958 word-matching experiments, where subjects were asked to match sets of
antonyms naming sense experiences in languages unrelated to English with their English
translations, on the basis of sound alone. For example, Chinese ch’ing and ch’ung were listed
opposite their translations, light and heavy, respectively; the order of the antonyms in each pair
varied throughout the tests, but 90% of the subjects correctly matched ch’ing to light. This
particular result, however, was out of the ordinary; the general outcome for English-speaking
subjects was a 55% to 60% success rate, which was nevertheless taken by the author as a greater-
than-chance statistical result, therefore suggesting at least a trace of cross-linguistic phonetic
symbolism (Brown, 258-9). While not a terribly convincing argument for cross-linguistic
iconicity, the experiment confirmed a language-specific tendency towards synaesthetic sound-
meaning associations for vowels in English, by demonstrating strong agreement among English
speakers even where their results were incorrect; for example, only 30% correctly guessed
Chinese fei to mean fat and shou to mean thin. The test subjects’ strongest agreements yielded
an interpretation in which the matches were shown to be based on vowel quality, specifically
vowel height, just as in the survey of deictic forms. Brown divides the phonetic forms guiding the
subjects’ synaesthetic associations into “lower pitched back vowels [which]...suggest what is
heavy, dark, slow, blunt, and male while the higher-pitched front vowels suggest what is light,
bright, fast, sharp and female” (259). Jakobson and Waugh, among others, cite a tendency in
European languages to add “small” to the second group, realized in the high [i] of French petit,
Italian *piccolo*, Scottish *wee*, Greek *mikros*, and so forth, though notably not our own *big* and *small* (184).

This particular division into higher and lower vowels and their corresponding synaesthetic qualities, while clearly a language-specific association (and an obscure one at that,) recurs in the research on sound symbolism as an essential (and therefore, perhaps, universal) expressive distinction. One author cites a study of West African languages in which expressive words, including highly productive new forms, depend on an association of the vowel group [e] [o] [a] with small and tense things, and [u] [o] [ ] with big and lax things; [i] “has its own specific expressive values, indicating something narrow, tight, squeezed or very dark” (Fischer-Jørgensen, 81). The ensuing study tested the expressive values of the same sets of vowels among Danish speakers, in a more holistic study where subjects were simply asked to match each vowel group to its corresponding value, showing that “79 to 98% of the Danish students were in agreement with the West Africans,” associating the higher pitched vowels with the qualities thin, flat, light, quick and agile, but also with bright, in opposition to the West African assessment (82). This one variation points to the language– and culture– specific nature of this type of sound-association, which, as Laurie Bauer writes in a critique of universalist claims in sound symbolism, is misleading precisely because of its intra-lingual strength; linguists looking for sound-meaning correspondences in other languages are so well enculturated in those from their own code that they are more likely to perceive, and report, associations that match their own, particularly in the context of a qualitative study (199).

What these studies nevertheless succeed in demonstrating is a consistent and widespread (if not yet universally shown) agreement among speakers as to the expressiveness, and specific expressive values, of certain phonemic segments within their respective languages. It is this
consensus which provokes claims of natural iconicity in sound symbolism, that is, of motivated correspondences between the nature of expressive speech sounds and the nature of the things they describe. The sound-meaning associations of vowels find an iconic motivation in Jakobson and Waugh’s claim that “the ready associability of [i] with small things is explained by the high pitch of the vowel,” (184) while others claim “that the expressive value ‘large’ of open vowels has something to do with their big mouth opening” (Fischer-Jørgensen, 55). One author goes so far as to identify an evolutionary basis for the so-called “frequency code” in which an innate identification of high pitch with utterances by smaller (hence less threatening, etc.) speakers finds a referential realization in the sound-symbolic nature of vowel frequency (Ohala, 342). Whether or not these justifications, based on different physical phenomena, are particularly compelling, they depend upon “conventionalized synaesthetic relations within a culture, e.g. the formal application of adjectives to different senses...and the metaphoric use in poetry,” as well as metaphoric use in ordinary speech (Fischer-Jørgensen, 88). In other words, speech sounds, if iconic, are incorporated into culturally determined sets of sensory experiences, so that while high pitch may connote what is light, bright, fast and sharp to an English speaker (not to mention the metaphoric application of “high” itself in describing pitch) the substitution of “dark” for “light” in another speech community does not undermine an argument for vowel iconicity, but merely places it in a different culturally-specific category of synaesthetic, and metaphoric, sense associations. Furthermore, different features of the same speech sound may be selected by different languages for sound-meaning association. In Gérard Diffloth’s (1994) study of Bahnar expressive forms, he finds high vowels to signal greater size than low vowels, directly reversing the pattern of Indo-European sound symbolism, but in an equally or more consistent manner. Diffloth argues that vowel iconicity results not from speech perception but from the articulatory
gesture, so that different languages may "focus upon different parts of the rich sensation package...
in our case the volume of the tongue instead of the size of the air passage between it and the palate." Whether dependent on speech production or perception, "iconicity can be both physiologically motivated and culturally relative at the same time" (113).

If the "frequency code" determining the expressive qualities of relative vowel height can be reversed depending on cultural context, the claims for the innate iconic value of speech sounds seem to be far from proving any universal tendencies. But the research on primary sound symbolism makes a strong case for the agreement among speakers of a particular language as to the expressive or meaningful nature of speech sounds. More extensive investigations have therefore focused on what is called secondary sound symbolism – learned, non-iconic associations of sound and meaning which operate at a smaller level than the morpheme, in ways other than traditional morphology, and which depend on both the structure of a particular language and the perceptions of speakers themselves.

Relative Motivation – Secondary Sound Symbolism

Even in the absence of a natural sound-meaning correspondence, a relatively motivated association between sound and sense arises as the result of speakers' perception – and creation – of such a correspondence. The tradition of research in sound symbolism can itself be seen to arise from this same tendency; the search for universal links of sound and meaning demonstrates perfectly an attempt to introduce to language a new principle of order and regularity. But theories of secondary sound symbolism essentially ignore (and often reject) the possibility of primary iconicity between sound and meaning. They do, however, point to a diagrammatic or structural
iconicity of compositionality in language; words derive a relative motivation from their composition not only out of morphemes, but also out of their phonemic units, even if the expressive or meaningful values of the sounds are learned— in essence, arbitrary. Most importantly, secondary sound symbolism is made meaningful by the perception, whether conscious or unconscious, of linguistic motivation among speakers themselves, a perception which itself becomes a creative force in language, leading to a productive remotivation of the sign.

Peirce’s (1955) taxonomy of signs identifies diagrammatic icons, as opposed to images and metaphors, as those “which represent the relation of the parts of one thing by analogous relations in their own parts...it is only in respect to the relations of their parts that their likeness consists” (qtd. in Waugh, 56). This definition frees the field of iconicity to encompass all of morphology; as Waugh notes, “the traditional morpheme (whether lexical, derivative or grammatical) is grounded in the recurrence of particular form-meaning correlations across words. And traditional morphology is a recognition of this fact even if the terms iconicity and isomorphism are not often found in books on morphology” (57). Approached from this viewpoint, anywhere that compositionality exists in the lexicon (that is, anywhere but in monomorphemes) there is a transparency of meaning, because morphemes influence the meaning of words in predictable, and diagrammatic, ways; and anywhere there is transparency of meaning, there is relative motivation.

Isomorphic iconicity, the general one form—one meaning principle, may be too fundamental to natural language to provide a meaningful perspective on relative motivation, but there are more specific examples of motivation both above and below the level of morphology. Iconicity in syntax has been the most widely noted and accepted, such as the pervasive pattern where “linear order of mention corresponds to the temporal sequence of events mentioned,” as in
“John came in and sat down,” where and bears no inherent temporal meaning (Hiraga, 8). Iconic morphology appears in subtler traces; Jakobson points out “an equivalent relation between ...signantia and signata” in Indo-European languages, where “superlative degrees of adjectives show a gradual increase in the number of phonemes, for example, high-higher-highest, altus-altior-altissimus,” reflecting the “gradation gamut” of the corresponding concepts (421).

Similarly, Jakobson writes, plural forms may be marked by an increased amount of phonetic material, that is, an additional morpheme or lengthened number marker, but no language exists where the reverse is true and only singular forms bear an additional morpheme (421).

Reduplication exemplifies a diagrammatic iconic relation in morphology, where more of form signals more of meaning; one study of Kinyarwanda identifies the major functions of reduplication as iterativity, insistence, emphasis, frequency, authenticity, sequence, prolongation and universality, all ranging over the same semantic field as the unreduplicated form. The author identifies a common denominator of iterativity underlying the semantic effects of reduplication, where the repetition of form signals a repetition of meaning in terms of temporal length, or breadth of scope, or emphasis, and so forth (Kimenyi, 155). This form-meaning relation is language-specific, but recurs frequently, including in English; Lakoff and Johnson offer “He ran and ran and ran” and “He is very very very tall” as examples of iteration where, in their notation of metaphor which is equally an iconic relation, “MORE OF FORM stands for MORE OF CONTENT,” a motivating principle which bears both on augmentation and on diminution, but always with regard to iterated degree (127-8).

Theories of relative motivation promote a non-arbitrary form-meaning relation at the level of phonemes as well as morphology and syntax, but always in terms of secondary sound symbolism, which identifies submorphemic and phonemic segments and even features as
meaningful within a particular linguistic code. This theoretical stance makes no claims for cross-linguistic motivation of the sign by non-arbitrary sound segments, but breaks from traditional morphology in showing how units smaller than the morpheme bear meaning; the motivation of any lexical item therefore derives not only from its composition out of morphemes, but also from its morphemes’ composition out of phonemic units. Among many illustrations, Waugh identifies the cluster of words expressing rapid movement (flap, flee, flick, flicker, fling, flip, flit, flow, flutter, fly, flurry) as gaining partial semantic motivation from their shared initial consonant cluster that signals the family association. Importantly, not all segments or submorphemic groups of segments can be attributed meaning in describing relative motivation; recognized as a set of language-specific sound-meaning relations, only particular speech sounds or groups of sounds, called phonaesthemes, that are perceived as meaningful in the speech community comprise the basic units of secondary sound symbolism.

Claims for the presence and pervasiveness of phonaesthemes are not seen as a weakening of claims for sound symbolism, but instead as a more realistic definition, and therefore an opportunity to investigate it as a significant structuring force within a particular language. Bowles (1995) argues for an explanation of phonaesthetic effects in terms of psychological processes; that certain sound clusters are felt to be meaningful is supported by the spreading activation model of cognitive linguistics, in which word recognition and production are believed to activate words linked by both similar sound structure and similar meaning. In the recognition or production of a word containing a phonaestheme, gleam being a given example where gl- connotes light and sight, a set of other gl- words is activated, whether phonaesthetic or not, e.g. glance, glad, even glue. But because the spreading model also describes an activation of similar semantic fields, only phonaesthetic words would be activated by spreading along both semantic
and phonemic nodes; recognition of *gleam* would activate *glow* and *glimmer*, but not *glue*, in several ways at once. The simultaneous activation of groups of words linked by both sound and meaning serves to reinforce the strength of the perceived association between them, and the strength of the perceived meaningfulness of the phonaestheme itself (Bowles, 49).

The psycholinguistic explanation of phonaesthetic effects is perhaps accurate and even potentially testable, but it underestimates a critical aspect of secondary sound symbolism; in order for an effect to be reinforced by the spreading activation model, it must already exist in the language, and for a set of meaningful relations to exist, they must be the result of speakers’ tendency to find and create them. Phonaesthemes exist only in clusters, as the “experiential links” or “cumulative suggestive value” (Bowles, 49) that allow a sound-meaning association. Just as “there really could not even conceivably exist such a signifier/signified natural connection...since before the fact of the connection there is nothing to connect,” (Boon, qtd. in Gordon, 12) sound-meaning associations arise from a “network of relations from word to word, based on systematic recurrences of form and meaning,” without which the association is genuinely arbitrary (Waugh, 62). The groups of phonaesthetically related words that Bolinger calls word-affinity relations or word constellations are therefore linked, and motivated, by speakers’ sense of isomorphic iconicity, the same principle that underlies traditional morphology; just as one form is felt to correspond to one meaning in repeated appearances of morphemes, *part of* one form, such as a consonant cluster, is felt to evoke at least a suggestion of the same meaning in phonaesthetic links.

Phonaesthetic relations are sometimes framed in terms of etymology, so that the correspondences within a word-affinity group can supposedly be traced to a single morpheme, no longer extant in the language, whose disappearance also allowed the diachronic sound change
that erased all but traces of the morpheme’s productivity. Though valid in places, this oversimplified explanation is partly undermined by the varied sources of words within a particular constellation; Rhodes cites how the group formed around “the largely Germanic fl-liquid classifier (flow, flush, flood, etc.) also includes the fl- in Latinate fluid” (289). And just as one word-affinity group may admit different historical sources, the same historical source may divide into more than one group of phonaesthetic associations, as in the polysemous use of fl- in the movement group and the fluid group. If sound-meaning affinities from different sources are perceived by speakers as related, and if this relation is reinforced by use within a particular speech community, then the perceptions of speakers, and the sense of iconicity that provokes sound-meaning associations, can be seen as a structuring force in the life of the language. The strength of this force can be seen in the productivity, and systematicity, of phonaesthetic groups. Bolinger notes crosspatterning between groups of phonaesthemes, the result of a productive recombination of elements, as in the pairs glitter-flitter, glow-flow, glare-flare, as well as the etymological sound-meaning affinity of pairs such as roil-rile which is repeated without an etymological link in coil-curl (Gordon 6). Even a less clearly phonaesthetic relation (though a word-affinity relation nonetheless) such as the apparent similarity between mother, father and brother, is the result, Waugh claims, of a historical reshaping of the first two to resemble phonemically their related kinship term; the synchronic perception of sound-meaning relations can apparently lead to diachronic change in the direction of greater relative motivation (58). One account of monosyllabic English words with the vowel [ə] identifies phonaesthetic clusters in as many as 75% of the words surveyed, certainly a strong argument for a remotivated reshaping of the lexicon (Householder, in Waugh, 60). Jakobson refers to the expressive value of new coinages such as blends and portmanteaus (Lewis Carroll’s slithy from slimy and lithe being the
classic example); this "joint interaction of ...signantia and signata," hinging upon the "experiential links" of phonaesthetic effects, again displays the partial form - partial meaning equation of an iconic and motivated system (423).

A similarly productive force, equally demonstrative of a motivated sense of language, falls under the title of folk etymology, a term which describes a tendency of foreign borrowings, archaic, technical, and otherwise unfamiliar expressions that enter a language to come to resemble forms that had already existed in the same language. Many folk-etymologized forms undergo only spelling changes, though others change in sound as well; Napoli cites the reanalysis of French écrivesse into English crayfish (186), and another study cites the spelling changes from playwright to playwrite, and from hiccup to hiccough, among others, in each case an alteration that generates a more transparent, more motivated form (Schofield, 347). Culler includes in this group even the Latinate outrage, derived from ultra and the suffix -age, but remotivated in pronunciation to emphasize the meaning of its re-assigned component morphemes (3). That unfamiliar words are transformed into forms motivated by their component parts shows a tendency for speakers not to accept the arbitrariness of the sign in learning new terms, but to seek, and therefore create, a potential motivation in the sound-shape, and sound-relations, of an unfamiliar item (Attardo, 154). Even words that resist reanalysis into meaningful segments come to resemble compounds of common forms, as Householder illustrates in the unmotivated examples of mushroom, catsup, alewife, mongoose, handsome, and so on; apparently even the illusion of relative motivation is more acceptable to speakers than non-compositional, hence totally arbitrary, forms (105). Just as in the word-affinity relations of phonaesthetic groups, speakers’ tendency to associate sound and meaning, to motivate language, leads to a productive
remotivation of the sign, in which sound-meaning relations are reinforced and recreated in usage
and in the production of new forms.

Linguistic Ideology – Metapragmatic Discourse

Folk etymology, phonaesthemic relations, blends and word-affinity groups demonstrate a
tendency for speakers to link sound and meaning, to find and create motivation in the
composition of words out of smaller units, both morphemic and phonemic; this inclination is not
only a way of “ordering the mass of signs,” in Saussure’s terms, but actually generates
demonstrable and exploitable forces in the life of a language. These occurrences of secondary
sound symbolism, all derived from evidence in English, therefore seem to be not the result of
strictly language-internal forces, but the product of an interchange between the language itself and
speakers’ engagement with, or understanding of, their specific code. And in a wide range of
languages, speakers demonstrate systems of understanding about the workings of their languages
– systems of linguistic ideology – which relate to the issue of relative motivation, a term which,
needless to say, applies to very different phenomena in languages outside of the Indo-European
family. The particular ideology that dictates speakers’ understanding of a motivated sound-
meaning relation in English is naturally not that which operates in other languages, and is not even
necessarily based on the fundamental referentiality, the relation of word to referent, that is often
taken to be the basis of sound symbolism. Michael Silverstein writes that “reference is one kind
of linguistic performance among many,” and analyzes a system of indexical meaning that utilizes
secondary sound symbolism as elaborately as any set of linguistic icons (Silverstein 1976: 18).
But even among disparate languages which impose disparate ideologies of language, there appear
similar strands of "metapragmatic discourse," speech about speech, which, in varying degrees of opacity, serves to justify speakers' own conceptions of their language (Agha, 181). These justifications also appear in varying degrees of accuracy, from the linguist's standpoint, just as the conception of an innate sound-meaning relationship challenges the accepted doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign; nevertheless, it is in the interplay between ideology and actual usage where sound-symbolic effects appear to be grounded, and this is where one must look in order to describe speakers' remotivation of language.

In "Relative Motivation in Denotational and Indexical Sound Symbolism of Wasco-Wishram Chinookan," Silverstein analyzes "a true indexical system" of creative consonantal change (45). Peirce's taxonomy of signs is here, again, the source of the root terms; unlike an icon, which resembles its signified in structure or evaluative qualities, an index is somehow continuous with its signified, and therefore indicates (i.e. indexes) an aspect of a speech situation or a non-speech entity which is independent from simple denotation. Jakobson's original study of "shifters" placed pronouns (as well as deictics and tense) under the label of indexicality, by which the referential meaning of "I," that is, the abstract idea of "the speaker," is given specific pragmatic meaning only by its indexical relation to a non-speech entity, the actual speaker. In Wasco-Wishram, diminutive and augmentative sound-symbolic forms of consonants are utilized to indexically "signal the utterer's affective and evaluative relationship to some denotatum otherwise determined by the lexical form to which the indexical system is, in effect, applied" (45). What is indexed in the consonantal change is the speaker's relation to what is referred to by the words themselves, sometimes to the extent that a sound change effects a full register shift, as in the use of the diminutive in "baby-talk" and kinterms or the augmentative in insulting and aggressive speech. Several features provide evidence that the indexical system is sound-symbolic
rather than morphological, including the relative creativity and subtle scalar gradations of the diminutive – augmentative system. In the simplest example of the forms “big” and “small,” (in this case denotational as well evaluatively indexical) Silverstein notes that the English glosses “are in reality in Wasco only two way-stations along this gradient cline,” defined by consonantal shifts where word-initial $qb > g$ (where $>$ shows “denotes greater size than,”) and $g > g^w > g^w$ in the augmentative $-gai$ while $g > k' > k^w > k^w$ in the diminutive $-gaic$ (49). Any phonologically possible form may be generated by speakers from any lexical item, without prior use, on this gradient of consonant forms (and corresponding ones on different places of articulation) indexing the speaker’s subjective “evaluation of oversize, overmuch, and affectively negative” versus “undersize, restricted, and affectively positive” (Silverstein, “The Limits of Awareness,” 8).

Most indicative, however, of the sound-symbolic qualities of Wasco-Wishram are the speakers’ own assessment of them; the forms of augmentative – diminutive indexical markers are utilized in metapragmatic narratives that justify their sound-symbolic nature for speakers who are fully grounded in the language and culture. Silverstein writes that in a commonly invoked motif of Wasco-Wishram storytelling, a narrating character about to engage in a wrestling match declares “‘If I manage to best her/him, … you[i.e.…the listeners] will hear “$g^w a:w$”; if she/he manages to best me, you will hear “$k'u$.” ’ Of course, these phonic forms display canonical augmentative vs. diminutive sound symbolism” (Silverstein 1994: 57). But it is only their use in a culturally-specific narrative that makes them the object of metalinguistic speculation, and the speculation is phrased in terms of the sounds themselves. The non-referential utterance produced by the victor in a match, the more powerful of two forces, is the sound of the augmentative form; Silverstein writes “the very terms $gwa:w$ and $k'u$ become onomatopoetic lexemes…with a distinct intuition of ‘sound-symbolism’: this is what such kinds of situations sound like!” (57)
The association between situation and sound is naturalized by its presence in a pervasive narrative, which therefore also metapragmatically justifies the use of this sound-symbol of power, size or force in evaluative indexical forms.

In spite of this justification and naturalization of the indexical system in Wasco-Wishram, another important feature marks its use of sound-symbolism; speakers are not, apparently, entirely conscious of their own use of augmentative – diminutive forms. Silverstein’s informant could not reproduce an augmentative form she had just used when prompted to do so, and could only describe diminutive effects utilized by other speakers by saying they “sounded kinda cute,” although she used both types of indexical markers actively in spontaneous speech, and contextual cues as well as frozen lexical items make clear the intelligibility and productivity of the indexical forms (Silverstein, “The Limits of Awareness,” 9). Speakers’ inability to identify the functioning of their own sound-symbolic speech by no means diminishes its importance in Wasco-Wishram; on the contrary, the augmentative – diminutive markers seem so natural to speakers, so bound to other functions in the language, and so well justified (if tacitly or subconsciously) by metapragmatic narratives, as to escape awareness in regular use. The Wasco-Wishram sense of the natural indexicality of certain speech forms can be seen to be as deeply imbedded, and as influential in the language, as an English speaker’s unspoken sense of the referential, motivated sound-meaning correspondence that appears in phonaesthetic links or word-affinity relations.

The indexical system in Wasco-Wishram is not explained by the way that speakers themselves describe their use of language – it is, in fact, not even fully accessible to speakers’ metapragmatic understanding. Nevertheless, in this case and others, metapragmatic terms and discourse provide a justification for a speech community’s particular use of language, and therefore also allow the speakers’ ideology of language to become a productive force, analogous
to the perception, and hence creation, of sound-symbolic motivation by speakers of English. In another study of the formation of conceptions of language, Asif Agha’s study of stereotypes and honorific language, the development of motivation for indexical registers of honorifics provides an analogue to speakers’ re-motivation of speech sounds in terms of meaning. In Lhasa Tibetan, as in many languages, the use of honorific forms indexes the relation of speaker and interlocutor as well as the speaker’s evaluatively honorific relation to the referents of his/her speech; in addition, the use of certain honorific forms in combination or in particular contexts forms another kind of speaker index, one which places the speaker in a system of stereotypes about different cultural groups’ manners of speech and relative “purity” of usage. The formation of the stereotypes themselves, according to Agha, depends on a mutual interaction between justifications of social conceptions and relative motivation of linguistic ones. Both types of justification are legible in metapragmatic discourse, which “construes differences of speech habit as EMBLEMATIC OF DIFFERENCES IN IDENTITY, employing language to motivate differences in social identity” (168) while simultaneously, “speaker stereotypes are also motivated by efforts on the part of the language users to rationalize features of LANGUAGE USE itself” (155).

Agha points to the naturalization of speakers’ formulated associations; in the mutual interchange between social and linguistic justifications, “once the characteristics of social beings become ideologically correlated with linguistic repertoires, the personified speech that results appears itself to be motivated rather than arbitrary” (178). And the perception of motivation is grounded in part in an appeal to the authority of the language itself; metapragmatic discourse is structured by the available terms of register type and speaker type which speakers use to stratify and stereotype users and usage, the “metapragmatic terms [which] gain their authority in part by the appearance of objectivity” (179). Importantly, the terms used in rationalizing descriptions of
stereotypes based on language use underdetermine, or insufficiently describe, the actual use of honorific language in Lhasa Tibetan, which is not as grounded in speaker identity as speakers themselves claim, but is instead, Agha argues, a source of complex and gradated creative indexical usage. Nevertheless, speakers' descriptions of language use, employing register names and stereotypes of speakers, act as a socially constructive force as well as a descriptive one; the terms that "impose a structure on more complex semiotic phenomena by serving as descriptive labels for them" also justify, and hence perpetuate, the social stratifications that they incompletely describe (180).

While somewhat removed from the discussion of speakers' sense of an innate sound-meaning relationship, the justifications of honorific language by Lhasa Tibetan speakers illustrate one form of speakers' conceptions of their own use of language, and may, through correspondences with the other examples of linguistic ideology, help to explain the phenomenon of sound symbolism as a whole. Silverstein's discussion of Wasco-Wishram and Agha's discussion of Lhasa Tibetan both point to speakers' metapragmatic descriptions, that is, an effort on the part of the speech community to understand and order -- in essence, motivate -- their own use of language. In Wasco-Wishram, tropes in the culture's stories provide an onomatopoeic naturalization of the sounds in their system of indexical sound symbolism, while in Lhasa Tibetan, a set of stereotypes about speakers' use of honorific forms justifies social stratifications, which then motivate an understanding of the language itself in terms of relative purity or quality. And in each case, speakers' metapragmatic descriptions are neither complete nor accurate, and are not necessarily even accessible to the speaker's conscious description; while Wasco speakers intuitively understand the consonants of the augmentative indexical form to be the very sound of size or power, they have difficulty identifying the same forms in natural
speech, and Lhasa Tibetan speakers reduce the varieties of speech to the simple categories defined by the terms for registers and speakers themselves, ignoring the actual productive and creative manipulation of these categories. Speakers’ understandings or descriptions of their language thus fail, predictably, to describe adequately its actual workings (and may even obscure elements of the language for the non-native linguist) just as the motivated theory of language demonstrated by folk etymology and phonaesthetic associations popularly opposes the fundamental arbitrariness of the linguistic sign at the level of the phoneme. But more importantly for the study of sound symbolism, each example of linguistic ideology demonstrates an area of interplay where speakers’ rationalizations become a constructive force, rendering their conceptions at least partly accurate by a projection onto actual use. The sounds of the augmentative-diminutive system, justified in narrative form, function well as sound-symbolic indexes, so that sound and situation are innately linked for the “fully cultured speaker” of Wasco-Wishram; the honorific forms of Lhasa Tibetan, motivated by speaker stereotypes, do indeed serve a function of indexing speaker status according to speakers’ conceptions of speech motivated by identity, and thus make socially real the stereotypes justified by terms of status and register; and speakers’ sense of a sound-meaning relationship evidenced in English actually leads to the diachronic reshaping of words so that, at a secondary symbolic level rather than a primary iconic one, sounds come to reflect meaning in ways other than the traditional morpheme. Metapragmatic discourse and ideology of language are therefore not simply speakers’ inaccurate assessments of their code, but are themselves observably productive forces.

The discussion of linguistic ideologies of Wasco-Wishram and Lhasa Tibetan speakers, demonstrated in part by metapragmatic discourse, begs the question of where such a discourse lies in English; although a conception of innately corresponding sound and meaning has been
demonstrated by traces of relative motivation, this sensibility among speakers is not overtly justified by their own assessments. Indeed, the sense of a sound-meaning relation operates below the level of awareness, as does the Wasco-Wishram speaker’s sense of the onomatopoeic nature of augmentative and diminutive forms. The realm of language-play in English, however, can be seen as an appropriately metalinguistic field, containing ample evidence of the motivated theory of language that creates secondary sound symbolism, and at the same time attempting to justify this theory. Attardo (1994) attributes punning, the humorous exploitation of homonyms, to speakers’ motivated theory of language, which generally follows the isomorphic iconicity principle of one form – one meaning; a playful evocation of a double meaning co-existing in a single phonetic form jars this expectation, but is resolvable by the status of humor as metalinguage which allows a temporary suspension of the understood rules of speech (147). This explanation uses the pun as evidence of speakers’ use of a motivated sound-meaning relation, but can be stretched farther. In an even more highly self-reflexive use of language, post-structuralist theory has taken up the double-entendre as a meaningful linguistic device, in which “a signifying cluster works to bring together material for thought and to suggest structural relationships...,” for instance Derrida’s pervasive exchange between l’être and lettre, being and letter; the unity of form is meant to illustrate a unity of meaning already existing in the language (Culler, 15). This is, however, simply a more formalized extension of the same motivated theory of language, and one which attempts to justify in metapragmatic terms the culturally imbedded use of language as if it were inherently motivated. The same approach to punning operates in the ordinary speaker’s understanding, which also demands that a relation of meaning be established by the formal resemblance of words; good wordplay, convention holds, draws meaningful connections by associating sound, so that the socially resonant good pun (history seen as his-story, etc.) is
perceived as more successful than the superficial "groaner" ("The first thing which strikes a stranger in New York is a big car") (Attardo, 146). The invocation of the motivated sound-meaning relationship in punning does not, therefore, merely reference and suspend the one-form one-meaning principle, as Attardo writes, but exploits it, and justifies it, in using similarity of form to demonstrate or even create similarity of meaning. It is, in this sense, a metapragmatic reference to the motivated theory of language that speakers seem to hold, even a (partially conscious) justification of it, and, in establishing its own realm of playful discourse, a demonstration of the same folk theory's creative productivity.

One final point serves to link speakers' motivating of social stereotypes in terms of speech, and vice versa, to other speakers' motivating of sound in terms of meaning, as well as linking metapragmatic descriptions to the actual functioning of the systems in question. Silverstein's reinterpretation of Whorf's theories describes how the speaker, in trying "even to 'think about' the referential properties of his native language in specific situations, is hopelessly at the mercy of... 'surface' lexicalized forms of the language" (Limits...," 18). Not only does the ordinary vocabulary of the language lack the terms to accurately describe itself, but further, in Silverstein's paraphrase of Whorf, the forms of the language impose a particular understanding of its own functioning which the linguist can only circumvent by "excruciating analysis" [my italics] (19). The understanding of augmentative-diminutive forms in Wasco-Wishram is therefore limited and mostly hidden beneath the level of awareness because the language makes few or no surface forms available for description, the indexical system being non-segmentable as descriptive lexemes and occurring only imbedded in other (referential) words. But in the more overt examples of linguistic ideology, a similarity of intention among speakers, that is, the tendency to motivate language, gets projected into different forms of rationalization; it is no surprise that modes of
speech that are tightly bound to social realities, speech that serves a strongly socially-indexical function, as in the multiply indexical honorific registers of Lhasa Tibetan, should be re-motivated in terms of speaker identity and stereotype. In English, on the other hand, the linguistic ideology that gives rise to secondary sound symbolism is the product of a code where social-indexical functions are limited, and motivation is instead attributed to the primary referential function, linking words to their referents, although there is no reason to believe that this latter type of motivation is not an element of Lhasa Tibetan as well. In each case, a tendency to order and justify language gets projected, through metapragmatic discourse and linguistic ideology, into a form of relative motivation unique to its particular language.

If each language dictates its own (limited) metapragmatic understanding to its speakers, then the research on universal and innate sound symbolism can be shown to be fundamentally flawed. The studies that attempt to find cross-linguistic consistency in the way particular ideas are phonetically encoded presuppose a system of reference identical to that of English, in assuming sounds to be iconically linked to referential meaning, thus overlooking the other types of “linguistic performance,” particularly indexical and evaluative connotation, which can also encode meaning through patterns of sound symbolism. Universalist claims ignore as well the significance of speakers’ own remotivation of language, which clearly varies widely across disparate languages, in the production of sound-meaning relations. Secondary sound symbolism, however, shows speakers’ linguistic ideology to be a powerful and productive force. In the clusters of phonaesthemes and word-affinity relations that pervade the English lexicon, phonemic units independent of morphology and etymology acquire meaning through connections with other semantically-related words; these learned associations or “cumulative suggestive values” arise
from an expectation of the motivated sound-meaning relation, in which a repeated part of one form corresponds in other contexts to a suggestion of the same meaning (Bowles, 49). As in the reshaping of folk-etymologized forms towards greater compositional motivation, speakers’ sense of a motivated language actually produces sound-meaning correspondences as groups of phonaesthetic links accrue members. This theory of language which operates subconsciously for speakers of English clearly cannot be said to operate cross-linguistically; speakers’ understandings of their languages are as different as the languages themselves. Claims cannot be made, then, for the universality of the remotivation of the linguistic sign which leads to secondary sound symbolism in English, nor for the universality of sound symbolism itself. But commonalities of linguistic ideology do appear cross-linguistically; in disparate contexts, speakers’ metapragmatic terms and discourse serve to explain, justify and order their speech, to varying degrees of accuracy and awareness, in each case describing, and thus creating, some degree of relative motivation in the language. Secondary sound symbolism in English is a product of such a culture- and language-specific motivating force; motivated correspondences of sound and meaning can only be explained from the basis of the structure of a particular language, and from the mutual exchange between speakers’ linguistic ideology and the functioning of their language.
Bibliography


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