

Sound Symbolism in Igbo: A Magnus Approach

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Abstract

Sound symbolism is the idea that the vocal sound or phonemes carry meaning in and of themselves. We do not know the similarities or dissimilarities between some languages in some aspects of sound symbolism (specifically, Igbo and English)? This study looks at Igbo sound symbolism using the three approaches of Magnus (Onomatopoeia, Iconism and Cluster). The model was first proposed by Wilhelm von Humboldt. The findings of this paper show that sounds do not become words until a meaning has been put into them, and this meaning represents the thought of a people. Words with meaning are suitable to be conveyed symbolically in sound. Igbo Consonants do not have a tone in Igbo apart from “n” and “m” which are the only letters that can be written with accent marks. Consonants, is to make a sound in speech produced by a stoppage or partial stoppage of the breath; a speech sound that is not a vowel. Igbo is a kwa language of the Benue-Congo subfamily of the Volta-Congo and Atlantic-Congo branches of the Niger-Congo language.

Keywords: *Sound, Sound Symbolism, Iconism, Clustering, Onomatopoeia*

Introduction

This paper examines a close look at sound symbolism in Igbo using Magnus approach. It aims at achieving the following objectives (i) to investigate Magnus sound symbolism (ii) determine phonetic sound cross linguistically represented and (iii) investigate similarities and dissimilarities between Igbo and English sound symbolism. A lot of studies have been carried out on sound symbolism. It is sad to note that, there is no study that looks at Igbo sound symbolism using the three approaches of Magnus (Onomatopoeia, Iconism, and Cluster). This study is advantageous to Igbo scholars, lecturers and most importantly to Nigerian scholars outside Igbo. It provides an understanding of sound symbolism from Magnus approach.

Going further, there is a reason why studying sound symbolism is important to linguistic researchers. First, sound symbolism possibly constitutes a counterargument against the thesis of arbitrariness, i.e. arbitrary relations between a significant and a signifié (Saussure, 1916). Second, to the extent that sound symbolism connections between sound and meaning may have phonetic bases, sound symbolism may instantiate a case of iconicity (Haiman, 1983, 1985a, b) between sound and meaning: phonetic factors affect- or even shape-meanings. Third, again to the extent that sound symbolism has phonetic bases, it may also constitute an instance of embodiment (Johnson, 1987, Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 1999), which is one of the central tenets’ of cognitive linguistics. Sound symbolism is a broad area of research. Therefore this paper narrows its research to Magnus three (3) approach to sound symbolism. Time and financial constraints have stood out as a major obstacle to this research.

In Linguistics, sound symbolism is the idea that the vocal sounds or phonemes carry meaning in and of themselves. Nordberg (1986) writes “sound symbolism or phonostheme... is the synesthetic combination of a certain sound or sound sequence with a particular notion or a particular connotative content.” Jakobson and Waugh (1979:19) define sound symbolism as “an inmost, natural association between sound and meaning.” Malkiel (1994) uses the term phonosymbolism to mean the same, he writes, as sound symbolism. The term sound symbolism is a general term for an iconic or indexical relationship between sound and meaning, and also between sound and sound (which is onomatopoeia).

Sound symbolism from general point of view is a phenomenon of language, though; the actual ratio of words in English expressed by sound symbolism elements is disputed by linguists. For some, language is mainly arbitrary and that sound symbolism is a mere fringe phenomenon (Saussure); others aver that language is inherently sound symbolic and always striving to equate sound with sense (Bolinger, 1965; Wescott, 1980). Question about whether the English language is growing more or less sound symbolic or whether it maintains a “steady state” equally remains unanswerable. However, the term ‘Sound Symbolism’ is widely used by linguists to represent the non-arbitrary quality of language.

Igbo is one of the languages of West Africa. The conclusion by the Atkinson research team that language originated in the Western part of Sub-Saharan Africa because Igbo language is based in the Western part of Sub-Saharan Africa. Claims to an Igbo origin of language, culture and civilization are not based on spoken language alone, but on the equally compelling fact that among the archaeological discoveries at Igbo Ukwu by British archaeologist Thurstan Shaw, were several inscriptions on pottery and bronze, which when

compared with ancient Middle Eastern inscriptions (Egyptian and Cretan Hieroglyphics, Hittite, Old Phoenician, Old Sumerian, Proto-Palestinian, etc) show several striking similarities. That shows that there was a civilization of note, based in Igbo land, now lost, which might have birthed the Middle Eastern civilizations and writing systems, but also their spoken languages.

Within Nigeria, Igbo as it is sometimes spelled Ibo is spoken primarily in the following Southern Delta region states: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. It is also spoken in the north east of the Delta state and in the southeast of the Rivers state. Igbo speakers are typically bilingual, speaking English as well. Igbo is a kwa language of the Benue-Congo subfamily of the Volta-Congo and Atlantic-Congo there are approximately branches of the Niger-Congo language family. In total, thirty Igbo dialects. These dialects vary considerably with respect to degree of intelligibility with the standard dialect. Variation is mostly lexical and phonological. The standard literary form is itself a dialect under development. It is based on Umuahia dialect.

Literature Review

The framework is Magnus three types of sound symbol: Onomatopoeia, Clustering and Iconism

Onomatopoeia: This is the least significant type of symbolism. It is simply imitative of sounds or suggests something that makes a sound. Simply a word or sound that imitates something. A vivid English example will be the bird name “cuckoo”. Others are *crash*, *bang* and *whoosh*.

Clustering: Words that share a sound sometimes have something in common. If we take, for example, words that have no prefix or suffix and group them according to meaning, some of them will fall into a number of categories. So we find that there is a group of words beginning with /b/ words that are banged, beaten, battered, bruised, blistered and bashed. This proportion is, according to Magnus, above the average for other letters. Another hypothesis states that if a word begins with a particular phoneme, then there is likely to be a number of other words starting with that phoneme that refers to the same thing. An example given by Magnus is if the basic word for ‘house’ in a given language starts with a /h/, then by clustering, disproportionately many words containing /h/ can be expected to concern housing: hut, home, hovel, habitat...Clustering language is dependent, although closely related languages will have similar clustering relationships.

Iconism: Iconism, according to Magnus (2010), becomes apparent when comparing words which have the same sort of referent. One way is to look at a group of words that all refer to the same thing and that differ only in their sound, such as ‘stamp’, ‘stomp’, ‘tromp’, ‘tamp’, ‘tramp’, and ‘step’. A /m/ before the /p/ in some words makes action more forceful; compare ‘stamp’ with ‘step’ with ‘tap’. According to Magnus, the /r/ sets the word in motion, especially after a /t/ so a ‘tamp’ is in one place, but a ‘tramp’ goes for a walk. The /p/ in all those words would be what emphasizes the individual steps.

Malkiel (1994) uses the term phonosymbolism to mean the same, he writes, as sound symbolism. Origins of sound symbolism in a landmark study with English speaking subjects, Sapir (1929) asked subjects to associate two invented words, mil and mal, with a small and a large table. Approximately 80% of subjects identified mal with the large table and mil with the small one. In the origins of sound symbolism, Newman (1933) performed similar experiments supporting size symbolism, as well as phonetic symbolism for a dark-light contrast, i.e. certain sounds communicate varying degrees of luminosity. Research on sound symbolism has been conducted on languages from around the world: German (Hilmer, 1914; Gabelentz, 1891; Schuchardt, 1897), French (Chastaing, 1958; Grammont, 1901; Guillaume, 1937; Peterfalvi, 1970), Hungarian (Allport, 1935; FoAnagy,1963), Danish (Jespersen, 1918), Korean (Kim, 1977; Martin, 1962), Chinese (Karlgrén,1962; Lapolla, 1994), Japanese (Amanuma, 1974; Hamano, 1986), African languages (Samarin, 1967; Westermann, 1937), and American Indian (Haas, 1969; Nichols, 1971). As contemplated by Plato, sound symbolism may cut across languages as well. For instance, Ultan (1978) reports that in almost 90% of the languages sampled, words representing diminutive form are similar in their vowel sounds.

Arbitrariness widely accounts for the sound-meaning associations in most modern languages, growing empirical evidence is challenging this purely arbitrary view in favor of sound symbolism (or phono-semantics), claiming for natural constraints governing the mapping of meaning into sounds (see, Jespersen 1922; Newman 1933; Nuckolls 2003; Sapir 1929).

Abelin (2000) undertook experimentations with the symbolism of consonant clusters in Swedish and concluded that; ‘For the contrastive studies, the general results are that there are both similarities and dissimilarities between the expressions in the different languages. The variation is greater for some semantic fields than for others.’ Chan (1996) is a useful synthesis that tried to explain the different types of sound symbolism. She noted that;

Hinton, L., Nichols, J., Ohala, J.J., (1994) tended to focus on the more universal tendencies in their typology, and ignored sound-symbolic phenomena that, though more language-specific, are iconically motivated. In their system, such phenomena fall between their “synesthetic sound symbolism” and “conventional sound symbolism” and fitting neither category. Hence, a further refinement of their typology, or classification, is proposed here by subdividing their third and most important category for sound-symbolic phenomena, namely, “synesthetic sound symbolism”, into two categories: “universal synesthetic sound symbolism”, and “local synesthetic sound symbolism”. The result is a five -category typology of sound symbolism: corporeal sound symbolism, imitative sound symbolism, universal synesthetic sound symbolism, local synesthetic sound symbolism, and conventional sound symbolism. The proposed classification is supported by data from Chinese.

Methodology

Ohala (1997) an apt and concise working definition and description of the methodology of this paper. He stated that;

If we find similar sounds associated with similar meanings in a sufficiently diverse number of languages, especially those not genetically or are rally connected, then we might with some confidence consider whether a non-arbitrary sound-meaning relation exists and then seek an explanation for it. Sound symbolism is the non-arbitrary connection between certain classes of speech sounds and the meanings of the words or morphemes they are in.

The data for this study is selected using a Purposive Sampling Method. It goes further to form the corpus of this paper. Below is the glossary and its meaning.

Table 1 Corpus of the Study

| GLOSSARY | MEANING |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Koi koi | sound of a female heel |
| Dum dum | sound of a drum bit (bass) |
| Gbim | sound of a fallen heavy object (palm bunch) |
| Towaij | sound of a gun |
| Tĩmkom Tĩmkom | sound of a clock ticking |
| gbam gbam | Sound of zinc for roofing |
| udu | Sound of a drum like pot |
| ogene | Sound of a local instrument made of iron |
| ogba tum tum | Sound of Motor cycle |
| zizizi | Sheepishly |
| tõrij | Smooth |
| tõtõlito | Over ripe |
| yõrij | Soft/tender |
| gidigidi | Suddenly/loudly/abruptly |
| yori yori | Softness/tenderness |
| ebe | Place |
| ubá égo | Wealthy in money |
| ulo ndi boda | boarding house |
| ulo akukwo boda | boarding school |
| nlekwa ahũikẽ | health care |
| sentã ahũikẽ | health centre |
| ñshorãnsi ahũikẽ | health insurance |
| mma | Beauty |
| pẽnsilin | penicillin |
| pẽsenti | percent |
| riyõlvã | revolver |
| rõkeeti | rocket |
| õtĩ iwu | legislator |
| itĩ iwu | legislate |
| keñtimuwu | legislative |
| ngãlãbã keñtimuwu | legislature |

Discussion

Table 2 – Examples of onomatopoeia, clustering and iconism

| Sound symbolism | English | Igbo |
|-----------------|---------|------|
| | | |

| | | |
|----------------|--------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Onomatopoeia | crash | Koi koi |
| | bang | Dum dum |
| | whoosh | Gbim |
| | | Towaii |
| | | Tĩmkom Tĩmkom |
| | | gbam gbam |
| Clustering /b/ | banged | ebe |
| | beaten | ulo akukwo bodá |
| | battered | ulo ndi bodá |
| | bruised | |
| | bashed | |
| | blistered | |
| /h/ | hut | nlekwa ahũikē |
| | home | sentā ahũikē |
| | habitat | ñshorānsi ahũikē |
| | hovel | |
| Iconism /p/ | Stamp, stomp | pēnsilĩ, pēsenti |
| /m/ | tromp | mma, eme |
| /r/ | tramp | rjvòlvà, ròkèeti, nri |
| /t/ | step | òtĩ iwu, itĩ iwu, keñtimuwu, ñgálàbà keñtimuwu |

Onomatopoeia in different languages can express moods, emotions and actions besides labeling objects (Yule, 1996). As an example, tick tock of a clock is a label for its action and zig zag of a car is a mood of its action. Due to the penetration of onomatopoeia to people's culture, it can be used as all forms of verbs, adjectives and adverbs (Dofs, 2008). According to Saussure, the difference among onomatopoeic words in languages is minor and can be ignored, in other words, he believed that because these words are derived from nature sounds, they are more or less used with the same pronunciation in different languages, but some other linguists like Jespersen (1933) considers these differences more seriously.

In spite of the importance of onomatopoeia in the world's languages, the linguistic study of them is pitifully inadequate. Many linguistics regarded onomatopoeia as "second class citizens among words, since they are often polysemous, while at the same time, paradoxically, applicable to only a narrow semantic range (Falk, 1978). Onomatopoeic words have a definite relationship to what they represent, thus they are not entirely arbitrary. However, different languages represent the same natural sounds in slightly different ways, meaning that they are not completely non-arbitrary either. It's not just the characteristics of words which can provoke connotative meanings in the minds, but symbolism sounds can also create a strong sense towards something they are used in. In other words, it can be taken into account that phonemes can have meanings, ideas, or feelings and most meanings of the words are applied by them (Wood, 2006).

Clustering in Igbo language. Clusters in Igbo do not from a single sound unit. A consonants cannot immediately precede another consonants in Igbo spellings. Note that digraphs are seen as single letters formed by two Latin consonants, therefore, one consonants is not immediately preceding another. Example ebe, bodá etc. Igbo words must end in vowels. Few words might end in M, in which case M is a pseudo-vowel as in Mma, Eme etc. Although two consonants cannot come together in Igbo spelling, M and N are exceptions. M and N are consonants when they precede vowels. M and N are pseudo-vowels when they precede consonants. The rule for spelling with pseudo-vowels is M must precede the following consonants: b, f, gb, m, p, kp, v, w. The other 20 consonants are preceded by N.

| Labial | Alveolar | Palatal | Velar | Glottal |
|--------|----------|---------|-------------------------------|---------|
| p b | t d | | k g | |
| | | | kp gb | |
| | | | k ^w g ^w | |
| | | ʃ ɖʒ | | |

| | | | | |
|-----|-----|-----|----------------|----|
| f v | s z | ʃ | ɣ | fi |
| m | n | ɲ ŋ | | |
| | | | ŋ ^w | |
| | l | j | w | |
| | r | | | |

Table 3 Standard Igbo Consonants

Findings

Consonants do not have a tone in Igbo apart from “n” and “m” which are the only consonants that can be written with accent marks. Consonants, is to make a sound in speech produced by a stoppage or partial stoppage of the breath; a speech sound that is not a vowel. This research work found out that there are both similarities and dissimilarities between the expressions in the languages. Reduplication is seen in some onomatopoeic Igbo words e.g. koi koi, dum dum. This reduplicated syllable does not adhere to the phonotactic structure of a given language. In the case of compounding, which is understood to be the result of the fixed combination of two free forms or words that have an otherwise independent existence (cf Adam, 1973:30) is present in some Igbo clustering and Iconic sounds. Revolver and penicillin are words borrowed from English to Igbo. In general, Magnus three types of sound symbolism are not different from the language of study. The study shows Igbo sounds with onomatopoeia, clustering and Iconism which is in line with Magnus model. Although it may not have presented it the way Magus presented hers, it has phonemes such as: /b/, /h/, /p/, /m/, /r/, /t/-which is present in Magnus.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one can say that sound symbolism in languages vary to an extent. The dissimilarities occur in meaning and expression. Words with meanings are suitable to be conveyed symbolically in sound. It is needful to expand the cross-linguistic compares to more languages especially Hausa and Yoruba that are major languages in Nigeria.

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