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ONOMATOPOEIA IN INTERACTIONS BETWEEN ADVANCED STUDENTS OF ENGLISH. A CORPUS BASED STUDY

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Summary. The aim of this work is to present a pilot study investigating the distribution of phono-iconic phenomena in interactions between learners of English. The study was based on Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) that contains transcripts of conversations between advanced and experienced non-native users of English. The description of material for analysis and methods of study was preceded by a short theoretical introduction to a range of directions of research concerning vocal behaviour in language with special reference to onomatopoeia. The article also provides brief and essential information on VOICE.

INTRODUCTION

The active role of the teacher in the process of language teaching is often underlined in the contemporary glottodidactic literature. In the early stages of professional career, teachers develop multiple practical skills and climb up their internal mental ladders of creativity in presenting linguistic materials, correcting mistakes, assessing progress, stimulating and enhancing students. These are only a few out of numerous areas of teaching activities. There is, however, a passive side of the language teaching process. Good teachers should be able to abandon their dynamic position at a certain point of a course and observe the students' speech from distance. The tactics of silent monitoring may result in a number of conclusions concerning communicative strategies applied by the students. Some of those strategies, to the teacher's satisfaction, would involve lexical and grammatical material covered in class, but some would exceed the realm of textbook

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knowledge. We are speaking here of communicating by means of gestures, body postures or non-lexical vocal forms. The overview of whole range of signs incorporated into ongoing interaction may help the teacher to diagnose all problematic areas and, as a consequence, plan the teaching process or modify the syllabus.

The correspondence between the use of para-linguistic forms and the level of proficiency in a language seems obvious. Within groups of less advanced students of a language the knowledge of lexis and grammar is limited, thus it is expected that the frequency of application of para-linguistic forms would be higher. The number of bodily and vocal signs in interaction should consequently decrease along with the growth of level of proficiency. These would be the commonly shared intuitions. The linguistic data, however, is too scarce to support such pre-suppositions.

This work constitutes only a cutaway of a larger project investigating frequency of application of audible para-linguistic forms in interactions and it will deal exclusively with non-lexical onomatopoeic forms used by members of multicultural sample group of proficient learners of the English language. The pilot study presented here was based on materials from Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE). Its description will be preceded by a theoretical section depicting a range of vocal phenomena in spoken language with special reference to onomatopoeia. The methods and procedures engaged in the pilot study will be described in the subsequent part of this work together with the results and their potential significance for glottodidactic field.

1. CLASSIFICATION OF VOCAL FORMS

Sound Symbolism (1994) edited by Hinton, Nichols and Ohala constitutes a milestone contribution to the research related to vocal forms in language. It will serve here as a main source of inspiration in characterizing and classifying vocal occurrences. The order of presentation of acoustic phenomena is based upon the degree of direct correlation of their form and meaning. The author of the introductory part containing the classification, J. J. Ohala, broadly discusses four key classes of vocal occurrences; namely corporeal, imitative, synesthetic and phonesthetic. Metalinguistic and metacommunicative vocal phenomena are also mentioned by the author, unfortunately the proportion of attention paid to these two types in the publication works to their disadvantage and leaves the reader unsated. It is worth mentioning that vocal phenomena are gathered in the publication under an umbrella term *sound symbolism*, which raises many doubts and questions.

The first of the discussed types of vocal occurrences, referred to as “corporeal sound symbolism” (Ohala 1994, p. 2), includes forms that express the internal

state of the speaker, be it physical or emotional. The most commonly mentioned examples of the corporeals are interjections, sounds such as coughing or throat clearing, intonation and other expressive features of voice. As the author remarks, “[m]uch of corporeal sound symbolism is not commonly written”. To exemplify this type of phenomena, we shall recall any of the few conventionalized utterances such as *aargh* /äp/ used to express disgust, nausea, or any other forceful negative reaction (<http://www.yourdictionary.com>). This example displays two characteristic features of corporeal phonic events; namely, structural minimalism and internal integrity. At this point Ohala notices the similarity of the corporeal forms to some vocatives such as a cry for help, as both the vocalization types seem to be inherently symptomatic.

Another group of vocal phenomena consists of imitative forms and generally confines to onomatopoeic words and phrases representing environmental acoustic effects. These can be illustrated by forms such as *meow* /μ:αY/ or *knock-knock* /Θκ vΘκ/. The former vocalization mimics the sounds produced by cat, whereas the latter constitutes an imitation of the sound of repeated hitting on a flat surface. Ohala describes them as “difficult to portray in writing” and grammatically structured (1994, p. 3) This type of events seem to play an important role in referential speech. The imitative forms will be discussed in details later in this work.

Third type of what was here called the sound – meaning correlation is connected to synesthetic phenomena, and, to be more precise, to the acoustic signification of non-acoustic events (Ohala 1994, p. 4). Here particular sounds or suprasegmentals are used to represent, for example, physical features of objects such as size and they tend to be structured. The ongoing research of diminutive and augmentative forms demonstrates that front high vowels are present in the former, whereas back low sounds characterize the latter.

The fourth type of the relation between sound and its meaning is conventional and often referred to as phonesthetic. It is based on analogical association of certain phonemes and clusters with certain meaning (Ohala 1994, p. 5). These units, be it single sounds or some submorphemic entities, are said to carry a meaning of some kind. Words such as *house* /ηαYσ/, *home* /η□Yμ/, *hut* /ηστ/ share the same sound; that is to say, glottal fricative /η/ in the initial position. The advocates of phonesthetic theories would describe /η/ as a phonestheme, the smallest unit of acoustic meaning.

Although metacommunicative and metalinguistic phenomena are placed beyond the core classification, adding them to the list may help to notice obvious correspondences between vocal forms classes and hierarchy of linguistic signs. Thus, generally speaking, phonic occurrences in language can be studied on three levels of signification: symptomatic, iconic and symbolic. Figure 1 depicts a more detailed organisational schema of the phenomena.

2. ONOMATOPOEIA

The previously mentioned classification of vocal forms depicts the diversity and complexity of phenomena. Each type constitutes a tempting subject of research for specialists from diverse scientific fields. This work, however, is focused on onomatopoeia and, interesting as they may seem, other vocal tract products need to be left aside.

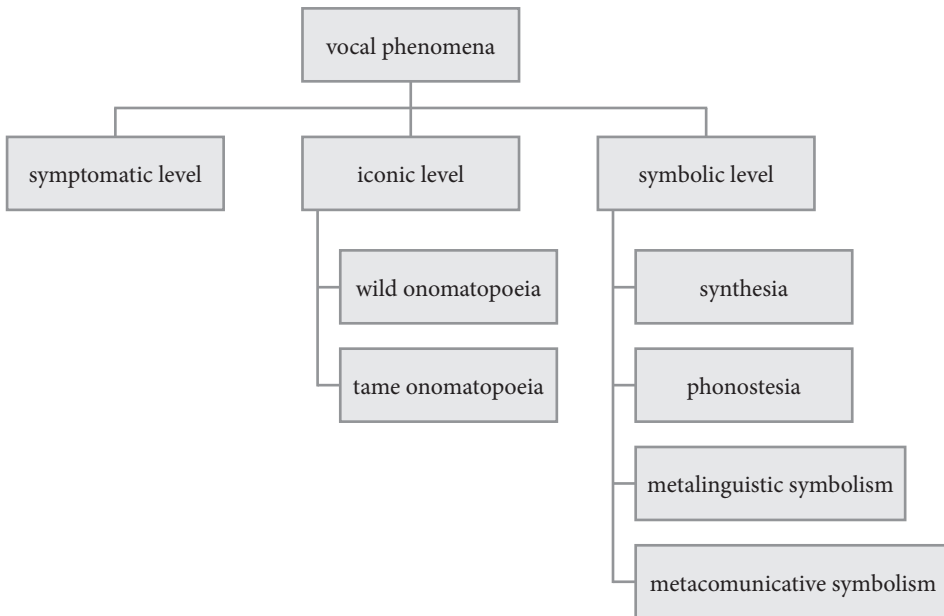


Fig. 1. The classification of vocal occurrences on three levels of linguistic signification

The term *onomatopoeia* comes from Greek words ‘*onoma*’ [ονομα] meaning a name and ‘*poieō*’ [ποιεῖο] being a first person singular form of the verb ‘to give/ to create’. *Onomatopoeia* thus applies to the process of naming. It is worth noticing that in current publications the term is understood and applied in two ways. Onomatopoeia may denote an activity of using or creating phono-iconic forms or it may denote a phono-iconic word or form. Therefore, in the technical literature the term may be used in reference to the process as well as to the result (Bańko 2008, p. 11). Onomatopoeia can be further classified with reference to kinds of occurrences it intends to imitate:

[O]nomatopoeia, in the most general definition, is a word that imitates sound in the world, or is assumed as imitating it (e.g. quack). However, this term is usually used not only as a word indicating sound (including voice), but also as a word indicating manner of action (e.g. zigzag) or physical/mental state(plump or sluggish). (Tamori and Schourup 1999, s. 10)

It is worth mentioning that some languages have much broader scope of onomatopoeic forms than others, as a consequence of that difference some definitions and characterisations may be limited, which does not make them less valuable. In order to avoid discussions of that nature, from that point we will be talking of phono-iconism.

There is one more typology of phono-iconic forms in language crucial for this work. The nature of iconic vocal form is dictated by the extent to which it undergone processes of linguistic conventionalization. Rhodes (1994) writes about 'wild' and 'tame' forms being on the opposite ends of the spectrum. Wild forms are the less conventional ones and they are not as eagerly presented in the glotto-didactic process as the lexicalized 'tame' forms such as *cuckoo* or *scratch*. Apart from school children L2 classes, teachers hardly ever present or use forms imitating elements of environment. Do the students use them outside classroom?

3. THE EMPIRICAL DATA

The material for frequential analysis of the pilot study being described here was taken from Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English also known as VOICE. It constitutes an excellent source of recordings and transcripts of natural interactions in English as lingua franca. It contains 151 transcripts of non-scripted, face-to-face communication – dialogues and multilogues such as free-time conversations, panel discussions, interviews, oral questionnaires, etc. The transcripts were categorized into 5 socially defined areas of human interactional activity: educational, leisure, professional business, professional organizational and professional research and science Table 1. depicts the ratio of transcripts in each area.

Table 1. The number of VOICE transcripts in each of 5 areas of linguistic activity

Area of activity	Symbol	Number of transcripts
Educational	ED	35
Leisure	LE	26
Professional business	PB	23
Professional organisational	PO	41
Professional research and science	PR	26

According to the authors of VOICE, collecting and processing the material were time consuming and intricate procedures such as recording interactions, selecting the recorded bits and pieces, keyboarding the selected recordings followed by professional annotation and detailed linguistic description of the prepared transcripts. The final outcome is stored in 3 versions: XML, HTML and TEXT. A group of recorded speakers was accounted for as much as 1250 people

referred to by the authors as experienced EFL users. The interactants constitute an extremely heterogeneous set consisting of people of different age, gender, and education. The internal diversification of the group is additionally marked by origin and a wide range of first language backgrounds (http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/page/corpus_information). This makes the material attractive for linguists of various scientific interests and viewpoints.

4. THE METHOD OF THE PILOT STUDY

The official statistics as to the number of words in the transcripts provided by the authors of VOICE comprises at approximately 1 million words; however, as it was underlined before, the corpus annotates forms that are non-lexical – it also includes descriptions of physical or vocal reactions of the recorded speakers. Taking these forms into account in order to obtain frequential results could raise many objections. Transcripts containing annotations of para-linguistic elements seems problematic. Although they may meet all 7 standards of textuality, and be acknowledged decent texts by many, we cannot apply commonly accepted frequential methods to them as we could to letters or articles. In order to see how often do the speakers use wild onomatopoeic forms, all the contributions to the interaction, be it linguistic or para-linguistic, need to be taken into consideration. The target phono-iconic forms, as well as many other vocal communicates were transcribed with International Phonetic Alphabet symbols.

As it is often done by conversation analysts, texts in question should be studied in terms of conversational moves¹ and not in terms of words or sentences. Such is the procedure here. The first stage of the study was to count the number of all conversational moves in the whole material for analysis. The necessity of taking this step as initial can be questioned; however, it seems crucial for converting academic focus from words and structures to interactional contributions of the participants. The total number of conversational moves in VOICE was accounted for as much as 105.095. The number of moves in each of the 5 areas of activity will be shown in figure 3.

The subsequent stage of the study consisted in locating all wild phono-iconic forms and extracting them along with their context with special attention paid to the signature of a conversation move containing it. This was possible by means of simple searching formulas of Internet Explorer 8, applied in every xml file.

¹ The term *conversational move* refers to a variety of constructional and functional units of spoken interaction, such as *turn*, i.e. “everything the current speaker says before the next speaker takes over” (Stenström 1994, p. 4), *move*, signalling a speaker’s communicative intention, e.g. <agree>, <confirm>, <reject>, *exchange*, a functionally related pair of moves, e.g. <request> <agree>, or *transaction*, i.e. a set of topically bounded exchanges. For discussion see Stenström (1994, p. 4 et seq.) and Żywicznyński (2010, pp. 90–97).

The extracted fragments were copied to Office Excel 2007 spreadsheet. Upon that an Office Access 2007 data based was created where, owing to simple counting formula the total number of wild phono-iconic forms was estimated, with visible division into 5 areas of activity. The total number was accounted for as much as 98. These appeared in 91 conversational moves, which indicates that some of the speakers' moves we constructed of more than one phono-iconic form.

5. THE RESULTS

The final procedure, namely, the last counting phase, consisted in calculating the interactional distribution by means of checking the number of wild vocal icons in each of the 5 categories of interactional activity Table 2. depicts the results.

Table 2. Interactional distribution of phono-iconic forms in 5 areas of activity

A. Areas of activity	B. Number of wild phono-iconic forms	C. Number of conversational moves	D. Distribution (x = C/B)
ED	23	30107	1309
LE	31	15324	494
PB	24	19936	830
PO	20	33402	1670
PR	0	6326	0

The outcome of the previously described procedures shows that in the analysed material there is one wild phono-iconic form in every 1072 conversational moves on average. There were 31 wild onomatopoeic forms found in the leisure-related interactions. The estimated average distribution equals one phono-iconic form in every 494 conversational moves. This means that the interactional frequency in this area of activity is the highest. In comparison to that result, in professional-organisational category of interactions the average frequency is relatively low. It was accounted for as much as one phono-iconic form in every 1670 conversational moves. There were no wild onomatopoeic forms found in scientific research-related interactions.

The communicative intention of each of the located 98 wild onomatopoeic forms is not a subject of this study; nevertheless, several commonsensical observations concerning the nature of phenomena imitated by the interactants can be made. One of the considerably numerous groups would include natural sounds, both animated environmental elements as well as unanimated ones. Mimicry of animal sounds such as barking may well exemplify the former, whereas sounds of weather phenomena like rumble or explosion illustrate the latter. Another large group would embrace vocal forms aiming at imitation of sounds of civilization such as noises produced by machines as well as sounds of clicking, switching,

pulling etc. The interactants relatively often produced sounds of music, be it simple rhythm patterns or melody played on particular musical instrument. An interesting category of vocal imitations comprises forms aiming at self-imitation or mimicry of other interactants. Forms such as /rʊrə/ produced right after an utterance of a person trying to speak with American accent intended to draw the attention of other interactants to the sound. The speakers tend to imitate others in the cases of mispronunciations or whenever they practice saying new sound cluster, word or phrase. The analysed material shows that the speakers often mimic bodily or emotional reactions such as sounds of sneezing, coughing, throat clearing or loud laughter whenever they anticipate them or immediately after they happen.

In order to compare the frequency of application of wild phono-iconic forms with a lexical phrase *sound like* that would enhance externalizing experiences by means of lexical items, a similar frequential procedure has been implemented. Surprisingly, only 22 instances of this phrase in various grammatical forms were found. Its interactional distribution was accounted for as much as one phrase in every 4777, which apparently is much less often than wild onomatopoeia.

CONCLUSIONS

The frequential analysis of VOICE resulted in many interesting observations. It is worth remembering, however, that statistics may only depict the extent of the studied problem and do not allow for deep and profound interpretations. As it was previously mentioned, the interactants recorded and transcribed by the authors of the corpus are proficient and experienced users of English as L2. It does not mean that their English is perfect. They tend to misuse some grammatical structures, they sometimes have difficulties with pronunciation and fluency. The immediate application of compensation and retrieval scenarios results in efficient and smooth communication regardless of linguistic mistakes.

The study shows that advanced students of English use phono-iconic forms approximately four times more frequently than *sound like* phrase. For some specialists it may prove that even on the proficient level of knowledge of a language the speakers turn to forms that are more deeply rooted in the evolutionary memory of human beings. From another point of view, the result may only highlight what was commonly known before about the expressive and universal values of onomatopoeia.

What is interesting here is the fact that the speakers hardly ever used phono-iconic forms to compensate for lexical deficits, be it in the realm of competence or just performance. Much more often wild onomatopoeic occurrences played a range of other, less obvious, communicative and textual functions. Many times they were applied to avoid discontinuation of dialogue, in some other cases they facilitated the change of subject. The qualitative analysis of the material would enable distinguishing more details about motivations. The statistics, however, reveal

that the advanced users of English freely maneuver between lexical and non-lexical forms, deliberately choosing from a gamut communicative means to obtain particular interactional goal, adapting to style standards and register of various situations. There is a relation between type of social interactional area acknowledged by a student and the use of para-linguistic vocal communicates. The frequency of phono-iconic forms decreases along with the growth in the degree of formality of interactional situation.

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ZJAWISKO ONOMATOPEI W INTERAKCJACH MIĘDZY UCZĄCYMI SIĘ JĘZYKA ANGIELSKIEGO. BADANIA KORPUSOWE

Słowa kluczowe: onomatopeja, *lingua franca*, korpus, komunikacja wokalna, dystrybucja interakcyjna

Streszczenie. Celem pracy jest przedstawienie studium pilotażowego badającego dystrybucję form fono-ikonicznych w interakcjach pomiędzy uczniami języka angielskiego. Badanie przeprowadzone zostało w oparciu o Wiedeńsko-Oxfordzki Międzynarodowy Korpus Języka Angielskiego (Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English), który zawiera transkrypcje rozmów pomiędzy zaawansowanymi i doświadczonymi użytkownikami języka angielskiego jako języka obcego. Opis materiału badawczego i metody postępowania poprzedzono krótkim wprowadzeniem ukazującym kierunki badań nad zachowaniami wokalnymi w języku, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem zjawiska onomatopei. Artykuł zawiera również podstawowe informacje na temat korpusu VOICE.