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Ideophone

Ideophones are words or phrases that do the work of representation by phonetic means. They are abundant in all known languages and constitute a counterforce to the arbitrariness of phonemes. It is naming that lies behind the Greek-derived term *onomatopoeia*, which simply means "to make names." Words described as onomatopoeic in English are called "picture words" in German (*Lautbilder*) and French (*mots images*). This reflects the fact that ideophones are often synesthetic, representing phenomena in sensory domains other than the auditory one.

The term *ideophone* first came into use among linguists specializing in African and especially Bantu languages. Most systematic studies of ideophones have been conducted by Africanists (for example, William Samarin and Lioba Moshi), and it was Samarin who developed a methodology for conducting such studies in the field. The early history of the interest in African ideophones is bound up with the history of attempts to construct stages of linguistic evolution. By now the study of ideophones has become a part of the Africanist subtradition in linguistics, independent of evolutionist theory. Serious studies of ideophones outside Africa are widely scattered; an important recent example is Janice Knuckolls' study of Quechua sound symbolism.

The marginal status of the study of ideophones has long been guaranteed by the central notion that languages are closed, conventional codes. In textbooks and introductory lectures, ever since Ferdinand de Saussure's lectures were published in his *Cours*, it has been customary to raise the issue of ideophones (under various names) only in order to dismiss it. It is argued that ideophones are rare, and that even the ones that purport to imitate nonlinguistic sounds are arbitrary. The latter point is demonstrated by brief citations of cases in which different languages represent similar sounds in dissimilar ways. The focus is thus on the contrast between English *bow-wow* and French *ouaoua* rather than on the resemblance. But when allowances are made for differences in phonology, words that represent the same

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acoustic phenomenon can be quite similar between unrelated languages, as in *ky'alh*, the Zuni equivalent of English *splash*, and *xpurpuwek*, the K'iche' Maya rendition of the call of the bird whose English name is whippoorwill. Even linguists who engage in the serious study of ideophones often employ strategies that have the effect of limiting the role such phenomena might play in the general study of language. The narrowest limitation is achieved by restricting attention to words that include sounds not otherwise found among the phonemes of a given language. In the case of Zuni, this would mean separating words with a glottalized *ch'*, which is found only in verb stems that represent nonlinguistic sounds, from verb stems whose representations involve glottalized consonants that have a wider distribution in Zuni. Thus *ch'uk'i-*, which evokes sounds like that of eye popping out of its socket, would be classed as an ideophone, whereas *ts'ini-*, which evokes a tinkling sound, would not.

Some studies define as ideophonic only such words as can be placed in a separate syntactic class of their own. Alternatively, ideophones may be allowed to participate in classes that include non-ideophones, but the classes in question may be limited to such secondary ones as interjections, adjectives, adverbs, and particles. Such an approach may work in Bantu languages, where ideophones seem not to take the form of verbs, but in Amerindian languages they frequently do (as in the Zuni examples already given). As for nouns, an enormous problem is raised by birds and insects, whose names are frequently ideophonic in character. English examples include *killdeer*, *bobwhite*, *cricket*, and *katydid*. In Zuni, names of this kind include not only birds and insects, as with *kwiishahapak'o* for "robin" and *shonnalhik'o* for "housefly," but mammals, as with *wahts'uts'ukya* for "chipmunk."

Reduplication, applied at the level of syllables or words or whole phrases, is a universal ideophonic phenomenon, as shown by Roman Jakobson and Linda Waugh. There are two major categories, one involving the repetition of an entire sound sequence and the other combining partial repetition with a change in a consonant or vowel. In K'iche', the routine call of the bird called *xar* (Steller's jay), represented as *xaw xaw xaw*, is interpreted as an indexical sign that a *xar* is nearby, but is otherwise regarded as meaningless. However, this bird sometimes makes a sound represented as *xaw xiw*, with the second syllable completely unvoiced (indicated here by small capitals). This pair of syllables has the structure of a "minimal pair, but it unites standard Kiche phonemes with unvoiced versions of *i* and *w*, which are nonstandard. It is interpreted as coming closer to human speech than the call involving simple repetition, and is consequently assigned greater meaning. It is an omen, warning of danger in the road ahead.

In English, ideophones referring to non-auditory domains are commonly constructed by means of partial reduplication (*willy-nilly*, *hoity-toity*, *roly-poly*, *heebie-jeebies*, *zigzag*). Words that are not ideophonic in themselves may be combined in phrases whose meaning derives from ideophonic repetitions (*row upon row*, *day after day*, *busy busy busy*) or partial contrasts (*here and there*, *black and blue*, *slip and slide*). Visual ideophones are ideographs turned inside out, in the sense that they are words whose sounds draw pictures instead of being pictures whose shapes evoke words. Concrete poems

can be ideophonic and ideographic at one and the same time, as in the case of the poem by Carlo Belloli about trains that reads, "treni / i treni / i / iiiiiiiiiiii."

(See also *iconicity, indexicality, metaphor, meter, music, orality, poetry, writing*)

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