

ETYMOLOGY OF IMITATIVE WORDS: HOMONYMY VS POLYSEMY

Imitative words (onomatopoeic words, ideophones) are notorious for their atypical diachronic behavior: they are known to withstand regular sound changes (Hock 1991: 50; Durkin 2009: 127; Malkiel 1990; Brodovich 2008; Martilla 2011: 17), for expressive ablaut, gemination and vowel lengthening (Voeltz et al. 2001, Hinton et al. 1994, Voronin 2006, Lühr 1988, Georgescu 2017), as well as for general lack of reliable etymologies. On the other hand, knowledge of peculiarities of imitative words as well as of sound-meaning correspondences in a particular language yields positive results in establishing the original iconic nature of words with obscure histories (Lieberman 1995; 2008; 2010; Koleva-Zlateva 2008; Klimova 1986).

Problem statement

The present talk will focus on the problem of distinguishing homonymous imitative words from polysemous ones in the English language. Thus, under *boo* OED unites *boo* (1555) ‘to low or bellow as a cow does’ and *boo* (1833) ‘to express disdain for or dissatisfaction with (a person or thing) by making a sound resembling ‘boo’; to jeer at’. Thus, *boo*, according to OED is a polysemic word; and one of its meanings is derived from another by metaphor.

I argue, however, that these are two independent words as they have different *motifs of nomination*. *Boo* ‘to low’ is an onomatopoeic word. It has an iconic sound-meaning correspondence ‘a low-pitched continuous natural sound : a low-pitched vowel’ (cf. *moo*, *low* < OE *hlowan*). *Boo* ‘to jeer at’, on the other hand, is a mimetic word with an additional, onomatopoeic component. Mimetic words (after Voronin 2006, see also Flaksman 2017) are articulatory copies and it is place of articulation which plays the most important role by such type of iconic imitation. In our case, there is an iconic correlation between lip movements (pejorative mimics of disgust) and a labial cluster /bu:/ (a bilabial consonant plus a rounded vowel). The role of labials (labial clusters in particular) by conveying negative, pejorative meanings was discussed in Shamina (1989).

Research material and methods

The researched is based on a 1244-word corpus of English words imitative by origin. This corpus was comprised by continuous sampling from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) with addition of words from *Written Sound* (WS), an online dictionary of onomatopoeia. The methods of analysis are historical-comparative method and the method of phonosemantic analysis (Voronin, 2006; 1990).

Research questions

The problems discussed in this talk are: (1) disambiguation of homonymy and polysemy by iconic coinage, (2) methods of establishing imitative origin of words, (3) nomination motifs and classes of imitative words, (4) limits of etymological research on onomatopoeia.

Thus, a balanced approach to diachronic research on imitative words reveals patterns of iconic word coinage which help solving difficult cases of establishing their origin and etymology.

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