

EIGHT HURDLES TO OVERCOME BY ICONIC COINAGE

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Imitative words (here: an umbrella term for ideophones, onomatopoeic and mimetic words) are words with iconic correlation between form and meaning (Peirce, 1940). Iconic coinage is known worldwide – in modern (see, e.g., Voeltz et. al., 2001), ancient, and reconstructed languages (an overview – see Flaksman, 2015), as well as in invented languages (Davydova, 2022). However, imitative words are not identical even in closely related languages despite the fact that they do share a considerable degree of cross-linguistic similarity. The *aim* of this talk is to define and classify the reasons why imitative words differ from each other worldwide. The examples are drawn from the *material* of the *Iconicity Atlas* (IA) and *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED).

I distinguish three main types of restrictions on iconic imitation: biological, systemic, and chance restrictions. The first type of restrictions is objective (predetermined by human physiology) and, therefore, does not add to the dissimilarity of imitative words. The other two, however, arbitrary and should be described in detail.

Biological restrictions

We can only imitate what we can hear (hurdle 1) and pronounce (hurdle 2). The biology of our speech organs does not allow us to produce an ideal imitation of a cat's miaow, for example. So, these two are rather 'technical' hurdles. The restrictions discussed below are, on the other hand, of cognitive nature, and, therefore, more complicated.

Systemic restrictions

Systemic restrictions are restrictions predetermined by the parameters of the language system where imitative words are coined. Language is an arbitrary system of signs, which implies that new, language-specific, hurdles arise if one intends to coin an imitative word.

Firstly, languages differ by their phonemic inventories (hurdle 3). Thus, such words as English *thump* or *thwack* are not possible to coin in Russian which has no /θ/ in its phonemic inventory.

Secondly, imitative words should comply with phonotactic rules of the language (hurdle 4). Thus, words like *scream*, *plump* or *mwah* cannot be coined in languages with prohibited initial or final consonant clusters.

Ideophones and certain ideophonic interjections tend to overcome these two hurdles with relative success (see, e.g., Voeltz et. al., 2001), however, these 'marked' traits tend to disappear in the course of system integration (Dingemanse, 2017; Dingemanse & Akita 2017).

Further grammatical integration (esp. creating content words out of ideophones/imitative interjections – see McGregor, 2001) in many languages creates an additional hurdle (5) – addition of (arbitrary) morphological markers (including root changes by ablaut).

Also, the longer the word exists in the language the more likely it is to be affected by language change, which affects iconicity negatively (Flaksman 2017; 2018).

Chance restrictions

Chance restrictions are restrictions which are neither explained by human biology or by linguistic factors. These include (hurdle 6) picking up the salient characteristics of the nominated sound (articulatory gesture), (hurdle 7) choosing between typologically similar phonemes from the phonemic inventory of the language, and (hurdle 8) arranging them into sequences (within the boundaries of phonotactic restrictions).

The chance restrictions were summed up by Voronin (2006: 185) in a form of *multiple-nomination law*. It states that “one and the same concept may have different (iconic) motifs of nomination and vice versa – one and the same motif of nomination may be encountered in several concepts”. Thus, a dog’s bark in different languages is conveyed via onomatopoeic words with different *nomination motifs*: cf. English *bark*, Swedish *skälla*, Norwegian *gjø*, German *bellen*, etc. (Shamina 2017: 325). The same nomination motif (e.g., a high-pitched sound) trigger the coinage of very dissimilar onomatopoeic words (e.g., *peep*, *beep*, *chirp*).

The talk will be devoted to the detailed discussion of these restrictions on imitative coinage which make imitative words so different in different languages. The similarities between imitative words which arise due to iconicity will be discussed as well.

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