

ONOMATOPOEIA AND LANGUAGE PERCEPTION

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“Voon-voon” says the dog in Laos whilst in Romania the same creature says “ham-ham”. The question we may ask here is whether dogs in different locales are saying different things or whether we humans perceive what they are saying differently? It seems common sense that a labrador in Asia and Europe will make the same noise completely independent of its surroundings. Why then does an English speaker, who is thinking “woof-woof”, laugh on finding out that in Indonesia, humans perceive dogs as making the sound “gong-gong”?

This brief investigation deals with onomatopoeia, or the instances where the sound structure or form of a word imitates the sound of an animal or object. It is a linguistic tool to demonstrate that the choice of linguistics description of the animal or object by the speaker is not always arbitrary. Hence, we are asking

- Is the link between language and nature arbitrary?
- Is language a natural thing or is it a human, contextual arbitrary system?
- Can our perceptions of animal noises be translated over different situations and parameters?
- Could the processes of sound change operating in our languages today have led to onomatopoeic words in earlier times that would conjure up conceptual representations of environmental stimuli even when the stimuli themselves were not present?

As a virgin environmental linguistics field researcher, I searched for the answer to this question. Table 1 is the result of this investigation. This indeed proved a difficult task, not least being because some people did not know what I was asking of them. I was not asking “what sounds do these animals make?” but “what sounds do you perceive these animals making in your language/country?” Many gaps are there but enough information is present to produce a representative onomatopoeic data set whereby interlingual comparison for universality, similarity, arbitrariness and humour of animal/object noises can be made*.

Looking at universality, cats and cows throughout the world tend to fare quite well. Or could it be that cats and cows, when spoken about in Australia, fare quite well? Nevertheless, there seems to be some kind of non-arbitrariness concerned with cat and cow onomatopoeia. A cat’s sound, ranging from “miau” through “miyao” to “meow” and the cow’s from “mboo” through “ma-ma” to “moe” seems to attribute some kind of direct and intrinsic meaning due to the relative lack of variation in these sounds.

Various onomatopoeia-friendly linguists may like to leave the analysis at this point, as the following information may prove a little saddening. A few hints of universality can be seen in the

* Gaps in Table 1 are either due to the participant not knowing the sound in their language, not actually having a sound for that object, or not having the object at all in their language or country.

sounds for cuckoo, goat, sheep and car, but it should be noted that these sounds are not universal and instead are heading toward mere similarity (for example, sounds for goat range from “moe-moe” through “mbee-mbee” to “bleat”). Furthermore, sounds for horse (from “hihiin” through “neigh” to “runnik”), mouse (from “piep-piep” through “squeak-squeak” to “chuk-chuk”) and pig (from “oink-oink” through “boo-boo”, “ut-it ut-it”, “nguik-nguik”, “øf-øf” to “grunz-grunz”) may lead to the conclusion that onomatopoeia is not a strong argument for the notion that language is based in non-arbitrary foundations.

It seems many onomatopoeic words found in various languages have evolved to their present form recently and often rapidly. Once a part of a language’s lexical structure, they are subjected to the same evolutionary process that other words undergo (see F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, McGraw-Hill 1959). Hence this proves that in assuming the linguistic sign “naturally” or without motivation, something is lost of a word’s, a mimic’s and/or an onomatopoeia’s original character. Language is an open, arbitrary system, subject to deterioration over time. Onomatopoeia is not common, numerous or important enough to invalidate the principle that language is arbitrary.

The more distinct and different the thing is, the more distinct the thing’s sign will be. So in the case of a dog, who is right? Who is making the correct or “real” sound representation? Table 2 presents international data for dog onomatopoeia.

Based on the notion that we can only comment on what happens in a certain area at a certain time, we arrive at the conclusion that any attempt to show constant relationships in nature across languages, cultures and geography is notprecedented. Humans create perceptions, images, rationalizations, truths and falsities through language and therefore it should not be considered a natural thing. Onomatopoeia is just one of these constructions.

I conclude by saying that this investigation has proven to be not only informative and enlightening but at the same time interesting and humorous. During the brief field research, I struck a nerve in many people that they never thought they had—the near-absurdity associated with animal noises in their own language.

The argument has been presented that language is an arbitrary, conventional and human-made system. The link between language and nature is not only unreliable, open to perception and interpretation but it is also open to deterioration over time. Any attempt to show a constant relationship between language, words, object noises to nature and across cultures and languages is unprecedented. Ontologically, there is a bad match between language and the environment, and theories of scientific truth and realism do not seem to help much, either. Whether our perceptions of object noises can be translated over different situations, time frames and other parameters remains to be seen.

So how can linguists and onomatopoeists, if there is such a term, alleviate or resolve this problem? Assigning more biocentric language to natural objects would be an initial step. Educating people into the language of animals in our natural environment and aiming at greater iconicity to increase understanding of the natural environment would also help. Time to fly. Buzz off.

ANIMAL	German	Vietnamese	Japanese	English	Indonesian	Persian	Afrikaans	Danish
goose	-	-	-		koang	-	blaas	-
hen	-	kutak-kutak		broawk-broawk		-	kloek-kloek	båk-båk
horse	-	-	hi-hiin	neigh	petok-petok	-	runnik	pru-pru
monkey	-	-	ki-ki	oo-oo-oo	hieem- hieem	-	kwetter	-
mouse	piep-piep	chuk-chek	chu-chu	squeak-squeak	cit-cit	-	piep-piep	piv-piv
owl	-	mboe-mboe	ho-hoo	who-who	keek	-	hoe-hoe	uhuu-uhuu
pig	grunz-grunz	ut-it...ut-it	boo-boo	oink-oink	nguik-nguik	-	oink-oink	øf- øf
turkey	-	pookwoo- pookwooo	-	gobble-gobble	kluk-kluk	-	kloek-kloek	kluk-kluk
train	tuff-tuff	xinh-xich ...xinh-xich	go-go-go-go	choo-choo	-	chee-chee	-	fut-fut
car	bruum-bruum	vbum-vbum	boon-boon	vroom-vroom	-	derr-derr	-	vrøn- vrøn
gun	peng!	pang!	-	bang!	-	tagh-tagh!	-	bang!

Table 1 – Comparative Onomatopoeia for Eight Arbitrarily Chosen Languages

ANIMAL	German	Vietnamese	Japanese	English	Indonesian	Persian	Afrikaans	Danish
bee	sum-sum	uuu-uuu	buun-bunn	buzz-buzz	ng-ng-ng	vezzz-vezzz	zoem-zoem	sum-sum
bird	piep-piep	chip-chip	piyo-piyo	tweet-tweet	cit-cit	jeek-jeek	tjiep-tjiep	pip-pip
cat	miau	meo	miyao	meow	meow	mew	miaau	miav
chicken	kikeviki	cook-cook	kokekokyo	cock-a-doodle-doo	kukuruyuk	ghode-ghodaa	koekelekoe	kykkeliky
cow	muuh	mboo	moo	moo	moo(w)	ma-ma	moe	muh
crow	-	woa-woa	ka-ka	aaar-aaar	gak-gak	ghar-ghar	kra-kra	kra-kra
cuckoo	kuck-kuck	kukoo	cuckoo	cuckoo	-	-	koek-koek	kuk-kuk
dog	wau-wau	wow-wow	wan-wan	woof-woof	gong-gong	vaagh-vaagh	woef-woef	vov-vov
donkey	i-ah-i-ah	-	-	ee-aw	-	arr	hie-ho	-
pigeon	gruh-gruh	-	-	coo-coo	-	-	koer	-
duck	quak-quak	kwap-kwap	guwa-guwa	quack-quack	kwek-kwek	kwak-kwak	kwak-kwak	rap-rap
elephant	-	-	paoon!	phrooear!	ueee!	-	trompteer!	truut!
goat	-	moe-moe	meee	bleat	mbee-mbee	-	me-me	mæh
sheep	maaah	-	meee	baa	-	baaa	me-me	mæh

Table 2 – International Dog Onomatopoeia

COUNTRY	SOUND
Czechoslovakia	haf-haf
Estonia	auh-auh
Denmark	vuf-vuf
Finland	hau-hau
Germany	wuff-wuff
Greece	rav-rav
Indonesia	gong-gong
Iran	hauv-hauv
Italy	bau-bau
Laos	voon-voon
Luxembourg	wau-wau
Netherlands	woef-woef
Philippines	aw-aw
Portugal	ão-ão
Romania	ham-ham
Spain	gau-gau
Spain (Catalonia)	bup-bup
Taiwan	wang-wang
Thailand	hong-hong
United Kingdom	woof-woof

Source: His Ham Ham's Worse Than His Bite (1999). <http://people.biola.edu/faculty/petes/linguistics/Animals.cfm>

The Circus of Words

This book, an abridgement of Richard Lederer's delightful 1998 book *The Word Circus*, has been repackaged for the younger reader (age 9 or older). Published in paperback by Chicago Review Press for \$12.95 (ISBN 1-55652-380-7), it reuses many of Dave Morice's clever illustrations as well. Lederer's emphasis is on words viewed as collections of letters to manipulate, in chapters like Ana Gram the Juggler, the Palindromedary, the Acro Bat, and Mary Had a Letter Lamb; however, one chapter is devoted to the appropriately-named Kangaroo Word (one containing a synonym, such as ContAiNer or ALLegIANCE). Lederer's enthusiasm for words shines forth on every page, a welcome antidote for those long-ago dryasdust language drills remembered by most adults. His book can be pithily characterized by two palindromes uttered by the Palindromedary: SPOT WORD ROW—TOPS and DUDE, NOT ONE DUD.