

FORCED ONOMATOPOEIA

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Onomatopoeia is a familiar phenomenon in language. It refers to words that sound somewhat like their meanings -- e.g., bang, splash, hiss, boom, plop, etc. It is widely recognized that onomatopoeic words are based on fairly subjective, culturally determined ideas about the verbal equivalents of noises found in nature. In the February 1975 issue of *Word Ways*, Maxey Brooke pointed out that French dogs are understood to be sounding out a "ouat-ouat" sound, German dogs "haf-haf," Chinese dogs "wah-wah," and so on.

What is not usually recognized is the fact that there is a large category of words in between the small group of onomatopoeic words and the far larger number of words that bear no possible relationship to their sounds. The word "potato" will never sound like a potato, and absolutely nothing about "table" and "shampoo" sounds like a table or shampoo. However, some words can be vocalized in an exaggerated way so that they are forced to sound like their meanings. For example, you could very easily play with the sounding-out of these words to make them onomatopoeic:

slow	afraid	sleepy	louder
excited	high	higher	highest

Other words translate less obviously into forced onomatopoeia, but they can test your ingenuity in ways that are fun. In some cases, body language becomes almost irresistible, although it isn't necessary:

fluctuated	irrationality	unrhythmical
sneaky	supercilious	contrastingly

Forced onomatopoeia can be a fascinating party game, but it also presents interesting logological questions: what kinds of words can be typically categorized in this way? Obviously, many adjectives can. Words about emotional states are also vocally bendable. Would a taxonomy of such words have practical value for literary criticism? for interpretation of song lyrics? for public speaking?

Concrete poetry is a well-established subgenre of poetry in which words are visually arrayed in a manner that reflects their meanings. This "figured verse" -- an elaborated form of Dmitri Borgmann's "Suggestive Words" in *Beyond Language* (Scribner's, 1967) -- is supported by a formidable body of theory and a respectable literary

history. As shown in Mary Ellen Solt's Concrete Poetry (Indiana University Press, 1968), it is taken quite seriously in South America and Europe. Forced onomatopoeia is a kind of auditory concrete poetry. The aural rather than the visual aspects of words are purposely distorted to bring sound and meaning, rather than graphology and meaning, into closer unity.

Forced onomatopoeia is most highly developed in Western culture in music, from Renaissance songs that take the word "fly" on an extended vocal tour, to jazz singers who moan on words like "blues" and intensify a remarkable variety of moods through appropriate vocal inflections in popular lyrics. (Billie Holiday and Peggy Lee, to name two, are masters of this technique.) Students of oratory and dramatic interpretation are also aware of the power of forced onomatopoeia, although its uses in those areas lag behind the rich and varied musical applications. Radio and TV actors and announcers make obvious, even melodramatic use of forced onomatopoeia on commercials.

Still, I know of no logological classification of potentially onomatopoeic words and no isolation of the concept sufficient to make it a tool of analysis or an aid in expressive performance. Forced onomatopoeia seems to fall in the crack between literary theory and vocal interpretation of written texts and musical lyrics.