



Evidence against the morpheme: The history of English phonaesthemes

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ABSTRACT

Phonaesthemes like the onset /sn-/ in *snore*, *snort*, and *sniffle* straddle the boundary of phonology and morphology and thus seemingly argue against the “theoretical desideratum” of absolute modularity in the grammatical architecture (Lowe, 2016). If modularity is psychologically real, however, a “correction” of the phonaesthetic problem should occur so that phonaesthemes either become more clearly phonological or more clearly morphological over time. Since the morpheme-like nature of phonaesthetic onsets is grounded in their type frequency (Bergen, 2004), a development toward either pole should manifest itself in a change of this frequency. This hypothesis is investigated by collecting all roots beginning with four onset clusters of phonaesthetic value (/fl-, gl-, sl-, sn-/ in Middle and in Present-Day English. The comparison of these counts shows that there is a significant decrease of the phonaesthetic share in only one group (sl-), mostly due to loanwords. In the other groups, the ratio of phonaesthetic to arbitrary roots has remained virtually the same. I take these results to show that a strict separation between phonology and morphology is psychologically implausible. In order to account for the diachronic stability of phonaesthemes, I invoke word-based approaches to morphology, in which segmentable morphemes are not theoretical primitives.

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1. Introduction

One of the defining characteristics of human languages is said to be a duality of patterning (Hockett, 1960). The first level of patterning refers to the finite number of meaningless phonemes that all languages have and with which an indefinitely large number of meaning-bearing units, morphemes, can be formed. At the second level of patterning, these morphemes can eventually be arranged into an indefinitely large number of utterances. In one way or another, this basic tenet underlies most theories of grammatical representation. However, it is also well-known that certain phenomena cast doubt on such a neat division (cf. Blevins, 2012). One such challenge to duality is the phonaestheme, a recurrent association of a sub-morphemic string with a specifiable meaning. A famous example is the /sn-/onset in English *snore*, *snort*, *sniffle*, etc. (cf. Philips, 2011). On strict structuralist analyses, these lexemes would have to be described as monomorphemic because, if /sn-/ were a morpheme, it would attach to unanalyzable residue in all such cases, which violates the principle of exhaustive segmentation (see Kwon and Round, 2015 for discussion). Yet, the type frequency of items that pair an /sn-/onset with meanings related to the oral and nasal tract is striking. In fact, Bergen (2004) showed experimentally that the type frequency of form-meaning pairings such as [sn- | ‘oral-nasal’] is so salient that they essentially have the same representation as uncontroversial morphemes. Thus, it

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appears as if, contrary to the traditional structural expectation that items fall either within phonology or within morphology, onsets may be stored and processed in the mental grammar as if they were morphological units.

1.1. Phonaesthemes in a linguistic system

The unusual status of phonaesthemes is captured by Malkiel's (1990: 158) concept of "phonosymbolism," which refers to the ability of certain sub-morphemic segments in certain environments to single-handedly bear a degree of semantic content. Phonaesthemes have also been considered instances of the closely related concept of "sound symbolism," defined as a "direct linkage between sound and meaning" by Hinton et al. (1994: 1). In Hinton et al. (1994: 2–6), it is proposed that sound symbolism is gradient and stretches from fully motivated to largely conventional. On this scale, phonaesthemes are at the "conventional" end. The three other types of sound-function pairings in the authors' typology are more iconic, with iconicity understood as a relationship in which "the structure of language reflects in some way the structure of experience" (Croft, 2003: 102).¹ They are, from more to less iconic, "corporeal" expressions (usually unwritten renderings of the physical or emotional state of the speaker, like *achoo* for sneezing), "imitative" expressions (as in onomatopoeic words like *bang*), and "synesthetic" phonological structures that systematically recur in expressions denoting, for instance, the size or shape of a physical object (e.g., the cross-linguistic tendency for high vowels, which are characterized by "small" articulatory gestures, to express small things, as in diminutive expressions; see Ultan, 1978; Nuckolls, 1999 for overviews). By classifying phonaesthemes as "conventional" (that is, arbitrary), Hinton et al. (1994) highlight the fact that they are typically not "direct," intuitive linkages, but specific to individual languages (Hinton et al., 1994: 5). This throws into sharp relief the homonymy of the term "sound symbolism," whose second sense refers to pairings of sound and meaning that are simply not amenable to traditional morphological analysis (Rhodes, 1994: 287; see also Liberman, 2010: 243, 252 on the same point). Not even an awareness of this distinction can solve the descriptive and theoretical dilemma, however. For instance, viewing phonaesthemes as a form of direct linkage between sound and meaning seems justifiable after all, in light of examples such as the /sn/-onset, where a nasal sound is associated with activities in and of the nasal tract. Hence, the nasal segment might be conceived of as corporeal or imitative, whereas the initial fricative is purely conventional.

The discussion in Childs (1994: 194) suggests that ideophones can perform functions similar to those of phonaesthemes. Yet, ideophones are best known from African languages and are often rendered by adjectives and adverbs in English glosses, as in *kubomvu tubhu* 'it is bright red' from Zulu, where the ideophone *tubhu* is translated as 'bright' (Voeltz and Kilian-Hatz, 2001: 1). However, ideophones are generally characterized by their incompatibility with traditional parts of speech, their phonologically and semantically marked nature, and their distinct status from onomatopoeia (cf. Voeltz and Kilian-Hatz, 2001: 2). All of these features would clearly set ideophones apart from phonaesthemes, but some of them appear to be less than categorical (cf. Newman, 2001: 251–255). Although this suggests that there are many phenomena in the "periphery" of grammar that linguistic theories need to incorporate in order to be exhaustive, and that these might even show complex overlaps, the present paper will confine itself to an analysis of English phonaesthemes. The next sub-sections will outline the fundamental issue phonaesthemes present for linguistic theories as well as the corresponding research question of this paper.

1.2. Phonaesthemes in linguistic theory

Phonaesthemes are difficult to account for in grammatical theories that rely on the independence of the different sub-branches of language structure. Initially, Generative Grammar was formulated in such a way. For example, Chomsky and Halle (1968: 6–7) describe the grammar as made up of a phonological, a syntactic, and a semantic "component" so that the phonological component assigns a phonetic interpretation exclusively to the syntactic surface structure. That is, the phonology does not have access to the internal mechanisms of the syntax; both components are clearly independent. (These "components" would essentially come to be called "modules" during the 1980s.) However, this rigid distinction was soon abandoned when the many formal intricacies in the (English) lexicon were noticed, upon which a component for word-formation processes became necessary (e.g., Halle, 1973; Kiparsky, 1982, 1985). In these approaches, phonology and the newly introduced morphology interact so as to faithfully generate derived words, which in English may differ considerably from their roots depending on how and whether they combine Germanic and Latinate roots and affixes (in terms of stress assignment, vowel changes, etc.). On these accounts, however, phonology and morphology interact only in strictly regulated sequences. That is, the generative process prescribes precisely when phonological and when morphological rules are to apply to a given item, thus reinforcing the assumption of separability between these two domains. Later on, even this assumption was loosened when investigations of more and more typologically diverse languages revealed that the connection between phonology and morphology is too close for a modular approach to work adequately and efficiently. Therefore, the contemporary tableaux of Optimality Theory indiscriminately list phonological and morphological constraints side by side (Kager, 1999: 122–123; Inkelas, 2014: 373–374).

While this historical development suggests that the concept of modularity (and its ancestor, duality of patterning) has been decreasing in importance in linguistic theorizing, a recent account such as Lowe (2016: 386), dealing with the relationship of syntax and prosody, still emphasizes that "absolute modularity of the grammatical architecture is a theoretical

¹ Note that Haiman's (1985) focus is on the relationship between morphological and syntactic variables on the one hand and semantic ones on the other; as such, it has little to say about direct links between *phonology* and semantics.

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