
Fighting a Losing Battle: Onomatopoeia vs Sound Changes

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Onomatopoeic words (imitative interjections, imitative content words, and ideophones) are words with iconic correlation between form and meaning, iconicity being a relationship of resemblance. Thus, onomatopoeic words ‘copy’ the natural sounds they denote. Therefore, any changes in form automatically imply changes in meaning. The present talk is devoted to the discussion of the effect of sound changes on onomatopoeic (more broadly – imitative) words.

The research is conducted on 1244 English words which are imitative by origin and were collected through continuous sampling from the third edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED).

Analysis of their etymologies and historical form changes revealed that 1/3 of the words from the corpus have changed their form. It has also revealed that regular (and sporadic) sound changes affect imitative words in different ways:

- (1) imitative words lose the connection between form and meaning (OE *hlahhan* > PDE *laugh* /lɑ:f/, see also Flaksman 2018);
- (2) imitative words fail to undergo any regular sound changes (*cuckoo*, which retains its form since Middle English, see also Durkin 2009: 127);
- (3) they acquire a new sound-meaning correlation (OE *gebed* ‘a prayer’ > PDE *bead* ‘a small globular body’ with an iconic correlation ‘i : small’, see also Campbell 2013: 224) or restore the lost one (OE *pyffan* > ME *puffe* > PDE *puff* /pʌf/).

The main conclusion of the research is that the overwhelming majority of the studied sound changes were *phonosemantically significant* (1), i.e., affected the imitative words in a negative way.

Cases of *phonosemantic inertia* (2) and *re-iconization / secondary sound symbolism* (3) are, on the other hand, rare (together they constitute less than 1% of the total).

References: • Campbell, L. (2013). *Historical Linguistics. An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. • Durkin, Ph. (2009). *The Oxford Guide to Etymology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. • Flaksman, M. (2018). Onomatopoeia and Regular Sound Changes. *Siberian Federal University Journal: Humanities & Social Sciences*, 1–11. • *The Oxford English Dictionary* (3^d edition). URL: <http://www.oed.com> (accessed August 19, 2022)