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**RETHINKING ON SOUND SYMBOLISM WITH TRANS-
DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE AND MULTI-LINGUAL TEXTS**

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Abstract

As opposite to the more established concept of linguistic arbitrariness, reflections on the natural relationship between sound and sense may risk of being confused with the Ancient Greek etymological speculations known as *phýsei*. The present essay centers on the development of the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen's concept of sound symbolism and attempts to reveal its close ties to the other relevant disciplines and its positive influence on the phonological studies, especially on Roman Jakobson's description of the sound shape of language. The author explores both linguistic and non-linguistic texts published on this topic in German, French, English as well as in certain non-international languages. As this essay reveals the positive role of sound symbolism in the history of phonology, it is intended to serve as a typical case in the study of linguistic historiography, in which a concept was formed well before English was used as a commonly accepted lingua franca among linguists. It thus proves that to investigate such a linguistic concept, it is necessary to have a trans-disciplinary perspective and gain supports from the relevant texts published in various languages.

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1. Introduction

Danish linguist Otto Jespersen (1860-1943) was among those who placed sound symbolism on a fairly important position. When “arbitrariness” started to be accepted as one of the key features of the linguistic sign, sound symbolism, which reflects the natural relationship between sound and sense, was considerably doubted and at least temporarily marginalized in the linguistic studies. Jespersen, however, unlike Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) who tried to confine this natural relationship to some peripheral linguistic phenomena, never lessened his belief that sound symbolism played a fairly visible role in the development of language (Jespersen, 1917, 1918, 1921, 1922, 1927, 1941). Sound symbolism, as he argued, widely exists in many languages in the more “mainstreamed” words beyond the onomatopoeias and exclamations; in addition, in the course of linguistic evolution, sound symbolism often helped decide which form was to survive.

2. Problem Statement

Recent studies have been reflecting an unusual interest in sound symbolism among researchers of both linguistics and other relevant fields. For the pure linguistic aspects of sound symbolism, Zhang and Cai (2013) reviewed important 20th century linguistic works that had dealt with this issue, Gnatchuk (2015) clarified some fallacies about sound symbolism, and Elsen (2017a) put forward his classification and proposed that natural and habitual sound symbolism be distinguished and treated separately. There are also linguists who continued the discussion of the evidence of sound symbolism in specific languages, either in a commonly used language (Blake, 2017) or in the endangered ones (Haynie, Bower, LaPalombara, & Jordan, 2014; Lee, 2017). Sound symbolism has also been applied to the fields beyond but related to linguistics, for example, by psychologists (Asl, 2018; Lockwood, Dingemanse, & Hagoort, 2016; Ozturk, Krehm, & Vouloumanos, 2013; Spector, & Maurer, 2013) and physiologists (Imai, & Kita, 2014) who explore its role in language acquisition. Their latest experimental works have included the links between sound symbolism and emotion (Adelman, Estes, & Cossu, 2018), and between sound symbolism and visual texture (Wakamatsu, Kwon, Sakamoto, & Nakauchi, 2018). Among the researchers on literature or on the translation of literary works, Pogacar, Peterlin, Pokorn, and Pogačar, (2017) applied sound symbolism to the analysis of certain aspects of prose fictions, and Elsen (2017b) investigated its chances and limits in lyrical languages.

While the interdisciplinary nature of sound symbolism has been revealed in these latest works, it is necessary for the linguistic historians to point out that such nature was an important characteristic for this linguistic concept ever since its starting point. However, this nature tends to be hidden if linguistic historians concentrate more on the Anglo-American sources than the Continental sources, because in Jespersen’s days, large numbers of Continental academic texts were written in German, French and other European languages. Therefore, the rethinking on the term “sound symbolism” needs to be implemented with a trans-disciplinary perspective, and with information gathered from relevant texts written in various languages, no matter these texts are nowadays considered classic or forgotten ones.

3. Research Questions

In this historical research of a linguistic concept, two questions are expected to be answered:

Question 1: What were the disciplines that played a constructive role in the linguistic concept of sound symbolism?

Question 2: What information did the non-English sources provide to Otto Jespersen and the other linguists who sought to promote sound symbolism as a linguistic concept?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this essay is to reveal the positive role of sound symbolism in the history of phonology, so as to serve as a typical case in the research of linguistic historiography. It proves that to investigate a linguistic concept formed before the boundary between language science and other relevant fields was sharply defined, and before English was used as the most important academic language, it is necessary to have a trans-disciplinary perspective and gain supports from the sources published in various languages.

5. Research Methods

The main method of a study of linguistic historiography is the investigation into the historical sources related to the designated topic. In the case of this essay, most of these resources are published books and journal articles and occasionally unpublished archives. They were written in various European languages. Original texts are cited in the process of the investigation and non-English ones are translated into English.

6. Findings

The historical investigations into the sources of sound symbolism reveal that its development involves interactions especially with psychology, physiology, acoustics and poetics.

6.1. Sound Symbolism and Its Psychological Basis

Firmly established in Saussure's posthumous work *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), linguistic arbitrariness, or the emphasis on the conventional (*théseï*) relationship inevitably degraded concepts reminiscent of the Ancient Greek *phýsei* as unscientific. This natural vs. conventional relationship between sound and sense is not only important in modern linguistics, but often discussed by the 19th century psychologists, although they may not have manifestly employed the term "sound symbolism". The one that deserves special attention was the French psychologist Victor Egger (1848-1909).

As Joseph (2012) indicated that Saussure was among the readers of Egger's book *La parole intérieure: Essai de psychologie descriptive* (1881), the latter's psychological interpretation of the relationship between *la parole intérieure* [the inner speech] and *la pensée* [the thought] was probably part of his influence on Saussure, although Saussure may not have agreed with Egger's views. Egger (1881),

in this book had already distinguished the two categories of such relationship: the arbitrary and the non-arbitrary, both of which may be eligible to the naming process in a language:

En effet, la convention qui attache un mot à une idée peut être, non pas arbitraire, mais motivée par un rapport plus or moins éloigné entre les deux termes que l'on associe; nous pouvons, par exemple, convenir de nommer le cheval par une imitation de son hennissement ou par celle du bruit d'un fouet, ... tel est le cas des signes visibles idéographiques, et en langage, celui des onomatopées. (p. 248)

[Indeed, the convention which attaches a word to an idea may be not arbitrary, but motivated by a relationship of more or less distance between these two associated terms; We may, for example, agree to name the horse by an imitation of its neighing or by that of the sound of a whip, ... such is the case of visible ideographic signs, and in language, that of onomatopoeia.]
(My translation)

The French word *cheval* (horse) is undoubtedly arbitrary, but the psychologist speculated that non-arbitrary words, or words showing sound symbolism, may probably have been the majority of the vocabulary of any specific language during certain primitive stage. They gradually decreased in the course of the linguistic evolution and were largely replaced by the arbitrary words. It was not the psychologist's urgent task to verify his speculations with linguistic facts. However, Egger and his influence testified a common interest shared by the 19th century psychologists and linguists. Thus, in a linguistic analysis sound symbolism should not be accused of being unscientific only because it has a psychological tinge.

Among linguists, this psychological tinge was highly visible in the description of *Lautsymbolik* by Georg von der Gabelentz (1840-1893), the German linguist who has constantly (Cosieriu, 1967; Elffers, 2008; Feng, 2017) been claimed as a precursor of modern synchronic linguistics. His statement on this issue in the once influential book *Die Sprachwissenschaft: Ihre Aufgaben, Methoden und bisherigen Ergebnisse* [Linguistics: Its Task, Methods and Previous Achievements] (1891) became a direct source of Jespersen's view on sound symbolism:

Mag unser etymologisches Wissen dazu sagen was es will, für unser Empfinden sind Wörter wie „Blitz“ und „Donner“, „rund“ und „spitz“ so innig und naturnothwendig mit ihren Bedeutungen verwachsen, dass wir uns den Fall kaum denken können, es hätten diese beiden Wortpaare ihre Bedeutung ausgetauscht. Statt Hund: Katze, statt Katze Spatz zu sagen, würde uns nicht so arg zuwider sein, weil hier die Laute dem symbolisierenden Gefühle weniger Anhalt bieten. (Gabelentz, 1891, p. 217)

[Let our etymological knowledge say what it wants: Words like “Blitz” (lightning) and “Donner” (thunder), or “rund” (round) and “spitz” (pointed) are so closely and naturally intertwined with their meanings that we can hardly think, in either of the pairs, of exchanging their meanings. In contrast, in pairs like “Hund : Katze” (dog : cat) or “Katze : Spatz” (cat :

sparrow), exchanging their meanings is not felt so repulsive, because in these cases the sounds offer less sense to the symbolizing feelings.] (My translation)

Based on the *symbolisierende Gefühle* [symbolizing feelings], Gabelentz interpreted persuasively the natural relationship between sound and sense within some words. But this relationship relied on the speakers' intuition, and he admitted that such intuition often belonged to the naïve speakers. He therefore did not forget to remind his readers that the *lautsymbolische Gefühl* [sound symbolic feeling] is never immune to exceptions. The French word *foudre* (lightning) was cited by him as a typical example: Whereas its German counterpart *Blitz* (lightning) exhibits a feeling of a sudden flash with its short and acute vowel, the French *foudre*, with its long and grave vowel, lacks such feelings but is an equally legitimate word.

Similarly Jespersen's sound symbolism was not a replica of the Greek *phýsei* either. On the one hand, he argued in one of his Danish articles that in the words of sound symbolism "der ... var et element, der bunder dybt i almenmenneskelig natur" [there was an element deep-rooted in human nature] (Jespersen, 1918, p. 55); on the other hand, he seriously warned that displaying the words of sound symbolism is "not speaking of the origin or etymology of the words enumerated" but only to maintain that "there is some association between sound and sense in these cases" (Jespersen, 1921, p. 17). As he clearly asserted, the idea that words need to acquire their contents and value by way of a natural sound-sense correspondence is "a favourite one with linguistic dilettanti" (Jespersen, 1922, p. 396). Thus psychology is not an inappropriate basis for the idea of sound symbolism, as the psychological tinge of sound symbolism did not guide Gabelentz and Jespersen to incorrect conclusions.

6.2. Sound Symbolism in the "Mainstream" Words and Its Physiological-Physical Basis

Unlike Saussure, Jespersen's list of words that reflect the natural relationship between sound and sense were not limited to the peripheral part of vocabulary that Saussure called *les onomatopées* (the onomatopoeias) and *les exclamations* (the interjections). Sound symbolism was visible among Jespersen's collections of negation words in *Negation in English and Other Languages* (1917), among the adversative words in "Nogle men-ord" [Some but-words] (1918) and among a large variety of other words in "Symbolic Value of the Vowel *I*" (1921). The vast majority of these words are "mainstream" nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs etc. instead of the onomatopoeias and interjections. These words more or less reflect sound symbolism because they often contain a physiological or physical quality relevant to their meanings.

Despite the lack of direct citations from the physiologists and physicists, it was not coincidental for Jespersen to note and grasp these delicate physiological-physical details that make sound symbolism possible, for as shown in his "Zur Geschichte der Phonetik" [On the History of Phonetics] (1905-1906), he was highly familiar with the phonetic studies done by the physicists and physiologists in Germany and Austria in the centuries prior to him, among whom were Wolfgang von Kempelen (1734-1804), Karl Moritz Rapp (1803-1883), Ernst Brücke (1819-1892) and Carl Ludwig Merkel (1812-1876). Therefore, although Jespersen wrote some of these works in English, the inspirations often arose from the above-mentioned scholars who wrote in German. In Jespersen's own works, especially in his Danish *Fonetik: En systematisk fremstilling af læren om sproglyd* (1897) and his German *Lehrbuch der Phonetik* (1904),

finely described structures and movements of speech organs preceded all the linguistic analyses and syntheses, which guaranteed his version of the natural relationship between sound and sense was by no means stale repetitions of an old-fashioned *physei* speculation.

6.2.1. Physiological basis for the words of sound symbolism

The physiological basis was noticeable in Jespersen's studies on the negation words and the adversative conjunctions. In the first of the above-mentioned works, *Negation in English and Other Languages*, he pointed out the fact that negation words initiated with *m-* or *n-* prevalently exist in many unrelated languages. Although he did not use the term "sound symbolism", he did attribute the reason to the natural relationship existing between the articulation of these consonants and the sense of negation:

The starting point ... is the old negative *ne*, which I take to be a primitive interjection of disgust, accompanied by the facial gesture of contracting the muscles of the nose. This natural origin will account for the fact that negatives beginning with nasals (*n*, *m*) are found in many languages outside the Indo-European family. (Jespersen, 1917, p. 6-7)

This accurate description of the articulation of *n* and *m* naturally enhanced the persuasiveness of his conclusion, although in his book he still centered on the Indo-European examples and failed to offer any specific examples from non-Indo-European languages. Fortunately, it is not difficult for the readers nowadays to notice some Asian examples that help confirm Jespersen's conclusion, e.g. Hokkien and Hakka *m* (𠵹, not), Hokkien *mai* (𠵹, don't), Hakka *mo* (無, no), Tibetan *ma* (མ, no), Thai *mai* (ไม, not), Japanese *na-i* (ない, not) etc. These negation words are found in languages of Sino-Tibetan, or Tai-Kadai, or other language family, but all of them well conform to Jespersen's description.

But this short book that Jespersen wrote in English was not his only work concerning sound symbolism at this stage. An article entitled "Nogle men-ord" [Some but-words] (1918) that he wrote in Danish witnessed the first time he began to employ the term sound symbolism, though in its Danish form "lydsymbolisme" (p. 54). (The English translation did not appear until he published it in the 1933 *Linguistica*.) Similar to the previous work, here he pointed out the fact that many unrelated languages have adversative conjunctions (the so-called "but-words") initiated with *m-*, and explained it again as a natural physiological need:

How often it happens that one wants to say something, even knows that one must and will, but is not quite clear as to *what* one is going to say. At this moment of uncertainty, when the thought is being born but is not yet clothed in words, one nevertheless begins the activity of speech: the vocal chords are set vibrating, while the lungs expel the air and, as the upper organs are precisely in the position described, the result is [m]. (English translation in Jespersen, 1933, p. 277).

These physiological gestures include: (1) the enclosure of the lips, (2) the lowering of the velar, and (3) the release of air stream through the nasal cavity, exactly what the speaker physiologically experiences in a state of hesitation: He is willing to and has to say something, but is not sure about what to say. These gestures present natural tendencies in the sound-sense relationship and explain why the

adversative words initiated with *m-* (e.g. French *mais*, Danish *men* etc.) are easier to “survive as the fittest”, an evidence of Jespersen’s Darwinian stance on linguistic evolution. In some of the cases that he mentioned, adversative conjunctions initiated with *m-* had replaced those without it, e.g. Latin *magis* taking the place of the once commonly used *sed* and becoming the parent word for modern French *mais*, Spanish *mas* and Italian *ma*. From these linguistic facts as well as what he mentioned decades later in *Efficiency in Linguistic Change*, it is evident that sound symbolism was valued in Jespersen’s view of linguistic evolution, and he believed that some linguistic forms develop in the direction of “being consistent with sound symbolism” (Qu, 2016, p. 39). The universality of his principle became strengthened through the small number of examples he cited in “Nogle men-ord” from a few less known non-Indo-European languages. Had he been familiar with Chinese, he should have agreed that the adversative conjunction of Hokkien and Hakka *mko* (無過) also well suits the physiological principle he established.

6.2.2. The Physical Basis for the Words of Sound Symbolism

Besides the physiological grounds for sound symbolism, the physical or, more specifically, auditory effects were also visible in Jespersen’s lists of words that show sound symbolism. He argued in his *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* (1922) that though the choice between English *window* and German *Fenster* indicate no correspondence to the nature of the object they refer to, the consonant *r* in English verb *roll*, French *rouler*, Danish *rulle* and German *rollen* does make these words more natural than their Russian semantic equivalents *katat’* and *katit’* (Jespersen, 1922, p. 398). Furthermore, the impressively elaborate list in “Symbolic Value of the Vowel *I*” (1921) reveals the fact that this high front vowel quite frequently appears in the words with semantic features of being small, young, delicate, or swift, and the like. His explanations on this natural relationship brought in light his even keener insights:

The reason why the sound [i] comes to be easily associated with small, and [u, o, a] with bigger things, may be to some extent the high pitch of the vowel...; the perception of the small lip aperture in one case and the more open mouth in the other may have also its share in the rise of this idea. (Jespersen, 1921, p. 16)

While the latter of these two reasons was a self-evident physiological fact, the former one was established on a physical (acoustic) basis. Naturally the “high pitch” was more of a subjective auditory impression in Jespersen’s days. However, three decades later, its correctness was confirmed graphically in the spectrogram images in Jakobson, Fant and Halle (1952): Pronouncing [i] makes energy cluster in the high-frequency areas on these images, therefore this high pitched vowel has “acuteness” as opposed to the “graveness” in [u, o, a]. This contrast in tonality was then established as one of the twelve pairs of distinctive features in Jakobson-Halle’s system.

Jespersen’s collection of words in “Symbolic Value of the Vowel *I*” covered a large variety of languages and dialects, but he cited few examples from Chinese, where there are various examples that accurately support his conclusions. The Hokkien words in Table 01 may well have been appropriate in

Jespersen’s original list. The acute effect of /i/ (occasionally /e/) in these words sharply contrasts with the grave effect of /a/, /o/, or /ai/ in their antonyms:

Table 01. Commonly used Hokkien words that suggest sound symbolism

Chinese Characters	Phonemic Transcriptions	Meanings	Jespersen’s Types
細 — 大	/se/ – /tua/	small – big	/i/ (or /e/) for smallness
囡仔 — 大人	/gina/ – /tualan/	child – adult	/i/ for child
一枝草 — 一叢樹仔	/tsit ki tshau/ – /tsit tsan tshiu a/	a grass – a tree	/i/ for the noun classifier of smaller things
緊 — 慢	/kin/ – /ban/	quick – slow	/i/ for swiftness
金 — 黯	/kim/ – /am/	bright – dark	/i/ for other extended meanings
水 — 稗	/sui/ – /bai/	pretty – ugly	
冷 — 燒	/liŋ/ – /sia/	cold – hot	
清氣 — 垃圾	/tshinŋkhi/ – /lasa/	clean – dirty	

Since Jespersen never intended to overestimate the role of sound symbolism (e.g. he emphasized that *little* and *big* exist side by side in English), here we are not surprised either to find “exceptions” in Hokkien. For example, the diminutive suffix is /-a/ (-仔) instead of /-i/; the demonstrative determiner /hi/ (彼) that contains /i/ is distal (*that*) instead of proximal (*this*). This high and front vowel is never expected to apply without exceptions in any specific language. The negligence of this side of sound symbolism leads exactly to the trap that Jespersen kept warning against.

6.3. Sound Symbolism and the Supports from Poetics

The value of sound symbolism was especially welcomed by Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), the renowned phonologist whose Slavic philological background often included an interaction between linguistics and poetics. Sound symbolism was discussed in *Six leçons sur le son et le sens*, a manuscript dealing with both linguistic and poetic issues, which he composed in French during the WWII (edited and published in English in 1978 and French in 1987). Later, in *The Sound Shape of Language* (1979, in collaboration with Linda Waugh), this topic returned under the topic of “The Spell of Speech Sounds”, where Jakobson acknowledged both Gabelentz and Jespersen for the idea of sound symbolism.

The influence of Jespersen’s sound symbolism on Jakobson is also indicated in the “Roman Jakobson Archives” at the library of Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In the extensive collection of published or unpublished materials that Jakobson assembled, four of them were Jespersen’s works. Among these four pieces are the photocopies of the Danish article “Nogle men-ord” and the English article “Symbolic Value of the Vowel *I*”. The great interest reflected by these photocopies well explains why Jakobson took serious efforts elaborating the idea of sound symbolism in *The Sound Shape of Language*, the conclusive work of his six-decade phonological explorations.

It is worth mentioning that Jakobson’s career as a phonologist began with the publication of a short book on poetics, *О чешском стихе, преимущественно в сопоставлении с русским* [On Czech Verse:

Mainly in contrast with Russian verse] (1922), where he made a clear distinction between phonetic and phonological elements. Half a century later, he ended *The Sound Shape of Language*, his last and probably the most important book on phonology with a section entitled “Language and Poetry”. In this sense, poetics became both A and Ω for Jakobsonian phonology (Qu, 2015, p. 292). Therefore, his supports to the idea of sound symbolism was deeply rooted in his poetic experiences, as exemplified in *Six leçons sur le son et le sens*:

The Czech words *den* “day” and *noc* “night”, which contain a vocalic opposition between acute and grave, are easily associated in poetry with the contrast between the brightness of midday and the nocturnal darkness. Mallarmé deplored the collision between the sounds and meanings of the French words *jour* “day” and *nuit* “night”. But poetry successfully eliminates this discordance by surrounding the word *jour* with acute vowelled vocables and the word *nuit* with grave vowelled vocables... (Jakobson, 1978, p. 113)

Unlike the Anglo-American research traditions where linguistics and poetics are treated as separate disciplines, Jakobson regarded them as inseparable. With the aid of sound symbolism, the phonological distinctive features interact with the readers’ aesthetic attitudes, making the linguistic and the poetic elements unified in the poetic language.

One should also know that when Jakobson was facing Jespersen’s ideas on sound symbolism, beliefs in the natural relationship between certain sounds and their associative meaning were neither new nor astonishing. In the Slavic world, the 18th century Russian poet Mikhail V. Lomonosov (1711-1765) was especially known for his experiments with the vocalic effects of sound symbolism in his odes. As he declared in *Риторика* [Rhetoric] that he published in 1748:

В российском языке, как кажется, частое повторение письмени “а” способствовать может к изображению великолепия, великого пространства, глубины и вышины, также и внезапного страха; учащение письмен “е”, “и”, “ъ”, “ю” — к изображению нежности, ласкательства, плачевных или малых вещей; чрез “я” показать можно приятность, увеселение, нежность и склонность; чрез “о”, “у”, “ы” — страшные и сильные вещи: гнев, зависть, боязнь и печаль. (Lomonosov, 1748, p. 164)

Frequent repetition of the letter “a” strengthen the image of the magnificence, the great space and depth and height, and the sudden fear. Writing more “je”, “i”, “je”, “ju” creates the image of tenderness, gentle touch, the lamentable, or the minute. Through “ja” one shows pleasure, amusement, tenderness and some hobby. And through “o”, “u”, “i”, the terrible and strong things like anger, envy, fear and sadness. (My translation)

Linguists may not agree with everything that the great poet expressed in this highly subjective description, but a phonologist who had been long familiar with this kind of discourse followed Jespersen’s ideas on sound symbolism without much pressure, for it was no more than to welcome a confluence of the East European poetic passion and the West European linguistic reason, in which sound symbolism was beneficial to the sound shape of language he was constructing.

7. Conclusion

Sound symbolism entered Jespersen's linguistic works as some more serious, more systematic and more scientific investigations after it had been put forward in the 19th century linguistic works. Just like its opposite concept, arbitrariness, it came into being with a strong psychological tinge. Jespersen succeeded in establishing it convincingly upon a multitude of linguistic facts, so that it would not be confused with the dilettanti of folk-etymological speculations. His investigation of sound symbolism in the negation words, the adversative conjunctions and some other mainstream vocabulary often involved certain physiological and physical features inside the relevant speech sounds. The scientific nature of these features was revealed decades later by Jakobson and his colleagues with the aid of the post-WWII technological advancements. Jakobson's positive views on sound symbolism also reflected his knowledge of the Slavic poetic tradition. In this sense, sound symbolism may well be regarded as a confluence of linguistics and poetics, and of East and West European philological traditions. A factor that has blurred this picture lies in the fact that many important texts supporting this history are scattered in several disciplines and written in several different European languages. These texts now rarely draw any attention if they are not completely forgotten. Several key texts were written in an international academic language in the 19th century sense, i.e. in German or in French rather than in English, or in a language much confined to East Europe like Russian, or in a non-international language like Danish. In a study of linguistic historiography, a full picture of the history will not become possible until all these jigsaw pieces are put together.

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