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## Towards the Problem of Translatability of Phonetically Motivated Elements

**Olga A. Bartashova and Elena V. Beloglazova\***  
*St. Petersburg University of Economics and Finance  
21 Sadovaya st., St. Petersburg, 191023 Russia<sup>1</sup>*

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*The article deals with the notion of translatability of phonetically motivated lexis traditionally viewed as having no translation equivalents. Phonetically motivated lexis is understood widely as including both sound imitating and sound symbolic words, at that the distinction between the two is to be taken into account in the translation process, since different translation strategies can be applied to them. The idea equivalence notwithstanding language differences, formulated by R. Jakobson, as well as the availability of both dictionary and contextual equivalents allow for the conclusion of principal translatability of the lexis in focus. Applying textual approach to translation as well as the method of phonosemantic analysis provide solution to the problem under investigation.*

*Keywords : phonosemantics, phonetic motivation, iconicity, phonosemantic attraction, onomatopoeia, sound imitation, sound symbolism, translatability, level of equivalence (in translation), textual approach to translating*

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### Introduction

Although phonosemantics dates back to the ancient era, its ideas being first voiced by such outstanding thinkers as Plato, later – St. Augustine, R. Rousseau, J. Locke, G. Leibniz, M.V. Lomonosov, its scientific history is much more recent. Being somewhat indebted to W. von Humboldt, it basically enters the research arena only in the XX century. The reason for it is apparently in the exceedingly high status of F. de Saussure's conception of the linguistic sign arbitrariness.

It took quite a while of time and effort on the part of highly respected advocates (L. Bloomfield, G. Genette, R. Jakobson, O. Jespersen, E. Sapir among others) to overcome this prejudice against

iconism still inherent in language signs. Thus we hold a more optimistic view if compared to that of Ph. Grew formulated in his response to the post "Phonological Clusters of Semantically Similar Words" on the linguists' forum <http://linguistlist.org>: "since Firth published his insights in 1930 phonaesthesia has been given short shrift because of the heretical nature of any investigation pairing phonological parallels with semantic affinities".

In Russia the science of phonosemantics is primarily associated with the name of S.V. Voronin (Vlakhov et al., 1980), who gave a comprehensive classification of iconic elements in a language and developed the complex method of identifying them.

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\* Corresponding author E-mail address: bartashova\_o@mail.ru

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At present researchers highlight various aspects of phonosemantics, which has grown into a separate branch of linguistics. Thus iconic elements are studied in stylistic vein, with a special focus on their expressive potential (Arnold, 1990), as well as in the etymological (Klimova, 1986; Skalicka, 1967), psycholinguistic (Zhuravlyov, 1974), ontolinguistic and diachronical veins (Gorelov, 1987; Skalicka, 1967). Some focus on phonetic motivation as a feature of particular lexical layers – terminology (Bartashova, 2010), jargon (Tatarinova, 2006), dialect (Shvetsova, 2011).

The present paper is mostly concerned with the translation aspect of the problem of iconicity in a language. It cannot but puzzle us with its paradox. On the one hand, we deal here with an objective link between linguistic form and extralinguistic referent, which should hypothetically create a universal basis for languages in general. On the other hand, this phonetic motivation appears in practice to be largely language dependent.

The fact that phonetic motivation turns out to be unique to each separate language not subject to straightforward translation has generated an aura of untranslatability around the phenomenon in question. It will be our goal here to consider the myth of iconic elements untranslatability – to justify or defy it.

### **Theoretical framework**

#### *Classification of iconic elements in language*

W. von Humboldt suggests to differentiate between three cases of connection between sound and meaning in a word. The first case is that of onomatopoeia, direct sound imitation. The second one is based on a transfer of association from one referent to the designated concept. The third case is based on similarity between designated concepts resulting in similarity in their sound form.

This classification largely correlates with the one, traditional in Russia phonosemantic school, where iconic elements are divided into two groups – sound imitating and sound symbolic. The third group from Humboldt's classification will fit into one of the above-mentioned, depending on the nature of connection between the sound and meaning. While if there is none, it is hardly possible to treat the case as iconic.

The classification given by M. Flyxe (Flyxe, 2002) is also of interest. Like Humboldt he gives an opposition of three types:

- sound imitating
- words describing mode (state or condition)
- words describing words describing feelings and emotions

Again we want to stress no great discrepancy between both of the above given typologies. But at the same time, that difference is of importance: Flyxe differentiates the case of synesthesia (transfer sense perception → feeling/ emotion) and that of synesthesia (cross-sensory transfer).

Summing up, we can suggest the following resulting classification of iconic (phonetically motivated) elements:

- (1) Sound imitation
- (2) Sound symbolism
  - a. Synesthetic
  - b. Synsthemic

M. Flyxe strikes another important note: the three cases vary in degree of connectedness between the sound and meaning. The most direct connection is the most evident, while the last group is more difficult to discern.

In our classification of types of connection between sound and meaning we took care to draw a distinct borderline between sound imitation and sound symbolism, unlike many a researcher, who find this distinction ignorable, count onomatopoeia as a variety of symbolism (Abelin, 1999) or use the term onomatopoeia as

a generic one, including sound symbolism in it (Yermakova, 1993).

This distinction, coupled with the observation of M. Flyxe, entails important translation consequences, i.e. various types of phonetic motivation require various ways of rendering them in another language.

#### **Iconicity in translation: translatable or untranslatable?**

The translation aspect of iconicity has received little attention so far. At that sound imitation, being more vivid, was at an advantage. The general impression is that of untranslatability, but untranslatability in purely linguistic sense is a vestige of the past.

It was R. Jakobson who proved the possibility of “equivalence in difference” (Jakobson, 1959) in purely semiotic terms, i.e. any meaning can be rendered by any language, not necessarily by means parallel to those in the original language. He claims lexical discrepancies, which were the focus of most early researches in untranslatability, are the easiest to overcome; grammatical ones are trickier, but can also be managed.

But with linguistic untranslatability thus defied, pragmatic one is brought into relief. A. Neubert states in his research that the pragmatic effect of the source text (ST) can sometimes be impossible to preserve in translation. Texts vary in the degree of pragmatic translatability, some being principally untranslatable (Neubert, 1978).

J. Catford’s view of untranslatability is even wider. Defining translation in purely semiotic terms as recoding, “the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language” [6:20], he also states that translation can be equivalent in linguistic respect, but not in cultural. Similarly to R. Jakobson, J. Catford sees no great problem in overcoming linguistic untranslatability, unlike the cultural one, being a true challenge.

Thus the theory of untranslatability evolves parallel to the expansionist development of linguistics in general: the notion of translation, originally implying shifting to a different language code on the surface level while leaving semantics unaffected, reveals greater complexity, with first narrow communicative, and then wide cultural context getting involved.

A somewhat different view of untranslatability is held by W. Benjamin and G. Derrida, approaching translation as an endless process where elements of untranslatability challenge translators and stimulate further search of a way to perfection (Baker et al., 2009). Any text is principally translatable, in the long run. But this stage can be easier or harder to achieve. Thus translatability / untranslatability appears not as a dual opposition, but rather a scale with innumerable gradations. This returns us to M. Flyxe having stated that cases of phonetic motivation vary in translatability.

#### *Translating sound imitations*

The most evident case is that of sound imitation or onomatopoeia. Most of the research in the sphere of iconicity is in fact dedicated entirely to this instance of the phenomenon in general. And the few works raising the translation aspect of the problem (Vlakhov et al., 1980; Yermakova, 1993) also focus on it.

S. Vlakhov and S. Florin symptomatically start their discussion of the problem with a quotation indicating the national uniqueness of onomatopoeic forms in different languages. Posing certain problems, this fact also means their rigidity, regularity in a language, which means that in most cases it is possible to find a dictionary equivalent to a particular case of sound imitation. This is true for many imitations of animal, mechanical and other sounds: *чук* = *slash*; *чук-чупук* = *tweet-tweet*, etc.

There is an important argument around sound imitations being close to realia, equivalentless lexis unique to a language, grounded on their different phonetic composition. Convincing disproof is provided that this difference is superficial, while if one considers the correlated elements of different languages using phonosematics methodology it becomes evident that they are commonly based on one and the same phonemotype (Bartashova, 2010). Thus the analysis of one of examples provided by S. Vlahov and S. Florin can be an illustration of this thesis: *Eng. bang!, chin. dun!, rom. bam!* reveal a complete coincidence, with the initial phonesteme belonging to plosives, and the final – to resonants, indicating the type of sound starting with a stroke and ending with a droning.

Therefore we can conclude that a dictionary equivalent, being the standard form for imitating a certain kind of sound, is the adequate way of translating regular sound imitations.

Of course one needs to bear in mind that there are irregular, occasional instances of onomatopoeia, having no natural dictionary equivalents. In this case the general recommendation is to render the way the author heard and imitated the sound, which is by means of transcription. Deviations might be justified, of course, if there is a lack of similar sounds in the target language or if the word gives rise to wrong associations. In this case the translator might be entitled to produce a functional analogue to the original onomatopoeia.

#### *Translating sound symbolism*

Sound symbolism, being a less evident case of iconicity, is commonly ignored by linguists, even more commonly by researchers in the sphere of translation. There are very few works focusing on the problem. Thus one can view as progressive even the stance held by N. Netyosina (Netyosina, 2009), who accepts the importance of taking into account the symbolic meaning of sounds, the

various associations they establish in different languages, but refrains from detailing how this is to be done and what potential problems there arise.

There is in fact no full scale research in translation technique of sound symbolism on Russian material. N.M. Yermakova (Yermakova, 1993) touches upon this problem in her work on onomatopoeic parallels in translation. And this is quite understandable. It is not only that sound symbolism is less evident in text. M. Flyxe notes, that the more indirect the connection between sound form and its meaning is (as in sound symbolism), the greater the degree of untranslatability. Sound symbolism represents a highly language specific relation, hardly allowing for direct parallels between languages. The problem of translating sound symbolism received the closest attention in relation to the Japanese language, where it is much more frequent and widespread than in most European languages. And with reference to a Japanese author K. Takeuchi M. Flyxe indicates three ways of rendering SS elements in translation, i.e.:

- by an adverb;
- by paraphrase;
- by omitting.

None of them obliges the translator to preserve the sound symbolic nature of the original, although it is to be kept whenever possible. But the major difficulties on this path are, firstly, different language norms in respect to sound symbolism and iconicity in general and, secondly, discrepancies in meaning of closest equivalents.

The first difficulty is also mentioned by A. Abelin, who writes that there is an opinion that “ideophones play a much more central role in certain African languages than in European languages” (Kazieva, 2009, p. 10).

The second one is dealt upon in a number of works, stressing that the symbolic associations

between sounds and meanings are more or less unique for each language. Phonosemantics differentiates between objective and subjective sound symbolism. With a great share of correlation present in the first group, the second demonstrates considerable differences. The uniqueness is, in particular, accentuated by I. Taylor and M. Taylor (Taylor et al., 1962).

On the other hand there has been extensive experiments proving universal sound symbolism. A. Abelin mentions studies performed by C.E. Osgood, revealing almost identical results for Japanese and American respondents in respect to emotional content of words. For both groups front consonants (e. g. *p*) were more pleasant than back consonants (e.g. *g*); high frequency sounds were associated with smallness and impotence. M. Chastaing research in symbolism of French phonemes gave further proof of the thesis, as did the research carried out by I. Fonagy on Hungarian material (Abelin, 1999, p. 39-40).

Therefore, notwithstanding the difficulties, study (Bartashova, 2010; Gorelov, 1987) proves the principal translatability of sound symbolic elements: in most cases translators can find an analogous unit in the target language, even within the type of the original, although it frequently involves a grammatical transformation.

As a last resort one can create a word, especially when dealing with a nonce formation in original. Most researchers agree that phonetic motivation is a productive word formation mechanism. The thesis can be easily illustrated by occasional lexis, neologisms, nonce words featuring both sound symbolism and individual contextual onomatopoeias.

Omitting sound symbolic elements can also be justified in cases of symbolism lost in the process of the word's semantic evolution, as is the case with *crack*, having developed the meaning "fracture, fissure" with no sound symbolic component in its semantics.

Thus it can be concluded, that even sound symbolic elements are principally translatable. The greatest problem here is identifying the case of sound symbolism, which requires a very subtle feeling for language. It was W. von Humboldt who was the first to notice that though "connection existing between sound and meaning seems certain, but the nature of this connection is seldom fully stateable" (Humboldt, 1998, p. 72).

It is interesting to trace how different translators deal with the same phonosemantically charged fragments and how their efforts are estimated by researchers.

We shall consider the fragment from J. Joyce *Ulysses*:

Original	Translation
Come on, you winefizzling ginsizzling booseguzzling existences ! Come on, you doggone bullnecked, beetlebrowed, hogjowled, peanutbrained, weaseleyed fourflushers, false alarms and excess baggage (p. 407)!	<p>1) Приидите все твари винососущие, пивоналитые, джиножаждущие! Приидите псиноухающие, быковыйные, жуколобые, мухомозглые, свинорылые, лисьеглазые, шулера, балаболки и людской сор (с. 411)! (пер. В.Хинкиса, С.Хоружего. СПб.: Симпозиум, 2002. 830 с.)</p> <p>2) Придите `се твари винососушье, водку пьянствующе, ханку хлебающе! Придите `се чертесобачии, бычешееи, жучиломордые, свиног'ловые, тупамозглые, хитроглазные пройды, ложно тревожные и вотще надеющие (с. 415)! (пер. С.Махова. М.: ООО СФК Инвест, 2007. 696 с.)</p>

E.A. Naugolnykh (Naugolnykh, 2010) considers in her article the ways of rendering nonce words in J. Joyce *Ulysses* and, having analysed German and Russian translations of the literary work comes to conclusion that translators generally strive to keep the original word model. But analyzing the above given example the researcher has but state the translators failure in keeping the iconic effect of the series *fizzling*, *sizzling*, *guzzling*. One could possibly ignore a single element of the kind, but a chain of three could not be unintentional, it was meant to produce a certain effect by the mere sound form. Being part of the author individual style (and Joyce is particularly noted for his treatment of words), this element was not to be omitted in translation as it distorts the author's concept.

At that another researcher E.A. Poulina (Poulina, 2009) considers the same example as an absolute success of translators, noting only their status as compounds, but not their mimetic nature.

#### **Textual approach to translating iconic elements**

When considering the translation aspect of the problem of iconicity one cannot but take the textual approach, as it is the **function** of any element in the text which is of importance in translation. It is seldom that literal translation is to be preferred to the functional one, which distinction was drawn by E. Nida in his opposition of formal and dynamic types of translation (Nida, 1964). Therefore we shall hold to it that the invariant in translation is function, and not its carrier.

L.A. Gorokhova (Gorokhova, 1998) states that sound imitations (we can generalize – mimetic elements) can perform various functions in a text, including sound imitating, descriptive, identifying, characterizing, intensifying emotional

impact, attracting, simplifying, compressive, aesthetic, explanatory, etc. Whatever way of translating one chooses, the original function must be preserved.

Textual approach also allows to highlight the issue of **contextual meaning**, rendered by an element. We have earlier touched upon the process of demotivisation, i.e. the loss of phonetic motivation in a word. This process is characteristic of both symbolic and imitating words. According to L.A. Gorokhova, such words as *laugh*, *cry*, *shout*, *strike*, *beat* can serve as examples of the latter, having lost their mimetic nature due to meaning generalization (Gorokhova 10). But one can note a reverse process of remotivisation – restoring of the lost phonetic motivation in a certain context, and a process of phonosemantic attraction, consisting in acquisition of phonetic motivation by a non-iconic word being involved into a certain phonosemantic group. In fiction there is a tendency to assembling iconic elements in agglomerates – chains of words relatively close in meaning and in function. When positioned in such an agglomerate, a non-mimetic word can acquire symbolic status.

Finally, a translator should adhere to the text genre norm, i.e. the pattern typical of a text belonging to a certain genre.

The already mentioned M. Flyxe touches upon the problem of discrepancy in text genre norm in respect to iconic elements. The researcher mentions that onomatopoeia in Swedish “has a childish, sometimes vulgar, nuance and might therefore be avoided” (Flyxe, 2002, p. 71). At that, he adds, sound symbolism does not have this nuance.

Very interesting data is provided in the dissertation by D.A. Kazieva, who demonstrates how different may be the phonosemantic portraits of one and the same text type in different languages. In her work she compares spell texts in Russian

and Karachay-Balkar languages (Kazieva, 2009) and comes up with exciting data.

Firstly, she states that in both languages spell texts belong to the group of texts with prominent phonosemantic characteristics. But the characteristics themselves differ in a number of respects:

1) The set of phonosemantic fields, where such fields as *home, speech, emotion* are to be found in Russian texts only, while peculiar to the Karachay-Balkar texts are the fields *face* and *garment*.

2) The phonosemantic fields evolvement – wave one in the Russian spell texts and rhythmical in the Karachay-Balkar texts.

3) The emotional associations – bright, cheerful, inspiring in the Russian texts and severe, gloomy, sad, ominous in the Karachay-Balkar texts.

4) The sound-colour associations, the dominant in Russian texts being blue and in Karachay-Balkar texts – black.

One can presume that we face pragmatic untranslatability here, as a spell text in targeted on a particular addressee, taking into account their mentality, sensual specificity which it is going to affect. In translation the suggestive effect can hardly be preserved, making the text pointless as a spell.

In general we quite agree with V.A. Razumovskaya (Razumovskaya, 2010), who suggests to differentiate between two levels of equivalence in literary translation: microequivalence and macroequivalence, meaning that finding an equivalent to individual elements of a text does not guarantee equivalent translation of the whole text. Alternatively, macroequivalence might allow for failures to achieve microequivalence in some instances. And it is the macroequivalence, equivalence on the textual level, that matters.

### Conclusion

The present discussion of translatability of iconic elements suggests optimism, as we have shown that in general there are both language (dictionary) and speech (contextual) equivalents to the lexis in focus.

Still, mechanical attitude to rendering phonetically motivated words can lead to errors and confusion, since the translator needs to take textual approach and consider the whole when deciding how to deal with its components.

And, of course, the translatability of particular cases varies from simple substitution by a ready equivalent to truly untranslatable instances.

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## **К проблеме переводимости фонетически мотивированных элементов**

**О.А. Барташова, Е.В. Белоглазова**  
*СПбГУЭФ, гуманитарный факультет,  
кафедра теории языка и переводоведения  
Россия 191023, Санкт-Петербург, Садовая ул., 21*

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*Статья посвящена проблеме непереводимости звукоизобразительной лексики, традиционно относимой к разряду безэквивалентной. Под ЗИ-лексикой понимается как ЗП-, так и ЗС-лексика, различия между которыми следует учитывать при переводе, так как разные типы фонетической мотивированности требуют различных способов перевода.*

*Положение Р.Якобсона об эквивалентности при наличии различий, а также факт существования языковых и речевых эквивалентов позволяют сделать вывод о принципиальной переводимости ЗИ-лексики. Применение текстового подхода к переводу, а также метода фоносемантического анализа позволяют решить эту переводческую проблему.*

*Ключевые слова: фоносемантика, фонетическая мотивированность, фоносемантическая аттракция, ономотопия, звукоподражание, звукоимовизм, переводимость, уровень переводческой эквивалентности, текстовый подход к переводу.*

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