Sources of Otto Jespersen's Sound Symbolism From Various Disciplines: A Case of Linguistic Historiography[*]

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Despite its role in literature, especially in poetics, sound symbolism does not traditionally enjoy a high esteem in linguistics. Ever since the scientific study of language was revolutionized by the Swiss structuralist pioneer Ferdinand de Saussure, sound symbolism tended to be restricted to some peripheral linguistic phenomena. The present essay is an interpretation of first-hand texts. It explores the development of the linguistic idea of sound symbolism scattered in the both linguistic and non-linguistic texts published in German, French, English and other languages. These texts are found to suggest that Saussure was not the only scholar interested in this sound-sense relationship in his age, nor was his idea of arbitrariness the final word on it. The author concludes that a study on the history of sound symbolism has to be accomplished with a trans-disciplinary perspective and the support of multi-lingual texts.

Keywords: sound symbolism, arbitrariness, linguistic texts, non-linguistic texts

Introduction

Ever since Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) deemed "arbitrariness" one of the two key natures of the linguistic sign, it goes without saying that sound symbolism, which explores the natural relationship between the sound and the meaning, has become marginalized in linguistic studies. Whereas Saussure suggested that sound symbolism be confined only within the issues about the onomatopoeias and other peripheral linguistic phenomena, Danish linguist Otto Jespersen (1860-1943) revealed in his books and articles that linguistic data support a much wider existence of sound symbolism than usually believed.

In the recent decade, among Chinese scholars, there are revived discussions on the linguistic aspects of sound symbolism. Zhang Baopei (2014) and Zhang Zhihui (2009) explored the natural relationship between the sound and meaning of certain phonological segments in their ontological descriptions of the English language. Wen (2010) made a study of sound symbolism utilized in the social, practical discourse. Tian (2010) and Chen (2007) analyzed the aesthetic effects of traditional poetic works with the aid of this theory.

There are also studies of linguistic historiography on the development of the term "sound symbolism". Zhang Lichang and Cai (2013) generally reviewed some important 20th century linguistic works on sound symbolism, while Zhang Kangkang (2010) focused specifically on the relationship between arbitrariness and iconicity. However, a shared limitation of these discussions looks evident: All these discussions are based on

the Anglo-American sources of sound symbolism, while sound symbolism was actually a Continental concept.

Therefore, to depict its history, one cannot avoid the relevant works written in German, French and some other languages. In addition, the natural vs. conventional relationship between sound and meaning was examined not only by the linguists of that era, but by the psychologists and the literary critics. Since most of these texts have never been translated into English and remain largely unknown to present-day linguists who rely more on the English source, it becomes necessary to investigate the sources of Jespersen's term "sound symbolism" with a trans-disciplinary perspective and with the support of multi-lingual texts, whether these texts are nowadays considered classic or forgotten.

Arbitrariness, Sound Symbolism and Their Psychological Basis

The disagreement between Saussure and Jespersen on the arbitrariness of linguistic sign was explicit in the latter's review of *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916). Immediately after the release of Saussure's posthumous book, Jespersen published his review on it in *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Filologi* [Nordic Journal of Philology]. Among the innumerous reviews and comments on the landmark of modern linguistics, Koerner classified Jespersen's as a "largely negative" review on the Saussurean linguistic cosmology, for Jespersen cast straightforward doubts on the Saussurean cornerstones, the langue-parole and the synchrony-diachrony distinctions (Koerner, 1999, p. 123). Similarly, on the issue of sound-meaning relationship, Jespersen visibly challenged against the legitimacy of the overstatement of the arbitrariness, which was used as part of his conclusion in this review:

> Finally, I do not think the final word was said on the relationship between sound and meaning with Madvig and Whitney singling out the conventional, while Saussure agreed with them by a strong overestimation of the role of arbitrariness in language and an underestimation of the role of the sound-words (the onomatopoeia). (Jespersen, 1917a, p. 41, my translation)

It must be noted that Jespersen's Danish term "klangorde" (sound-words) covers a larger range than the more or less marginal part of vocabulary that Saussure summed up as *les onomatopées* (the onomatopoeias) and *les exclamations* (the interjections). Jespersen believed that sound symbolism applies to a larger, "mainstream" portion of the vocabulary. He soon published in English his long list of words of sound symbolism, with the overwhelming majority being content words like nouns, adjectives and verbs, instead of the peripheral vocabulary elements. Entitled "Symbolic Value of the Vowel *I*", this article was persuasive due to the large number of the examples collected from a rich variety of languages. In this list, the vowel /i/ evidently appears more often in certain types of words and affixes: the adjectives expressing "small", "swiftness", "clear" and other comparable meanings; the nouns indicating children and young animals; the diminutive suffixes, etc. It forms sharp contrasts with the feeling of bigness, slowness or darkness brought by the vowels /u/, /a/ or /o/ in the antonyms of the above-mentioned words.

The sources that helped shape Jespersen's belief had an inevitable psychological tinge. In his *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* (1922), he acknowledged Georg von der Gabelentz's *Die Sprachwissenschaft: Ihre Aufgaben, Methoden und bisherigen Ergebnisse* [Linguistics: Its Task, Methods and Previous Achievements] (1891) as one of "the two greatest works on the general linguistics" of the past four decades that he "owe[s] incomparably much to" (Jespersen, 1922, p. 98). As for the case of "sound-words", this is where he borrowed the term *Lautsymbolik* and translated it into English as "sound symbolism". However, the rationale of Gabelentz's *Lautsymbolik* was visibly psychological:

> 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. Instead, 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. (Gabelentz, 1891, p. 217, my translation)

By the aide of "symbolisirenden Gefühle" [symbolizing feelings], Gabelentz interpreted this phenomenon as speakers' intuition, although he admitted that such intuition often belonged to naive speakers. He cited the word for "lightning" as a typical example: The German word "*blitz*" exhibits a feeling of a sudden flash with its short and acute vowel, whereas its French counterpart "*foudre*", with its long and grave vowel, completely lacks it. While he termed this feeling with a symbolic label, he did not yet forget to remind that this type of sound-meaning relation is by no means immune to exceptions.

The psychological root of Jespersen's sound symbolism looks apparent due to its reference to Gabelentz. However, it is inappropriate to accuse Jespersen of placing the term upon a wrong, non-linguistic ground. On the side of Saussure, the arbitrary nature of sound-meaning relationship also has a psychological root. Basing on the unpublished Saussurean manuscripts, Joseph (2012) recently explored Saussure's indebtedness to the French psychologist Victor Egger (1848-1909), especially the latter's book *La parole intérieure: Essai de psychologie descriptive* (1881), which Saussure personally owned a copy. In his psychological interpretation of the relationship between "la parole intérieure" [the inner speech] and "la pensée" [the thought], Egger had already distinguished two categories of such relationship: the arbitrary and the non-arbitrary. Both of them may be eligible to the naming process:

> 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. (Egger, 1881, p. 248, my translation)

The French word *cheval* (horse) is undoubtedly arbitrary. But he speculated that non-arbitrary words may probably have been the majority of the vocabulary of any specific language during some primitive stage. Their number must have decreased gradually in the course of linguistic evolution, and most of them were replaced by the arbitrary words.

Therefore, the Saussurean arbitrariness, or the denial of sound symbolism as something more general, also has its psychological root. Like various other influence from outside the philological traditions, psychology in the late 19th century made a constructive contribution to modern linguistics. In the present case, it facilitated both Jespersen's and Saussure's ideas on the issue of sound symbolism.

Jespersen's Elaborations on Sound Symbolism

To trace Jespersen's own ideas on the linguistic nature of sound symbolism, one has again to resort to texts he wrote in both English and other languages. He speculated English book *Negation in English and Other Languages* (1917) that Proto-Indo-European negative word "ne" may have originated from "a primitive interjection of disgust, accompanied by the facial gesture of contracting the muscles of the nose" (Jespersen, 1917b, p. 6). As this illuminating point may not be readers' focus in a book of grammar, his Danish article "Nogle men-ord" [Some but-words] (1918) discussed on the sound-symbolic nature of some non-onomatopoeia, non-interjection words more saliently.

Obviously, the "but-words", or called "adversative conjunction" as in its English translation in *Linguistica* (1933), are not among the marginal words in Saussure's sense. Then considering the sound-sense relationship, what "naturalness" is involved in these words? In "Nogle men-ord", Jespersen noted that many European languages possess adversative conjunctions that initiated with the consonant *m-*, e.g. French *mais*, Dano-Norwegian *men* etc. In some other cases, adversative conjunctions initiated with *m-* replaced those with other initials. For example, Latin *magis* had taken the place of the once prevalent *sed* and became the common parent word for modern French *mais*, Spanish *mas* and Italian *ma*. Jespersen believed that the phonetic gestures of /m/ make it a natural choice for the "but-words":

> 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]. (Jespersen, 1933, p. 277)

These phonetic gestures include: the enclosure of the lips, the lowering of the velar, and the release of air stream through the nasal cavity, exactly the gestures of a speaker's hesitation: He will say something, 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-* are easier to "survive as the fittest". He also cited similar examples from non-Indo-European languages and less known languages to make his conclusion persuasive.

This early attempt was later elaborated in *Language* (1922), the book he published in English. More sets of examples were employed as proofs of this sound-sense relation. For example, he argued that although the choice between *window* and *fenster* shows no correspondence to the nature of the object they refer to, examples like English *roll*, French *rouler*, Danish *rulle* and German *rollen* do sound more competent than their Russian counterparts *katat'* and *katit'* (Jespersen, 1922, p. 398).

It must be emphasized that Jespersen never intended to deny the arbitrariness of linguistic signs, nor would he agree completely with the ancient Greek speculations on sound-sense relationship. What he did was an objective description of linguistic facts rather than an etymological explanation. He specially clarified in "Symbolic Value of the Vowel *I*" that /i/ does not always stand for smallness, and that this vowel is never consistently applied without exceptions in any specific language. In English, for example, *little* and *big* exist side by side. Obviously enough, neglecting this side of sound symbolism leads to a trap that Jespersen warns against.

Discussion: Examples of Sound Symbolism From Chinese

Although "Symbolic Value of the Vowel *I*" is known for its huge number of proofs from a large variety of languages, Jespersen cited few examples from the Chinese languages, where we do find examples that support his conclusions.

For the part of "but-words", there is a commonly used adversative conjunction /m̩ko/ (嘸過) in Hokkien and Hakka. This bi-syllabic word has a syllabic /m̩/ (originally a negation morpheme) as its first syllable, which perfectly meets Jespersen's description of the physiological gestures in "Nogle men-ord".

As for the symbolic value of /i/ (sometimes /e/, acoustically similar to /i/), we can also add some Chinese examples to Jespersen's list. For example, all the Hokkien words in Table 1 may well have been appropriate in Jespersen's original list. The sharp effect of /i/ or /e/ contrast manifestly with the blurring effect of /a/, /o/, or /ai/.

Table 1

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
金 — 黯	/kim/ – /am/	bright / dark	/i/ for other extended meanings
水 — 稗	/sui/ – /bai/	pretty / ugly	
冷 — 燒	/liŋ/ – /siɔ/	cold / hot	
清氣 – 垃圾	/tsʰiŋkʰi/ - /lasa/	clean / dirty	
囝仔 — 大人	/gina/ – /tualaŋ/	child / adult	/i/ for child
一枝草 — 一叢樹仔	/tsit ki tsʰau/ – /tsit tsaŋ tsʰiu a/	a grass / a tree	/i/ for the noun classifier of smaller things
緊 — 慢	/kim/ – /ban/	quick / slow	/i/ for swiftness

Since Jespersen never intended to overestimate the role of sound symbolism, here we are also unsurprised 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*).

Jespersen's keen insights are seen in his explanation of the reason why /i/ exposes such effects. On one hand, /i/ is high-pitched; on the other hand, /i/ reminds of the narrow lip shape. If the latter point is physiologically obvious, the former point must be called far-sighted. Three decades later, with the aid of the post-WWII technological advancements, its acoustic nature was proved by Jakobson, Fant and Halle (1952), who visualized on the spectrum the acoustic contrast between the "acuteness" of /i, e/ and the "graveness" of /u, o/. This contrast became one of the earliest pairs of distinctive features in the Jakobson-Halle system.

The Supportive Points of Sound Symbolism From Poetics

Besides psychology, poetics is another discipline related to Jespersen's idea of sound symbolism. The issue of sound symbolism was discussed considerably in *Six leçons sur le son et le sens* (1942), Roman Jakobson's once unpublished French manuscript on both linguistic and poetic issues (later translated into English and published in 1978). And in *The Sound Shape of Language* (1979, in collaboration with Linda Waugh), the conclusive work of Jakobsonian phonology, this topic returns as important sections under the title "the spell of speech sounds", where Jakobson acknowledged both Gabelentz and Jespersen for the idea of sound symbolism.

Jakobson's embrace of sound symbolism partly originated in the Slavic poetic tradition in which he was fostered. In the Russian-speaking world, he was too familiar with Mikhail V. Lomonosov's (1711-1765) experiments with the vocalic effects of sound symbolism in the odes as well as the theoretical formulation of them:

> Frequent repetition of the letter "a" strengthen the image of the magnificence, the great space, depth and height, and the sudden fear; Writing more "e", "и", "ѣ", "ю", the image of tenderness, caress, lamentable or minute; through "я" one shows pleasure, amusement, tenderness and inclination; through "о", "у", "ы", terrible and strong things like anger, envy, fear and sadness. (Lomonosov, 1748, p. 164, my translation)

For Jakobson who was familiar with this tradition, this mingling of poetic images and phonetic vehicles had best exemplified a solution to the problems shared by literature and linguistics. A glance at the publication history of Jakobson also reveals that poetics became both A and Ω for Jakobsonian phonology (Qu, 2015, p. 292): his career as a phonologist actually began with the publication of his booklet on poetics, *О чешском*

стихе, преимущественно в сопоставлении с русским [On Czech Verse: Mainly in Contrast with Russian Verse] (1923), and ended with *The Sound Shape of Language* (1979), with "Language and poetry" as its last chapter. Therefore, it was no coincidence for him to defend sound symbolism on the poetic grounds, as he 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 two separate disciplines, Jakobson did not see the boundary between them and regarded them as a unified science that explores two inseparable universals. With the aid of sound symbolism, once distinctive features successfully interact with the readers' aesthetic attitudes, the phonological and the poetic elements become immediately unified in the poetic language. From the view of linguistic historiography, Jakobson's idea is a product of both the Slavic poetic tradition and the application of linguistic sound symbolism practiced in a related discipline. When this East European tradition runs in confluence with the West European idea of symbolism from Humbolt to Gabelentz and to Jespersen, modern phonology benefits from a multicultural and trans-disciplinary source. Therefore, every step of this development is commemorative.

Conclusions

Sound symbolism as the opposite of arbitrariness of linguistic signs was thus reactivated in the psychological interpretation of sound-sense relationship in both linguistic and non-linguistic works. Such efforts were then followed and elaborated in Jespersen's more serious, more systematic and more scientific investigations, which aimed at describing the existence of linguistic facts rather than folk-etymological speculations. Therefore, his idea on sound symbolism should never be regarded as a mere revival of the ancient Greek idea of *phýsei*. With the development of the theory of distinctive features in the phonological studies, sound symbolism has been better justified, and further supported in poetics. However, several factors have become the obstacles of this panoramic view: Some key texts supporting this history are scattered in several disciplines; these texts are now rarely available if not completely forgotten; they were often written in an academic language in the 19th century sense, viz. in German or in French rather than in English, while Jespersen's own writings may have occasionally been composed Danish, a language that was never used as an international academic language. Consequently, a study on the history of the linguistic term "sound symbolism" has to be accomplished with a trans-disciplinary perspective and the support of multi-lingual texts.

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