

Probing mimetic expressions with corpus data in Czech

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Existing literature on mimetic expressions tends to stress a divide between the sound/motion/sensory-iconic expressions and “the rest” of the language. Ideophones are sometimes regarded as “a totally different kind of linguistic animal” (Diffloth 1976) and “constitute a part of speech that belongs in an entirely different realm from the familiar nouns, verbs, and particles, and from bound morphemes” (Alpher 1994). Some studies dedicated to sound-iconic expressions attribute primitiveness or naiveté to mimetic expressions (Kořínek 1934 and Fónagy 1999).

This paper explores connections between onomatopoeic expressions (OpEs) on the one hand and grammar and discourse on the other. It attempts to show how phonosemantic relationships in Czech OpEs (Fidler 2014) can motivate processes in discourse and grammar. OpEs not only depict sound-motion, but also function as discourse markers while retaining some aspects of the original phonosemantic relationship. Phonosemantic properties observed in OpEs are also relevant to choice of segments involving verbal suffixation and verbal aspect.

These processes in grammar and discourse are akin to the process of grammaticalization in which traces of lexical meaning remain when a lexical item becomes grammaticalized (Hopper 1991). Emergence of sound-meaning relationship and its extension is consistent with the pattern discussed in Bybee 2001 where meanings evolve like “a termite’s nest” without a “master plan” as linguistic forms are repeatedly used in contexts.

OpEs might also serve as a starting point to rethink the Saussurean arbitrariness principle. OpEs resemble direct quotation, which “demonstrates” rather than describes (Clark and Gerrig 1990) by highlighting some specific (and limited) aspects of the original utterance; phonosemantic meanings and their extensions can be seen as “emerging” when only some property (of oral gesture or meaning) is chosen out of a set of all possible properties. Such a selection process, yielding a slightly different meaning-function at every step, is most likely arbitrary. Saussurean arbitrariness of sign could then be seen as a *consequence* rather than a principle, with repeated processes of arbitrary selection leading to varying degrees of resemblance to sound-motion.

Discussions are based on qualitative analysis of samples and quantitative corpus data (SYN2005).

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