

Function of Sound Devices in the Construction of Metaphoric Meaning in Poetry

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Abstract

This paper presents a study of the relation between the meaning of the words and their phonological features within the poetic context. The article presents a short overview of the existing theories and assumptions in the researched area. Special attention is given to the theory of the arbitrariness of signs and recent studies, suggesting this claim to be incomplete and subject to numerous exceptions. This research is aimed at finding the evidence of metaphorical use of sounds patterns in the poetry of Dylan Thomas. This paper presents a detailed analysis of four poems: “From Love’s First Fever to Her Plague”, “Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines”, “Especially When the October Wind” and “After the Funeral” with a few examples from other poems. The results of the analysis show that sound, being one of the most important elements of poetic texts, is able to obtain a specific semantic meaning of its own but is highly dependent on the context. Interpretation of sound patterns and their expressive potential is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of poetic texts.

Keywords: metaphor, sound symbolism, sound devices, phonaestheme, stylistics, linguistic function, poetic language

1. Introduction

One of the most essential problems existing in the theory of poetry is the interpretation of sound effects, their meaning and their role in the construction of poetic imagery. Sound metaphors in poetry function as a means of emotional influence upon the readers.

This research can be regarded important due to “the large-scale indifference to sound structure in the current discourse on poetry” (Perloff & Dworkin, 2009). We also agree with Kreuzer’s assumption that “the major importance of sound must always be realized in terms of content. Merely to discover alliteration or assonance... is but a small part of the total process of dealing with sound; the larger part is discovering precisely what the function of the sound pattern is in terms of the poem as a whole” (Kreuzer, 1955).

The purpose of this research is to find the evidence of metaphorical use of sounds patterns in the poetry of Dylan Thomas and to prove that they serve as a medium of meaning. We believe that sound, being one of the most important elements of poetic texts, can obtain a specific semantic meaning of its own but is highly dependent on the context. Sound patterns are known to have a structuring function, however if the hypothesis about their meaning potential is true, they can as well organize the text at the semantic level. This research contributes to further development of integrated stylistic and linguistic analysis of poetry.

2. Background and Related Research

The phenomenon of sound symbolism has been widely discussed. This problem is closely connected with the arbitrariness of the sign. However, some studies and corpus-based experimental analysis show that there are exceptions to this rule in terms of sound-meaning symbolism.

Contrary to the Saussurean theory of arbitrary sound-meaning relation, Otto Jespersen’s works claim that languages in their modern state tend “to grow richer and richer in symbolic words ... towards a greater number

of easy and adequate expressions—expressions in which sound and sense are united in a marriage-union closer than was ever known to our remote ancestors” (Jespersen, 1922). Besides, Jakobson and Waugh (1979) consider sound symbolism as “an inmost, natural association between sound and meaning” having an expressive function.

“Phoneme clusters like syllable onsets or rimes that typically occur in words belonging to specific semantic fields” are called phonaesthemes (Schmidtke, Conrad, & Jacobs, 2014). Statistical and corpus-based analysis of phonaestheme as “a sub-morphemic unit that has a predictable effect on the meaning of a word as a whole” presented a method for its examination and identification within texts (Otis & Sagi, 2008). Psycholinguistics study of phonaesthemes (Bergen, 2004) allowed detecting some frequently repeated clusters that bear the same or closely related meaning: gl- which is usually present on words denoting light and vision (glimmer, glow, glitter, gleam, etc.) and sn-, denoting actions related to nose or mouth (snore, sneeze, sniff, snort, etc.).

Hock and Joseph (2009) discussed a case of phonosthematic attraction, demonstrating how the meaning of word *sag* “sink; droop” (16th century Engl. *Sacke*) was irregularly changed due to its association with other words containing cluster—ag, denoting “slow, tired or tedious action” (drag, flag, lag, fag).

Another research is concerned with the effect of form-meaning arbitrariness in language learning (Monaghan, Christiansen, & Fitneva, 2011). After a series of computational experiments the study showed that language learning process incorporates both arbitrariness and systematicity of the vocabulary. This result suggests that the arbitrariness assumption “is not as complete as is conventionally thought”. There is also an evidence that “non-arbitrary relationships between sound and meaning exist in natural language and influence the encoding and retrieval of the meaning of unfamiliar words” (Nygaard, Cook, & Namy, 2009).

Such correspondence between semantic elements and phonemes, arising from the acoustic and/or articulatory qualities of the phonemes is called sound symbolism, while the term “sound symbolic association” “refers to the sense that the phonemes in question seem related to, or to naturally go along with, stimuli possessing the associated elements or features (e.g., objects of a certain size or shape)” (Sidhu & Pexman, 2018).

The research of this phenomenon began almost a century ago: Wundt (1922) was the first scholar to coin the term “sound metaphors” (“Lautmetapher”) in his writings regarding the origins of language. According to his theory, the sound metaphors constitute such a relation between the phonetic and semantic characteristics of a unit that causes an emotional response towards the signified object.

Later Hrushovski (1980) discussed the relationship between the meaning and the sound, stating that sounds themselves cannot carry the meaning, but the meaning of the words can “make the sounds carriers of some expressive meaning, or shades of meaning”. When sound patterns coincide with a structurally important contextual semantic element of the poem, that can be reinforced by the sounds, the reader “transfers a quality, a tone, a connotation, etc. from the domain of meaning to the sound pattern”. Thus, the author suggests a two-directional interaction of sound patterns and lexical units that implies the transfer of meaning between the two levels.

Recent study of auditory-induced emotions by Västfjäll (2012) showed the dependence between the valence and activation of emotions and the perceived loudness and sharpness of the perceived sounds. Though the experiments involved only static sounds devoid of meaning, they proved that physical characteristics may predict the emotional reaction.

The results of an experiment on phonetic symbolism (D’Anselmo, Prete, Zdybek, Tommasi, & Brancucci, 2019) demonstrated that the participants were able to guess the meaning of unfamiliar spoken words due to the symbolic nature of their acoustic properties. Three experiments carried out by Tzeng, Nygaard and Namy (2016) also proved that the sound properties contributed to the inferring of word meaning.

Contextual analysis of sounds in poetry by Fónagy (2001) showed that there is a certain set of associations for each phoneme at the level of articulation. For example, sound /u/ is considered to be a dark vowel of mourning, sorrow and grief, whereas sound /i/ is brighter and happier. This case is explained by the fact that in joy all sounds are shifted forward and in order to simulate sadness they are pulled backward. The study of Hungarian, German and French poetry revealed that poems with frequently repeated phonemes /m/, /n/, /l/, /i/ were perceived as tender and soft, but those with /k/, /t/, /r/ - as aggressive ones.

Further research proved again that articulation can influence the perception of words. Wiseman and van Peer (2002) studied the correspondence between the Brazilian and German sounds and the emotions of grief and joy. The results proved that grief “is better expressed by open vowels (/ah/, /oh/ and /uh/) and nasal consonants (/m/ and /n/)” and “joy correspondingly better by closed vowels (/ih/ and /eh/) and plosives (/b/, /t/, /p/ and /d/)”.

Moreover, the link between the vowels and emotions was highlighted in the paper by Rummer and Schweppe (2018): the vowel /i:/ more frequently occurred in the names for positive referents and the vowel /o:/ was included mainly in the names for negative referents. These symbolic associations are proved to play an important role in the creation of novel names.

Though Tsur (2012) agrees that some sounds are better suited for conveying particular emotions, he suggests that speech sounds have numerous “meaning potentials”, activated by specific meanings of a text, thus the change of context leads to a change of potential. He also claims, “that sound effects cannot be reduced to meanings: they can only generate some general psychological atmosphere that may be individuated by meaning into a variety of more specific emotional qualities” (Tsur, 2017).

Thus, the studies of sound associations provide empirical evidence for their strong emotional effects on speakers of different languages. The next section describes the material for this research and the procedures involved into the analysis.

3. Materials and Methods.

This article is based on the analysis of poetic texts because they are aimed at the transmission of emotions and represent a great source of metaphors that can be studied in the context of sound-to meaning relation. We chose Dylan Thomas as he is one of the most significant and controversial chapters in the history of British literature. He is generally praised for his original metaphors, symbolically encoded mysticism and outstanding use of language devices. From his early *Notebook Poems*, he demonstrated a passion for excess and grotesqueness, putting his characters into a phantasmagoric world.

His first book of poems was published in 1934 and was titled *18 poems*. Among the major aesthetic characteristics of Thomas’s poetry is obscurity of the language and seeming lack of sense. The words in his writings seem to exist and combine according to their own rules; they tend to depart from their literal meanings so far that the reader can hardly grasp the information. Davies (1972) notices in his collection of critical essays, that Thomas’s poems often “offer the reader only impenetrable enigma” due to his desire “to make up a new language, using words, phrases and grammar altogether familiar in themselves, but positively arranged in a new way”.

Stylistic methods used by Thomas are often considered to be surrealistic because of the abundant dissonance of words and grammatical structures, based primarily on subconscious creative process. His writing style was greatly influenced by the works of William Blake, Sigmund Freud, Arthur Rimbaud, Caradoc Evans and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Thomas himself admitted deliberate use of all possible literary devices, saying that he was “a painstaking, conscientious, involved and devious craftsman in words” who used everything and anything to make his poems work and move in the directions he want them to: “old tricks, new tricks, puns, portmanteau-words, paradox, allusion, paronomasia, paragram, catachresis, slang, assonantal rhymes, vowel rhymes, sprung rhythm” (Fitzgibbon, 1987).

Many critics in the 1930s insisted that Thomas’s poetry was in fact the product of automatic writing, which is the characteristic of Surrealism. However, he denied any kind of such influence and tried to disassociate himself from the Surrealists, saying that they put their words down together on paper chaotically without shaping them. He stated that serious and emotionally strong poetry required a great amount of intellectual labor, and that is why this comparison with surrealistic works wounded his dignity (Thomas, 1961).

Besides, Dylan Thomas cared much about the acoustic qualities of his poems, saying that “The Death of the Ear” would be an apt subtitle for a book on the plight of modern poetry”. He believed that much of the poetry back in those days sounded abominable, because of the lack of aural value which debased the art of poetry “that is primarily dependent on the musical mingling of vowels and consonants”: “Too much poetry to-day is flat o the page, a black and white thing of words created by intelligences that no longer think it’s necessary for a poem to be read and understood by anything but the eyes” (Thomas, 1971).

Therefore, we believe that Dylan Thomas’s poetry is a perfect material for studying sound patterns’ functions and their role in building the metaphorical mappings. Within the framework of this study aimed at finding the relation between the sound and meaning we used a complex methodological approach to ensure the integrity of our analysis. This paper presents a detailed analysis of four poems: “From Love’s First Fever to Her Plague”, “Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines”, “Especially When the October Wind” and “After the Funeral” with a few examples from other poems.

The primary stage of the research included continuous sampling method to select relevant examples. Then we

continued with lexicographic analysis of lexical units' definitions represented in the dictionaries to establish the contextual meaning of lexical units. Phonological analysis was applied to study the prosodic features of the poems and auditory repetitions. Finally, functional and stylistic analysis of lexical units helped us to find stylistic potential and connotational meaning of the studied elements.

4. Results

The first poem, "From Love's First Fever to Her Plague", tells the reader about the birth, death and human development at different stages of life. The structure of the poem is extremely irregular with paragraphs ranging from three to nine lines. The rhythmical pattern is also irregular, but mostly tending to be an iambic one.

The first paragraph, telling about the embryonic stage of life, is characterized by full assonance with the dominant sound f (9 times) and multiple long vowels (/u:/, /ɜ:/, /ɔ:/, /i:/), recreating the hollowness of the womb, corresponding to the conceptual metaphor of womb being an enclosed space or container.

The poet gives much attention to the rhythm and tempo of the poem. Long and soft vowels in the opening part, corresponding to the calm and carefree childhood are replaced with strong voiceless consonants adding sharp tone and staccato-like tempo: "I learnt man's tongue, to twist the shapes of thoughts / To shade and knit anew the patch of words / ... / The root of tongues ends in a spentout cancer, / That but a name, where maggots have their X".

On the contrary, in the last paragraph there is a clearly identified slowing down of the rhythm due to the excessive use of semicolons and dissonant sound combinations: "One womb, one mind, spewed out the matter, / One breast gave suck the fever's issue; / From the divorcing sky I learnt the double, / The two-framed globe that spun into a score; / A million minds gave suck to such a bud / As forks my eye; / Youth did condense; the tears of spring / Dissolved in summer and the hundred seasons; / One sun, one manna, warmed and fed". This slowing of tempo coincides with character's journey towards the final life stage—to death, thus elaborating the development of the meaning content.

Another interesting point about this poem is the use of parallel constructions at the end of the first, the second and the fourth paragraphs: "...And earth and sky were as one airy light. / ... / The sun was red, the moon was grey, / The earth and sky were as two mountains meeting ...". Lexical repetition, aimed to highlight the transcendence of human existence, is reinforced by the parallel auditory constructions, resolving in stressed patterns of equal power.

The sound pattern of repeated voiced consonants metaphorically representing one of life stages in "From Love's First Fever to Her Plague" is used in "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines" to emphasize the opposite meaning. This poem tells the reader about the everlasting conflict between "dark and light, inner and outer, above and below, microcosm and macrocosm" (Tindall, 1962). The last line, drawing a conclusion to the quarrel between life and death, states that "Above the waste allotments the dawn halts". These clusters make the reader stop just as the dawn stops dead, surrendering to the darkness.

The next poem, "Especially When the October Wind", tells the reader about the process of making a poem, as well as about passage of time and approaching death (Perrine, 1962). The first paragraph describes the author's walk by the seaside and is full of repetitive sounds s and z that imitate the sound of sea waves: "By the sea's side, hearing the noise of birds, / Hearing the raven cough in winter sticks, / My busy heart who shudders as she talks / Sheds the syllabic blood and drains her words". Further on the "cold" sounds /z/ together with sound /r/ serve as the means to focus reader's attention on the setting of a cold windy day in October: "With frosty fingers punishes my hair", "the rows / Of the star-gestured child/ren in the park".

"After the Funeral" is a poem about the burial of a "devout woman of the lower class who died virtually unknown" written from the point of view of a boy (Stearns, 1945). The opening of the elegy tells about the hypocrisy of the mourners and the mechanicalness of their actions. The monotony of the procession is emphasized through multiple commas and short monosyllabic stressed words (... mule praises, brays, / ... / blinds down the lids, the teeth in black). Such close proximity of two stressed words "praise" ("an expression of strong approval or admiration") and "brays" ("a sound, voice, or laugh resembling the loud, harsh cry of a donkey or mule"), together with their assonance forces the collision of their contrastive meanings.

The repetition of sounds /s/ and /ʃ/ acoustically reminds of the grave atmosphere of funeral feast with whispered condolences and dry handshakes: "Windshake of sailshaped ears, / ... / The spittled eyes, the salt ponds in the sleeves". The lines "...muffle-toed tap / Tap happily of one peg in the thick / Grave's foot", containing the repetition of plosives /t/, /p/, /k/ and /g/, recreate the sound of nails being hammered into the coffin, thus enhancing the lexical repetition of the verb "tap" meaning "to make a soft knocking sound".

One of the most interesting cases of sound-meaning relation is a phonetic pun that serves as a verbal representation of the conceptual metaphor *life is light* in “I see the boys of summer”: “sons of flint and pitch”, “your polestar neighbor, sun of another street”. Such potential substitution enriches the associative frame of the concept of youth, adding an element with the meaning “bringing light”—that is, “bringing life”—into the world.

The same pun appears in the poem “In the Beginning”: “The substance forked that narrowed the first sun”. Kidder (2015) states that sun-son substitution may suggest an allusion to Adam, “the first son” of God. However, in “Vision and Prayer” the poet again uses the ambiguity of these sounds, but this time his intention is to allude to Christ in the lines: “But the loud sun / Christens down / The sky / ... / in his world’s wound”.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Poetic language presents an extraordinary use of all possible sound patterns, lexical and sound repetitions capable of evoking synaesthetic sensations when reading the texts. The elements of the poetic texts appear to be tightly intertwined. Deliberately chosen phonetic patterns can change the semantic content of the text. Such sound metaphors have a clear expressive function and the power of inducing emotions. The sound devices are able to reinforce the poet’s message and thus their analysis should be incorporated into the interpretation of poems.

The results show that metaphoric meaning in poetry can be constructed with the help of sound-to meaning mappings, which can be regarded as instances of sound-meaning symbolic associations. The occurrence of such associations supports the hypothesis of non-arbitrary relation between sound and meaning developed by many researchers (Blasi, Wichmann, Hammarstrom, Stadler, & Christiansen, 2016; Svantesson, 2017; Rabaglia, Maglio, Krehm, Seok, & Trope, 2016; Dingemanse, Blasi, Lupyan, Christiansen, & Monaghan, 2015; Walker & Parameswaran, 2019).

Such sound devices as alliteration, assonance and consonance are used by the author to rearrange or to focus reader’s attention, to convey emotional charge of the poem, to accentuate the meaning of lexical units or to evoke auditory associations, related to the described object or phenomenon. In some cases, phonetic puns become crucial for understanding the meaning of the lines and for decoding of author’s message and intention.

A potential task for further research is to investigate a larger corpus of poetic contexts with specific sound patterns that may convey emotions and get or alternate the semantic meaning. Another significantly important task is a comparative analysis of original poems and their translations in terms of sound-meaning relations and their expressive potential in different languages.

In sum, the findings show that sound is one of the key poetic elements which can carry a specific semantic meaning of its own but is still highly dependent on the context. Sound metaphors in Dylan Thomas’s poetry reinforce the emotional influence upon the readers and help organize the poetic texts at the semantic level.

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