

Phonaesthemes in Standard Arabic
Asst. Prof. Mohammed Nasser Abdulsada
College of Basic Education, Wasit University,
mohmednasser@rocketmail.com

Abstract

Phonaesthemes are a set of sound-inspired meanings in a language. They represent words, nouns, adjectives, or verbs whose general meaning is related. The present paper sheds light on this area by investigating phonaesthemes in Standard Arabic through a broader consideration of all the possible syllables and sound sequences which are expressive of phonaesthemes. There exist in Standard Arabic certain sound syllables, mainly initial ones, that manifest a noticeable similarity in meaning and this paper attempts at investigating this area. Firstly, phonaesthemes are introduced as to definition, history, and cross-linguistic familiarity. Then, phonaesthemes in Standard Arabic are listed along with a broader discussion. Finally, a few conclusions, results, and implications are proposed at the end of the research.

Key Words: Standard Arabic, Sound-meaning relation, Sound symbolism, Phonaesthetics, Arbitrariness, Ideophone.

1. Introductory Remarks

Phonaesthemes denote a relationship between the sounds used in a word and the meaning of that word, in addition to the common meanings shared by all the words with the same sound sequence. This area of meaning is also termed as *sound symbolism*, *ideophone*, *phonaesthetics*, *phonaesthetics*, *phonesemantics*, *phonosymbolism*, and *iconicity*.

Phonaestheme can be seen as a semantic significance of certain letters or words, especially at the beginning of certain words. Such sounds often imply a common area of reference between the words related. Words can be regarded as phonaesthetically significant if the initial sound pairs are the same and the meaning of every single word is similar to the others.

Arbitrariness has always been a significant feature that rises to surface whenever the meaning-form relationship is debated or questioned. Bolinger (1949) stressed the importance of comparative linguistics when dealing with semantics. He viewed the resemblance in meaning among certain

words as a justification to the fundamental assumptions of linguists that language is arbitrary.

Pharies (1985:90ff) viewed onomatopoeia as a sign of sound symbolism, being expressive of all the imagined iconicity of any word in the language. Pharies based his assumption on the sound studies that have raised the issue of iconicity and phonesthetics.

Smith (2014) maintained that blends in English are phonaesthetic in sense. He investigated all the blends listed in the Oxford English Dictionary, and he found that blends imply a sort of sound symbolism. The author cited blends such as *smog*, *smarm*, *smash* as having an insulting or pejorative sense.

2. Background and Related Studies

The relationship between sound and meaning, whether in general or in a given language, has seen various attempts of investigation and analysis. Several previous studies in English, as well as in other languages, have proposed a considerable set of sound-inspired meanings, both in vowels and consonants. The issue of sound-meaning relationship has attracted a lot of scholarly work. Moreover, such relationship between certain sounds and meanings or their semantic reference has always been an area of significance and debate. Phonesthetics is the study of the relationship between sounds and words. Crystal (2008:361) maintained that "phonaesthetics is a term sometimes used in linguistics to refer to the study of the aesthetic properties of sound, especially the sound symbolism attributable to individual sounds. Cases such as the [ip] vowels in a language signaling smallness (cf. *teeny*, *weeny*, etc.) have been suggested as evidence for a limited sound/meaning correspondence in language. The sound units concerned being referred to as 'phonaesthetics'. The branch of stylistics which studies such expressive effects (e.g. the onomatopoeia of poetry) is known as phonostylistics."

The term 'phonaesthetics' was first used by Firth (1930:184) for sequences like the *sl-* of *slack*, *slouch*, *slush* and the *-ump* of *slump*, *bump*, *dump*. Firth described these elements as affective and notes that they have become identifiable after repeated appearances in particular kinds of

context. 'It is all a matter of habit' (187). But establishing the nature of phonaesthemes and deciding which parts of words can plausibly be regarded as phonaesthetic (or phonaesthemic) elements is not at all straightforward.

Adams (2001:121) maintains "There is obviously some-thing non-arbitrary in the following examples of sound-denoting words syntactically detached from their surroundings: Check for gas leaks. Light a match and – whoomp/ Thwack! Boston's Jim Rice sends the first pitch sailing over the left-field wall."

Pharies (1958:95ff) held that sound symbolism can be accounted for through psychological and semantic foregrounds in order to understand the iconic similarity between words.

Käsmann (1992) investigated a few similarity-based combinations of sounds in English, mainly the letters *sl-* where he stressed that this sequence of sounds carries a rather multiple scope of meanings. He listed more than 80 words beginning with *sl-*, which he proposed as being iconic. The author exemplified *slu-*, *sle-* and *slo-* as sound combinations that suggest laziness, awkwardness, and incompetency respectively.

Crystal (2008:443) added "sound-symbolism is used in semiotics and linguistics to refer to a direct association between the form and the meaning of language: the sounds used reflect properties of the external world, as in cases of onomatopoeia (e.g. cuckoo, murmur, crash) and other forms of synaesthesia (e.g. *sl-* in such words as *slimy*, *slither*). Sound-symbolic words are also sometimes referred to as mimetic."

Fromkin et al. (2014:4) stated that "There is some sound symbolism in language—that is, words whose pronunciation suggests their meanings. Most languages contain onomatopoeic words like buzz or murmur that imitate the sounds associated with the objects or actions they refer to. But even here, the sounds differ from language to language and reflect the particular sound system of the language. In English cock-a-doodle-doo is an onomatopoeic word whose meaning is the crow of a rooster, whereas in Finnish the rooster's crow is kukkokiekuu. Forget gobble gobble when you're in Istanbul; a turkey in Turkey goes glu-glu."

They (ibid.:5) added "Sometimes particular sound combinations seem to relate to a particular concept. Many English words beginning with *gl* relate to sight, such as glare, glint, gleam, glitter, glossy, glaze, glance, glimmer, glimpse, and glisten. However, *gl* words and their like are a very small part of any language, and *gl* may have nothing to do with "sight" in another language, or even in other words in English, such as gladiator, glucose, glory, glutton, globe, and so on. To know a language we must know words of that language."

Booij (2007:22) believes that "The overview of word creation does not exhaust the set of special form-meaning correspondences in words. Sound symbolism exists in words beginning with the same sound sequence. For instance, words with initial *sw*- typically denote swinging movements (sweep, swing, swingle, etc.), and the following Dutch words with *kr*- all refer to unpleasant, twisted notions: *krijts* "to shout", *kramp* "cramp", *krank* "ill", *krimp* "shrink". The similarity at a more abstract level between morphology proper and word creation is that both are based on patterns of paradigmatic relationships between sets of words."

Jakobson and Waugh (2002:190ff) maintained that the purpose of a speech sound and the abstract meaning could be expressive of a symbolic connotation or relation.

Phonesthemes or the issue of sound-meaning relationship has much been discussed and investigated across different languages. Adams (2001:24-27) listed more than nine paired letters or sound which carry certain meanings in them. As early as the 1920s, Jespersen (1922) and Sapir (1929) proposed that short vowels in English and in other languages in the world express smallness. Hence, they both viewed this meaningful feature as a universal aspect that is found in other languages.

In English, phonesthemes have been studied in more than one attempt by different scholars and linguists. Throughout the 1940s, several attempts have been made by some scholars in investigating phonaesthemes. Firth's (1930:184ff) study is a pioneering scholarship into the relationship between certain sounds and meanings. He (ibid.) listed thirteen initial sequences of sound combinations which he claimed to have suggested certain meanings. Of these, for instance, are the combinations *sl*- denoting a sense of

pejoration as in *slack, slouch, slush, slime, sloppy, sluggard, slattern, slit, slay, slant, slither, slink, slaver, slump, slate, dr-* denoting hanging and falling as in *drip, drop, droop*, and *kl-* denoting clumsiness or stupidity as in *clay, clot, clod, cloy, clumsy, cling*.

In 1946, Householder published a study in which he expressly maintained that there is a problematic connection between some words and their forms in English. Householder's (1946) paper shed light on the very connection between sounds and their graphic form through derivation and other word formations.

Sturtevant (1947:109) identified a few initial sound clusters that are thought of being semantically meaningful, including *kr-* (sudden or loud noise) as in *crash, crack, crank, gl-* (light) as in *glare, gleam, glow, gloom*, and *fl-* (fast movement) as in *flicker, flitter, flame, flounce, flash*.

Bolinger (1949) dedicated a whole book for this phenomenon whereby he raised the issue of non-arbitrary associations in several languages between meanings and form. His study tackled sound-meaning relation in three languages (English, French, and Italian).

Marchand (1966:315-335) identified ten initial sound sequences with a significant aspect of a remarkably common sense or meaning. These are *st-, kr-, sw-, tw-, str-, skw-, sn-, sl-, kl-, and gr-*. The senses included in these initial syllables ranged from generic adjectives, physical attributes, actions, movement, to disturbance.

Cassidy (1983) investigated the semantic extension of the initial sounds *ker-* in more than a hundred examples. The author found that words beginning with *cr-, cul-, and col-* share close meanings, citing Scottish English as a rich source of iconicity.

Bowles (1995:104) investigated phonaesthemes in English by undertaking a considerable investigation of the words listed in the English dictionaries. He suggested nine phonaesthematic syllables used at the beginning of words.

Crystal (2002) claimed that *sl-* initial syllables in English carry negative as well as non-negative connotations, following comparing and counting all

the words beginning with this syllable. He (ibid.) also based his account on several English dictionaries which he consulted for his study.

Bergen (2004) elaborated on the significance of sound-form meaning from a psychological perspective, claiming that semantics is affected by psychological variables. The author based his claims on a few lists of phonaesthemes and he has cited the various correlated meanings as evidence of sound-form relation.

A recent account on English phonaesthematic associations by Reay (2006) suggested six sounds or sound combinations with a possible association of meaning. Reay's study stated that *sk-*, *sl-*, and *kl-* denote a physical movement or action.

As for other languages, phonaesthemes have also been found to be significant and remarkable. Heinsoo and Saar (2015) analysed specific phonologically meaningful syllables in four Finnic languages (Estonian, Finnish, Ingrian, and Votic). They contrasted these syllables between the four languages and they found that expressive verbs may carry similar meanings in their roots or stems. They also noted that initial consonant clusters in these languages denote considerable similarities in a few related meanings.

Haynie et al. (2014) focused on the covert symbolisms found in the sounds of some indigenous languages of Australia. The most significant associations of meaning that have been found in their study were the locative and physical connotations denoting smallness, nearness, and proximity, having concluded that such connotations can be meaningful only if they are attached to vowel segments in the words given.

Abelin's (2014) study has been concerned with phonaesthemes in Swedish brand names. Abelin analyzed the Swedish lexicon with emphasis on the sound symbolic properties of initial and final consonant clusters. He found that every constructed word is interpreted correctly by at least some dimensions such as lengthening, reduplication and illegal phonotactics.

Bordbar and Kambuzya (2016) reported in their contrastive study investigating sound-meaning relation in three languages, English, Persian, and Spanish, that no absolute arbitrariness can be established. They found

that a continuum of sound-meaning can demonstrate the order and degree iconicity.

Ibarretxe-Antuñano (2009) elaborated on the relationship between movement imitatives, i.e. sound symbolic expressions for the characterization of movement and their utilisation in the lexicalisation and description of motion events in Basque. He found that the Basque initial syllables carry certain phonesthematic meanings where nine categories of movements and positions have been identified in relation to similarity of sounds, based on a lexical comparison of words.

3. Methodology

The paper is a descriptive account in a rather quantitative approach of analysis without any frequencies or percentages. It focuses on all the initial consonantal sequences that may carry possible or related meanings. The examples and meanings suggested are self-generated., i.e., they are based on the researcher's own thorough analysis. Additionally, two Arabic dictionaries have been consulted as a model for glossemes or words. They are; معجم اللغة العربية المعاصرة and مختار الصحاح.

4. Realization of Phonaesthemes in SA

There is a considerable amount of sounds and sound sequences in Standard Arabic (SA) that demonstrate specific meanings, especially in initial consonants.

5. Syllables and Senses

There are certain syllables and sounds, mainly initial ones, whose meaning in one way or another expresses a common sense in the words related. Below is an account of these syllables along with the derived meanings. The categories are classed alphabetically within which the related letters are listed.

١. بد

This syllable implies initiating, launching, starting, or bringing forth, as in;

بدأ *to start*

to initiate بدر

to innovate بدع

٢.بر

When used initially, these two sounds suggest rise, coming, advance, initiation, arrival, or a significant growth, as in;

to rise برز

to be volunteer برع

to glimmer برق

to spring forth برعم

to create, to originate برأ

٣.بل

This is a syllable that often suggests deepening, or moving inwards, and the following words express that sense;

to swallow بلع

to reach بلغ

٤.جز

Most words starting with this syllable imply shortening, clipping, cutting, or stripping, as in;

to clip جز

to cut جزر

to cut جزم

to curtail, to shorten جزل

٥. جسـ

These two sounds suggest touching, close connection or relatedness, as in;

body جسـد

body جسـم

to bridge, to connect جسـر

to touch جسـ

٦. جمـ

When these two sound merge in a single syllable, they suggest gathering, solidity, or bringing together, as in;

to freeze جمـد

to gather جمـع

to assemble in multitude جمـهـر

to add جمـل

٧. حرـ

This initial sequence of consonants suggests danger, gravity, seriousness, or risk, as:

war حرـب

heat حر

burning حرـق

to deprive from حَرَمَ

illegal حرام

Related to this syllable are a few words whose sense implies movement, as in;

to move حَرَكَ

to plough حَرَثَ

to slant, to deviate حَرَفَ

٨. خَشَب

It is a syllable the sense of which suggests rudeness, coarseness, or solidity, as in;

wood خَشَب

coarse خَشِنَ

Derived from this syllable is another sense that carries the meaning of fear, awe, or submission, as in;

to fear خَشِيَ

to be submissive خَشَعَ

٩. خَطَب

These two fricatives suggest danger, risk, hurt, damage, and gravity. Many words in SA beginning with this syllable imply these senses;

danger, risk خَطَرَ

wrong, problem خَطَبَ

mistake, to mistake خَطَأَ

خطيئة *sin*

١٠. خر

A syllable that suggests in one way or another a sense of breaking into or going through, as in;

خرم *to perforate*

خرق *to penetrate*

خرز *to pierce*

خرج *to come out*

١١. خف

A syllable that suggests lessening, minimizing, diminishing, or retarding, as in;

خفف *to lessen, to decrease*

خفت *to faint*

خفض *to lower*

خفق *to pulsate*

خاف *to fear*

١٢. دح

Here, the meaning is concerned with rejection, defiance, or challenge, as in;

دحض *to refute*

دحر *to defeat*

١٣. رج

A syllable that suggests irritation, shaking, instability, or vibrating, as in;

to shake رج

to stir, to agitate رجف

to make probable رجح

to shake, to move رج

to vibrate ررج

١٤. رك

A syllable that gives the sense of attaching, touching, close movement, or depending, as in;

to ride ركب

to rely on ركن

to bow down ركع

to be supported ركز

to pause on the ground ركد

١٥. رد

This is a syllable that may imply replying, responding, or reacting, as in;

to reply, to respond رد

to deter ردع

to return ردم

to repeat back ردد

16. رم

These two sounds imply a physical or bodily movement, as in;

to glance رَمَق

to blink رَمَش

to hit رَمَى

17. سم

The words here share the sense of thickness, filling, bulkiness, or to be in a block, as in;

thickness سُمُك

to fatten, to be fat سَمَّنَ

18. سح

A syllable that gives the sense of pulling, attracting, or steering towards a certain direction, as in;

to pull سَحَب

to drag سَحَلَ

19. عص

It is a syllable that suggests storming, heavy striking, or violent raging, as in;

to storm عَصَفَ

to be nervous عَصِبَ

hurricane اعْصَار

to disobey عصى

disobedience عصيان

٢٠. عضد

A syllable that implies strength, connection, or building, as in;

bone عَضِمَ

to be muscular عَضَلَ

to support عَضَدَ

٢١. عقم

This syllable suggests deficiency or lack, as in;

to sterile عَقَمَ

to be infertile عقم

sterility عقر

٢٢. زر

This syllable implies embedding, implanting, or cause something to grow or develop;

to plant زرع

to inject زرق

٢٣. سبب

In this syllable, the meaning is closer to probing, searching, or poking into, as in;

to swim سبج

to probe سبر

to proceed سبق

٢٤. طم

In this syllable, the sense is closer to covering, or concealing, as in;

to bury طمر

to remove طمس

to cover with water طمّ

٢٥. غر

This is a syllable with the sense of inserting, piercing into, or plunging, as in;

to pierce غرز

to plant غرس

to dip غرف

to sink غرق

٢٦. غف

This syllable implies pardon, unattentiveness, carelessness, or disregard, as in;

forget, overlook غفّل

pardon, forgive غفّر

to doze غفى

٢٧. غم

They refer to immersion, deepening, or going in;

to plunge غمق

to immerse in water غمس

to dip غمد

٢٨. فت

This is a syllable whose sense is always related to opening, inquiring, searching, or investigating. The following are the words exemplifying these senses;

to open فتح

to tear فتق

to inspect فتش

to break into pieces فتت

٢٩. قش

ق + شد

sweep قش

to skim قشط

to peel قشر

to scratch قشد

٣٠. كج

A syllable that suggests closing, restraining, confining, or holding back, as in;

to restrain كجح

to restrain كبت

to press كبس

to chain كبل

٣١. قص

They suggest breaking, clipping, or shortening;

to cut قص

to break قضم

to break short قصف

to cut قصل

to shorten قصر

to butcher قصب

٣٢. قط

These letters suggest cutting, clipping, separation, cropping, or curtailing, as there are a few words that share these senses;

cut قطع

to bite قطم

pick قطف

clip قظ

to make into pieces قَطَرَ

cut off قَطَلَ

٣٣. كَسَدَ

This sequence often implies breaking, curtailing, terminating, or finishing;

to break كَسَرَ

to darken, to eclipse كَسَفَ

to cripple كَسَحَ

to slump, to dull كَسَدَ

to be drowse, to be lazy كَسَلَ

٣٤. مَكَرَ

A syllable that carries the meaning of plotting, planning, or secretly devising and attempting, as in;

to deceive مَكَرَ

deception مَكِيدَةٌ

to empower, to make strong مَكَنَ

٣٥. هَلَعُ

This syllable gives the impression of running, restlessness, fear, agitation, or dismay as in;

to be restless هَلَعُ

to frighten هَلَلَ

to cause to perish هَلَكَ

to agitate هلوس

Come on! هلم

٣٦. نهـ

A syllable that suggests taking, holding, or gripping, as in;

to loot نهب

to seize نهش

to quaff نهل

to devour نهم

There is another sense related this syllable and which implies prevention, shouting, denial, or forbidding, as in;

to negate, to prohibit نهى

to rebuke نهر

to object ناهض

to shout نهق

٣٧. هر

A syllable that has a sense of running, fleeing, or moving disorderly, as in;

to run هرب

to walk هرول

to run towards something هرع

to cause disorder هرج

38. هد

When combined together, these two sounds imply destroying, terminating, or destructing, as in;

to destroy هدم

to demolish هد

to waste هدر

to threaten هدد

39. هز

This syllable expresses vocal effect or shock since there are several words beginning with these two sounds imply similarity in this sense;

to shock, to shake هز

هزم

to chant هزج

to laugh هزر

to joke, to be humorous هزل

to mock هزأ

thunder sound هزيم

40. رد

A syllable that suggests a response or reply-back, as in;

to reply رد

to repeat ردد

to succeed ردف

1. ذل

These two letters have the sense of close or intimate touching, petting or fondling as in;

to pet دلع

to coddle دلدل

to massage دلك

2. سد

The two letters carry the sense of locking or closing;

to close سد

to lock سدل

sacristan: protector of a holy place سادن

3. زل

They imply deviation;

to slip زلّ

to slip زلق

to slide زلج

to fawn زلف

4. غل

This sequence has a sense of closing, wrapping, or enclosing;

to close غلق

to wrap غلف

to tighten غلض

5. غط

They suggest immersion;

to immerse غطس

to cover غطى

5. Concluding Remarks

1. Most meanings are based on initial clusters. Because SA is mostly consonant-vowel in sequence, the occurrence of final or medial consonant clusters or adjacent consonants is very rare.

2. The examples discussed in this paper show a challenging evidence that there are certain syllables and sound sequences in SA that imply common meanings or references.

3. The striking relatedness found between certain two-sound syllables and the meanings expressed by the related words is an indication that sound-meaning relation in SA is realizable and traceable.

4. The fact that the apparently noticeable relatedness between certain words in a language might have triggered, during some periods of the history of that language, the creation of new words following an early two-letter syllable, is still controversial even though it is highly questioned.

5. Interestingly, there are certain sound combinations that may manifest a meaning

relevancy to various senses. In this token, the *مر* is mostly associated combination

with locative, non-animate things, such as; مرتبة / مركب / مرج / مرسى

6. It can be seen that most initial letters in the phonaesthemes proposed in this paper are fricatives, while most post initial letters are plosives. The connection, if there is any, between the manner by which sounds are produced and the senses or meanings derived from these sounds along with their semantic relatedness may signal the significance of certain sounds in the production of meaning-related words, as it is the case with fricatives.

The table below shows how some letters are combined to produce different senses.

Initial	Post-initial	Combination	Phonaesthematic sense	Lexicon
ب	د	بد	initiation	to start بدأ
ج	س	جسد	touching	to touch جس
خ	ش	خشد	coarseness	coarse خشن
ر	ج	رج	shaking	to agitate رجف

7. Phonaesthemes in English and SA can be compared and contrasted in order to check how different and similar they are.

8. The semantics of individual sounds, consonants or vowels, whether in SA or in English, has not been so far investigated thoroughly, and therefore a further analysis is needed to check the possibility of sound-meaning relationship at the single sound level.

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دلالة الصوت اللغوي في اللغة العربية

الأستاذ المساعد: محمد ناصر عبد السادة

أستاذ اللغة الإنكليزية المساعد - كلية التربية الأساسية - جامعة واسط

mohmednasser@rocketmail.com

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الملخص

يتناول البحث دلالة الصوت في اللغة العربية وما يتضمن هذه الدلالة من معاني وإشارات وذلك من خلال تقصي وتحليل بعض المقاطع الصوتية للأحرف المستخدمة في بداية الكلمات وقد استندت فرضية وجود دلالة معنوية للمقاطع الصوتية المستخدمة في بداية بعض الكلمات إلى الدلالات والجوانب المعنوية المشتركة أي المعاني التي تم ملاحظتها بين أكثر من كلمة تبدأ بذات المقطع، ويمهد البحث في البداية إلى الموضوع من خلال التعريف بهذه الدلالات الصوتية ومضامينها ثم يتطرق البحث إلى عدة دراسات سابقة تناولت هذا الموضوع في لغات أخرى، ومن ثم يسرد جميع المقاطع التي تحمل معاني مشتركة في ما بينها والموجودة في اللغة العربية، وفي نهاية البحث تُطرح عدة استنتاجات إلى جانب بعض الدراسات المستقبلية المقترحة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة العربية، العلاقة بين الصوت والمعنى، رمزية الحرف والصوت، الاعتبارية اللغوية، دلالة الصوت اللغوي.