



# Iconicity and Indexicality: A Perceptual Approach to Language

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## Introduction

In the present article I discuss the nature of phonosymbolism in poetry. My aim is to define more clearly the notion of phonosymbolism as it arises from two main sources: sounds, and the images sounds signify. Charles S. Peirce's theoretical apparatus will prove to be central to the present analysis, insofar as the sign will be conceived as the triadic dynamic relation of three entities: sign, object, and interpretant. When the sign is in relation with itself, it gives origin to an icon, an index, and a diagram. Both icon and index will be useful to show the differences between symbolism as it derives from the perception of icons and symbolism when it arises from indices. To illustrate my hypotheses I will refer to selected poems from English literature.

## 1. The Phonological Figure

Let me begin with a quote from Joseph Trapp (1742: 64):

Whether it was from Chance, or Design, that these Verses, by their very Sound, represent the Thing they describe, is not worth enquiring. It is certain, some Words are so naturally formed for this Purpose, and Poetry for the proper Disposal of them, that this Felicity can't well be avoided; and 'tis to Chance alone we are often indebted for these beautiful Echo's.

Sometimes, however, they are undoubted Effect of Art. Whence soever they proceed, they frequently occur, and are an ample Proof of the Force and Elegance of the poetic Style.

Yet according to Jakobson, the main feature of poetry is the repetition of the phonological figure. The network of connections on which poetry roots its nature is above all a phonic artifice shaped by the poet in such a way as to induce in the reader's mind images and emotions deriving from the quality of sounds: we may say that acoustic images evoke visual images. The correspondence between sounds and psychic reactions, that is, between acoustic substance and the network of meanings and impressions thus evoked, dates back to Plato's *Cratylus*.

An example of iconicity comes to us from Pope's *Essay on Criticism*:

True Ease in Writing comes from Art, not Chance,  
As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance.  
'Tis not enough no Harshness gives Offence,  
The Sound must seem an Echo to the Sense  
Soft is the Strain when Zephyr gently blows,  
And the smooth Stream in smoother Numbers flows;  
But when loud Surges lash the sounding Shore,  
The hoarse, rough Verse shou'd like the Torrent roar.

These lines illustrate the strong relationship between the phonetic and the semantic levels of the text: The Sound must seem an Echo to the Sense. For instance, in lines 8 and 9 the use of fricatives and nasals, as well as the repetition of mid-vowels, reinforces the idea of the softness of breeze and echoes the idea of smoothness. In lines 4 and 5 the palatal fricatives are meant to evoke hoarseness and harshness.

Although phoneme is, by definition, the minimal unit of language which has no meaning, it is undeniable that sounds support meaning effects in Pope. In the above example phonemes or sequences of phonemes have a connotative semantic value. This "natural" sound-meaning relation is a representation mainly based on perceived similarity, on our perception of the world.

## 2. The Autonomy of Signans

In the last two decades a great attention has been focussed in the investigation on the autonomy of the sign, in other words, if the sign can convey meaning in itself independently of its semantic content. The idea, suggested by Jakobson, leads us to question again on the ‘natural’ powers of language, the first of which is the iconic power, that is to say, the natural analogy or resemblance between the sign and the object. Jakobson exemplified this similarity through the famous Caesar’s phrase, *veni, vidi, vici* which mirrors the chronological sequence and the rapidity of Caesar’s victory at Farnace.

## 3. Indexicality

In the present paper my interest is focussed on the power of iconicity at the phonological level, but iconicity models every level of language. Iconicity in poetry is realized by means of rhyme and prosody, stanzaic ordering and typographic layout on the page.

The act of reading is manipulated by the poet through the skilful use of the layout, the line and stanza breaks, punctuation. Spatial dislocation of words and/or letters are used to create an iconic visual poetry of great interest for the analyst as well as for the reader.

George Herbert and E.E. Cummings serve as examples of the way in which the disposition of words on the page can be exploited in order to convey meaning even before the reading of the poem.

Herbert used the technique of the *Carmen figuratum*, very popular in the 16th and 17th centuries, also known as the “hieroglyphic form.” It consists of a particular typographical layout: the verses of the poem were printed so as to form a shape or a design on the page. The layout of the pattern poem below gives hints to the reader about the meaning of the poem. The title, together with the typographical layout, reinforces the themes of wings and flight. The pattern of the lines is indexical, that is, points to the main theme of resurrection. It goes without saying that this type of indexicality, that I would call “surface indexicality,” is the simplest and the easiest to catch by the reader.

Lord, Who createdst man in wealth and store,  
Though foolishly he lost the same,  
Decaying more and more  
Till he came  
Most poor:  
With Thee  
O let me rise,  
As larks, harmoniously,  
And sing this day Thy victories:  
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.  
My tender age in sorrow did beginne;  
And still with sickness and shame  
Thou didst so punish sinne,  
That I became  
Most thinne.  
With Thee  
Let me combine,  
And feel this day Thy victorie;  
For, if I limp my wing on Thine,  
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

— G. Herbert, “Easter Wings”

E.E.Cummings provides a similar example: in the poem below loneliness is compared to a falling leaf. The typographical pattern suggests the image of a leaf that is falling on the ground.

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— e.e. cummings, *L(A*

This sort of resemblance between layout and meaning is a kind of similarity that we may label, after Peirce, indexical analogy in the sense that the layout directly points, at least, to one of the meanings of the poem. E.E. Cummings' poem is indexical in that the disposition of letter and brackets reveal the poet's intention of paralleling the meaning of the poem and the motion of a falling leaf.

#### 4. Phonoindexicality

Jakobson (1960: 356) underlined the importance of phonetic phenomena in literary and non-literary production, proposing to oppose the combination axis, correspondent to syntagmatic relation, to the selection axis, correspondent to paradigmatic relation. This procedure is synthesized in his "Projection Principle": "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination."

This means that the network of associations on which poetry roots its proper bases is above all a phonological device forged by the poet in such a way as to evoke in the reader images deriving from the quality of sound: that is to say, acoustic images evoke visual images.

Let us focus on another example of a more complex kind of similarity deriving from the reader's perceptive ability of connecting articulatory facts with meaning:

Summer ends now; now, barbarous in beauty, the stooks rise  
 Around; up above, what wind-walks! what lovely behaviour  
 Of silk-sack clouds! has wilder, wilful-wavier  
 Meal-drift moulded ever and melted across skies?

I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes  
 Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour  
 And, eyes, heart, what looks, what lips yet gave you a  
 Rapturous love's greeting of realer, of rounder replies?

And the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding shoulder  
Majestic — as a stallion stalwart, very-violet-sweet!  
These things, these things were here and but the beholder  
Wanting; which two when they once meet,  
The heart rears wings bold and bolder  
And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.

— G.M. Hopkins, *Hurrying in Harvest*

It was Hopkins himself who stated that poetry is “speech wholly or partially repeating the same figure of sounds”. In the sonnet the high percentage of fricatives is meant to parallel the whistling of wind which, at the thematic level, is not only the voice of nature but also the voice of ‘our Saviour’ who communicates His presence to the human beings. Hence the phonological figure is semantic figure, and the acoustic images overlap the visual images in a phonoiconic use of language.

Indexicality is exemplified in Hopkins’s sonnet by the hyphenated words in the first lines as well as by a skilful alternation of front raising vowels and back vowels. The combination of apophonic compounds (wind-walks, silk-sack, wilful-wavier) contributes to convey, with a minimum expenditure of expression, a series of images, also deriving from the unusual collocation of words belonging to distant semantic fields. The opposition of phonemes /i:/ and /a/ in the apophonic compounds is indexical of the occlusion and opening of mouth in the act of articulating the vowels and they can be said to stand in an indexical relation to the objects they depict, the cone-shaped stooks.

There is an interplay of iconicity and indexicality within the sonnet which ensnare the ear of the reader and leads him toward the chosen interpretation.

The reader perceives iconic elements in a poem via the semantic level of the text, and never vice versa. We may say that in these cases iconicity and indexicality are semantically motivated and their perception is directly proportional to the interpretative ability of the reader who connects meaning with form.

Jakobson (1985: 59) asks an interesting question:

Are the designs disclosed by linguistic analysis deliberately and rationally planned in the creative work of a poet, and is he really aware of them? A calculus of probability as well as an accurate comparison of poetic texts with other kinds of verbal messages demonstrates that the striking particularities in the poetic selection, accumulation, juxtaposition, distribution, and exclusion of diverse phonological and grammatical classes cannot be viewed as negligible accidentals governed by the rule of chance.

Jakobson's own answer is a further question about the possibility of the reader ability of catching so refined iconic and indexical allusion to the thematic level of the sonnet. "Intuition may act as the main or, not seldom, even sole designer of the complicated phonological and grammatical structures in the writings of individual poets." (p.68)

## 5. The Perceptive Explanation

According to the perceptive explanation the phoneme [i] is associated to the dimension of smallness in that it establishes a unique bilateral one-to-one relation between the phoneme and the object the phoneme is applied to. Studies in the field of acoustic phonetics have shown that the frequency of a sound is inversely proportional to the dimension of the object producing the sound: this fact can be easily explained observing that the occlusion of mouth gives origin to the production of high pitch vowels. Bertinetto (1983) notices that associations of this kind can be referred to extralinguistic characteristics of sociological nature. The habit of matching sound with meaning would be in tune with the Peircean triadic nature of sign and, being language symbolic in nature, sound-symbol is a sign which establishes a conventional relation with the denotatum: this process is named phonoiconism in Peircean terms. Bertinetto distinguishes phonoiconism from phono-indexicality: while the first term should be applied to common phonosymbolism in which a sound/phoneme, considered as an icon, is a signans which mirrors the phonic quality of its signatum; the second term should be used for the signans when it is considered as a index which, by its nature, recalls its signatum via image.

Neurolinguistic experiments (see, for example, Caramazza, 1992) have shown that the lexical meaning/signatum does not establish any relation with the signans in that the speaker, after perceiving a sensorial stimulus from whatever source, auditive olfactory gustative or tactile, enters a unique

neuronal area where all meanings are stored. As a consequence, the matching between a sensorial stimulus, the phoneme [i] in the specimen, and a meaning, the diminutive status in our case, is due only to frequency in the lexicon of words/lexemes formed by high pitch sounds and the object they depict. According to the sound-iconic hypothesis, high pitch in tone languages refers to smallness; whereas the sound-indexical hypothesis indicates fronting and raising of vowels and consonants as index of smallness, a directive stimulus toward the idea of little dimension. Bertinetto cites the results of statistic measurements (Chastaing, 1965; Brown, 1955; Bertinetto, 1981) among a wide number of different languages, according to which words indicating small dimension present a non casual distribution of fronting and raising vowels, while central and back vowels are more frequent in words indicating ample dimensions.

In a more recent study, Sweetser (1990: 6) asserts “our linguistic system is inextricably interwoven with the rest of our physical and cognitive selves.” This means that what is generally known as one of the main features of poetry, that is, phonosymbolism, may find a scientific explanation in neurolinguistic investigations.

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