

Challenging the Morpheme: Cross-Linguistic Occurrences of Phonaesthetic Structures¹

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Abstract

The article below sets out to demonstrate that a long-time underestimated concept in linguistics, the phonaestheme, may find its rightful place in morphological theory alongside the morpheme, traditionally defined as the smallest linguistic unit carrying meaning. The analysis includes a critical survey of literature in the field intended to offer a more comprehensive and integrated theoretical perspective on the nature of the phonaestheme and reject the idea that the sign is exclusively arbitrary. Once this objective has been achieved, the focus of the article will switch to determining how phonaesthetic meaning occurs cross-linguistically and to what extent. In order to achieve this, Margaret Magnus's phonosemantic classification will be discussed and applied in the case of Romanian phonaesthemes.

Keywords: arbitrariness of the sign, phonosemantics, phonaesthesia, phonaesthemes, iconism

Introduction

The idea of the arbitrariness of the sign has dominated the landscape of semantics for more than a century, with linguists –

notably Ferdinand de Saussure – arguing in favour of the conventional nature of meaning as reflected by words. Yet, every now and then, linguists seem to have shied away from the mainstream and ventured into more unexplored grounds on meaning giving rise to a rather niche domain, phonosemantics. The present article explores some of the theoretical concerns around the issue of meaning and how it reflects at the level of the sound or sound cluster and seeks to determine how phonaesthemes occur cross-linguistically. In pursuing these general objectives, I will attempt to integrate phonaesthesia as a form of sound symbolism in the more comprehensive framework of morphology – thereby implicitly challenging the status of the morpheme as the smallest meaningful linguistic unit – and determine the extent to which phonaesthemes transcend language borders.

Un-learning the Arbitrariness of the Sign

One of the most prominent linguists to discuss the validity of the arbitrariness of the sign is Roman Jakobson who argued that Saussure's dissociation of the *signifiant* from the *signifié* produces a fracture at the very heart of the linguistic sign, which, he suggests, limits considerably the linguistic perspective:

as long as linguists consistently applied the isolating method postulated by the neogrammarian school, these two aspects of linguistic phenomena, the sensible and the intelligible, were envisaged quite uniquely as entirely independent and closed domains. Thus, the unity of the sign was disregarded. The study of speech sounds cut off from their significant function inevitably lost its intimate connection with linguistics as a semiotic discipline and threatened to become merely a branch of physiology and of acoustics, whereas the strictly linguistic problem of meaning was either forgotten in the search for their psychological background or mistaken for the extrinsic “realm of nonlinguistic objects” (according to Charles Morris’ terse formulation; see 1938, 1946). (396)

Instead, he argues in favour of a more holistic approach contending that, regardless of the size of the linguistic unit, it “must be twofold and comprise both a *signans* and a *signatum*” (396), and that includes the speech sound which must be interpreted semiotically, in any language, by virtue of its individual distinctive features, for example plosive/nasal, voiced/voiceless, etc.

All differences of phonemes in any language can be resolved into simple and undecomposable binary oppositions of distinctive features. Hence all phonemes of any language can be fully dissociated into further indivisible features. The pattern of phonemes . . . can be reduced to a net of few distinctive features (a system, one might term it, of primary particles): the parallel to the recent development of physical concepts is complete. When ascertaining thus the intrinsic composition of a phoneme, we apply strictly SEMIOTIC CRITERIA, just as for the higher units: the *signans* is envisaged in relation to its *signatum*. (398)

As the author points out, this approach is very much consistent with the treatment applied to all semantic units whether we refer to words or morphemes. Unlike them, however, the type of meaning attached to individual sounds tends to be – as many will argue – more intuitive, even subjective based on the linguistic experience of a speaker or group of speakers. Hence, the door is open for a field of research that has become particularly productive over the past couple of decades despite its complexity triggered by often overlapping concepts, sophisticated, state-of-the-art research methods, and a huge body of empirical data for analysis that expands across languages.

Margaret Magnus points out that – unlike other philosophers and linguists of the time – Jakobson’s work in the field was not marginal, with the issue of the interrelatedness between sound and meaning recurring throughout his writings indicating that “he was a philosopher who tended to appeal primarily to his readers’ reason and intuitions” (29). Jakobson’s interest in phonosemantics, she argues, stems from his studies in poetics:

He studied poetry throughout his life, and especially in later years, he wrote numerous analyses of poems seeking to get at what it was about the interrelations and juxtapositions of sound and gave the poem its powerful emotional effect. Jakobson's thought resembled Grammont's in that to him, poetry existed when a writer was being attentive to the effect of form on content. (29-30)

Whereas in everyday speech, the relationship between sound and meaning is rather subtle, nowhere is this interrelation more evident than in poetic discourse. Concepts such as 'sound iconicity,' 'sound symbolism,' 'onomatopoeia,' 'phonaesthesia,' etc. are very much central in the "linguistics of verse" – to quote the subtitle of one of Michael Ferber's books on stylistics – alongside suprasegmental aspects like rhyme and rhythm, syntactic issues like word order, etc. all of which contribute to the overall meaning of poetry. Yet, the question is to what extent is sound iconicity – which is largely associated with sound symbolism – present in everyday language and how – if possible – can it be accommodated in the more comprehensive landscape of traditional morphology?

In attempting to answer this question, Linda Waugh – Jakobson's collaborator in a number of publications – investigated the ability of sounds forming a word to "carry any cue about its meaning" (55). The first step in her analysis was to exclude image iconicity, i.e. sound patterns which carry meaning by virtue of their form, such as onomatopoeia and any instances of sound symbolism, thereby focusing on isomorphic iconicity, which she defines as the "consistency of form-meaning relation across words" (56). In other words, if a particular sound or cluster of sounds recurs formally across a set of words and displays a similarity of meaning or, as she calls it, "subparts of meaning" in the entire set, this will count as a case of isomorphic iconicity. The only problem in this logic, as she suggests, is that in traditional morphology the morpheme is described very much along the same lines (56). According to Waugh, iconicity tends to be evident at the level of the morpheme since it is easily recognizable across words such as 'blackberry' and 'daily,' for example. But it also occurs in submorphemes, that are defined as the recurrence of partial characteristics in a given set of

words. Words designating kinship like ‘brother,’ ‘mother,’ and ‘father’ all share ‘-ther’ but there is historical regularity in the occurrence of ‘th’ in ‘brother’ whereas such diachronic regularity does not exist in ‘mother’ and ‘father.’ Finally, iconicity, Waugh argues, also occurs at the level of the phonaestheme (58-59). The term, coined by John Rupert Firth in 1930, is essentially a combination of ‘phoneme’ and ‘synesthesia’ used to designate a sound or group of sounds different from a morpheme occurring in words sharing a semantic area (186-187). Some examples include /fl/ in ‘flap,’ ‘flare,’ ‘flee,’ ‘flick,’ ‘fling,’ etc. referring to some kind of movement and /sn/ in ‘snore,’ ‘snorke,’ ‘sneeze,’ ‘snout,’ etc. pointing to some aspect of the nose (Waugh 59). In Waugh’s view, these are all instances of isomorphic iconicity, which, as mentioned above, is different from instances of image iconicity, as for example is the case of onomatopoeia.

The idea that there are linguistic units smaller than the morpheme that may carry meaning has inspired other researchers to attempt to accommodate phonaesthemes in the more comprehensive framework of morphological theory. Like Jakobson and Waugh before them, Nayun Kwon and Erich R. Round argue in favour of a theoretical framework that would integrate phonaesthemes and confirm their status as recurring meaningful units (1). In order to confirm their hypothesis, they employ methods pertaining to Canonical Typology, a methodological framework used to deconstruct concepts and analyse linguistic features against a scale of typological variation. Despite the fact that Canonical Typology was not initially devised as one of the typical theoretical frameworks normally employed in morphological analysis, it “utilizes observations on a large number of empirically motivated variables to gauge the similarities and differences between linguistic structures (within or across languages)” (Bond 409). Hence its relevance in developing a set of criteria to indicate that, like morphemes, phonaesthemes may contribute to the development of a more coherent and comprehensive theoretical framework.

Following Greville G. Corbett’s model in measuring the canonicity of morphemes against a set of five criteria and using

examples provided by other linguists in previous research, Kwon and Round develop their own system of seven criteria, which they devise to analyse the degree to which phonaesthemes are canonical in terms of recurrence, form and meaning, distribution and transparency (13). The first criterion measuring the frequency among lexical items indicates the recurrence of phonaesthemes to various degrees. For example, *cl-* occurs in a number of lexical items such as *cluck*, *click*, *clap*, *clack*, *clash*, *clutter*, *clang*, *clank*, *clamber*, *clamour*, *clam*, *clump*, *clip* referencing a particular type of sound whereas *spr-* – meaning ‘spread’ is less frequent and occurs in words like *sprout*, *spread*, *spring*, *sprawl*, *sprinkle*. In this respect, *cl-* turns out to be more canonical than *spr-* (Marchand qtd. in Kwon and Round 13). As far as their frequency in parts of speech is concerned, which is the second criterion, phonaesthemes seem to occur in lexical words, as is the case of *gl-*, which is found in both nouns (*glass*, *glimmer*, *glimpse*) and verbs (*gleam*, *glisten*, *glow*, *glare*). Nevertheless, the authors point out the fact that this is not the case of *wh-* in question words and *th-* in demonstratives as they are typically categorised as submorphemes rather than phonaesthemes in the literature. Hence, in what regards the second criterion, phonaesthemes are non-canonical as they do not occur throughout the entire range of parts of speech (14).

Criteria three to five refer to the relationship between form and meaning in phonaesthemic structures. Criterion three is designed to measure image iconicity and it reveals that whereas some phonaesthemes are highly canonical, i.e. they are strongly image-iconic as there is a strong association between the acoustic effect they produce and what is meant (e.g. *-nk* meaning ‘resonant sounds cut short’ as in *bonk*, *clank*, *clunk*, *clik*, *boink*; *-ck* meaning ‘abruptly terminating sounds’ as in *whack*, *thwack*, *tick*) (Oswalt qtd. in Kwon and Round 15), others place themselves at the other end of the spectrum as they hardly manifest sound iconicity at all (e.g. *gl-* as in *gloss*, *glitter*, *glisten*) (Fordyce qtd. in Kwon and Round 15).

The next criterion argues that in the case of phonaesthemes, form corresponds to only one meaning. In other words, the form of

a highly canonical phonaestheme will only correspond to one meaning as is the case of *tr-* meaning 'tread' in *tread, tramp, trample, trip, trudge, trot*. Nevertheless, there are phonaesthemes which will pair with several meanings. *Sl-*, for example, may mean 'falling or sliding movement' (e.g. *slide, slither, slif, slouch, slump*), 'a falling blow' (e.g. *slay, slaughter, slit, sling, slash*, etc.), or 'slimy/slushy matter' (e.g. *sludge, slosh, sloppy*) (Marchand qtd. in Kwon and Round 15).

The fifth criterion is in reversed logic to the fourth and postulates that, typically, in phonaesthemes, meaning corresponds to only one form. As with previous criteria, the authors identify various levels of canonicity ranging from one meaning – 'swing' or 'sway' – as reflected in *sw-* (e.g. *sweep, swing, swap, swirl*, etc.) (Marchand qtd. in Kwon and Round 16) to one meaning – 'grasp' – occurring both in *cl-* (e.g. *clutch, claw, cling, close*, etc.) and in *gr-* (*grasp, grip, grab*, etc.) (Hutchins qtd. in Kwon and Round 16).

The sixth criterion scrutinizes the nature of phonaesthemes distributionally, more specifically in combination with non-recurrent residues. In this respect, phonaesthemes like *-i-* and *-o-*, meaning 'higher' and 'lower pitched' respectively, are highly canonical in the sense that their residues (*dr-p, cl-p, d-ng, pl-nk, t-ck*) do not recur (e.g. *drip, drop, clip, clop, ding, dong, plink, plonk, tick, tock*) (16). Other phonaesthemes are far less canonical as they either combine with recurrent residues – *sn-* meaning 'nasal' as in *snaffle, snap, snarl, sneeze*, etc. (Blust qtd. in Kwon and Round 17), also combining in *sneer* with *-eer* which means 'expression of contempt' in *sneer, leer, jeer* (Bergen qtd. in Kwon and Round 17) – or with no residue at all, as is the case of *-owl* meaning 'sinister' in *owl, prowl, foul, scowl*, etc. (Boliger qtd. in Kwon and Round 17).

Finally, the seventh criterion investigates the transparency of phonaesthemes and postulates that they combine agglutinatively with residues in order to form a stem. From this perspective, phonaesthemes are highly canonical. A less transparent case is that of the above-mentioned *-o-* and *-i-* in the case of which the residue is discontinuous (17).

Kwon and Round's complex analysis has revealed a number of aspects concerning phonaesthemes. Firstly, that phonaesthetic structures can be scrutinized via research methods that apply to morphological theory and that the instruments used in derivational morphology can be adapted to gather valuable information on the nature of phonaesthetic units. Secondly, it suggests that phonaesthemes and morphemes are more similar than different, with only criterion six clearly distinguishing morphemes from phonaesthemes. This criterion indicates that, except in very few cases, phonaesthemes combine with non-recurrent residues which is not typical of morphemes – derivation is more than evident in this respect.

Other linguists have taken different paths in challenging the arbitrariness of the sign and argued in favour of a more integrative approach to the analysis of meaning. Magnus's doctoral thesis, *What's in a Word? Studies in Phonosemantics* – has become seminal in the field since its publication in 2001. Magnus's hypothesis that in semantics not everything is about convention and that every phoneme bears meaning by virtue of its articulatory features emerges as a complementary perspective to structuralism and morphological theory. In this respect, her study is possibly one of the most complex field surveys ever carried out in phonosemantics in English, with experiments providing extensive amounts of data for analysis on issues which include – but are not limited to – the synaesthetic effect of sounds, the phonological patterns that impact meaning, the position of phonemes in words and the way in which it influences word semantics, how phonetic features tend to carry meaning, and, last but not least, a cross-linguistic analysis of phonaesthemes (171).

Sound iconicity – or 'iconism,' as Magnus calls it – which refers to the synaesthetic effect of sounds on users, is responsible for the layer of meaning underlying all other aspects of word semantics:

The connotation of a word is affected directly by its phonological form. On the Iconic level, a word means what it is. The form of a

word does not *directly* affect what the word refers to, what its argument structure is, or any other aspect of its meaning. It only affects what the thing referred to in the word is *like*. Viewed from the perspective of parole, . . . Iconism is among the least salient aspect(s) of word semantics. From the perspective of langue, Iconism is the most fundamental and pervasive aspect of word semantics on top of which all other layers of semantics are built. (34)

In other words, Magnus argues that sound iconism is a layer within the layered semantic structure of a word and precedes reference as it “affects what the word is *like* rather than what the word *refers to*” (172). Hence, phonaesthemes, by virtue of their synaesthetic nature, are more relevant in the shaping of meaning than commonly assumed by structuralist perspectives favouring arbitrariness in semantics. This being said, the signifier, i.e. the sound image in a sign, becomes a fuzzy concept in the sense that it is no longer exclusively formal but tends to acquire substance by virtue of the synaesthetic nature of its components.

Cross-linguistic Occurrences of Phonaesthetic Units

One argument against the dichotomous structure of phonaesthetic units – a key feature upon which structuralist theories on the arbitrariness of the sign are built – is the universality of the phonaestheme. In other words, if some evidence can be provided that phonaesthetic units transcend language borders, this would be proof that, at least to some degree, the semantics of phonemes is “to some degree universal or subject to natural law” (Magnus 131).

In order to support this hypothesis, Magnus uses a set of nine distinct phonosemantic criteria (or meanings) that she locates in a set of monosyllabic words whose common formal feature is that they have /str/, /st/ or /s/ in the onset. The meaning categories identified in English include: ‘straight,’ ‘strong/stern,’ ‘start,’ ‘struggle,’ ‘stop,’ ‘strange/distant,’ ‘stroll,’ ‘stretch/spread,’ and ‘strike.’ This set of criteria is applied to an extensive corpus of /str/ words in a number of languages including English, Greek, Irish,

Norwegian, Catalan, Welsh, Hindi, Russian, Indonesian, Lithuanian, Albanian, and German. For example, according to the author, 'straight' occurs in English words such as: *stair*, *steer*, *steak*, *straight*, *strait*, *straw*, *string*, *strip*, etc. In Irish words like *starr* (= tooth, tusk, jut, rough pull, fit of anger), *starran* (projection), *straille* (tall, lazy aimless person), *striopan* (strip, streamer), *stroc* (iron keel band), etc. (129-130); in Albanian words like *shtrat* (bed), and *stroj* (lay, cover, coat); in Catalan words like *esteranyianador* (broom), *estira* (stretching), *estret* (narrow), *estria* (flute, groove), *estrop* (strap), etc.; in German words like *Starr* (star), *Storch* (stork), etc.; in Greek words like *sterope* (flash of lightening), *streblou* (twist, strain tight), *streptos* (flexible, twisted pastry), *strefe* (spin, twist a rope, torture, stick close to something, be at large), etc.; in Hindi words like *sitar* (stringed instrument), *sutari* (heavy needle), *sutr* (thread, origin, source, formula); in Indonesian in words like *setrik* (hair ribbon), *setrip* (line, stripe, slash), *setrum* (electric current, induce); in Lithuanian words like *stirta* (stack), *strangblys* (trunks, probiscus), *strele* (arrow), *strigti* (stick), etc. (Magnus, Appendix X n. p.).

Although at first sight, these words occurring in a number of languages with distinct diachronic evolution do not seem to have much in common, it would be interesting to scrutinize what lies beyond their apparent shared form, their distinct meaning categories, and the transformations they undergo across languages. Firstly, it should be pointed out that a number of English words with a /str/, /st/ or /s/ form in them may occur in several of Magnus's categories. For example, the monosyllabic word *star* is included both in the 'strange/distant' and 'stretch/spread' criteria of the author's phonosemantic classification; *stork* occurs both in 'straight' and in 'stretch/spread'; *storm* occurs in 'strong/stern,' 'struggle,' and 'strange/distant' (129). This seems to be a widely spread phenomenon since the meaning of phonaesthetic units may be perceived as more fragmented and slightly different in nature than that of morphemes – in the sense that whereas the meaning of words may be described in terms of [+/- animated], [+/- human], [+/- male], [+/- abstract], etc. the meaning of phonaesthetic units is

described as in the above-mentioned examples. But just like the meaning of morphemes and words, the meaning of phonaesthemes may be subject to componential analysis, which would explain the presence of some monosyllabic words in multiple phonosemantic groups.

Secondly, there is the problem of similar phonaesthetic units occurring in words across more or less diachronically-related languages. For example, /st/ in the English *star* and *stork* and the German *Starr* and *Storch* is an interesting case of how phonaesthetic units travel across languages. On a formal level, the spelling of the onset is remarkably similar, obviously due to common linguistic heritage. As is the meaning of the two pairs of words. However, what Magnus identifies as /st/ in the pronunciation of the German word *Starr* and *Storch*, is in fact pronounced /ft/ since in German, s followed by t or p will be pronounced /f/. Therefore, technically, since phonaesthemes are defined as phonological units, /st/ in English and /ft/ in German are in fact two distinct phonemic clusters in what may be regarded as a special case of cross-linguistic phonaesthetic equivalence.

Another peculiarity is the case of Greek words *streblou* (twist, strain tight), *streptos* (flexible, twisted pastry) and *strefe* (spin, twist a rope, torture, stick close to something, be at large), all of which being included in the phonosemantic category of 'straight' (Magnus, Appendix X n. p.). Unlike /str/ words in all other languages included in the study whose phonosemantic classification is 'straight,' these Greek words seem to deviate from the description since they are used to refer to objects that are anything but straight. However, these examples seem to have been included in this category due to the fact that the criterion of 'straight' may be interpreted semantically as either [+ straight] or [- straight]. Yet, this does not make them less interesting linguistically since no other languages included in Magnus's study display this feature.

At this point, I would like to take Magnus' idea and take it a step further by identifying /str/ words – here I include /str/, /st/, and /s/ words – in my mother tongue, Romanian, to which I will apply Magnus's phonosemantic classification. My purpose is to find out

some aspects of cross-linguistic transfer in the case of phonaesthemes between English and Romanian and some peculiarities and/or irregularities in their case. In the process I have used the Dexonline Dictionary since it compiles contributions from a number of dictionaries published over the years including academic dictionaries, thesauruses, etymological dictionaries, encyclopedias, a number of technical dictionaries, etc., which makes it possibly the most comprehensive – and informative – Romanian dictionary. The word lists compiled below are not exhaustive, nor are they meant to be since the observations I will make are intended to be qualitative rather than quantitative. In the process, I have been able to identify a number of words matching some of Magnus's criteria as follows:

- 'straight': *strâmb* (crooked), *strabism* (strabismus), *strajă* (vb. guard), *stârc* (egret or any of several types of heron), *striat* (striped), *striu* (stripe)
- 'strong/stern': *stoarce*, (squeeze; exhaust; make a profit by coercion), *ștram* (clever, smart, intelligent; in Transylvanian dialect robust), *stropși* (crush), *strivi* (crush), *strină* (pinkish-purple in colour), *strâns* (tight), *strașnic* (extraordinary, wonderful; also horrendous, terrific, strong, creepy, awful)
- 'start': *start* (start)
- 'struggle': *stoarce* (squeeze; exhaust; make a profit by coercion), *strâns* (tight)
- 'stop': *strajă* (defence), *strivi* (crush), *static* (static), *stație* (station), *struni* (bridle a horse, restrain, control)
- 'strange/distant': *strident* (shrill, strident)
- 'stroll': *strabism* (strabismus)
- 'stretch/spread': *ștrimf* (in regional dialect, German etymology, stocking), *strâns* (tight), *streașină* (eaves)
- 'strike': *stropși* (crush by striking unexpectedly), *strâns* (tight)

As in the case of Magnus's study, the collection of words in Romanian – which typically includes stem words – has revealed a number of variations or irregularities from the intended pattern. Firstly, I must point out right from the outset that not all /str/, /st/, /s/ words in Romanian could be included in one of the phonosemantic categories above. As a matter of fact, very many words have not been included here as they are either too elusive in terms of meaning to match any of the above categories, obsolete, or complex in structure. Nevertheless, my expectations were exceeded by far when I identified a consistent body of lexical items that match the criteria in a relatively short time without attempting to be exhaustive. This suggests that the list is far longer than this and that a more detailed study would probably reveal a wider range or linguistic peculiarities.

Secondly, within the group of the selected lexical items in Romanian, there are a number of phenomena similar to those present in Magnus's multilingual list. For example, it has become evident that just like in English and other languages, in Romanian, some criteria are far more productive than others, with the 'strong/stern' the most numerous and the 'start' group the least numerous. In fact, I have not been able to identify a lexical item to match this criterion of classification apart from the word *start*, which has English etymology. Another less than productive criterion is 'stroll.' Apparently, Romanian words to match this criterion are rather hard to identify. Nevertheless, I have included here *strabism* (strabismus) since it refers to a medical condition of the eyes looking in different directions, a hint that /str/ might indicate a deviation from norm in the case of this particular word. Hence the need for an experiment in the form of a linguistic poll among a more consistent lot of Romanian speakers to confirm this hypothesis.

Etymology-related irregularities are also present. As mentioned earlier, German pronunciation rules only allow for /str/ or /st/ words to be pronounced as /ʃtr/ and /ʃt/ respectively. This variation is also present in Romanian words of German etymology, especially in dialects used in Transylvanian areas where German

communities used to thrive, for example in *ștrîmf* (stocking), from the German *Strümpfe*.

Phonosemantic peculiarities are also present. For example, some words in the ‘straight’ category display a similar feature of some Greek words in the sense that they mean [-stright] rather than [+ straight] as is the case of *strâmb* (crooked) and *strabism* (strabismus). An interesting occurrence is that of *strașnic* in the ‘strong/stern’ category, as it displays a unique feature among other members in the same group, namely it can be used with both positive or negative connotations depending on the geographic region. A word of Slavic origin, it is used predominantly by speakers in the Republic of Moldova and Eastern Romania (Moldavia) alike. But whereas speakers in the Republic of Moldova use it to refer to something horrendous, terrific, creepy or awful, in Eastern Romania it is typically – but not exclusively – used to mean something extraordinary, wonderful, great, or simply strong. Hence, in this case, /str/ is associated with [+strong] but may be used with a positive or negative connotation depending on the regional dialect. The term is not preferred among speakers of other geographic regions in Romania.

Conclusions

The objective of this study has been twofold: to challenge the status of the morpheme as the smallest meaningful linguistic unit by determining how phonaesthemes can be integrated in the more comprehensive framework of morphological theory, on the one hand, and to find out how phonaesthemes can be tracked cross-linguistically, on the other hand. The critical discussion of Waugh’s gradable perspective on iconicity as a linguistic phenomenon, of Kwon and Round’s use of Canonical Typology in theoretical morphology, and Magnus’s phonosemantic approach has created the premises for a more inclusive theoretical perspective on the nature of phonaesthemes, demonstrating that:

- phonaesthemes are non-arbitrary in nature

- semantic meaning is multi-layered and phonaesthemes are the bottom layer of this structure upon which all other meanings of more complex structures rest
- the theoretical framework accommodating morphological phenomena may easily accommodate phonaesthemes since both morphemes and phonaesthemes can be described by means of a set of common principles which demonstrates that, in fact, they have very similar features
- phonaesthemes occur cross-linguistically in a variety of more or less related languages
- there is solid evidence that while being part of different words in different languages, they may preserve meaning which sets them on the right track to achieving the status of language universals.

With these aspects in mind, one can only argue that, given the intricacies of these phonological structures, there is still much work to be carried out, especially as far as their cross-linguistic behaviour is concerned. However, this can only be achieved via extensive and exhaustive linguistic research involving linguists, vast resources, a large numbers of speakers, and will have to make the object of a more comprehensive study.

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