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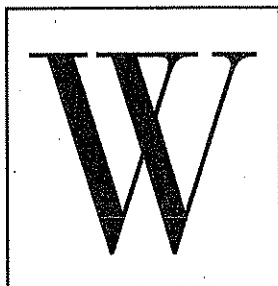
Words Like Silver Fish

The Affective Component of Sound in Meaning

BY MARY MAHIR


hen we teach meaning in language, we usually resort to the solid security offered by the authority of the dictionary. But the assistance that dictionaries—even the best of them—afford us is retarded by the dual nature of semantics: the meaning and the meaning-potential of words. The former with its clearly demarcated boundaries and concrete nature poses little problem for the lexicographer; but the nebulous quality of the latter is harder to crystallize in clearcut definition, simply because meaning-potential stems from an amalgamation of cultural, experiential, and sensory imprints gathered over a lifetime and varies from individual to individual. The mysterious power that words have cannot be attributed solely to their meaning, since they move us by their sound, texture, shape, colour, and even taste.

The following extract from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* is an illustration of the truth that linguistic meaning is frequently dependent on a complex wealth of sensory details.

"Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe."

"That's enough to begin with," Humpty Dumpty interrupted. "There are plenty of hard words there. *Brillig* means four o'clock in the afternoon—the time when you begin *broiling* things for dinner."

"That'll do very well," said Alice. "And *slithy?*"

"Well, *slithy* means 'lithe and slimy.' 'Lithe' is the same as 'active.' You see, it's like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up into one word."

"I see it now," Alice remarked thoughtfully. "And what are *toves?*"

"Well, *toves* are something like badgers—they are something like lizards—and they're something like corkscrews."

"They must be very curious-looking creatures."

"They are that," said Humpty Dumpty. "Also, they make their nests under sundials—also, they live on cheese."

"And what's to *gyre* and to *gimble?*"

"To *gyre* is to go round and round like a gyroscope. To *gimble* is to make holes like a gimlet."

"And the *wabe* is the grass plot round a sundial, I suppose?" said Alice, surprised at her own ingenuity.

"Of course, it is. It is called *wabe* you know, because it goes a long way before it, and a long way behind it."

"And a long way beyond it on each side," Alice added.

"Exactly so. Well, then, *mimsy* is 'flimsy and miserable' (There's another portmanteau for you). And a *borogove* is a thin, shabby-looking bird with its feathers sticking out all round—something like a live mop."

"And then *mome raths?*" said Alice. "I'm afraid I'm giving you a great deal of trouble."

"Well, a *rath* is a sort of green pig, but *mome* I'm not certain about. I think it's short for 'from home' meaning that they'd lost their way, you know."

"And what does *outgrabe* mean?"

"Well, *outgrabing* is something between bellowing and whistling, with a kind of sneeze in the middle. However, you'll hear it done, maybe—down in the wood yonder—and when you've heard it, you'll be *quite* content..." (pp. 166–7).

By divesting words of sense, Lewis Carroll has provided us with an effective demonstration of how by mere sound and shape, we can build meaning into even nonsensical words, especially in our subconscious, just as in a little girl's dreams.

Vocabulary building through onomatopoeia

If we paused to reflect on the probable origin of words in a language like English, we would discover an astonishingly large number of words which convey through sound and syllable, auditory portraits of what they represent. This onomatopoeic influence determines our reactions to words and our choice of the *mot juste* on occasion.

As human beings, a lot of what goes on within us takes shape through nonverbal mediums: color, sound, taste, smell, and touch. If we express what is within us through language, then we are employing sound to convey color, taste, smell, and touch. Our sensory reactions to sound are innate components of our linguistic performance.

This is precisely why our language tends to touch us at the most profound levels of our being; a bond of intimacy between a language and its users that excludes those whose involvement is no more than an intellectual exercise that leaves the rest of their humanness untouched. This underlines why the best part of language can seldom be taught but must be acquired. Internalizing a language means learning to communicate the kaleidoscopic nature of our inner meaning through sound. This means that the inflections of sound must correspond with the nuances of meaning, for in language as in music, we give shape to sense through sound.

Inculcating an awareness of and sensitivity to sound is far more vital to language teaching than we think. Syntax and vocabulary may be mastered in a relatively short time, but an acute and accurate ear for the subtleties of semantics takes a much longer time to develop. Response to sound is an affective factor that has psychological implications on the relationship between language and its users. The more the learner is aware of the infinite meaning-potential in words, the greater will be the likelihood for fluent and fluid expression in the target language. But, this cannot be taught; at best, we can only make our students aware of it by actualizing the elusive through tangible experience with poetry—where sound is deliberately and fully employed to construct dimensions of meaning to delight language users.

The study of poetry

Poetry generally offers a total language experience under the microscope, in the sense that the non-lexical aspects of language, such as sound, intonation, stress, pattern, and rhythm—can be isolated and studied and their contribution to the overall impact of meaning more fully appreciated. After all, the supreme achievement of poets is to make "connections among sounds, images, and ideas" (O'Hara:8) as in a well-known example:

> "Whenas in silks my Julia goes
> Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows
> That liquefaction of her clothes."
> (Herrick:20)

The combined alliterative effect of the voiced consonants /w/, /n/, /l/, /dž/, the sibilants /s/, /z/ and the elongated sounds of the rhymed words create an auditory image of the sinuous flow of a silken gown.

A contrasting effect is evident in the following line taken from Wilfred Owen's *Anthem For Doomed Youth*

> "Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle"

where the short accented syllables and cacophonic effect of the /r/ and /t/ imitate the staccato report of gunfire. The same poem dramatically slows down to a funereal solemnity with the concluding line

> "And each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds."

Here, the syllables are drawn out on the vowel sounds to produce a dolorous effect. The poet William Packard (1974:21)

The mysterious power that words have cannot be attributed solely to their meaning, since they move us by their sound, texture, shape, colour, and even taste.

employs a light stress on short, sibilant syllables to capture the quick, ephemeral movements of

"those voices
silver fish in the
invisible river."

The compatibility of sound and sense promotes a three-dimensional depth to meaning in each of these examples. However, when we teach vocabulary, what is often ignored or glossed over, is the affective component—those non-linguistic features that personally affect us. Words per se are only the tip of the iceberg. The greater part of meaning-potential is adduced largely through the non-linguistic features of sound, intonation, and syllabic rhythm. These are the aspects of language use that must be emphasized in a poetry class.

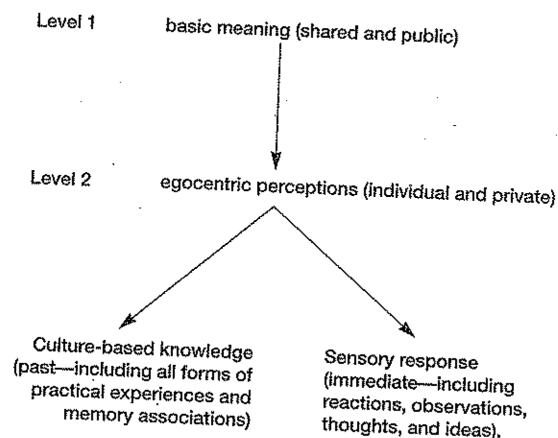
Our initial appreciation of a poem is largely acoustical, since the poet conveys atmosphere through sound and movement.

The meaning-potential of a poem

A poem must never be used as a sample of straightforward communication as teachers will invariably encounter the stumbling block of poetic license which permits eccentric grammatical construction and word coinage. In poetry, meaning (as restricted by lexicography) must always be held subservient to meaning-potential. What the poet says is usually secondary to the manner in which s/he says it. Take for example, Alfred Dorn's *The Knowledge of Silence:*

Silence is not an empty room
Where entering mind grows void in vacancy,
But a museum where the self collects
Its past in marble.
Here is yet the bloom
Of vanished laughter held in tinted stone,
For here is all the sculpting mind has known.
Here is the white lucidity of tasks
Perfected; here stand jagged blocks of pain
Broken from time.
And here the mind at last
Endures the pitiless light beneath its mask.

An examination of the poem's semantic structure should be compartmentalized into two levels. The first is the basic meaning that is universally perceived. In this case, the subject is the human mind with its store of memories of experiences—both good and bad—that is likened to a museum as a treasure house of past achievements. The poem's fundamental message should be understood first because it is the basis upon which the reader's egocentric sensory perceptions will be constructed. The latter is the combined result of what the reader builds from within and without—knowledge of the world gained through practical experience and inner-sense perceptions of this world. Diagrammatically, our comprehension of a poem would look like this:



Obviously, the basic meaning of the poem is the most tangible thing about it. The rest of its meaning has, quite literally, to permeate through its atmosphere.

Our initial appreciation of a poem is largely acoustical, since the poet conveys atmosphere through sound and movement.[1] When the poem is read aloud, the regularity of the stress patterns and the speed with which syllables move will determine largely our response to the content. The atmosphere has to be appreciated as a whole before being broken down to individual words and their separate, image-evoking contributions to sound/sense. A vocabulary lesson drawn from a poem calls upon the creative and imaginative faculties in students—qualities which are vital to dynamic communication.

1. The later, more comprehensive analyses of the poem are the results of a process of cognitive deliberation, in which experiential knowledge and memory associations (triggered by specific words) are combined with forms of impressionistic data.

The central metaphor of the poem under discussion, around which its atmosphere is created, is the museum—quiet and hushed with the aura of stepping back in time. The lines appropriately move with a slow, measured tread. The sounds are mellow with a few exceptions, as in the phrase "jagged blocks of pain" where the sharpness of "jagged" is juxtaposed with the heaviness of "blocks," highlighting through sound two qualities of pain. The harsh glare of light is conveyed through the whiplash sound of "pitiless" with its short, swift, accented syllables; and the hush of the museum is established with the poem's opening word.

With the mellow consonants /s/, /l/, /n/, the higher pitched /ay/, the elongated sound of /e/ dying away on the final sibilant sound, the word *silence* is onomatopoeic. Other examples from this poem are *lucidity* with its soft fluid caress, the consonant clusters in *sculpting* chipping lightly like a chisel on stone, the *bloom of laughter*, softly pink and fragrant (*tinted*), emptiness echoing in *room*, the rounded *void* suggesting the spatial roundness of the sky, etc.

Exploiting the affective component of poetry

To teach what is largely imaginative and intuitive, certain practical steps may be followed:

- Supply the students with the orthodox meaning of the words as defined by the dictionary.
- Ask the students to "feel" the words, seeing how the sounds match meanings.
- Get them to visualize the words through sound—round, long, hard, soft, harsh, prickly, sweet, and so on.
- With the individual words seen in this new light, have the students examine the words again in the context of the poem to see how the poet may have been subtly influencing us.
- Ask the students to identify synonyms for the words used in the poem, e.g. *silence, hush, quiet, peace,* etc. and discuss what variation in meaning would result if they were used instead.[2]
- Ask the students to write a short poem of their own. (The class should have encouraged them to manipulate the sound of words in a little "poetry" of their own creation.)

The possibilities arising from experimentation with these basic steps are endless, but the results will always be delightful. Learners will never consider a language class as dull if their teachers exploit the full potential of the human imagination. After all, as language users, why shouldn't they share with the poets, this empathy with the full richness of meaning molded into sound, that is a human language?

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2. To show how sound affects meaning, I once offered my students a simple but practical demonstration with Tennyson's poem "Break, break, break," among others. The opening lines "Break, break, break, On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!" became "Crash, crash, crash, on thy cold gray rocks, Ocean." Synonymous, you would say: Or is it?

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