THE EXPRESSION OF VULGARITY, FORCE, SEVERITY AND SIZE THROUGH R-L ALTERNATIONS:

PHONAESTHEMIC MINIMAL PAIRS IN RETA

THANKS TO: FIREBIRD FOUNDATION FOR ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH, WILLIAM MCGREGOR, REBEKAH BAGLINI, EHM HJORTH MILTersen
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bela ‘bad, (lightly) damaged’

bera ‘terrible, heavily damaged’
abiaala ‘peel, skin something’

abiaara ‘peel, skin something with force’
SHORT VERBAL ABSTRACT:

In Reta, /l/ can be substituted with /r/ to create phonaesthetic alternations. This is not productive, and ultimately arose out of a sound change /r/>/l/ and subsequent re-introduction of /r/. Such alternations are sound-symbolic but are different from both morphology and ‘regular’ phonaesthemes like English gl-.
PHONEMIC VS. PHONAESTHEMIC

- Phonemic contrasts:

  - *lupuk* ‘fall into sitting position’ ≠ *rupuk* ‘demolished’
  - *dolu* ‘protect new crops’ ≠ *doru* ‘altar, stone heap’
  - *paloha* ‘warm, hot’ ≠ *paroha* ‘itch from wet clothing’

- Phonaesthetic alternations:

  - *betul* ‘move (a little)’ ≠ *betur* ‘move with force’
  - *-ool* ‘penis’ ≠ *-oor* ‘cock, prick’
  - *taloohang* ‘fight, seize, compete’ ≠ *taroohang* ‘snatch away, rob, violate’
PHONAESTHEMIC ALTERNATIONS

- Vulgarity (body parts):
  -oo1 ‘penis’ ≠ -oor ‘cock, prick’
  -aal ‘vagina’ ≠ -aar ‘cunt’

- Force (actions):
  abiaala ‘peel, skin sth’ ≠ abiaara ‘peel, skin sth with force’
  betul ‘move (a little)’ ≠ betur ‘move with force’

- Severity/extent (states):
  tabula ‘concerned, at a loss’ ≠ tabura ‘panic, frenzy, try to survive’
  lavak ‘broken’ ≠ ravak ‘destroyed, collapsed, uprooted’

- Size/significance (inanimate objects):
  bugul ‘(small) hole, leak’ ≠ bugur ‘big hole, leak’
  aliku ‘vein, fibre, sinew’ ≠ ariku ‘(big) vein or artery visible on the body’
WHAT MAKES IT NOTEWORTHY?

- Sound symbolism itself = a direct link between sound and meaning
- It is well-attested, e.g.:
  - Stutts & Torres (2012) on the link between vowel roundedness and creamy vs. tart taste
  - Köhler (1947) on the link between vowel roundedness and curvedness of shapes
  - Spence & Gallace (2011) on the link between vowel roundedness and various food types
  - Kuehnl & Mantau (2013) on the link between vowel frontness and preferred SUV brand names
  - Ngo, Misra & Spence (2011) on the link between vowel roundedness and bitterness of chocolate
  - Tarte & Barritt (1971) on the link between vowel openness and table size
  - …and other bouba-kiki/baluba-takete-like studies
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  - …and other bouba-kiki/baluba-takete-like studies

These are associations, but do not necessarily part of the lexicon
WHAT MAKES IT NOTEWORTHY?

- We are dealing with phonaesthemes here
  - i.e., a lexical associations between sound and meaning
  - *gl*-initial words in German often denote shining or glowing things (von der Gabelentz 1891:219)
    - in English they often denote ‘light’ or ‘vision’ (Bloomfield 1933:245)
  - *sl*-initial words in English are often associated with pejoratives (Firth 1930:50-1)
    - Swedish: pejoratives and quick/strong movement (Abelin 1991:95,109)
  - *-ump* final words in English are often associated with clumsiness (Bloomfield 1933:245)

- These have been dubbed ‘submorphemes’ (Blust 1988) and ‘root-forming morphemes’ (Bloomfield 1933)
- They are meaning-bearing units
WHAT MAKES IT NOTEWORTHY?

- Phonaesthemes are ‘atomic’ and have a meaning component
- No contrast with other elements and are not compositional
- Reta phonaesthemes do contrast with non-phonaesthemes and have a base form

* X-ance
  - gl-ance
  - *fl-ance
  - *sl-ance
...

*beXa
  - bela ‘bad’
  - bera ‘terrible’
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& \downarrow \\
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& bera \ ‘terrible’ \rightarrow \]

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IN SUM

✓ /r/ is a single sound that bears meaning
✓ It bears a paradigmatic relation to unmarked /l/
  ✓ Unmarked /l/ is the base form
IS IT MORPHOLOGY?

- Before we draw a comparison with morphology, we want to know a bit more
  - Is it productive?
  - How did it emerge?
IS IT MORPHOLOGY?

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IS IT PRODUCTIVE?

- Type frequency of 1709 (/l/) vs. 609 (/r/) (lexicon +/- 4000 items)
- 63 total minimal pairs between /r/ and /l/
  - 32 phonaesthemic ☞ might be productive

- Two ways of measuring productivity
  - Language game
  - R-colouring of existing L-words & vice versa
IS IT PRODUCTIVE? – LANGUAGE GAME

- Set of picture-pairs capturing semantic differences
- Nonce-words conforming to Reta phonology, forced responses
  - tolo, hale, teeli, peli, bilo, voola, benol, moobel, gidil, hoonel
IS IT PRODUCTIVE? – LANGUAGE GAME

- Set of picture-pairs capturing semantic differences
- Nonce-words conforming to Reta phonology, forced responses
  - tolo, hale, teeli, peli, bilo, voola, benol, moobel, gidil, hoonel
- Not a single R-coloured response
IS IT PRODUCTIVE? – EXTANT WORDS

- Two 35-item word lists (r/l) containing existing words
  - /r/>/l/ and /l/>/r/
  - No results

- Phonaesthemic pairing is not productive.
IS IT MORPHOLOGY?

- To draw a comparison with morphology, we need to know a bit more
  - Is it productive?
  - How did it emerge? ☞ Comparison with Blagar
HOW DID IT EMERGE?
HOW DID IT EMERGE?

- pAP *r > overwhelmingly /l/ in Reta, but not in Blagar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>pAP</th>
<th>Reta</th>
<th>Blagar (Pura or otherwise)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*hagur ‘yawn’</td>
<td>agaagul</td>
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Blagar data from Holton et al. (2012), Steinhauer & Gomang (2016), Robinson (2010a-f), Klamer 2016
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HOW DID IT EMERGE?

- Instances of /r/ in 2 comparative word lists: 180 (Bl.) vs. 46 (Rt.) (=>*4)
  - Many of these 46 Reta words are loans from Blagar
HOW DID IT EMERGE?

- proto-Alor-Pantar *r > /l/ in Reta, not in Blagar
- Blagar /r/ = /l/ in Reta
- Where Blagar /r/ = Reta /r/, usually a loan
- /r/ more prevalent in Blagar (~4*)
  - Often over-emphasised in imitative speech
- Blagar is the dominant language

- Probably either:
  - (i) borrowed /r/-coloured look-a-likes (though synchronically rare), or
  - (ii) mocking speech
IS IT MORPHOLOGY?

- To draw a comparison with morphology, we need to know a bit more
  - Is it productive?  NO
  - How did it emerge?  Ultimately through a sound change
### PHONOLOGY? MORPHOLOGY? BOTH? NEITHER?

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Phonaesthetic alternations have a lot in common with morphology.
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But, unlike morphology, target any /l/, regardless of position.

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<td>l</td>
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Recall that these came about through a sound change.
**PHONOLOGY? MORPHOLOGY? BOTH? NEITHER?**

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But, unlike morphology, target any /l/, regardless of position.

- *bili* ‘pull’
- *bir* ‘yank’
- *aal* ‘vagina’
- *aar* ‘pussy, cunt’
- *lavak* ‘broken’
- *ravak* ‘destroyed’

But these are always predictable position-wise

Other languages also have meaning-changing consonant mutations:

- Arabic *dak*ara ‘remembered’ > *dakk*ara ‘reminded’ (Burridge & Stebbins 2016: 114)
- Bemba *koma* ‘deaf’ > *komya* ‘cause to be deaf’ (Kula 2000: 174)
- Abui *batek* ‘strike’ ≠ *bateg* ‘strike (completive)’ (Kratochvil 2008: 210)
**PHONOLOGY? MORPHOLOGY? BOTH? NEITHER?**

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- Formally, it resembles a **sound change**
- Functionally, it is akin to **derivational morphology**
HOW UNIQUE IS IT? – PERHAPS RARE, NOT UNIQUE

- Diegueño (Langdon 1971: 153)
  - ‘əsəl’ ‘my hand, arm’ vs. ʿəsəl’ ‘my little hand, arm’
  - yarəyar ‘(to be large and) circular’ vs. yarəyar. ‘to be small and circular’

- Korean (Sohn 1999: 102)
  - ping-ping ~ phing-phing ~ pping-pping ‘spinning, turning, whirling (increasingly faster)’
  - cwul-cwul ~ chwul-chwul ~ ccwul-ccwul ‘trickling, flowing (increasingly faster flow)’

- Wishram (Sapir 1911: 638)
  - ite’iau ‘snake’ ≠ its’iau ‘small snake’ ≠ idz’iau ‘big snake’

- Also in Chuckchee (Bogoras 1992: 646, 834-7), Basque (Lafitte 1944: 147-9), Georgian (Neisser 1953: 39-45) and various other western North-American languages (Nichols 1971)
Phonaesthemes vs. morphemes: phonaesthemes have non-recurring residue
Phonaesthemic alternations: much variation, but all constitute a regular phonological-based operation on all relevant segments of a given form that is neutral and unmarked relative to a given base form

Both are different from morphology, but in their own way
TO SUM UP

- As for Reta /r/:
  - It came about through a sound change /r/>/l/ and re-introduction of /r/
  - This resulting opposition between /r/ and /l/ acquired meaning
  - It is formally like a sound change, and functionally like derivation
    - These are phonaesthemic alternations

- In general:
  - Phonaesthemes straddle the border between domains in various ways
  - But phonaesthemic alternations are best distinguished from phonaesthemes
REFERENCES


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