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Tracing the Roots of Phonaesthesia: An Investigation of the *gl-* and *sl-* Phonaesthemes

Phonaesthesia has been described as a type of conventional sound symbolism whereby phonemes, clusters or syllables are associated with a sub-lexical meaning. While some previous researchers have considered phonaesthemes to fall within the realm of morphology, others have not, though the arguments from both sides have relied upon little evidence. Some have resorted to attributing the correspondence to a type of image or sound iconism, due to the fact that the semantics of many of the alleged phonaesthemes involves visual or auditory perception: *sl-* wetness, *gl-* light, *cl-* closure, etc. (Bloomfield, 1984; Nida, 1946; Waugh, 2000; Rhodes, 1994).

The current study investigates this phenomenon from both historical and psycholinguistic perspectives in order to gain a better understanding of the status of phonaesthemes within the lexicon. A historical analysis of the phonaesthemes *sl-* (slimy, slippery, slide, slick, etc.) and *gl-* (glitter, glisten, glint, glow etc.) investigated the history of *sl-* and *gl-* words from Proto-Indo-European, to Proto-Germanic, Old English, Middle English and into Modern English. This investigation shows that the central members of the proposed phonaesthetic categories were descended from either a single Indo-European root, or a small group of semantically and phonologically related roots. These results revealed that the relatedness among the phonaesthetic words can be explained through their etymology.

While the historical analysis explains the origins of the phonaestheme classes, what is perhaps more interesting is whether individuals categorize phonaesthetic words as they might categorize morphologically related words in their lexicons. If, over time, speakers begin to reanalyze the phonological/semantic correspondence of the phonaesthemes as being morphology-like, one would expect them to develop categories that reflect such a reanalysis. Empirical tests were implemented to examine whether speakers had categories of phonaesthetic words similar to categories of words that share derivational morphology or those that are semantically but not phonologically related. Preliminary results of a free-listing task and a similarity-judgment task suggest that the phonaesthetic words did not behave differently from semantically related but phonologically unrelated words, and therefore did not seem to be analyzed morphologically by speakers.

The results of both the historical and empirical studies suggest that an iconic explanation of phonaesthesia is unnecessary and insufficient to explain the status of phonaesthemes in lexical organization. The combination of historical and psycholinguistic analyses was shown to be useful in gaining a broad understanding of the possible origin and development of sub-morphemic categories.