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RHYME OVER REASON: PHONOLOGICAL MOTIVATION IN ENGLISH
(Réka Benczes, *Rhyme over Reason: Phonological Motivation in English*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 269 pages)

The statement made by Ferdinand de Saussure more than a century ago that the relationship between a word's sound and its sense is both conventional and arbitrary also implies that no natural relation or similarity need exist between words' forms and their meanings (Delahunty and Garvey 2010: 32). Yet, people constantly search for meaning in form, "thereby contradicting the principle of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign" (Benczes 2019: 180). Whether there is indeed reason in rhyme is extensively investigated by Réka Benczes in her latest book *Rhyme over Reason: Phonological Motivation in English* (2019). The title of the book is an ingenious adaptation of the alliterating English idiom *neither rhyme nor reason*.[2] Réka Benczes is an Associate Professor at the Institute of Behavioural Sciences and Communication Theory, Corvinus University of Budapest, and is also the author of *Creative Compounding in English* (2006). She is the co-editor of *Defining Metonymy and Metaphor in Cognitive Linguistics* (2011) and *Wrestling with Words and Meanings: Essays in Honor of Keith Allan* (2014).

The book to be reviewed here is a comprehensive account, written from the perspective of cognitive linguistics[3], of the role phonological motivation plays

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2 According to Benczes (2019: 1), the distinction between *rhyme* and *reason* has traditionally been used in linguistics to denote poetic and referential functions of language, respectively. The former focuses on "*form* of the message and is represented by expressive, playful language use" (e.g. the repetition of sounds in single words, but also in multi-word units and poetry), whereas the focus of the latter is on "the *content* of the message" (Benczes 2019: 1). Furthermore, it is the referential function of language, with its focus on the context, that contemporary linguistics has almost exclusively concentrated on (Benczes 2019: 1). However, there are certain phenomena such as everyday speech errors which suggest a pervasive influence of sound on meaning in language and also an unnecessary distinction between poetic and referential functions of language, i.e. between rhyme and reason (Benczes 2019: 3).

3 Note that one of the central claims of this linguistic paradigm is that "language is inherently symbolic", which further implies that "meaning occupies a central place" in it (Benczes 2019: 19). It also explains why people search for meaning at all linguistic levels.

in English. It is divided into seven chapters.[4] The chapters are accompanied by the Appendix (which consists of an extremely useful list of lexical entries with imitative origins extracted from the OED), References, as well as the Subject and author index. Regarding the emphasis the book places upon investigating the effects of phonological motivation on English word-formation, it is important to mention that, compared to previous research on phonological motivation in English, it includes products of some of the minor or, better, atypical word-formation processes such as blends, rhyming compounds, ablaut-motivated compounds and similar phenomena (e.g. sound symbolism), thereby necessitating the reconsideration of the traditional category of morpheme in English morphology. In other words, it does not only view language as being "essentially motivated, meaningful and dynamic", but also advocates "a more relaxed view of the category 'morpheme'" (Benczes 2010: 12, 24; cf. also Schmid (2011) for a more inclusive conceptualization of morpheme).

In Chapter 1, the Introduction, the author presents the aim of the book, its subject matter, as well as the main theorethical assumptions. The key concept of phonological motivation is defined by Benczes (2019: 5–7) as "the phonological conditions that lead to a non-arbitrary relationship between (1) form and meaning; and (2) form and form". In the first of these two motivational processes, the meaning motivates the form, while in the second, the meaning is motivated by the form. This led Benczes (2019: 8–9) to conclude that the motivational relationship between form and meaning is often a bidirectional process or "a non-arbitrary relationship where meaning is reflected and shaped by form".

Chapter 2 *Phonological Motivation in Language Evolution and Development* explores the role of form-meaning correspondences (*iconicity* among others) in language evolution, language acquisition and language learning, as well as that of form-to-form correspondences in language development.[5] It also examines the question of phonological motivation being a stimulus in speech errors or, more appropriately – 'unintentional linguistic innovations' (Benczes 2019: 49; after Sturtevant 1947: 38) such as slips of the tongue, malapropisms, assimilation, sound exchange, and mondegreens, by arguing that these are not accidental but highly systematic, in that they are originally phonologically motivated. For Benczes (2019: 54, 57), this only reinforces the idea that sound is one of the essential organizing principles of the mental lexicon. By further investigating the relationship between iconicity and the origins of language, as well as the one between iconicity and language learning, the chapter suggests that if iconicity played an important role in language evolution, it must play an equally important role in language learning. Benczes (2019: 32) also claims that "iconicity and arbitrariness are two complementary and at the same time conflicting forces of language". The chapter concludes by stating that, based on research into language evolution and development, the motivation between form and meaning is "a governing and basic feature

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4   The review follows the structure of the book.
5   Although the book is not written from a diachronic perspective, this chapter provides some valuable insights into the origins of language.

of language", thus necessitating the re-evaluation of arbitrariness. In fact, according to Benczes (2019: 58), non-arbitrariness is "one of the driving forces of language, complementing arbitrariness […]; language structure and language use emerge from their dynamic interplay".

Chapter 3 *Phonetic Symbolism* investigates the role of sound symbolism, i.e. phonological motivation in (individual) sounds such as the pairing of 'smallness' with the front vowel /ɪ/, as well as the most productive phonesthemes in English (e.g. *gl-*, *sn-*, *sm-*, *fl-*) and possible ways of their emergence. At the very beginning of the chapter, the problematic nature of the umbrella term *sound symbolism* is discussed. The attention is also drawn to the question of phonetic symbolism being a potentially universal feature in both human language and animal communication. Relative to that, Benczes (2019: 64, 93) believes that, even though there have been many studies suggesting that sound symbolism is present in many of the world's languages, the answer as to whether it is a universal phenomenon or not is rather uncertain, since some of its features are relatively widespread, while others are particularly language-specific. Consequently, she argues that phonetic symbolism should be considered a graded affair, in which meaning is primarily based on similarity. Similarly to phonetic symbolism, "phonesthemes have also had a rather disputed history in linguistics, and especially in morphology" owing to the absence of systematicity and compositionality, semantic vagueness, and "the impressionistic nature of" their analysis (Benczes 2019: 69, 83–87). However, corpus-based studies have attested to far more similarities than differences between phonesthemes and morphemes, as well as to the so-called phonesthemic families, thereby necessitating the inclusion of phonesthemes in English morphology (Benczes 2019: 86, 93).

Focusing on yet another type of the form-meaning correspondence (i.e. onomatopoeia), Chapter 4 entitled *Onomatopoeia* attempts to delimit the term, while discussing its motivation, areas of language where it seems to be most frequent (e.g. persuasive speech, poetry, child language, and child-directed speech, colloquial speech and slang), possible reasons for its presence in these particular areas, as well as its potential for lexicalization or, in Benczes' words, a complete lack of compositionality. Although onomatopoeia is felt by many people to be natural, Benczes (2019: 96, 112) holds that it is largely based on convention and therefore has to be learned. In addition, according to Benczes (2019: 102, 112), similarity constitutes an essential part of any definition of onomatopoeia, which she defines as "a novel or conventionalized word in which a part of the phonological form is perceived to be similar to the referent or to a sound metonymically associated with it" (e.g. *cuckoo*). Furthermore, since onomatopoeia has both language-specific and universal features, Benczes (2019: 95–96) is of the opinion that it should be (similarly to a number of concepts elaborated on in the previous chapters) considered a graded affair.

Chapter 5 *Rhyme and Alliteration in Blends and Compounds* focuses on form-to-form motivational process by examining its role in the creation of blends from the source words which are phonetically similar (i.e. those which

include phonetic overlap and thus exhibit perhaps the greatest creativity of usage (Benczes 2019: 117; Kemmer 2003: 80)). It also examines the role of form-meaning correspondence in the creation of compounds, namely rhyming compounds, alliterating compounds, reduplicatives, and ablaut-motivated compounds. The author (Benczes 2019: 115, 150) argues that focus on form is both consciously and intentionally employed by language users to serve various semantic (e.g. *pejoration*) and pragmatic communivative purposes (e.g. *solidarity*) and that such phenomena represent much more than what has most often been referred to as "constituent copying" in the literature.[6] She also highlights the importance of (studying) phenomena (e.g. lexical blends, reduplicatives, etc.) which have often been downgraded to the periphery of morphological analysis despite the fact that, for instance, blends themselves represent a rich source of new combining forms or that reduplication is one of the most frequent processes in language acquisition or premorphology and a quite popular method of word-building in English (Benczes 2019: 120–122). The chapter further comments on the productivity of rhyming compounds over the centuries, as well as the major semantic domains they have been coined in (e.g. sound, mental or physical disorder, disparagement, deception, children's speech, and child-directed speech). The areas alliterating compounds most frequently emerge in, together with the possible reasons for their coining, are also addressed here. One of the chapter's subsections is devoted to manifestations of "a unique compound-forming pattern in English, whereby the sound shape of an already existing and conventionalized compound motivates the creation of a novel one" (e.g. *drug-driving* which is created on the analogy of *drink-driving*) (Benczes 2019: 147).

Chapter 6 *Words, Words, Words: Rhyme and Repetition in Multi-word Expressions* is concerned with the effects phonological criteria ((consonant) repetition and rhyme) may have on the creation of multi-word units (e.g. binomials, similes, idioms, fixed expressions, catchy slogans and promotional messages (including presidential inaugural addresses in the US), legal language, and proverbs). Namely, it has been shown that phonological motivation in such expressions, besides being simply fun to produce, can actually be employed as a mnemonic and/or entrenchment device (Benczes 2019: 154). It should be noted, however, that different types of phonological motivation may not be equally favored in all multi-word units (e.g. alliteration seems to be prevalent in idioms and proverbs) (Benczes 2019: 158).

Chapter 7 *Conclusions: The Piggy in the Middle* revisits a variety of phenomena in present-day English affected by phonological motivation, including the implications this has for how language is acquired, learned, used, and eventually described. Benczes' advocacy of the view that separation of the referential function from the poetic function of language does not reflect how language works in reality has led her to propose an alternative model of

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6 Importantly, Benczes (2019: 126) provides a number of pragmatic meanings (often neglected in the literature) fully reduplicated compounds can actually have such as affection and intimacy, contrast, contempt, or intensification.

the Jakobsonian functions of language, where the poetic function is placed at the center of the communication process, thus becoming the real "piggy in the middle" (Benczes 2019: 172, 174–175). It is important to note that this modification entails making certain changes in linguistic theorizing such as the adoption of proto-type approach to morphology and the category of morpheme, as well as the one of gradability of semantic associations.

Last but not least, I believe the present review would not do justice to the book if there were no comments on its language and style. Namely, although the book is rather theoretical in character, it is nonetheless written in such an approachable, intelligible, inspiring, and intellectually stimulating way that, together with a wealth of illustrative examples (although mostly borrowed from other works), it represents an indispensable and invaluable guide to all those with an interest in English phonology, morphology (particularly its word-formation), and lexicology. Another illustration of the book's theoretical importance is its clearly articulated accounts of a number of rather ambiguous concepts in the relevant literature the author successfully delimits and defines. Regarding the systematic use of examples in the book to illustrate various phenomena or present and reinforce different arguments, it should be noted that these were originally obtained from various up-to-date authentic materials such as popular TV shows, documentaries, newspapers, etc., which only adds to the pertinence and indispensability of this innovative book in both contemporary linguistic analysis and teaching.

References

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