A BRIEF LOOK AT ROMAN JAKOBSON'S "SIX LECTURES ON SOUND AND MEANING"

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Abstract: One of the founders of the Prague School of Linguistics was a Russian-born American, Roman Jakobson (1896-1982). This article presents a summary of his famous "Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning" (1942). In the lectures, he argues that acoustic phonetics (sounds) is a quite significant aspect in communication because of its intimate relationship with meaning. Yet, people have been paying more attention to articulatory phonetics or how sounds are produced. The article also discusses the strengths, weaknesses, and contributions of the lectures to TEFL or SLA.

Key words: sound, meaning, acoustic, motor, signifier, signified.

One of Jakobson's brilliant ideas is reflected in his famous "Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning" (1942). Jakobson starts his first lecture by referring to Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven" (1845). The narrative poem, which consists of eighteen stanzas, is noted for its musicality, stylized language, and supernatural atmosphere. It tells of a talking raven's mysterious visit to a distraught lover, tracing the latter's slow descent into madness. The lover is lamenting the loss of his love, Lenore. The raven seems to further investigate his distress with its constant repetition of the word "Nevermore" (Wikipedia Encyclopedia) that appears at the ends of the last eleven stanzas. The quotation below is the first two and the last two stanzas of the poem.

> Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,
>
> *Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,*
> *While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,*
> *As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.*
> *Tis some visitor,' I muttered, 'tapping at my chamber door -*
> *Only this, and nothing more.'*
>
> *Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December,*
> *And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.*
> *Eagerly I wished the morrow; - vainly I had sought to borrow*
> *From my books surcease of sorrow-sorrow for the lost Lenore -*

For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels named Lenore -
Nameless here for evermore.
……

Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!' I shrieked upstarting –
Get thee back into the tempest and the Night's Plutonian shore!
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
Lave my loneliness unbroken! – quit the bust above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!'
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'
And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted – nevermore!

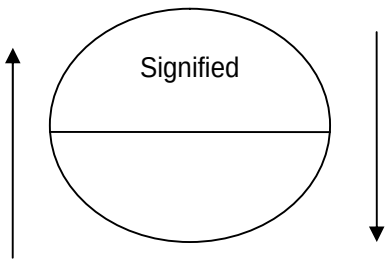
(Behme, 2007)

Jakobson sees the repeated word "Nevermore" in the poem rich in semantic content though consisting of only a few sounds. It is able to project us into the future, or even into eternity. Within the context of the dialogue, the word conveys a series of meanings: you will never forget her, you will never regain peace of mind, you will never again embrace her, I will never leave you! Besides, it can function as the symbolic name the poet gives to the raven, his nocturnal visitor.

The value of the expression, however, is not entirely accounted for its semantic value, but also its general meaning plus its contextual one. The poet himself says that it was *the potential onomatopoeic quality* of the sounds of the word *nevermore* which suggested to him its association with the croaking of a raven, and which was even the inspiration for the whole poem. In addition, it is nevertheless certain that variation of its phonic qualities that allow the emotive value of the word to be quantitatively varied in all kinds of ways.

The word "Nevermore" involves only a small number of articulatory motions to be heard, yet, in "The Raven", it expresses and communicates a wealth of conceptual, emotive, and aesthetic content. According to Jakobson, this is the mystery of the idea embodied in phonic matter.

As it has been known, a word, like any verbal sign, is a unity of sound and meaning (Saussure's terms 'signifier' and 'signified') that diagrammatically is represented as follows:



The combination is perfectly clear, yet, the structure remains unobvious. What is the relation between sound and meaning within a word, or within language generally? How can the sounds function as the vehicle for the meaning?

Strongly Jakobson argued that how sounds function was indeed worth investigating. In fact, it was how to produce sounds that people were busy with. They paid attention more on the *motor* aspects of speech rather than the *acoustic.* He emphasized that the immediate goal of the phonatory act is the acoustic phenomenon itself, not the motor. It is the acoustic that a speaker aims at producing, and it is the acoustic phenomenon that is directly accessible to the listener.

Yet, phonetics in the neogrammarian period concerned itself in the first place with the articulation of sound and not with its acoustic aspect. The fact that linguistic sounds are signifiers was deliberately put aside without regard for the role they play in language. Along with the advancement of technology, X-ray photography was used to reveal the functioning of the vocal apparatus in all its details. Later, radiography brought to light the crucial role of the hidden parts of the vocal apparatus so that the importance of the hyoid bone, the epiglottis, the pharynx, and the soft palate became much better known.

Nevertheless, as Ferdinand de Saus-sure had explained in his *Cours de linguistique general* long before those equipments were invented, even people could record on film all the movements of the mouth and larynx in producing a chain of sounds it is still impossible to discover subdivisions in the sequence of articulatory movements. It is not known where one sound begins and where another ends. Further, the great linguist states it is not the acoustic phenomenon in itself that enables people to subdivide the speech chain into distinct elements; only the linguistic value of the pheno-menon can do that.

Saussure's prediction was proved true by Menzerath and his friend Armando Lacerda twenty years later who demonstrated that the act of speech is a continuous, uninterrupted movement (*Koartikulation, Steuerung und Lautab-grenzung*, 1933). Whereas traditional doctrine had distinguished between positional sounds, which are held steady, and transitional sounds which lack this stability and which occur in the transition from one position to another, these two phoneticians showed that all sounds are in fact transitional. All above shows that however interesting and sophisticated is the study of motor phonetics, it is no more than an auxiliary instrument for linguistics that encourages the search for the principles of the organization of phonic matter.

Although focusing on the motor aspect of the language, phoneticians were unable to ignore the fact that sound as such is an acoustic phenomenon. However, they believed that there is one-to-one corres-pondence between the two aspects and that the classification of motor pheno-mena has an exact equivalent in the classification of acoustic phenomena. Therefore, by only constructing the former, the latter will automatically follow from it. This argument, which has many implications for linguistics, is utterly refuted now, contradicted by the facts.

Acoustic phonetics, with its deve-loping richness, already enables people to solve many of the mysteries of sound, mysteries which motor phonetics could not even

begin to solve. In spite of its greater organizing power, however, just like motor phonetics, acoustic fails to provide an autonomous basis for the systematization and the classification of the phonic phenomena of language. It can give detailed micrographic image of each sound, but cannot interpret the image. When two sounds show both similarities and dissimilarities, acoustics, having no intrinsic criteria to distinguish what is significant from what is not, does not know which one is crucial in any given case. It cannot even tell whether it is a case of two variants of one sound or of two different sounds.

As faced with a similar problem in relation to motor phonetics it is crucial to ask what the immediate aim of sounds, considered as acoustic phenomena is. This goes beyond the level of the signi-fier, and enters the domain of signified, the domain of meaning. It is not enough just to speak in order to be heard, but more than that, to be heard in order to be understood. The journey goes from sound to meaning. Thus, in spite of staying in the territory of phonetics, which studies sounds solely in their motor and acoustic aspects, it enters the territory of phono-logy, which studies the sounds of language in their linguistic aspect.

Phonology, which used to rely far too much on a mechanistic and creeping empiri-cism, now seeks more and more to over-come the vestiges. It now investi-gates speech sound in relation to the meanings with which they are invested, i.e., sounds viewed as signifiers, and above all to throw light on the structure of the relation between sounds and meaning.

To analyze a word from the point of view of its phonic aspect, phonologists decompose it into a sequence of distinc-tive units, or phonemes. The phoneme, although an element at the service of meaning, is itself devoid of meaning. It is the smallest linguistic entity composed of a bundle of distinctive features. The distinctive features are subdivided into a class of inherent features, which are bound to the axis of simultaneity, and a class of prosodic ones involving the other axis, that of succession.

There are two essential characters contributed by Ferdinand de Saussure that become the fundamental principles of linguistic signs – 'the linear character of the signifier' and 'the arbitrariness of the sign.' He also sated that there is no internal relation between 'signified' and its 'signifier', for instance, the signified 'ox' has as its signifier *b-ő-f (bœuf)'* on one side of the border and *o-k-s (Ochs)* on the other. The difference in value also happens in the French *mouton* and the English *sheep (Course,* 160/115). In other words, accor-ding to de Saussure, there is neither signified without signifier nor signifier without signified in language.

his opinion is opposed by Emile Ben-veniste, a profound French linguist, in his article in Acta Linguistica (1939) that says 'the connection between the signifier and the signified is not arbitrary; on the contrary, it is *necessary*.' For him the signified 'boeuf' is inevitably tantamount to the signifier, the phonic group *b- ő-f*. They have been imprinted on his mind together; they are mutually evocative in all circumstances.

Different from Saussure's thesis, in Benveniste's opinion, the connection between signifier and signified is neces-sary; but only in the association based on contiguity, and thus on an external relation, whereas the internal one is only occasional. It only appears in the peri-phery of the conceptual lexicon, in onomatopoeic and

expressive words such as *cuckoo, zigzag, crack*, etc.

The question of the internal relation between the sounds and the meaning of a word, however, is not exhausted. The intimacy of the connection encourages speakers to add an internal relation to the external one, resemblance to contiguity, to complement the signified by a rudimentary image. They use phonic oppositions to evoke relations with musical, chromatic, olfactory, tactile, etc. sensations. The opposition between acute and grave phonemes, for instance, suggests an image of bright and dark, pointed and rounded, thin and thick, light and heavy, etc. The sound symbolism, using Edward Sapir's term, or the inner value of the distinctive features, although latent, is brought to life as soon as it finds a correspondence in the meaning of a given word and in our emotional or aesthetic attitude towards this word and even more towards pairs of words with two opposite meanings.

In poetic language, where the sign as such takes on an autonomous value, the sound symbolism becomes an actual factor and creates a sort of accom-paniment to the signified. The investi-gation of the symbolic value of phonemes invites the risk of giving rise to am-biguous and trivial interpretations because phonemes are complex entities, bundles of distinctive features. This fact will result in an appositive character that leads to synaesthesia, as shown in the language of children.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The core of Jakobson's lectures on sound and meaning is quite striking. It makes us aware that sound plays a very important role in creating meaning especially to the listener. For the listener, it does not really matter how the speaker produces the sound. The most important thing is that the former can hear and understand it. For example, when I hear someone talk to me "Thirty kilometers" I do not care how s/he operates his/her tongue and vocal cords, whether the tip of the tongue is put between two rows of teeth or not, or whether the latter vibrates or not. What is important for me is I can hear the utterance and understand it correctly. It is *thirty kilo*meters, not *dirty pillow* meters.

Another point worth noting is that sound symbolism, or the inner value of the distinc-tive features, although seemingly meaning-less, becomes meaningful as soon as it finds a correspondence in the meaning of a given word and in our emotional or aesthetic attitude towards this word. In the Javanese traditional literature, especially children playing songs, many nonsense words are used as the accompaniment to the signified. Let us see the following traditional song enti-tled *Cing Cong Cing Cohung*.

Cing cong cing cohung
Cing cong cing cohung
Kowe bocah kuncung
Uwis awan isih njingkrung
Kae, bocah kuncung
Kancamu wis padha rampung
Enggal, bocah kuncung
Cing cong cing cohung.

(APN in Prabowo et al., 2002)

Cing cong cing cohung
Cing cong cing cohung
You, a forelock boy
Still coiling on your bed on this high day
Look, your friends are ready
Hurry up, forelock boy!
Cing cong cing cohung.

Lexically the words *cing cong cing cohung* do not mean anything; however, in the song above they become "meaning-ful" because they create compatibility between sound and meaning. Another example is in the chant entitled *"Mengko Sore Nggonku"* below:

Mengko sore nggonku ku
Arep ana wayang
Mengko sore aku ku
Ndelok sandhing dhalang
Engek engo-ek gung
Engek engo-ek po
Engek engo-ek gung
Engek engo-ek gong.
(APN in Prabowo et al., 2002)

There will be a puppet shadow performance at my village this evening
I will watch near the puppet master this evening
Engek engo-ek gung
Engek engo-ek po
Engek engo-ek gung
Engek engo-ek gong

The nonsense words in the above lines -- *Engek engo-ek gung/ Engek engo-ek po/ Engek engo-ek gung/ Engek engo-ek gong*-- seem unrelated to the other lines, neither for meaning nor for rhyming. Yet, they build a unity that cannot be separa-ted from the others. A probable reason for using the sound *'engek engo-ek'* is that it represents the sound of *rebab,* a Javanese violin in the gamelan orchestra ac-companying the performance, while *'gung'* and *'gong'* represent that of *gong*, another musical instrument.

Besides showing the remarkable strengths, Jakobson himself has identified the weaknesses of acoustic phonetics. It fails to provide an autonomous basis for the systematization and the classification of the phonic phenomena of language. It can give detailed micrographic image of each sound, but cannot interpret the image. When two sounds show both similarities and dissimilarities, acoustics does not know which one is crucial in any given case. It cannot even tell whether it is a case of two variants of one sound or of two different sounds.

What I found, if it may be called a weakness, is that although it is crucial to study acoustic phonetics, articulatory phonetics is also important especially for language learners who have difficulties in pronunciation. In other words, it is help-ful for language learners in the effort to be able to speak appropriately in order that other people understand them. For example, how to produce the sound / δ / in the article 'the' or 'they' as contrasted to the sound / θ / in the word 'three' or 'thirsty'.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO TEFL OR SLA

The contributions of this school to TEFL or SLA, as I can see, are in the ALM (Audio Lingual Method) and in teaching Literature, especially Poetry. I do not mention the development of Semantics here, as it is closer to Linguis-tics. As we know, oral drills are quite dominant in the ALM. Therefore, sounds play an important role in the teaching learning activities. In teaching English to young learners, the teacher also often uses songs or chants in which there are rhymes. Children like to hear and repeat rhyming sounds and, accompanied with gestures, they learn the meaning of the words easily. Look at the song entitled "Row, row your boat" below:

Row, row, row your boat
Gently down the stream
Merrily, merrily, merrily
Life is just a dream

The repeated words 'row', and 'merrily', plus the repeated sound /i:m/ make this song interesting for children to sing.

Moreover, while acting it out like the teacher, they learn the meaning of the words 'row' and 'merrily'. Another e-xample is a popular song "Old Mc Donald":

Old Mc Donald had a farm, ei-ei-o
In all his farm he had some chicks, ei-ei-o
With the chick-chick here
With the chick-chick there
Everywhere are chick, chick
Old Mc Donald had a farm, ei-ei-o

The nonsense sounds *'ei-ei-o'* create joy in this song, while *'chick-chick',* besi-des telling the meaning of the word 'chick' itself, emphasize the idea that there are many chicks in the farm. When hearing this song, one will imagine a farm with chicks everywhere.

The intimate relationship between sound and meaning frequently occurs in poetry. We can feel it in a poem like "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost, for example. The following lines are the first stanza of the poem. Let us read aloud each line slowly.

Whose woods these are I think I know
His house is in the village though
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods filled up with snow.

The hollow sounds produced by the words 'know', 'though', and 'snow' suggest silence, mysterious quietness accompanying the poet's deep contemplation. Such an example and explanation is important in helping students to go deeper in understanding a poem.

In conclusion, with its strengths and weaknesses, Jakobson's Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning is not only meaningful to linguistic itself, but to some extent, it is also useful in the process of learning a second or foreign language.

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