Phonaesthemes in Standard Arabic
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Abstract

Phonaesthemes are a set of sound-inspired meanings in a language. They represent words, nouns, adjectives, or verbs whose general meaning is related. The present paper sheds light on this area by investigating phonaesthemes in Standard Arabic through a broader consideration of all the possible syllables and sound sequences which are expressive of phonaesthemes. There exist in Standard Arabic certain sound syllables, mainly initial ones, that manifest a noticeable similarity in meaning and this paper attempts at investigating this area. Firstly, phonaesthemes are introduced as to definition, history, and cross-linguistic familiarity. Then, phonaesthemes in Standard Arabic are listed along with a broader discussion. Finally, a few conclusions, results, and implications are proposed at the end of the research.

Key Words: Standard Arabic, Sound-meaning relation, Sound symbolism, Phonaesthematics, Arbitrariness, Ideophone.

1. Introductory Remarks

Phonaesthemes denote a relationship between the sounds used in a word and the meaning of that word, in addition to the common meanings shared by all the words with the same sound sequence. This area of meaning is also termed as sound symbolism, ideophone, phonaesthetics, phonosemantics, phonosymbolism, and iconicity.

Phonaestheme can be seen as a semantic significance of certain letters or words, especially at the beginning of certain words. Such sounds often imply a common area of reference between the words related. Words can be regarded as phonaesthetically significant if the initial sound pairs are the same and the meaning of every single word is similar to the others.

Arbitrariness has always been a significant feature that rises to surface whenever the meaning-form relationship is debated or questioned. Bolinger (1949) stressed the importance of comparative linguistics when dealing with semantics. He viewed the resemblance in meaning among certain
words as a justification to the fundamental assumptions of linguists that language is arbitrary.

Pharies (1985:90ff) viewed onomatopoeia as a sign of sound symbolism, being expressive of all the imagined iconicity of any word in the language. Pharies based his assumption on the sound studies that have raised the issue of iconicity and phonesthematics.

Smith (2014) maintained that blends in English are phonaesthematic in sense. He investigated all the blends listed in the Oxford English Dictionary, and he found that blends imply a sort of sound symbolism. The author cited blends such as *smog, smarm, smash* as having an insulting or pejorative sense.

2. Background and Related Studies

The relationship between sound and meaning, whether in general or in a given language, has seen various attempts of investigation and analysis. Several previous studies in English, as well as in other languages, have proposed a considerable set of sound-inspired meanings, both in vowels and consonants. The issue of sound-meaning relationship has attracted a lot of scholarly work. Moreover, such relationship between certain sounds and meanings or their semantic reference has always been an area of significance and debate. Phonesthematics is the study of the relationship between sounds and words. Crystal (2008:361) maintained that "phonaesthetics is a term sometimes used in linguistics to refer to the study of the aesthetic properties of sound, especially the sound symbolism attributable to individual sounds. Cases such as the [ip] vowels in a language signaling smallness (cf. *teeny, weeny*, etc.) have been suggested as evidence for a limited sound/meaning correspondence in language. The sound units concerned being referred to as 'phonaesthemes'. The branch of stylistics which studies such expressive effects (e.g. the onomatopoeia of poetry) is known as phonostylistics."

The term 'phonaestheme' was first used by Firth (1930:184) for sequences like the *sl*- of *slack, slouch, slush* and the *-ump* of *slump, bump, dump*. Firth described these elements as affective and notes that they have become identifiable after repeated appearances in particular kinds of
context. ‘It is all a matter of habit’ (187). But establishing the nature of phonaesthemes and deciding which parts of words can plausibly be regarded as phonaesthetic (or phonaesthetic) elements is not at all straightforward.

Adams (2001:121) maintains "There is obviously some-thing non-arbitrary in the following examples of sound-denoting words syntactically detached from their surroundings: Check for gas leaks. Light a match and – whoomph/ Thwack! Boston's Jim Rice sends the first pitch sailing over the left-field wall."

Pharies (1958:95ff) held that sound symbolism can be accounted for through psychological and semantic foregrounds in order to understand the iconic similarity between words.

Käsmann (1992) investigated a few similarity-based combinations of sounds in English, mainly the letters sl- where he stressed that this sequence of sounds carries a rather multiple scope of meanings. He listed more than 80 words beginning with sl-, which he proposed as being iconic. The author exemplified slu-, sle- and slo- as sound combinations that suggest laziness, awkwardness, and incompetency respectively.

Crystal (2008:443) added "sound-symbolism is used in semiotics and linguistics to refer to a direct association between the form and the meaning of language: the sounds used reflect properties of the external world, as in cases of onomatopoeia (e.g. cuckoo, murmur, crash) and other forms of synaesthesia (e.g. sl- in such words as slimy, slither). Sound-symbolic words are also sometimes referred to as mimetic."

Fromkin et al. (2014:4) stated that "There is some sound symbolism in language—that is, words whose pronunciation suggests their meanings. Most languages contain onomatopoeic words like buzz or murmur that imitate the sounds associated with the objects or actions they refer to. But even here, the sounds differ from language to language and reflect the particular sound system of the language. In English cock-a-doodle-doo is an onomatopoeic word whose meaning is the crow of a rooster, whereas in Finnish the rooster’s crow is kukkokiekuu. Forget gobble gobble when you’re in Istanbul; a turkey in Turkey goes glu-glu."
They (ibid.:5) added "Sometimes particular sound combinations seem to relate to a particular concept. Many English words beginning with gl relate to sight, such as glare, glint, gleam, glitter, glossy, glaze, glance, glimmer, glimpse, and glisten. However, gl words and their like are a very small part of any language, and gl may have nothing to do with “sight” in another language, or even in other words in English, such as gladiator, glucose, glory, gluton, globe, and so on. To know a language we must know words of that language."

Booij (2007:22) believes that "The overview of word creation does not exhaust the set of special form-meaning correspondences in words. Sound symbolism exists in words beginning with the same sound sequence. For instance, words with initial sw- typically denote swinging movements (sweep, swing, swingle, etc.), and the following Dutch words with kr- all refer to unpleasant, twisted notions: krijs “to shout”, kramp “cramp”, krank “ill”, krimp “shrink”. The similarity at a more abstract level between morphology proper and word creation is that both are based on patterns of paradigmatic relationships between sets of words."

Jakobson and Waugh (2002:190ff) maintained that the purpose of a speech sound and the abstract meaning could be expressive of a symbolic connotation or relation.

Phonesthemes or the issue of sound-meaning relationship has much been discussed and investigated across different languages. Adams (2001:24-27) listed more than nine paired letters or sound which carry certain meanings in them. As early as the 1920s, Jespersen (1922) and Sapir (1929) proposed that short vowels in English and in other languages in the world express smallness. Hence, they both viewed this meaningful feature as a universal aspect that is found in other languages.

In English, phonesthemes have been studied in more than one attempt by different scholars and linguists. Throughout the 1940s, several attempts have been made by some scholars in investigating phonaesthemes. Firth’s (1930:184ff) study is a pioneering scholarship into the relationship between certain sounds and meanings. He (ibid.) listed thirteen initial sequences of sound combinations which he claimed to have suggested certain meanings. Of these, for instance, are the combinations sl- denoting a sense of
pejoration as in slack, slouch, slush, slime, sloppy, sluggard, slattern, slit, slay, slant, slither, slink, slaver, slump, slate, *dr*- denoting hanging and falling as in drip, drop, droop, and *kl*- denoting clumsiness or stupidity as in clay, clot, clod, cloy, clumsy, cling.

In 1946, Householder published a study in which he expressly maintained that there is a problematic connection between some words and their forms in English. Householder's (1946) paper shed light on the very connection between sounds and their graphic form through derivation and other word formations.

Sturtevant (1947:109) identified a few initial sound clusters that are thought of being semantically meaningful, including *kr*- (sudden or loud noise) as in crash, crack, crank, *gl*- (light) as in glare, gleam, glow, gloom, and *fl*- (fast movement) as in flicker, flitter, flame, flounce, flash.

Bolinger (1949) dedicated a whole book for this phenomenon whereby he raised the issue of non-arbitrary associations in several languages between meanings and form. His study tackled sound-meaning relation in three languages (English, French, and Italian).

Marchand (1966:315-335) identified ten initial sound sequences with a significant aspect of a remarkably common sense or meaning. These are *st*-, *kr*-, *sw*-, *tw*-, *str*-, *skw*-, *sn*-, *sl*-, *kl*-, and *gr*-. The senses included in these initial syllables ranged from generic adjectives, physical attributes, actions, movement, to disturbance.

Cassidy (1983) investigated the semantic extension of the initial sounds *ker*- in more than a hundred examples. The author found that words beginning with *cr*-, *cul*-, and *col*- share close meanings, citing Scottish English as a rich source of iconicity.

Bowles (1995:104) investigated phonaesthemes in English by undertaking a considerable investigation of the words listed in the English dictionaries. He suggested nine phonaesthematic syllables used at the beginning of words.

Crystal (2002) claimed that *sl*- initial syllables in English carry negative as well as non-negative connotations, following comparing and counting all
the words beginning with this syllable. He (ibid.) also based his account on
several English dictionaries which he consulted for his study.

Bergen (2004) elaborated on the significance of sound-form meaning
from a psychological perspective, claiming that semantics is affected by
psychological variables. The author based his claims on a few lists of
phonaesthemes and he has cited the various correlated meanings as
evidence of sound-form relation.

A recent account on English phonaesthematic associations by Reay (2006)
suggested six sounds or sound combinations with a possible association of
meaning. Reay's study stated that *sk-* , *sl-* , and *kl-* denote a physical
movement or action.

As for other languages, phonaesthemes have also been found to be
significant and remarkable. Heinson and Saar (2015) analysed specific
phonologically meaningful syllables in four Finnic languages (Estonian,
Finnish, Ingrian, and Votic). They contrasted these syllables between the
four languages and they found that expressive verbs may carry similar
meanings in their roots or stems. They also noted that initial consonant
clusters in these languages denote considerable similarities in a few related
meanings.

Haynie et al. (2014) focused on the covert symbolisms found in the
sounds of some indigenous languages of Australia. The most significant
associations of meaning that have been found in their study were the
locative and physical connotations denoting smallness, nearness, and
proximity, having concluded that such connotations can be meaningful
only if they are attached to vowel segments in the words given.

Abelin’s (2014) study has been concerned with phonaesthemes in
Swedish brand names. Abelin analyzed the Swedish lexicon with emphasis
on the sound symbolic properties of initial and final consonant clusters. He
found that every constructed word is interpreted correctly by at least some
dimensions such as lengthening, reduplication and illegal phonotactics.

Bordbar and Kambuziya (2016) reported in their contrastive study
investigating sound-meaning relation in three languages, English, Persian,
and Spanish, that no absolute arbitrariness can be established. They found
that a continuum of sound-meaning can demonstrate the order and degree iconicity.

Ibarretxe-Antuñano (2009) elaborated on the relationship between movement imitatives, i.e. sound symbolic expressions for the characterization of movement and their utilisation in the lexicalisation and description of motion events in Basque. He found that the Basque initial syllables carry certain phonesthematic meanings where nine categories of movements and positions have been identified in relation to similarity of sounds, based on a lexical comparison of words.

3. Methodology

The paper is a descriptive account in a rather quantitative approach of analysis without any frequencies or percentages. It focuses on all the initial consonantal sequences that may carry possible or related meanings. The examples and meanings suggested are self-generated., i.e., they are based on the researcher’s own thorough analysis. Additionally, two Arabic dictionaries have been consulted as a model for glossemes or words. They are: مختار الصحاح and مجمع اللغة العربية المعاصرة.

4. Realization of Phonaesthemes in SA

There is a considerable amount of sounds and sound sequences in Standard Arabic (SA) that demonstrate specific meanings, especially in initial consonants.

5. Syllables and Senses

There are certain syllables and sounds, mainly initial ones, whose meaning in one way or another expresses a common sense in the words related. Below is an account of these syllables along with the derived meanings. The categories are classed alphabetically within which the related letters are listed.

1. بـذ

This syllable implies initiating, launching, starting, or bringing forth, as in;

\textit{to start} بدأ
When used initially, these two sounds suggest rise, coming, advance, initiation, arrival, or a significant growth, as in:

- to rise ُبرز
- to be volunteer ُبرع
- to glimmer ُبرق
- to spring forth ُبرعم
- to create, to originate ُبرأ

This is a syllable that often suggests deepening, or moving inwards, and the following words express that sense:

- to swallow ُبلغ
- to reach ُبلغ

Most words starting with this syllable imply shortening, clipping, cutting, or stripping, as in:

- to clip ُجز
- to cut ُجز
to cut جزم

to curtail, to shorten جزل

5. جس

These two sounds suggest touching, close connection or relatedness, as in:

body جسد

body جسم

to bridge, to connect جسر

to touch جنس

6. جم

When these two sound merge in a single syllable, they suggest gathering, solidity, or bringing together, as in:

to freeze ججم

to gather جمجم

to assemble in multitude جمهور

to add جمل

7. حر

This initial sequence of consonants suggests danger, gravity, seriousness, or risk, as:

war حرب

heat حز

burning حرق
Related to this syllable are a few words whose sense implies movement, as in:

- to move درَّک
- to plough درَّث
- to slant, to deviate درَّف

It is a syllable the sense of which suggests rudeness, coarseness, or solidity, as in:

- wood خشب
- coarse خشی

Derived from this syllable is another sense that carries the meaning of fear, awe, or submission, as in:

- to fear خشی
- to be submissive خشع

These two fricatives suggest danger, risk, hurt, damage, and gravity. Many words in SA beginning with this syllable imply these senses:

- danger, risk خطر
- wrong, problem خطب
- mistake, to mistake خطأ
خطئة

1. خـر

A syllable that suggests in one way or another a sense of breaking into or going through, as in;

*to perforate* خَرَ
*to penetrate* خَرَق
*to pierce* خَرَز
*to come out* خَجَر

11. خـفـ

A syllable that suggests lessening, minimizing, diminishing, or retarding, as in;

*to lessen, to decrease* خَفَف
*to faint* خَفَت
*to lower* خَفَض
*to pulsate* خَفَق
*to fear* خَاف

12. دحـ

Here, the meaning is concerned with rejection, defiance, or challenge, as in;

*to refute* دَحَض
*to defeat* دَحَر
A syllable that suggests irritation, shaking, instability, or vibrating, as in:

- رجح to shake
- رجف to stir, to agitate
- رجح to make probable
- رج to shake, to move
- رجب to vibrate

A syllable that gives the sense of attaching, touching, close movement, or depending, as in:

- ركب to ride
- ركن to rely on
- ركع to bow down
- ركز to be supported
- ركد to pause on the ground

This is a syllable that may imply replying, responding, or reacting, as in:

- رد to reply, to respond
- ردع to deter
- ردَ to return
- ردَد to repeat back
These two sounds imply a physical or bodily movement, as in:

- رَمَيُّ (to hit)
- رَمْشُ (to blink)
- رِكَّ (to glance)

The words here share the sense of thickness, filling, bulkiness, or to be in a block, as in:

- ضَمْنُ (to fatten, to be fat)
- ضُهُّ (thickness)

A syllable that gives the sense of pulling, attracting, or steering towards a certain direction, as in:

- ضذُّ (to pull)
- ضذًّ (to drag)

It is a syllable that suggests storming, heavy striking, or violent raging, as in:

- عَصَفُ (to storm)
- عصَبَر (hurricane)
- عصبُ (to be nervous)
to disobey عصى

disobedience عصيان

A syllable that implies strength, connection, or building, as in;

bone عضم
to be muscular عضل

to support عضن

This syllable suggests deficiency or lack, as in;

sterility عم١

to sterile عم

This syllable implies embedding, implanting, or cause something to grow or develop;

plant زرع

to inject زرق

سـب۲۳
In this syllable, the meaning is closer to probing, searching, or poking into, as in:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ضجخ} & \quad \text{to swim} \\
\text{ضجر} & \quad \text{to probe} \\
\text{ضجك} & \quad \text{to proceed}
\end{align*}
\]

In this syllable, the sense is closer to covering, or concealing, as in:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{طـ} & \quad \text{to bury} \\
\text{طـمـ} & \quad \text{to remove} \\
\text{طـم} & \quad \text{to cover with water}
\end{align*}
\]

This is a syllable with the sense of inserting, piercing into, or plunging, as in:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{غرز} & \quad \text{to pierce} \\
\text{غرش} & \quad \text{to plant} \\
\text{غرف} & \quad \text{to dip} \\
\text{غرق} & \quad \text{to sink}
\end{align*}
\]

This syllable implies pardon, unattentiveness, carelessness, or disregard, as in:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{غَفَرَ} & \quad \text{pardon, forgive} \\
\text{غَفَ} & \quad \text{forget, overlook}
\end{align*}
\]
They refer to immersion, deepening, or going in;

- to doze: غفى
- to plunge: غمق
- to immerse in water: غمس
- to dip: غمد

This is a syllable whose sense is always related to opening, inquiring, searching, or investigating. The following are the words exemplifying these senses;

- to open: فتح
- to tear: فتق
- to inspect: فتش
- to break into pieces: فتت

- sweep: قش
- to skim: قشط
- to peel: قشر
- to scratch: قشد
A syllable that suggests closing, restraining, confining, or holding back, as in:

- كبح (to restrain)
- كبت (to restrict)
- كبس (to press)
- كيل (to chain)

They suggest breaking, clipping, or shortening:

- قص (to cut)
- قسم (to cut)
- قصف (to break)
- قصر (to break short)
- قصب (to cut)
- قص (to cut)
- قص (to cut)

These letters suggest cutting, clipping, separation, cropping, or curtailing, as there are a few words that share these senses:

- قطع (cut)
- قضم (to bite)
- قفط (pick)
- قط (clip)
This sequence often implies breaking, curtailing, terminating, or finishing;

- كسر: to break
- كسير: to darken, to eclipse
- كسه: to cripple
- كسه: to slump, to dull
- كسل: to be drowse, to be lazy

A syllable that carries the meaning of plotting, planning, or secretly devising and attempting, as in;

- مكر: to deceive
- مكيدة: deception
- مكن: to empower, to make strong

This syllable gives the impression of running, restlessness, fear, agitation, or dismay as in;

- هلع: to be restless
- هلل: to frighten
- هلك: to cause to perish
to agitate

Come on!

A syllable that suggests taking, holding, or gripping, as in:

- to loot
- to seize
- to quaff
- to devour

There is another sense related to this syllable and which implies prevention, shouting, denial, or forbidding, as in:

- to negate, to prohibit
- to rebuke
- to object
- to shout

A syllable that has a sense of running, fleeing, or moving disorderly, as in:

- to run
- to walk

- to run towards something
- to cause disorder
When combined together, these two sounds imply destroying, terminating, or destructing, as in:

- to destroy  هَدَم
- to demolish  هَدَم
- to waste  هَدَر
- to threaten  هَدَد

This syllable expresses vocal effect or shock since there are several words beginning with these two sounds imply similarity in this sense:

- to shock, to shake  هَز
- to chant  هَزْج
- to laugh  هَزْر
- to joke, to be humorous  هَزْل
- to mock  هَزْأ
- thunder sound  هَزْيم

A syllable that suggests a response or reply-back, as in:

- to reply  رد
- to repeat  رَدَد
- to succeed  رَدْف
These two letters have the sense of close or intimate touching, petting or fondling as in:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{دلـ} & \quad \text{to pet} \\
\text{دـٌٌ} & \quad \text{to coddle} \\
\text{دـٌه} & \quad \text{to massage}
\end{align*}
\]

The two letters carry the sense of locking or closing:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{سـذ} & \quad \text{to close} \\
\text{ضذي} & \quad \text{to lock} \\
\text{ضـب} & \quad \text{sacristan: protector of a holy place}
\end{align*}
\]

They imply deviation:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{زـٌََكَ} & \quad \text{to slip} \\
\text{زٌَج} & \quad \text{to slide} \\
\text{زٌََفَ} & \quad \text{to fawn}
\end{align*}
\]

This sequence has a sense of closing, wrapping, or enclosing:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{غٍك} & \quad \text{to close} \\
\text{غٍف} & \quad \text{to wrap} \\
\text{غٍض} & \quad \text{to tighten}
\end{align*}
\]
They suggest immersion;

\[ \textit{to immerse} \quad \text{غطص} \]

\[ \textit{to cover} \quad \text{غطي} \]

5. **Concluding Remarks**

1. Most meanings are based on initial clusters. Because SA is mostly consonant-vowel in sequence, the occurrence of final or medial consonant clusters or adjacent consonants is very rare.

2. The examples discussed in this paper show a challenging evidence that there are certain syllables and sound sequences in SA that imply common meanings or references.

3. The striking relatedness found between certain two-sound syllables and the meanings expressed by the related words is an indication that sound-meaning relation in SA is realizable and traceable.

4. The fact that the apparently noticeable relatedness between certain words in a language might have triggered, during some periods of the history of that language, the creation of new words following an early two-letter syllable, is still controversial even though it is highly questioned.

5. Interestingly, there are certain sound combinations that may manifest a meaning relevancy to various senses. In this token, the \( \text{مر} \) is mostly associated combination

\( \text{مرتبة} / \text{مركب} / \text{مرح} / \text{مرسي} \)

6. It can be seen that most initial letters in the phonaesthemes proposed in this paper are fricatives, while most post initial letters are plosives. The connection, if there is any, between the manner by which sounds are produced and the senses or meanings derived from these sounds along with their semantic relatedness may signal the significance of certain sounds in the production of meaning-related words, as it is the case with fricatives.
The table below shows how some letters are combined to produce different senses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial</th>
<th>Post-initial</th>
<th>Combination</th>
<th>Phonaesthematic sense</th>
<th>Lexicon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>بـذأ</td>
<td>دـثـجـشـرـج</td>
<td>بدـثذـجـشـرـج</td>
<td>initiation</td>
<td>to start</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ثذـجـشـرـج</td>
<td>جـسـخـفسـرجـش</td>
<td>جـسـخـفسـرجـش</td>
<td>touching</td>
<td>to touch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>خـفسـرجـش</td>
<td>خـفسـرجـش</td>
<td>خـفسـرجـش</td>
<td>coarseness</td>
<td>coarse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>رـجـشـرـج</td>
<td>جـسـخـفسـرجـش</td>
<td>جـسـخـفسـرجـش</td>
<td>shaking</td>
<td>to agitate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Phonaesthemes in English and SA can be compared and contrasted in order to check how different and similar they are.

8. The semantics of individual sounds, consonants or vowels, whether in SA or in English, has not been so far investigated thoroughly, and therefore a further analysis is needed to check the possibility of sound-meaning relationship at the single sound level.
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دلالة الصوت اللغوي في اللغة العربية

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الملخص

يتناول البحث دلالة الصوت في اللغة العربية وما ي تتضمن هذه الدلالة من معاني وإشارات وذلك من خلال تقصي وتحليل بعض المقاطع الصوتية للأحرف المستخدمة في بداية الكلمات وقد استندت فرضية وجود دلالة معنوية للمقاطع الصوتية المستخدمة في بداية بعض الكلمات إلى الدلالات والجوانب المعنوية المشتركة أي المعاني التي تم ملاحظتها بين أكثر من كلمة تبدأ بذات المقاطع، ويمهد البحث في البداية إلى الموضوع من خلال التعريف بهذه الدلالات الصوتية وموضعاتها ثم يتطرق البحث إلى عدة دراسات سابقة تناولت هذا الموضوع في لغات أخرى، ومن ثم يسرد جميع المقطع التي تحمل معاني مشتركة في ما بينها والموجودة في اللغة العربية، وفي نهاية البحث تُطرح عدة استنتاجات إلى جانب بعض الدراسات المستقبلية المفترضة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة العربية، العلاقة بين الصوت والمعنى، رمزية الحرف والصوت، الاعتقادية اللغوية، دلالة الصوت اللغوي.